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Sunday, Dec. 31

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship with communion, 9 a.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Worship at St. John's, 9 a.m.; at Zion, 11 a.m.

United Methodist: Conde worship, 8:30 a.m.; coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.; Sunday school, 9:30 a.m.; Groton worship, 10:30 a.m.

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

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

First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11 a.m.

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

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton
The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.
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Monday, Jan. 1 - HAPPY NEW YEAR! 2024
No School

GDILIVE.COM

GT Groton Area Tigers

Any interest in any of these basketball games on **GDILIVE.COM**? They are \$25 each.

- Warner Boys JV
- Warner Girls JV
- Clark Girls C
- Clark Girls JV
- Clark Boys C
- Clark Boys JV
- Tiropa Zina Girls JV
- Tiropa Zina Boys JV
- Dakota Valley Boys C
- Dakota Valley Boys JV
- Dakota Valley Girls JV
- Milbank Girls JV
- Milbank Boys JV
- Great Plains Lutheran Girls C
- Great Plains Lutheran Girls JV
- Northwestern Girls JV
- Northwestern Boys JV

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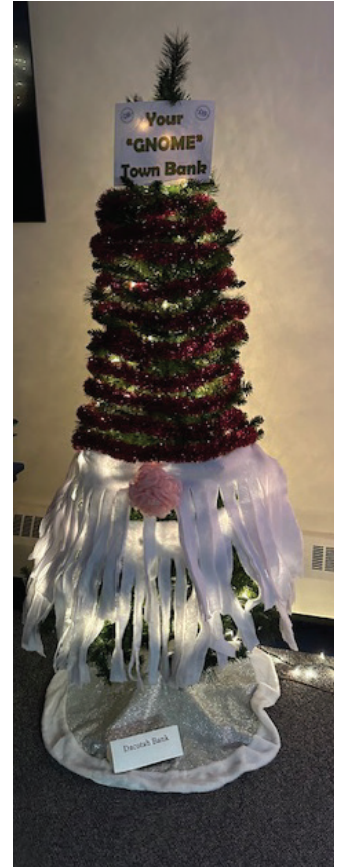
Trees featured at Wage Memorial Library



God Is Visible Every Day
In this new year, be grateful that
God has given you victory over
many things over the past year.
- Steven M. Hitchcock

Happy
New Year

Hanlon Brothers
Gravel Hauling
New & Cleaning of Stockdams with our 60' reach trackhoes
605/395-6531



Our best wishes to you
and yours in 2024.

2023 2024

Spanier's Custom
Harvesting
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(605) 228-3880

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Thank you for your past patronage and we look forward to serving you in 2024!



S & S Lumber

HARDWARE HANK

201 East Hwy 12 • 605/397-2361

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We look forward to helping you with your road maintenance, dirt and gravel needs in 2024!

Krueger Brothers

Road Maintenance,
Dirt & Gravel



From the Groton Daily Independent!
Paul, Tina and Jeslyn Kosel
Dorene Nelson
Elizabeth Varin

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GHS Boys' Wrestling

Ehresmann wins at Webster Invitational

Christian Ehresmann won the 144 pound weight class at the Webster Invitational Wrestling Tournament held Saturday in Webster. He pinned his first three opponents and won the final match with an 11-5 decision.

Wyatt Hagen was a third place finisher at the tournament while Walker Zoellner placed fourth.

Groton Area placed eighth in the 16 team tournament with 63 points.

Team Points: 1, Miller, 211.0; 2, Aberdeen Central, 164.5; 3, Clark/Willow Lake, 137.5; 4, Webster Area, 122.0; 5, Deuel, 104.5; 6, Border West, 98.0; 7, Sioux Valley, 68.0; 8, Groton Area, 63.0; 9, Britton/Hecla, 56.0; 10, Hamlin, 53.0; 11, Ipswich-Bowdle, 35.0; 12, Garretson, 34.0; 13, Mobridge/Pollock, 32.0; 14, Hanson County, 30.0; 15, Ortonville, 4.0; 16, Sanborn Central, 2.0

106: Wyatt Hagen (11-5) placed 3rd and scored 16.0 team points.

Champ. Round 1 - Wyatt Hagen (Groton Area) 11-5 received a bye () (Bye)

Quarterfinal - Wyatt Hagen (Groton Area) 11-5 won by fall over Lucas Ludwig (Garretson) 0-2 (Fall 3:25)

Semifinal - Chase Hurd (Miller) 18-2 won by fall over Wyatt Hagen (Groton Area) 11-5 (Fall 0:41)

Cons. Semi - Wyatt Hagen (Groton Area) 11-5 won by fall over Gage Landmark (Deuel) 5-8 (Fall 0:30)

3rd Place Match - Wyatt Hagen (Groton Area) 11-5 won by decision over Bailey Gillen (Aberdeen Central) 2-2 (Dec 10-7)

120: John Bisbee (1-8).

Quarterfinal - Zach Rikimoto (Border West) 9-4 won by fall over John Bisbee (Groton Area) 1-8 (Fall 2:50)

Cons. Round 1 - Tanner Atkinson (Britton/Hecla) 3-7 won by fall over John Bisbee (Groton Area) 1-8 (Fall 1:40)

126: Donovan Block (2-8)..

Champ. Round 1 - Jaden Buchmann (Hamlin) 6-7 won by decision over Donovan Block (Groton Area) 2-8 (Dec 7-5)

Cons. Round 1 - Donovan Block (Groton Area) 2-8 received a bye () (Bye)

Cons. Round 2 - Tyson Hagberg (Deuel) 6-10 won by fall over Donovan Block (Groton Area) 2-8 (Fall 3:15)

132: Walker Zoellner (11-6) placed 4th and scored 11.0 team points.

Champ. Round 1 - Walker Zoellner (Groton Area) 11-6 received a bye () (Bye)

Quarterfinal - Walker Zoellner (Groton Area) 11-6 won by decision over Logan Foster (Clark/Willow Lake) 7-9 (Dec 5-1)

Semifinal - Wyatt Wientjes (Mobridge/Pollock) 7-3 won by fall over Walker Zoellner (Groton Area) 11-6 (Fall 1:40)

Cons. Semi - Walker Zoellner (Groton Area) 11-6 won by fall over Dubhlaonn Vermeulen (Sioux Valley) 7-14 (Fall 4:16)

3rd Place Match - Brenden Grove (Aberdeen Central) 6-3 won by fall over Walker Zoellner (Groton Area) 11-6 (Fall 4:52)

144: Christian Ehresmann (13-2) placed 1st and scored 26.0 team points.

Champ. Round 1 - Christian Ehresmann (Groton Area) 13-2 won by fall over Trace Shoemaker (Webster Area) 6-8 (Fall 0:22)

Quarterfinal - Christian Ehresmann (Groton Area) 13-2 won by fall over Gunnar Knittel (Ipswich-Bowdle) 1-3 (Fall 2:00)

Semifinal - Christian Ehresmann (Groton Area) 13-2 won by fall over Bryce Hawkinson (Britton/Hecla) 11-4 (Fall 3:09)

1st Place Match - Christian Ehresmann (Groton Area) 13-2 won by decision over Teagan Foreman (Miller) 14-2 (Dec 11-5)

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157: Easten Ekern (2-11).

Champ. Round 1 - Beau Schilling (Ipswich-Bowdle) 8-11 won by fall over Easten Ekern (Groton Area) 2-11 (Fall 2:00)

Cons. Round 1 - Easten Ekern (Groton Area) 2-11 received a bye () (Bye)

Cons. Round 2 - Bryce Klancke (Clark/Willow Lake) 6-5 won by fall over Easten Ekern (Groton Area) 2-11 (Fall 1:45)

175: Ben Hoeft (5-10) scored 2.0 team points.

Champ. Round 1 - Ben Hoeft (Groton Area) 5-10 won by decision over Logan Omundson (Ortonville) 1-7 (Dec 9-2)

Quarterfinal - Justin Rorhbach (Ipswich-Bowdle) 10-9 won by fall over Ben Hoeft (Groton Area) 5-10 (Fall 1:00)

Cons. Round 2 - Westin Switzer (Hanson County) 1-4 won by decision over Ben Hoeft (Groton Area) 5-10 (Dec 9-4)

190: Isiah Scepaniak (0-9).

Champ. Round 1 - Caleb Kneen (Sanborn Central) 5-7 won by decision over Isiah Scepaniak (Groton Area) 0-9 (Dec 14-10)

Cons. Round 1 - Isiah Scepaniak (Groton Area) 0-9 received a bye () (Bye)

Cons. Round 2 - Isaac Nelson (Webster Area) 10-7 won by fall over Isiah Scepaniak (Groton Area) 0-9 (Fall 1:51)

285: Gavin Englund (11-5) scored 8.0 team points.

Champ. Round 1 - Gavin Englund (Groton Area) 11-5 won by fall over Mathis Resel (Miller) 4-4 (Fall 3:14)

Quarterfinal - Gavin Englund (Groton Area) 11-5 won by fall over Raymond Klein (Deuel) 6-10 (Fall 5:03)

Semifinal - Samson Flakus (Aberdeen Central) 12-5 won by fall over Gavin Englund (Groton Area) 11-5 (Fall 0:51)

Cons. Semi - Noah Adelman (Border West) 5-7 won by fall over Gavin Englund (Groton Area) 11-5 (Fall 0:59)

GHS Girls' Wrestling

Little places fourth at Webster Invitational

Maddie Little placed fourth at the Webster Invitational Wrestling Tournament held Saturday.

G107: Maddie Little (1-4) placed 4th and scored 4.0 team points.

Quarterfinal - Maddie Little (Groton Area) 1-4 received a bye () (Bye)

Semifinal - Dani Batchelor (Clark/Willow Lake) 7-2 won by fall over Maddie Little (Groton Area) 1-4 (Fall 2:29)

Cons. Semi - Maddie Little (Groton Area) 1-4 received a bye () (Bye)

3rd Place Match - Trinity Kurtenbach (Sioux Valley) 4-5 won by fall over Maddie Little (Groton Area) 1-4 (Fall 0:57)

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Tuff Tigers Wrestling

Warner/NW Youth Wrestling Tournament Results for Groton Tuff Tigers

Tots 31-32: Watson Herron's place is 2nd.

1st Place Match - Aiden Braun (Ipswich Area) won by fall over Watson Herron (Groton Tuff Tigers) (Fall 0:38)

Tots 36-40: Ryker Herron's place is 1st and has scored 7.0 team points.

Round 1 - Ryker Herron (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Cohen Nath (Warner/Northwestern) (Fall 0:04)

Round 2 - Ryker Herron (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Cody Shanley (Warner/Northwestern) (Fall 0:12)

Round 3 - Ryker Herron (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Tayven Hutchinson (Aberdeen Youth Wrestling Club) (Fall 0:46)

Tots 49-53: Kruz Khali's place is 3rd and has scored 3.0 team points.

Round 2 - Kohen Resel (Miller AAU Wrestling) won by fall over Kruz Khali (Groton Tuff Tigers) (Fall 0:10)

Round 3 - Lincoln Peckham (Warner/Northwestern) won by fall over Kruz Khali (Groton Tuff Tigers) (Fall 1:49)

Bantam 52-57: Roman Bahr's place is 1st and has scored 7.0 team points.

Round 1 - Roman Bahr (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Hayes Frericks (Warner/Northwestern) (Fall 2:08)

Round 2 - Roman Bahr (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by major decision over Berkley ODay (Aberdeen Youth Wrestling Club) (Maj 8-0)

Round 3 - Roman Bahr (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Trigger Munce (Huron Wrestling Club) (Fall 0:43)

Bantam 70-75: Kroy Khali's place is 1st and has scored 7.0 team points.

Round 1 - Kroy Khali (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Westin Huizenga (Redfield Youth Wrestling) (Fall 0:16)

Round 2 - Kroy Khali (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Hendrix Becker (Warner/Northwestern) (Fall 0:17)

Round 3 - Kroy Khali (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Oakley Town (Aberdeen Youth Wrestling Club) (Fall 1:45)

Midgets 49-52: Bennett Iverson's place is 1st and has scored 7.0 team points.

Round 2 - Bennett Iverson (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Aiden Frost (Hoven Greyhounds) (Fall 0:37)

Round 3 - Bennett Iverson (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Kandrick Jones (Britton Wrestling Club) (Fall 2:34)

Midgets 76-80: Huntley Overacker's place is 1st and has scored 7.0 team points.

Round 1 - Huntley Overacker (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Eli Wacholz (Warner/Northwestern) (Fall 0:46)

Round 2 - Huntley Overacker (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Camryn Fitzgerald (Watertown Arrows) (Fall 2:04)

Round 3 - Huntley Overacker (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by decision over Eli McCloud (Kingsbury County) (Dec 6-2)

Novice 76-80: Bentley Ehresmann's place is 1st and has scored 7.0 team points.

Round 1 - Bentley Ehresmann (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by decision over Chan Dreis (Aberdeen Youth Wrestling Club) (Dec 9-7)

Round 2 - Bentley Ehresmann (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Grayson Decker (WWBC) (Fall 0:59)

Round 3 - Bentley Ehresmann (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by fall over Logan Josephsen (Kingsbury County) (Fall 1:44)

Round 4 - Bentley Ehresmann (Groton Tuff Tigers) won by major decision over Graham Reuer (Warner/Northwestern) (Maj 12-0)



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Why South Dakota's landmark teacher pay law failed State has faded to 49th in average salary even after a 2016 tax increase intended for educators

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - DECEMBER 30, 2023 11:45 AM

Inflation, turnover, minimal increases in state aid to education, and pay raises absorbed by non-teaching staff: Those are the reasons for South Dakota's lagging teacher pay, according to education experts and school officials.

The Legislature expected to infuse over \$60 million into public K-12 education in the first year following 2016's historic half-percent state sales tax increase. The tax hike was primarily meant to boost the state's last-in-the-nation ranking for average teacher pay.

Expectation soon gave way to disappointment.

South Dakota rose to 47th in the nation for teacher pay thanks to the 2016 influx of funding, but has since fallen back to 49th, based on 2021-2022 state averages collected by the National Education Association. South Dakota's average teacher salary in those rankings, about \$51,000, ranks higher than only West Virginia and Mississippi (the rankings go to 51 because of the inclusion of the District of Columbia).

The Legislature adopted minimal increases in state aid to education in years immediately following the tax increase — as low as a 0.3% increase in one year. Then, last winter, lawmakers reduced the state sales tax from 4.5% to 4.2% until 2027.

Wider socioeconomic factors have also influenced the fall backward. The teaching profession has suffered massive turnover, driven by the COVID-19 pandemic and low pay. School districts have struggled to hire other positions — bus drivers, counselors and custodians — forcing the districts to choose between raises for teachers or other employees.

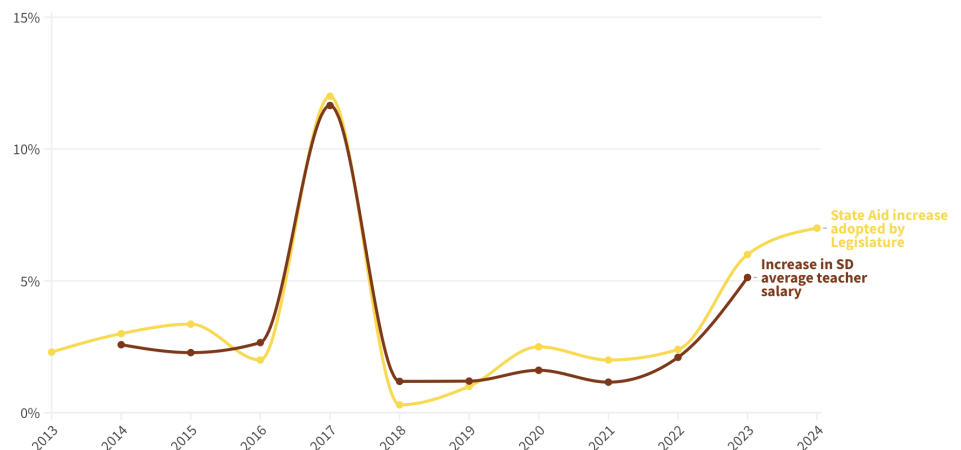
Inflation rates that rose to 5% and 8% in 2021 and 2022, respectively, only widened the gap — with school districts paying more in utilities, gas and other overhead costs.

Gov. Kristi Noem addressed lagging salary increases in her budget address earlier this month, criticizing school districts for the slow growth and proposing a 4% boost in state education funding. The state Department of Education is actively working on "accountability measures" to address the issue, she said without offering further specifics.

The Legislature's decision to

SD increase in average teacher pay (2013-2024)

The year-over-year increase in average teacher pay in South Dakota trails slightly behind what the state Legislature adopts for state aid to K-12 public education each fiscal year. The Legislature approved increases in state aid of less than 3% from 2018-2022, resulting in minimal increases in average teacher pay across the state.



Source: DOE school funding snapshot, DOE statistical digests • Years correlate with the state fiscal year calendar: fiscal year 2024 runs from July 1, 2023 to June 30, 2024.

Data visualization made with Flourish

initially slow state aid increases after 2016 has been detrimental to the initiative's success, said Jacqueline Sly, a former House of Representatives Education Committee chair from Rapid City who co-chaired the Blue Ribbon Task Force that proposed the tax-increase legislation.

Teacher salary projections made by the task force depended on 3% or higher annual increases in state aid. "That got us off track right away," Sly said. "That piece of it was really vital initially, because then we moved up on the ranking and then went back down and are at the bottom again."

The Legislature tightened its belt after the 2016 sales tax increase in response to lower than expected sales tax revenue in 2017. That year saw a 0.3% increase in state aid to education. The following year was also a tight budget year, but an unexpected influx of revenue pushed the increase to 1%. Education funding received a 2.5% inflationary increase during the 2019 legislative session and 2% in 2020.

If there aren't consistent increases, Sly said, the state will never make headway.

Demystifying state aid and teacher pay

The Blue Ribbon Task Force convinced the Legislature to revamp the state school funding formula, basing it on a statewide target for average teacher salary to prioritize the role of teachers in state funding. That target was set at \$48,500 in 2016, and has increased each year by a percentage adopted by the Legislature.

The statewide average teacher salary has never reached those targets.

That's because the state's "target teacher salary" isn't actually the state's goal for average teacher pay. In reality, it's a basis for the state's public education funding formula. Before the 2016 legislation, the formula was based on a per-student allocation.

Funding determined by the "target teacher salary" formula update goes not just toward teacher salaries, but also toward overhead costs and salaries for other school workers — bus drivers, preschool teachers, librarians, administrators, custodians, food service workers and counselors. Schools also receive funding from their own local property taxes.

"There's this misbelief that the target teacher salary means every district in the state should be paying that salary on average. That's not the intention of that number," said Rob Monson, executive director of the School Administrators of South Dakota. "That's what is set to gather the dollars needed to fund the K-12 system."

That's not to say the "target" that now defines overall school funding isn't also the average salary goal sought by educators. The South Dakota Education Association President Loren Paul said the "target teacher salary" is what educators are going after.

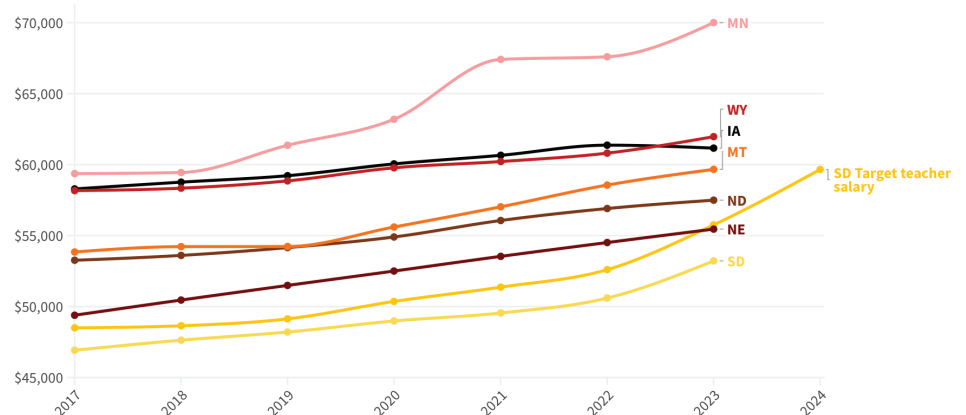
Currently, the statewide average teacher salary is far short of the current target of \$59,659. Noem recommended a 4% increase in state aid for the coming legislative session, which, if approved, will increase the target to \$62,045.

"Four percent is good," Paul said. "With the shortage of educators, we could always use a little bit more. We are gaining on states, but we haven't overtaken anybody yet. A little more would help. Five percent would be great."

Increase in SD average teacher salary (2017-2022)
compared to surrounding states



South Dakota teachers on average consistently make less than teachers in surrounding states, though the overall average teacher salary in the state is increasing. The state is losing ground in reaching its annual "target teacher salary."



Source: SD DOE statistical digests, Average teacher pay data for ND, MN, IA, NE, WY, MT • Years correlate with the end of the school year: 2017 references 2016-2017 school year salaries

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Accountability standards are 'outdated'

The 2016 legislation sent 63% of the tax increase to public schools, 34% to property tax relief and 3% to raise instructor pay at the state's technical colleges. Of the money that went to public schools, 85% had to be used to increase teacher salaries in that first year.

The legislation did not mandate that future increases in state aid would go to teachers. But the legislation did create a School Finance Accountability Board to track if state aid increases went toward teacher salaries.

Based on the law, school districts only have to compensate their teachers, on average, more than they did in 2017 — meaning if a school district failed to increase its average teacher compensation for nearly seven years since then, it wouldn't be penalized for it. Compensation, in contrast to pay alone, includes the monetary value of benefits, such as health care coverage.

The Rapid City School District's average teacher pay, for example, increased 2.5% between fiscal years 2017 and 2023. Its average teacher compensation has increased just over 7%. That put the district below the target salary goal, but nonetheless kept it out of the accountability board's crosshairs.

If consistent improvement was the goal, Paul said, defining success as better than 2017 has become an inadequate metric.

That's "outdated," Paul said. The organization is "anxiously awaiting" the state Department of Education's new accountability measures.

The teacher-pay law was originally effective through June 2021, but was extended through June 2024 nearly two years ago. Sly said the task force's intention was to have legislators reevaluate and reset the accountability measure in 2022, not simply extend it.

The South Dakota Education Association, which Paul serves as president, had asked legislators to extend the board's authority.

"My dream would be to have something more updated than what we have because comparing to 2017 pay is no longer relevant," Paul said.

Average teacher pay percent increases have kept pace with the increases in state aid for about half of South Dakota's districts, Paul said. But he added that the districts whose average teacher pay increases are lower, even around 2% or 4% since 2017, "have something to answer for" to their constituents.

Inflation & turnover impact average teacher salaries

Willow Lake Superintendent Chris Lee tracked salaries for teachers who've remained in the district from the 2015-2016 school year (before the Blue Ribbon Task Force legislation) through the 2022-2023 school year. Those teachers received an average of 37.9% increases in salaries — higher than the 28.7% increase in state aid approved by the Legislature in that same timeframe.

The district's average teacher salary overall has increased 27.8% in that same timeframe. That's because new teachers who start at lower base salaries bring that average salary down. The district's entry-level teacher salary increased 26.13% in the same time period.

"That's the danger of averages," Lee said. "I don't think there's a district out there pocketing money. We're doing everything we can to try and keep the best teachers in our classrooms and keep the kids fed and pay a substitute when it's necessary. Some days we're getting by with bale wire and duct tape."

Lee's small eastern South Dakota district had to answer to the state's School Finance Accountability Board

Area School Districts Increase in average teacher salary 2017-2023

Faulkton School District:	22.6%
Northwestern Area School District:	21.5%
Milbank School District:	16.5%
Leola School District:	16.0%
Groton Area School District:	15.5%
Florence School District:	15.2%
Ipswich School District:	13.8%
Doland School District:	13.3%
Aberdeen School District:	12.8%
Langford Area School:	12.7%
Britton-Hecla School District:	12.3%
Frederick Area School District:	11.3%
Clark School District:	11.2%
Warner School District:	11.2%
Webster School District:	11.0%
Redfield School District:	8.7%

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for that in 2018. After two long-tenured teachers retired, the district's average teacher salary dropped below the 2017 benchmark.

The 2016 legislation's supporters intended that when older teachers retire, school districts would reinvest the money from retiring teacher salaries into the salary pool to increase the district's overall average.

That's easy on paper, but not in real life, Lee said.

Average teacher pay doesn't consider other positions needed to keep a school running, Lee said. Many of those positions have seen higher raises because schools wouldn't be able to hire for the positions without them.

Salary spending on bus drivers in Willow Lake, for example, increased 86% from 2017 to 2022 — far outpacing the 8.5% increase in teacher salary expenditures during that time. Even then, Lee has to sometimes fill in and drive a bus route himself.

Across the state, school districts increased salary spending on teachers by 16% from 2017 to 2022, which failed to keep pace with inflation. Transportation salaries (bus drivers) increased by 25%, while pay for student and staff services (counselors or curriculum directors) increased by 29% and "other support services" (such as librarians) saw an increase of 32%.

"The percentage-wise raises were more than teachers, but those people are just as important," Lee said. "You can't get kids to school without bus drivers. Those raises need to come out of that same piece of pie."

Statewide spending on administrative services, which includes superintendent salaries, increased by 23% during that time — seven percentage points higher than spending on teacher salaries.

Those spending decisions didn't come from the administrators themselves, according to Monson, of the School Administrators of South Dakota. District spending is set by elected school boards.

"If they thought the superintendent was paid too much, they wouldn't have put it in contract," Monson said.

A number of school districts have had to dip into their building and maintenance or reserve funds to cover operations and pay teachers more. That's a "red flag" that state funding "is not adequate," Sly said.

Lee thinks there are several avenues to explore for funding: Earmarking a certain amount of education funding increases to teacher pay, which was introduced but failed during the 2018 legislative session; finding other tax revenue for schools, such as from recently approved sports betting; or tweaking the school funding formula to address issues such as funding for English-as-second-language students.

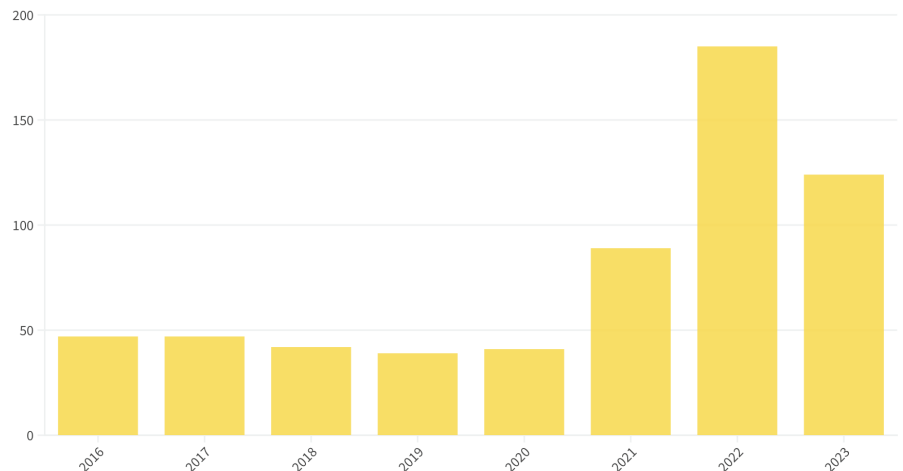
Districts receive extra state aid if they have English-as-a-second-language students who score below a certain number on the language acquisition assessment.

"There are a lot of students that fall into that English-learning category where they're receiving services and it costs districts money, but the districts aren't being funded because the student doesn't score low enough for extra funding," Lee explained.

Over 5% of South Dakota's public school students this school year are English language learners, according to the state Department of Education.

SD open teacher positions in August, 2016-2023

The number of open teacher positions in South Dakota school districts significantly increased during the COVID-19 pandemic and has remained higher than pre-pandemic numbers.



Source: Associated School Boards of South Dakota

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Legislative course correction

For the most part, school districts and school boards are trying to match state aid increases with teacher salary increases, Monson said.

It's nearly impossible to increase teacher salaries beyond that, Sly said.

"At the beginning, when we didn't as a state fulfill that obligation to fund schools more, then the other states were zooming ahead on teacher pay," Sly said. "There has to be a significant amount of money put into that to make that change."

The Blue Ribbon Task Force based its formula on 3%-a-year increases, Sly said. The statute requires the Legislature provide schools a funding increase of 3% or inflation, whichever is lower — a mandate that'd been in law for decades before the task force met.

If the Legislature had stuck to a 3% increase in state funding each year since its 2016 legislation, the target teacher salary would be \$59,648 for the 2023-2024 school year. Given the 6% and 7% increases in state aid approved by the Legislature in 2022 and 2023, respectively, the state has managed to get back on track with the 3%-a-year projections for the "target teacher salary" — since the target teacher salary this year was \$59,659.

That doesn't mean the actual average teacher salary has hit that mark. The latest data puts statewide average teacher salary at \$53,217 during the 2022-2023 school year.

And teachers are falling behind inflation. To keep pace with the buying power of their 2017 average salaries, South Dakota teachers would need to make an average of about \$59,000 today, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Part of the problem, Sly added, is that legislators often lump education funding into what they call "The Big Three" with health providers and state employee salary increases.

If all three areas get the same state funding increase, state employees get the better end of the deal since the money goes directly into their salaries or benefits.

Sly said the three don't have to receive the same percentage increase in funding.

"That's not the law," Sly said. "That's just an assumption. Then they're fearful that if they do it for schools they have to do it for others."

The Legislature approved pay increases of 7% for state employees last session, in line with its boost to school funding. Lawmakers also backed a 100% cost reimbursement rate for community support providers that rely on government funding, such as nursing homes. Other Medicaid providers, such as hospitals, received a 5% increase.

In 2019, the Legislature approved a 10% boost to the state's Medicaid reimbursement rate for nursing homes, while education funding and state employees received inflationary increases of 2.5%.

Sly said she wants the Legislature to reevaluate school funding and teacher pay and make adjustments "so as a system it works rather than having to redo the whole thing." The funding formula and requirements set forth by the 2016 legislation have largely gone untouched.

Some school districts are doing fine, while others are struggling to keep their heads above water, Sly said, adding it's the Legislature's job to find out why and address it.

"You can't just throw money at something. It has to be with intention," Sly said. "Does everybody need more money? Is it just certain districts? And then find out why they're not making it. I don't think it's a good idea to ask for more money without asking why and finding where those needs are."

Anyone who believed teacher pay was "fixed" by the 2016 Blue Ribbon legislation was "sorely mistaken," Monson said.

"Any time you want to raise all boats you have to fill the pond," Monson said. "If we want to do better than keep up, then we're going to have to go above what is the inflationary factor."

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.

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THE ILLUSTRATED BIBLE



*Do not let your heart envy sinners,
But be zealous for the fear
of the Lord all the day;
For surely there is a hereafter,
And your hope will not be cut off.*

🎭 PROVERBS 23: 17, 18 🎭

*Detail of "Woman listening with outstretched arms
to the choir of angels in the clouds above her"
by Gijsbert de Groot (1691)*

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1. For possible new year's resolutions, Proverbs 16:3 says, "Commit thy works unto the Lord, and thy thoughts shall be ____." *Resolved, Established, Directed, Bountiful*

2. Likewise, Psalm 37:5 instructs us to, "Commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in him; and he shall bring it to ____." *Nurture, Pass, Action, Light*

3. Which book proclaims the first day of the new year is for resting and a memorial sounding the trumpet? *Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers*

4. 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Galatians 2:20 are among the verses to focus on what in a new year? *Blessings, Moving forward, Grace, Church attendance*

5. In which month of the religious calendar did the new year begin in the Bible? *3rd, 5th, 7th, 9th*

6. From James 1:5, what may one lack and if they ask God it shall be given? *Love, Wisdom, Truth, Goals*

ANSWERS: 1) Established, 2) Pass, 3) Leviticus, 4) Moving forward, 5) 7th, 6) Wisdom

Hardcore trivia fan? Visit Wilson Casey's subscribersite at www.patreon.com/triviaguy.

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FLASH GORDON

I AM PRINCE BARIN, RIGHTFUL KING OF THE PLANET MONGO.

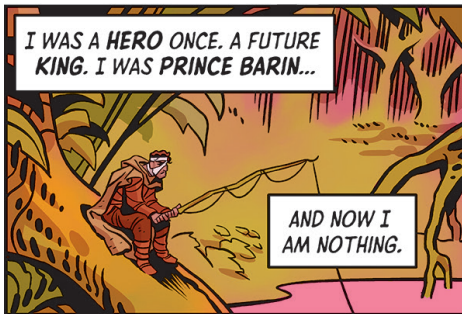
FOR TOO LONG, WE HAVE BEEN RULED BY A USURPER.

AT LAST, WE REBELLED.



OUR PLAN WAS TO OVERTHROW THE TYRANT, MING THE MERCILESS--

--AND UNIFY MONGO THROUGH A MARRIAGE BETWEEN ME AND AURA, HEIRESS TO MING'S EMPIRE.



I WAS A HERO ONCE. A FUTURE KING. I WAS PRINCE BARIN...

AND NOW I AM NOTHING.



MING BROKE ME IN HIS DUNGEONS.

HE KILLED MY HOPE.

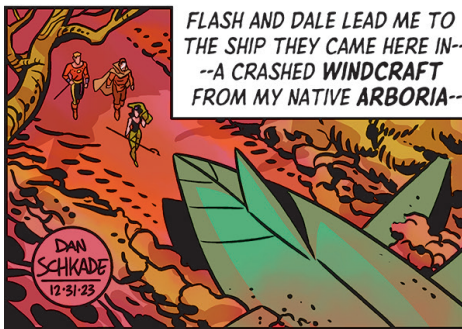
TOA HELP ME, I AGREED TO SURRENDER...



...BUT FLASH GORDON DEFEATED MING FIRST.

HE HAS FOUND ME, HIDING FROM MY SECRET SHAME.

HE BELIEVES IN ME... EVEN IF I NO LONGER CAN.



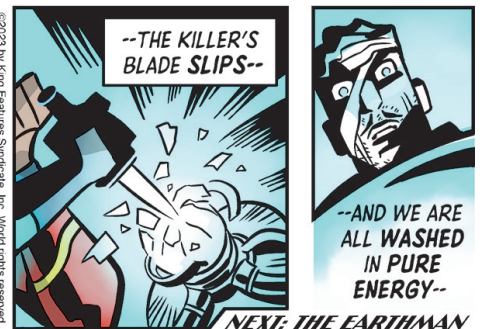
FLASH AND DALE LEAD ME TO THE SHIP THEY CAME HERE IN--
--A CRASHED WINDCRAFT FROM MY NATIVE ARBORIA--

DAN SCHKADE 12-31-23



--WHERE WE'VE BEEN FOLLOWED BY A MADMAN IN MING'S COLORS.

HE SPRINGS ON FLASH--

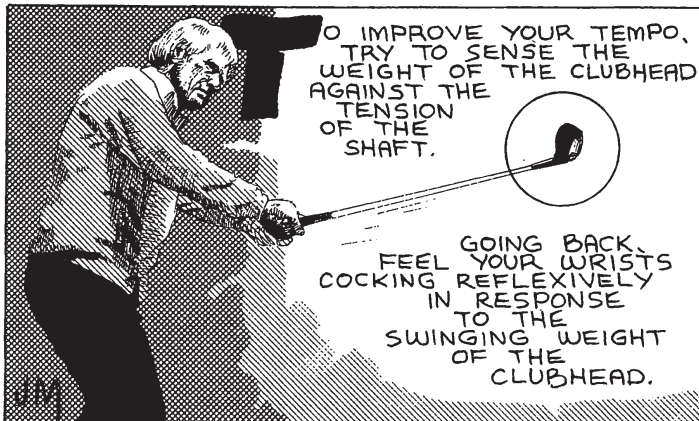


--THE KILLER'S BLADE SLIPS--

--AND WE ARE ALL WASHED IN PURE ENERGY--

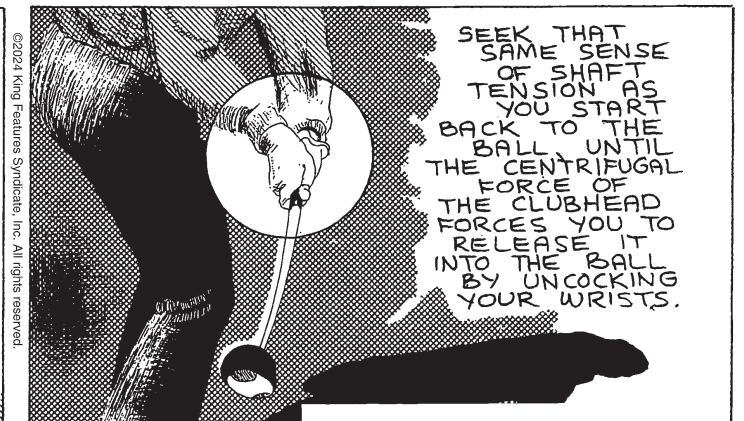
NEXT: THE EARTHMAN

Play Better Golf with JACK NICKLAUS



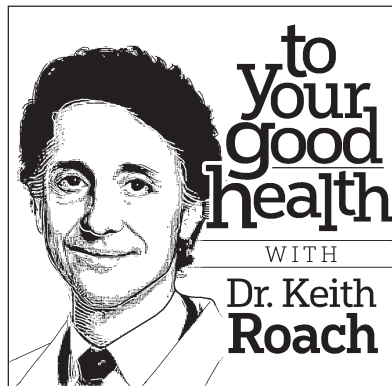
TO IMPROVE YOUR TEMPO, TRY TO SENSE THE WEIGHT OF THE CLUBHEAD AGAINST THE TENSION OF THE SHAFT.

GOING BACK, FEEL YOUR WRISTS COCKING REFLEXIVELY IN RESPONSE TO THE SWINGING WEIGHT OF THE CLUBHEAD.



SEEK THAT SAME SENSE OF SHAFT TENSION AS YOU START BACK TO THE BALL, UNTIL THE CENTRIFUGAL FORCE OF THE CLUBHEAD FORCES YOU TO RELEASE IT INTO THE BALL BY UNCOCKING YOUR WRISTS.

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Blood Bank Turns Away Donor With High Iron Levels

DEAR DR. ROACH: Recently, I was rejected from donating plasma (not blood) because my iron that day was 57 mcmol/L, and the maximum allowable was 54 mcmol/L. I was rescheduled to get retested in a few days. The technician said to eat beans and similar foods to lower my iron levels.

I checked my own records and didn't find any results that fell below the cutoff. My red blood cell count was 5.15; my white blood cell count was 6.0; my hemoglobin level was 16.1 g/dL; and my hematocrit level was 48.5%, all within the healthy range.

Which test results could they be referring to, and how do I lower my iron? — S.L.

ANSWER: Blood banks typically screen donors for anemia, which is frequently caused by iron deficiency, but I'm confused as to why they are screening you with iron tests because that is typically not done. Moreover, they are telling you that your iron is too high, which is the opposite of the iron-deficiency anemia that is usually looked for.

I recommend that you see your own physician and get retested. If we take the blood bank at their word, and your iron level is too high, that raises the possibility of hereditary hemochromatosis (HH), which is caused by a defect of iron absorption. With this condition, your body absorbs as much iron as possible, even if it doesn't need any. This causes iron overload, which damages the heart, liver, bone marrow, adrenal glands, skin and joints, just to name a few.

HH is easy to treat once the diagnosis is made. However, making the diagnosis requires thinking about the possibility, and it's uncommon enough that a lot of healthcare professionals don't think about it right away. Your doctor should test your iron and iron-binding capacity, as well as your ferritin level, which tends to correlate with the total amount of body iron stores.

But I don't want to jump to conclusions, which is why your own doctor should test you to see if you really do have excess iron.

DEAR DR. ROACH: Like a lot of older men (I'm 74), I get up often at night to dribble a little urine. I have found that if I go downstairs, walk to the kitchen, then climb back upstairs, I can often urinate again as much as I did the first time. Can you explain?

Also, I've noticed that on nights that I have popcorn with salt, I get up less often. Could a person take a salt tablet before bedtime to reproduce this effect? — S.C.

ANSWER: Both men and women can have voiding problems due to bladder issues, but men can also have symptoms due to an enlarged prostate. I can't tell which of these you might have because, for both, there are underlying reasons as to why you might be able to urinate again a few minutes after going the first time. But it's more common in men with prostate trouble.

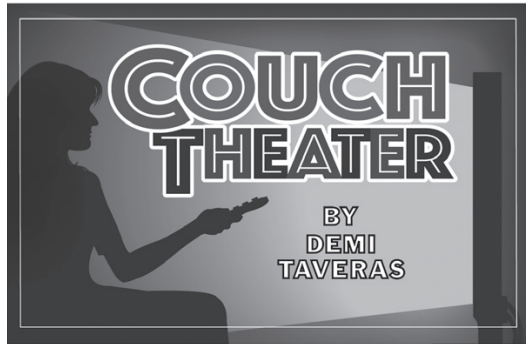
Exercise isn't usually needed; just giving yourself a few minutes can often be enough to cause you to void again. I recommend voiding twice before bed if getting up at night is a problem. You may find that changing positions while urinating can be helpful to fully empty your bladder.

As far as salt goes, it makes your body hold on to water. While you could take a salt tablet, you might get thirsty at night. In addition, excess salt increases most people's risk for heart attack and stroke, so I don't recommend it.

Dr. Roach regrets that he is unable to answer individual questions, but will incorporate them in the column whenever possible. Readers may email questions to ToYourGoodHealth@med.cornell.edu.

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Dan Levy makes his directorial debut in "Good Grief."

Courtesy of Netflix

"Priscilla" (R) -- Since it is so often the case with Hollywood to tout out similar movies back-to-back while interest is still up, we all knew that a foil to Baz Luhrmann's "Elvis," which tells the story of musical legend Elvis Presley, was surely on its way. And a year later, it came by way of Sofia Coppola and Presley's ex-wife, Priscilla. In this biopic, Cailee

Spaeny plays a young Priscilla just as she meets the man who would become one of the most popular singers in the world, and her future husband, this time played by Jacob Elordi. While the film didn't wow at the box office, it received positive reviews from critics for Spaeny and Elordi, with Spaeny snagging a nomination for Best Actress at the Golden Globes. Out now to rent. (Amazon Prime Video)

"Good Grief" (R) -- Dan Levy ("Schitt's Creek") makes his directorial debut in this comedy-drama film out Jan. 5. A true triple threat, Levy stars as the lead character, while also directing and having written the screenplay himself. At the film's start, his character, Marc, is struggling with the unexpected death of his husband, and after spending a year grieving with his best friends, Sophie (Ruth Negga) and Thomas (Himesh Patel), the trio decides to go on a weekend getaway to Paris. This weekend proves to be a rebirth for Marc and his friends, as they all work to unearth the inconveniently intense feelings that they've all been harboring. Luke Evans, Emma Corrin and Kaitlyn Dever make appearances in this very touching and strong debut from Levy. (Netflix)

In Case You Missed It

"Official Competition" (R) -- Multimillionaire businessman Humberto Suarez reaches his 80th birthday and feels that he doesn't have anything long-lasting to show for it. On a whim, he decides to produce a film that can live on past his lifetime, with eccentric director Lola Cuevas (Penelope Cruz) at the forefront. Lola has a strict creative vision for this film, which includes hiring two egotistical lead actors from different sides of the acting spectrum. Method actor Ivan Torres (Oscar Martinez) isn't fond of pomp and glamour, while Hollywood actor Felix Rivero (Antonio Banderas) relishes in everything celebrity and combining the two results in a chaotically hilarious performance. Cruz, Banderas and Martinez were the perfect trio for this Spanish black comedy. Out now. (Hulu)

"The Morning Show" (TV-MA) -- This critically acclaimed show starring Jennifer Aniston and Reese Witherspoon is an addicting binge-watch. Aniston plays Alex Levy, co-anchor of "The Morning Show" alongside Mitch Kessler (Steve Carell). When Mitch's sexual misconduct results in his firing from the show, Alex is forced to protect her job and reputation. Meanwhile, West Virginia field reporter Bradley Jackson finds herself like a fish out of water when she lands the position as co-anchor. After its first season, the show expands on topics like racial inequality, the Russian-Ukrainian war and the Capitol riot. All three seasons are out now. (Apple TV+)

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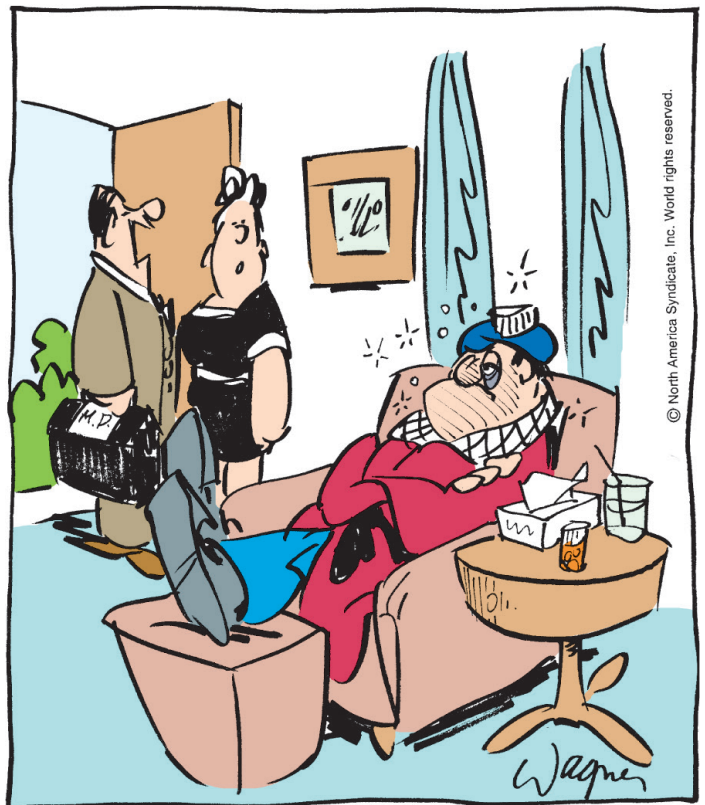
1. Who wrote and released "While My Guitar Gently Weeps"?
2. Which group originally released "Don't Bring Me Down" in 1966?
3. Who wrote and released the 1962 parody "The Monster Mash"?
4. Elvin Bishop is considered a one-hit wonder for which song?
5. Name the song that contains this lyric: "Moons and Junes and Ferris wheels, the dizzy dancing way you feel, When every fairy tale comes real."

Answers

1. George Harrison of the Beatles, appearing on their 1968 White Album. Harrison and Eric Clapton often played it together, including for the 1971 "Concert for Bangladesh" album.
2. Eric Burdon and the Animals. The song charted in the Top Ten and was then covered by several others, including The Guess Who and Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers.
3. Bobby "Boris" Pickett & The Crypt-Kickers. The song was released just before Halloween and tells of a scientist who created a monster that danced. A movie musical was released based on the song in 1995.
4. "Fooled Around and Fell in Love," from 1976.
5. "Both Sides Now," by Judy Collins in 1967. Songwriter Joni Mitchell included the song on her own "Clouds" album and the song earned a Grammy for Best Folk Recording in 1969.

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GRIN and BEAR IT ^{Wagner}



"He has a few good years left if he skips New Year's Eves."

Just Like Cats & Dogs ^{by Dave T. Phipps}

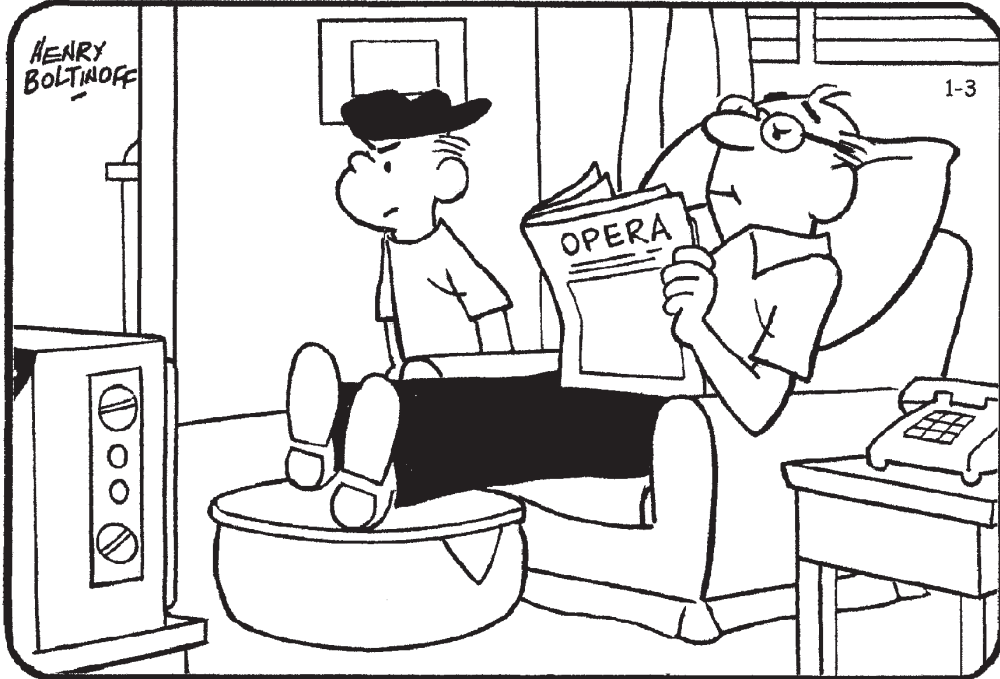


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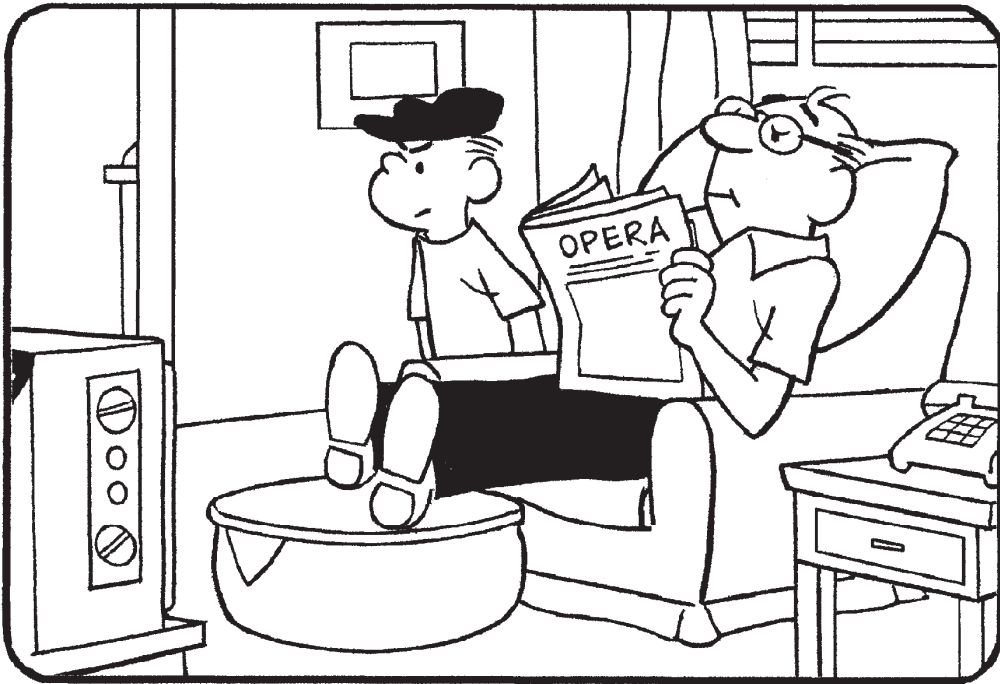
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HOCUS-FOCUS

BY
HENRY BOLTINOFF



Find at least six differences in details between panels.



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Differences: 1. Ottoman is turned. 2. Drawer is added. 3. Phone is moved. 4. Legs are shorter. 5. Hat is turned around. 6. Boy is moved.

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* If you like taking baths, you can invest in a second rubber bath mat to drape over the side of the tub. The edge will be nonslip, so you can hold on for support and your hands will not slide.

* Sunburn happens in the winter too, especially on the slopes. Use a cotton ball soaked in cold tea to ease tight dry skin. Be sure you apply sunscreen to your face and wear eye protection when going out to play in the snow.

* For drains slowed by grease, sprinkle a half-cup each of salt and baking soda down the drain, and follow it with an entire kettle or pot of boiling water.

* If the smell in your cedar chest has faded, you can bring it back easily with extra-fine sandpaper. A very light sanding is all it takes in most cases.

* For delicious baked potatoes, boil a pot of salted water, add whole potatoes with skin, remove from heat and let stand for 15 minutes. Finish in the oven for a sturdier skin. Start checking for doneness after 15 minutes in the oven. Baking time can be cut in half! -- J.L. in Florida

* Remove musty smell from stored clothes by adding either vinegar or ammonia to the wash water. Be sure to check for smell removal BEFORE drying, as the dryer can bake the smell into clothes, making it more difficult to remove.

Send your tips to Now Here's a Tip, 628 Virginia Drive, Orlando, FL 32803.

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TIGER

by BUD BLAKE



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King Crossword

ACROSS

- 1 Melville captain
- 5 Male swans
- 9 Luau dish
- 12 Humorist Barry
- 13 Med. plan options
- 14 PC program
- 15 Barrel bottom bit
- 16 Concerning
- 17 Old Olds
- 18 Voice in an iPhone
- 19 Half of XIV
- 20 Rooters
- 21 Formerly called
- 23 "Morning Edition" ainer
- 25 Humidor contents
- 28 Salad base
- 32 Maxim
- 33 Sean of "Rudy"
- 34 Bequest
- 36 Surround with light
- 37 Judge Lance
- 38 Approves
- 39 Iowa crop
- 42 WWII service member
- 44 "See ya!"
- 48 Some
- 49 "Legally Blonde" role

1	2	3	4		5	6	7	8		9	10	11
12					13					14		
15					16					17		
18					19				20			
			21	22			23	24				
25	26	27					28			29	30	31
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39	40	41			42	43			44	45	46	47
48				49					50			
51					52				53			
54					55				56			

- 50 Branches
- 51 Wish otherwise
- 52 Intend
- 53 Harvest
- 54 Curvy letter
- 55 "Garfield" dog
- 56 Catches some rays
- 6 Hotel chain
- 7 Ho-hum
- 8 Away from NNW
- 9 Brazilian rubber
- 10 Frank
- 11 Wall St. debuts
- 20 Clean slate
- 22 Upright
- 24 Bit of mischief
- 25 Baseball's Ripken
- 26 Chemical suffix
- 27 Joke
- 29 JFK info
- 30 Goose egg
- 31 — -cone
- 35 Cried in pain
- 36 Tertiary Period epoch
- 39 Give a darn
- 40 Burden
- 41 Deli loaves
- 43 Jai —
- 45 Bailiwick
- 46 Eliot Ness, e.g.
- 47 Nile vipers
- 49 Punk rock off-shoot

DOWN

- 1 Totals
- 2 Mata —
- 3 Say it's so
- 4 2013 Keira Knightley film
- 5 Sour cream tidbits

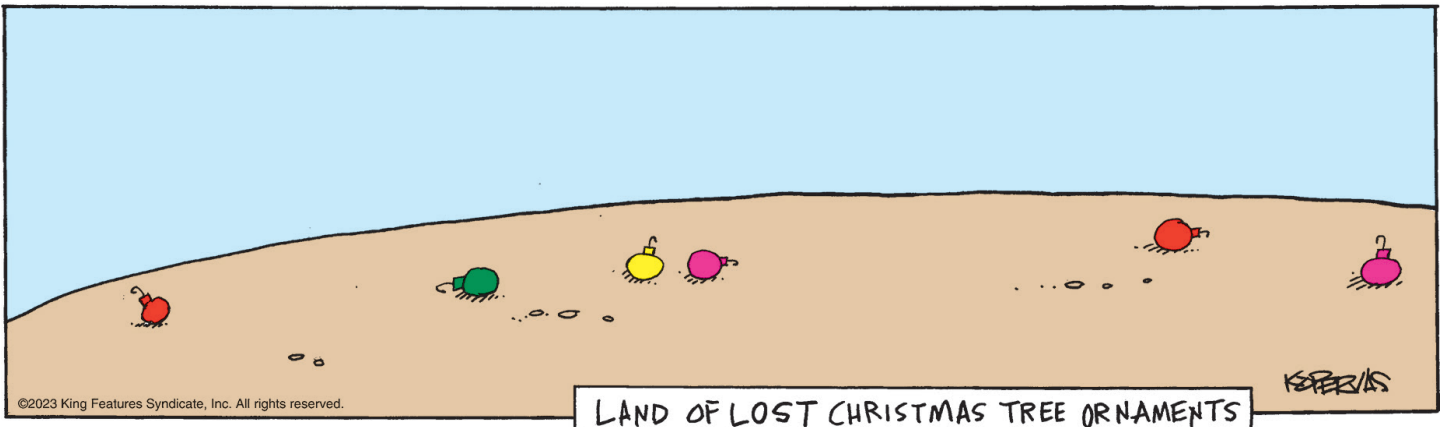
— King Crossword — Answers

Solution time: 21 mins.

A	H	A	B		C	O	B	S		P	O	I	
D	A	V	E		H	M	O	S		A	P	P	
D	R	E	G		I	N	R	E		R	E	O	
S	I	R	I		V	I	I			F	A	N	S
			N	E	E		N	P	R				
C	I	G	A	R	S		G	R	E	E	N	S	
A	D	A	G	E				A	S	T	I	N	
L	E	G	A	C	Y		E	N	H	A	L	O	
			I	T	O		O	K	S				
C	O	R	N		W	A	C			T	A	T	A
A	N	Y			E	L	L	E		A	R	M	S
R	U	E			M	E	A	N		R	E	A	P
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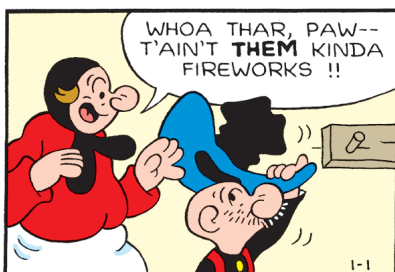
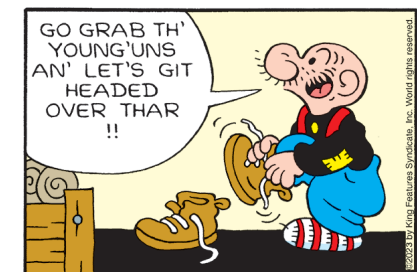
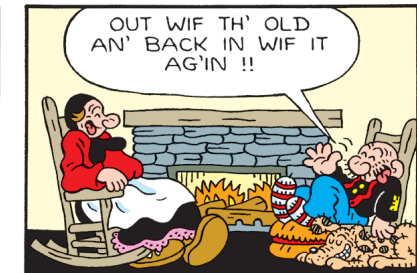
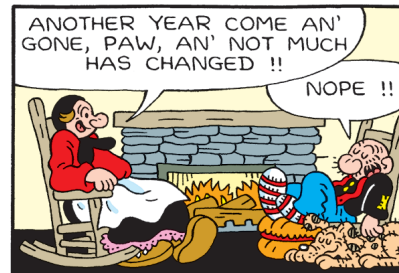
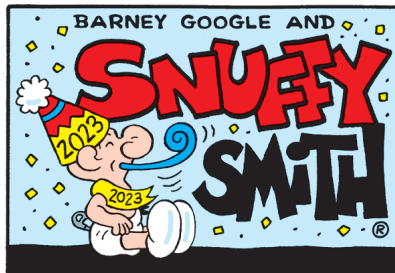
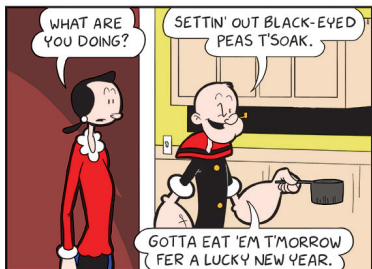
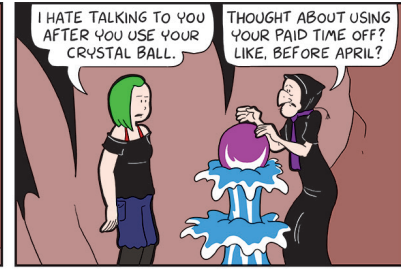
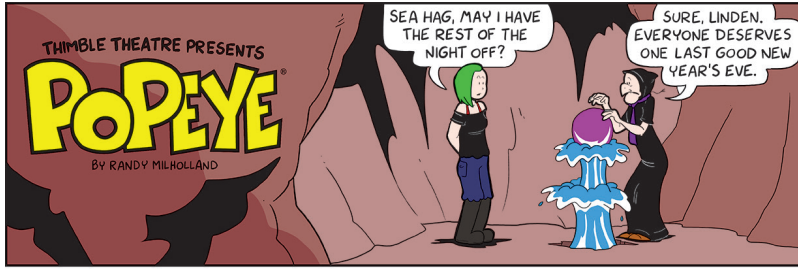
Out on a Limb

by Gary Koperas



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... AND THE KNIGHTS ARE SENT ON THEIR WAY, TO PREPARE THE NEXT STEP. CLOSE TO CASTLE GRUNYARD, THEY STOP BY A TAVERN TO PICK UP NEWS, DISCUSS THE UPCOMING ARCHERY TOURNAY...



... AND IMMERSE THEMSELVES IN THE LOCAL BREW. THE BARKEEP IS BOTH ASTONISHED AND TERRIFIED—IT DOES NOT BODE WELL TO SEE THE NOBILITY SINK EVEN FURTHER INTO CRAZINESS.



BUT THERE IS METHOD TO THE MADNESS. AS EXPECTED, THE TWO COMPANIONS ARE INTERCEPTED BEFORE THE CASTLE GATES BY BARMUS DRAMFELL. ROGER'S CAPTAIN IS READY TO INTERROGATE THEM AS TO THEIR RECENT DISAPPEARANCE, BUT SIGHT AND SMELL TELL HIM ALL HE NEEDS TO KNOW.
NEXT: A game proposal

The Spats

by Jeff Pickering



SENIOR NEWS LINE

by Matilda Charles

Finding a Nursing Home

Choosing a nursing home isn't easy, even in the best of circumstances. Whether it's for you or a spouse, or for your parents, for now or for later, there are things you need to know and red flags to beware of.

When you want accurate information, you have to consider the sources you use. Ask friends and family for recommendations or warnings about local facilities. Go online to the National Institute on Aging (www.nia.nih.gov) and search for nursing homes and long-term care facilities. Print out their Medicare Nursing Home Checklist and take it with you to each facility. Check the Medicare Compare tool (www.medicare.gov/care-compare) for local facilities. Call the Eldercare Locator, at 1-800-677-1116, run by the U.S. Administration on Aging. Look for online news stories and reviews about any facility you consider.

Visits to the facilities you are considering are a must. Whether it's daytime appointments with a member of staff or sudden visits at night, what you see can be revealing. Try to time at least one surprise visit at mealtime. Is the food appetizing? Will it encourage seniors to eat? Are there low-sodium options, as well as foods for lactose intolerant residents? Try to talk to staff who actively work with the residents and ask questions.

Ask about the staff/resident ratio, the turnover rate and the level of training given to staff. How did they do during the Covid pandemic, as well as with other illnesses? Does the facility look and smell clean?

Find out about cost (do they accept Medicare?), social and recreation activities for residents, physical therapy and use of psychiatric drugs.

If anyone doesn't want to answer your questions, consider it a red flag.

Don't wait until the last minute to choose a nursing home. This is not a decision to make quickly. Start now to get a handle on the facilities near you; you'll be many steps ahead when the need arises.

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1. What Pro Football Hall of Famer and TV personality was on board a Blue Origin New Shepard suborbital spaceflight mission in December 2021?

2. NASCAR driver Glenn Roberts got what nickname from his days as a pitcher for an American Legion baseball team?

3. Boxer Azumah Nelson, a former featherweight and super-featherweight champion, is a native of what African country?

4. What Basketball Hall of Famer and former University of Georgia Bulldogs women's basketball star won Olympic gold medals with Team USA in 1988 and '96?

5. Israeli athlete Moshe Weinberg, who was killed in the terrorist attack on the 1972 Munich Olympics, was a coach in what sport?

6. In a 1980 NFL season playoff game known as "Red Right 88," what team lost to the Oakland Raiders 14-12 after an ill-advised pass that led to an interception in the end zone?

7. What Japanese martial art, often translated as "the way of harmonious spirit," emphasizes the safety and well-being of one's attacker?



by Ryan A. Berenz

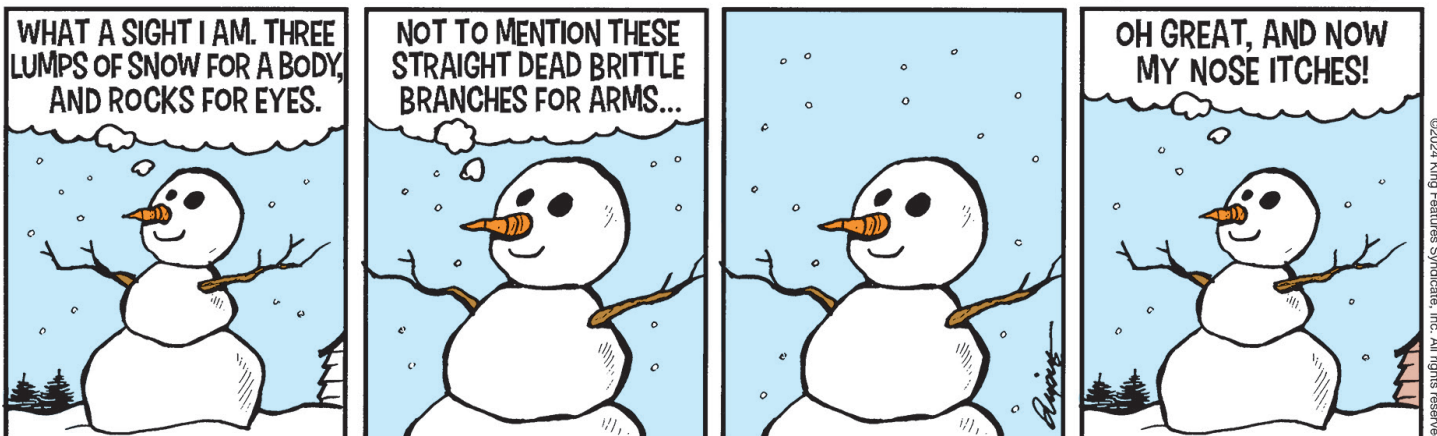
Answers

1. Michael Strahan.
2. Fireball.
3. Ghana.
4. Katrina McClain.
5. Wrestling.
6. The Cleveland Browns.
7. Aikido.

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Amber Waves

by Dave T. Phipps





How to Give Your Pet a Healthy, Happy New Year

DEAR PAW'S CORNER: This week, many Americans are celebrating their newest gift to the family: a cute puppy or kitten, duck or chicken, or pocket pets like hamsters and guinea pigs. It's also a time to form new resolutions in anticipation of the New Year.

I hope that new pet owners' first resolution will be to establish a relationship with a veterinarian with expertise in their specific pet. Some pets need to start or continue a vaccination schedule so they grow up healthy -- puppies are at risk of contracting parvovirus, for example, so bolstering their immune

system is very important.

Your vet can also provide advice and tips for caring for pets. Guinea pigs, hamsters and rabbits communicate happiness or distress in unique ways that a new owner may not be familiar with. Puppies are wiggly and energetic. Kittens are curious and fearless. Vets can help new owners navigate these waters and provide regular checkups to help keep pets healthy. -- Dedicated Vet in Boston

DEAR DEDICATED: Thank you for sending this! Establishing a care routine with a veterinarian is so important. It should sit at the top of owners' to-do lists, along with providing comfortable warm bedding, a clean and safe environment, and especially for puppies, a daily training routine. Mark your calendar with key dates, including checkups with the vet, appointments with a trainer and regular resupply of food, litter, bedding and everything else your new pet needs.

Here's to a happy, healthy and fun New Year with your pet!

Send your tips, comments or questions to ask@pawscorner.com.

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Strange BUT TRUE

By Lucie Winborne

* The first 72 hours in jail pose the highest risk of death for an inmate, for any reason.

* The cat in "The Godfather" was a stray that director Francis Ford Coppola found in the studio and handed to Marlon Brando before the shot. The animal took a shine to Brando and settled in his lap, purring so loudly that the crew was afraid the noise would drown out the dialogue!

* And speaking of cats ... cheetahs communicate with house cat-like meows rather than roars like most big cats.

* Benjamin Franklin sold chocolate in his print shop in Philadelphia.

* Forget about whether pineapple belongs on a pizza -- how about snake? For a limited time snake will be on Pizza Hut's menu in Hong Kong, as the restaurant partners with another eatery known for its snake stew.

* A tool bag lost during a spacewalk orbits Earth and is visible to people on the ground.

* Researchers at George Washington University found that the skin behind our ears and between our toes has a different set of microbes than those found on more frequently washed areas, so heed Mama's advice and don't forget to scrub them.

* In 1873, billiards became the first sport to have a world championship.

* Prior to the 17th century, common folk seated themselves on stools and benches, while chairs were designed for royalty and the rich.

* Pogonophobia is the fear or dislike of beards.

* For Scrabble's 50th anniversary in 1988, a giant game utilizing six-foot tiles that required two large men to lift was played in Britain's Wembley Stadium.

Thought for the Day: "If you can't fly, then run. If you can't run, then walk. If you can't walk, then crawl. But whatever you do, you have to keep moving forward." -- Martin Luther King Jr.

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Prepping the soil

Work now to improve your soil for the coming year's growth.

First: do a **soil test** to see if it is lacking pH-raising materials like lime, or acidifying items like elemental sulfur, and purchase what is needed. With a pitchfork or spade, gently begin breaking up your existing soil, then gently work in compost, cow or horse manure, any needed materials determined by your soil testing, and organic fertilizers like greensand, rock phosphate, kelp, bonemeal or bloodmeal. The microbes and beneficial soil-dwellers will start working right away to break all these nutrients down in time

for spring planting. - Brenda Weaver

Source: bonnieplants.com



by Freddy Groves

Homeless Veterans Grants for 2024

The annual Point-in-Time Count takes place on a given night in January every year and attempts to estimate the number of homeless who are out on the streets. The most recent one, done in January 2023, revealed that yes, what many of us sensed, there had been an increase in the number of homeless veterans -- 7.4% over the previous January.

To try to get ahead of the problem, especially given the coming January 2024 count, the Department of Veterans Affairs has announced millions to be spent on grants to help homeless veterans.

The Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) grants will give out hundreds of millions to organizations that help veterans and their families find housing, find more stable housing or avoid loss of their home. The exact amount of the grants is yet unknown.

But the Legal Services for Homeless Veterans and Veterans At-Risk for Homelessness Grants program will give over \$26 million to groups and organizations to help with the legal side of things: court proceedings, defense related to homelessness in criminal cases and legal representation.

VA efforts during 2023 saw progress in several areas despite the increase in the number of homeless veterans. During 2023, the VA awarded over \$1 billion in grants to groups and organizations for homeless veterans. Nearly 39,000 homeless veterans found permanent housing, and over 145,000 veterans and their families were helped to avoid foreclosure on their homes. The HUD-VASH program helped 13,000 veterans find affordable housing as well as support services.

Those support services follow the Housing First model, which uses a plan with specific steps: Get the veteran into housing and then ensure they can stay there by offering several types of support. That can include job training, education help, health care and legal assistance. Studies have shown that veterans who are in the Housing First program find housing much more quickly (in 35 days as opposed to 223 days).

For veterans who are either homeless or in danger of becoming homeless, go online to www.va.gov/homeless or call 877-4AID-VET (877-424-3838) to get help.

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Wishing Well®

8	3	5	6	4	3	5	8	3	2	7	6	4
S	M	T	S	V	A	H	T	K	C	E	W	I
3	4	2	6	3	7	2	5	2	3	4	7	6
E	C	U	E	S	X	L	I	T	M	T	E	E
2	3	5	3	2	3	8	4	2	5	7	3	5
I	A	N	R	V	T	A	O	A	K	R	C	P
4	5	7	2	4	7	2	3	5	6	2	4	8
R	O	T	T	Y	I	E	H	S	T	F	R	R
4	6	2	4	2	3	4	2	7	5	4	3	6
E	S	R	L	I	O	I	E	D	I	S	I	U
2	3	7	3	2	4	6	4	8	2	4	7	6
N	C	E	E	D	H	C	E	T	S	D	A	C
3	5	8	5	6	7	5	6	5	8	6	8	8
S	T	A	I	E	S	V	S	E	N	S	E	W

HERE IS A PLEASANT LITTLE GAME that will give you a message every day. It's a numerical puzzle designed to spell out your fortune. Count the letters in your first name. If the number of letters is 6 or more, subtract 4. If the number is less than 6, add 3. The result is your key number. Start at the upper left-hand corner and check one of your key numbers, left to right. Then read the message the letters under the checked figures give you.

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1. GENERAL KNOWLEDGE: When is Three King's Day celebrated typically?
2. TELEVISION: In the drama series "Mad Men," what product is presumed to be Don Draper's last advertisement?
3. GEOGRAPHY: What is a chain or collection of islands called?
4. MOVIES: To which city is the McCallister family traveling in the holiday classic "Home Alone"?
5. LEGAL: What is a moot court?
6. LITERATURE: What is the name of the heroine in "The Scarlet Letter"?
7. FOOD & DRINK: What kind of nut is used in marzipan?
8. MUSIC: What is the gift on the 11th day in the song "The Twelve Days of Christmas"?
9. SCIENCE: How much of the Earth's surface is covered with water?
10. HISTORY: What are the two Japanese cities that the United States hit with atomic bombs in WWII?

Answers

1. Jan. 6, the 12th day of Christmas.
2. Coca-Cola.
3. An archipelago.
4. Paris, France.
5. A simulated court to give law students a chance to practice what they have learned.
6. Hester Prynne.
7. Almond.
8. 11 pipers piping.
9. Almost 71%.
10. Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

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South Dakota Governor

Kristi Noem



South Dakota: *Under God, the People Rule*

Ring in the New Year, Letting Freedom Ring

As 2023 comes to an end, we may find ourselves reflecting on the last year and looking forward to the year ahead. And as I am thinking about all that South Dakota has accomplished this year, I think of our people.

My favorite part of my job is getting to hear stories from folks about how the decisions we make in Pierre really impact their lives. People are grateful to live in a state that still believes in the American Dream, that still respects individual rights, and still holds ourselves to a higher standard of Freedom.

Some of the most inspiring stories have come from people who have moved to South Dakota in the last year with the help of the Freedom Works Here workforce recruitment campaign. And in 2024, we are looking forward to another year of Freedom Working Here.

I recently heard a great story from State Auditor Rich Sattgast about an employee his office had hired, Ashley, who recently moved here from Ohio. In fact, three of the State Auditor's fifteen employees have moved to South Dakota from other states because of our Freedom-first policies.

Ashley was kind enough to write me a letter about her experience and why she chose to move to South Dakota over any other state in America. She wrote that while most states were shutting down during the pandemic, one state caught her eye – the state that stayed "Open for Business."

From South Dakota's booming economy, to our record-low unemployment rates, and our dedication to the very principles upon which our nation was founded, Ashley couldn't deny that the quality of life just looked better here than anywhere else.

So, Ashley moved out of her home state for the first time in her life. Just a few weeks ago, she set foot in South Dakota for the first time. She wrote of the beauty she saw along her drive across the state and how excited she is to see our state continue to grow and develop.

We are telling South Dakota's story – and it's resonating with Freedom-loving Americans all over. I am glad that our state is reaching so many people across the country. And I am sure that Auditor Sattgast will love welcoming Ashley into our state and into her new community.

In 2024, we will be releasing more Freedom Works Here ads to recruit hardworking people like Ashley to our state. I am excited to see the continued success of this campaign and growth of our winning workforce.

So, as we head into a new year, I can promise that South Dakota will continue to be the Freest state in America. We will still be a beacon of hope for the rest of nation. And we will keep showing the world the Freedom really does Work Here.

In South Dakota, we won't just be ringing in 2024 – we'll be letting Freedom ring.

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CONGRESSMAN
DUSTY JOHNSON
Representing **SOUTH DAKOTA** at large



New Year, Same Priorities

The New Year is a natural time to reflect on the past year and set priorities for the one ahead. House Republicans' priorities were listed in our Commitment to America at the beginning of this year, and we plan to keep working towards those goals in 2024.

In 2023, House Republicans passed 70 bills addressing our Commitment to America and held 866 committee hearings. Yet, there is still more to be done to secure the border, cut spending, counter the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and boost American energy security.

Border Security -

For months, House Republicans have called on the Senate and administration to secure our southern border. Earlier this year, the House passed H.R. 2, the Secure the Border Act, while President Biden's border policies have left the border wide open. We're consistently seeing record-breaking numbers of illegal immigrant encounters at the border. While the Senate and the Biden administration must act, the House will continue to work on policies to restart construction of the border wall, increase funding for U.S. Customs and Border Patrol agents, implement new technology at the border, and re-implement Remain-in-Mexico policies.

Cutting Spending -

Since January 2021, I have opposed more than \$13 trillion in unnecessary spending. Our \$33 trillion debt is out of control, and we must restore sanity to our fiscal house. In 2023, Congress passed legislation to save \$1.6 trillion over the next ten years – a great step towards fiscal responsibility, but it's just the beginning. House Republicans will keep working to right size our budget in 2024.

Countering the CCP -

The Select Committee on China has been hard at work this year identifying key threats from the CCP and finding solutions to protect America's national security and stop human rights abuses. The Select Committee compiled much of its work into a report with nearly 150 policy recommendations to reset the terms of our economic relationship, prevent the use of U.S. dollars and technology from fueling the CCP's tyranny, and build collective economic resilience with our allies. While this year's work focused heavily on identification, I expect our work in 2024 to focus on championing these solutions and passing them out of the House.

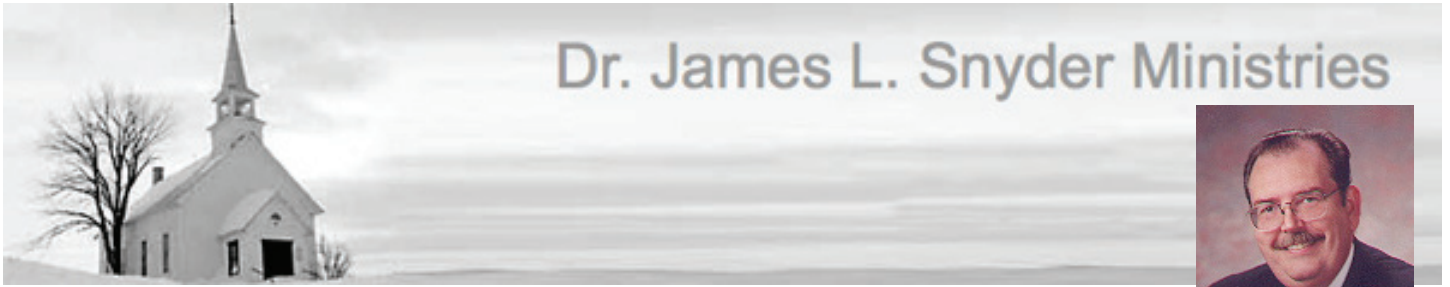
Bolster American Energy Security -

Relying on our adversaries like China and Sudan for energy production is dangerous. We need to increase American energy production for a cleaner, more reliable supply. House Republicans made big progress here by passing H.R. 1, the Lower Energy Costs Act. This legislation will unleash American energy and lower costs for families. We need an all-of-the-above approach to energy security using renewable and traditional sources. The Lower Energy Costs Act will do that.

These priorities should be near the top of Congress's and President Biden's list for 2024. We are privileged to live in the world's greatest nation, and I hope we can all work together to ensure it stays that way.

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The Regifting Queen of the Family

Sitting around the Christmas tree with my family and opening up Christmas presents, it stirred fond memories of my Aunt Edith. She was known as The Regifting Queen of our family. And believe me, she earned that name quite well.

Most of the family didn't catch on to what she was doing. I know I didn't realize it until several years before she passed.

Little did we know that when we gathered as a family at Christmas time, the gifts we received from Aunt Edith were regifted. I had no idea what that meant then, but I was to find out what it was all about.

One of my cousins caught on first. One Christmas, he received a gift that he remembered from last Christmas, which was given to her. At first, he thought he was imagining things, but as the gifts kept going around, he began to notice that the gifts given to his family members were given to his Aunt Edith last year.

She had it very well worked out because nobody got a gift from her that they gave to her the year before. When my cousin mentioned this to me, I thought he was joking, and I just went along with him. But I was to realize that maybe what he was saying was true.

I started paying attention to the gifts Aunt Edith gave to the family so I could remember them for next year. And sure enough, the following year, people received gifts from Aunt Edith that had been given to her the year before.

My cousin looked at me, looked back, and we just smiled, hoping we could keep our secret.

Based on that thought, my cousin and I gave Aunt Edith a present we would want the following year. Sure enough, those gifts appeared to our family from good old Aunt Edith. Everybody smiled, thankful for Aunt Edith's thoughtfulness at Christmas time.

That was the one thing my cousin and I looked forward to each year. And the thing was, everybody got from Aunt Edith a present they gave her the year before. She was very good at this regifting.

We discovered that when Aunt Edith got a Christmas gift, she always put the giver's name on the gift. That way, she would not get the gifts mixed when she regifted them.

My cousin and I let it fly because we did not want to embarrass Aunt Edith. She was such a wonderful lady, and we felt that if that was her way of celebrating Christmas, so be it.

As the years went on, Aunt Edith got older. No surprise there. Everybody gets older. But as she got older, her memory began to play tricks on her.

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I began to notice one year when Aunt Edith gave me a Christmas present that I gave her the year before. Up to this time, that had never happened. She was very particular in how she distributed her regifting.

As I opened my gift from her, I began to chuckle because it was what I gave her last year. I didn't say anything because I respected her and everybody makes mistakes. I just went along with her regifting program.

I almost told my cousin, but I thought I'd just better leave everything under the table at this point. After all, Christmas is a merry time of the year, and I didn't want to sabotage the merry element.

Watching Aunt Edith throughout the year, I noticed her memory was slipping. With that in mind, I was anxious for Christmas to come and see how Aunt Edith would handle her regifting.

As it turned out, that year was the last year Aunt Edith was around for Christmas. It was a special Christmas, although we did not know it then.

As the gifts were being passed around and as people began opening their gifts from Aunt Edith, people began to recognize that this was a gift they had given her last year. It was hard for me to believe, but everybody got from Aunt Edith what they had given her the Christmas before.

After all those years of meticulously regifting those Christmas presents, it was finally catching up. Nobody knew what to do or say at that point. Everybody just thanked Aunt Edith for her wonderful Christmas presents. Nobody realized what was happening, but Aunt Edith confused the names on the gifts as the "for" and not the "from."

It wasn't until Aunt Edith's funeral that people began to share their ideas about Christmas. Someone said, "Did you know that at the last Christmas party, I received a gift from Aunt Edith that I gave her the year before?"

When she said that, everybody began to laugh and had the same story to tell. Aunt Edith had been meticulously regifting all her Christmas presents for all those years, and nobody knew it until her last Christmas.

What I took away from it is that if I'm going to give a gift, I should give a gift I want to receive myself. And I must thank good old Aunt Edith for that thinking.

I couldn't help but think of a Bible verse. "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (Galatians 6:7-8).

Whatever I do to others will finally come back on me. Give what you want to receive is my motto.

EARTHTALK ™

Dear EarthTalk: How much “old-growth” forest is left in the U.S. today and what are we doing to protect it?

-- Paul Belaire, Chico, CA

Scientists have found it tough to settle on a precise definition for old-growth forests. There’s no single formula to determine what is considered an “old” tree, and growth rates among tree species are varied. Some species have ages at which they can be considered “old.” At 80 years, Gambel oaks are considered old-growth, but for bristlecone pines it is 300 years. In general, old-growth forests are areas of land with layers of undisturbed trees and vegetation. Prior to becoming old-growth, trees enter a stage where they are considered “mature.” Mature forest definitions are even broader and have no specific age.

One categorization system that Wilderness Society scientists have proposed is to base a tree’s maturity on its “biomass”—the amount of collected carbon stored in the tree. One of the reasons that old-growth forests are important is that the trunks and branches of old trees store large amounts of carbon and thus are crucial to fighting climate change because they absorb more carbon than they release into the atmosphere. When these trees burn in wildfires, like the ones that have devastated California in recent years, the carbon is released back into the atmosphere.

In early 2023, the U.S. initiated its first national inventory of mature and old-growth forests. It revealed more than expected, showing that the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management collectively oversee over 50,000 square miles of old-growth forests and 125,000 square miles of mature forests. Most of this land is in the West and together covers an area larger than California. Of all of the U.S. forests, only about six percent are old-growth. Decades of logging, development, drought and wildfire have torn through the forests, heavily decreasing their numbers. Some 32 percent of U.S. forests are considered mature, and it’s equally important to protect these so that they can one day become old-growth forests.

Recent actions by the Biden administration have moved to conserve groves of old-growth trees. The proposal would limit commercial timber harvesting in old-growth forests, while allowing logging in mature forests that are not considered old yet. This proposal is somewhat controversial, as many believe that the government should be thinning out forests to reduce wildfire risks. Earlier this year, the Biden administration also reinstated roadless forests protections in Southeast Alaska’s Tongass National Forest, one of the last intact temperate rainforests in the world. Indigenous communities there have been protesting destructive logging and development for years, and this achievement is a result of their efforts.

The Tongass Forest is a prime example of the change that can come through community efforts. The best way to help protect old-growth forests is to speak out. With enough public support, government agencies can be persuaded to enact stronger protection policies. Sign petitions, join protests, write letters to your representatives. Every bit of support can help.

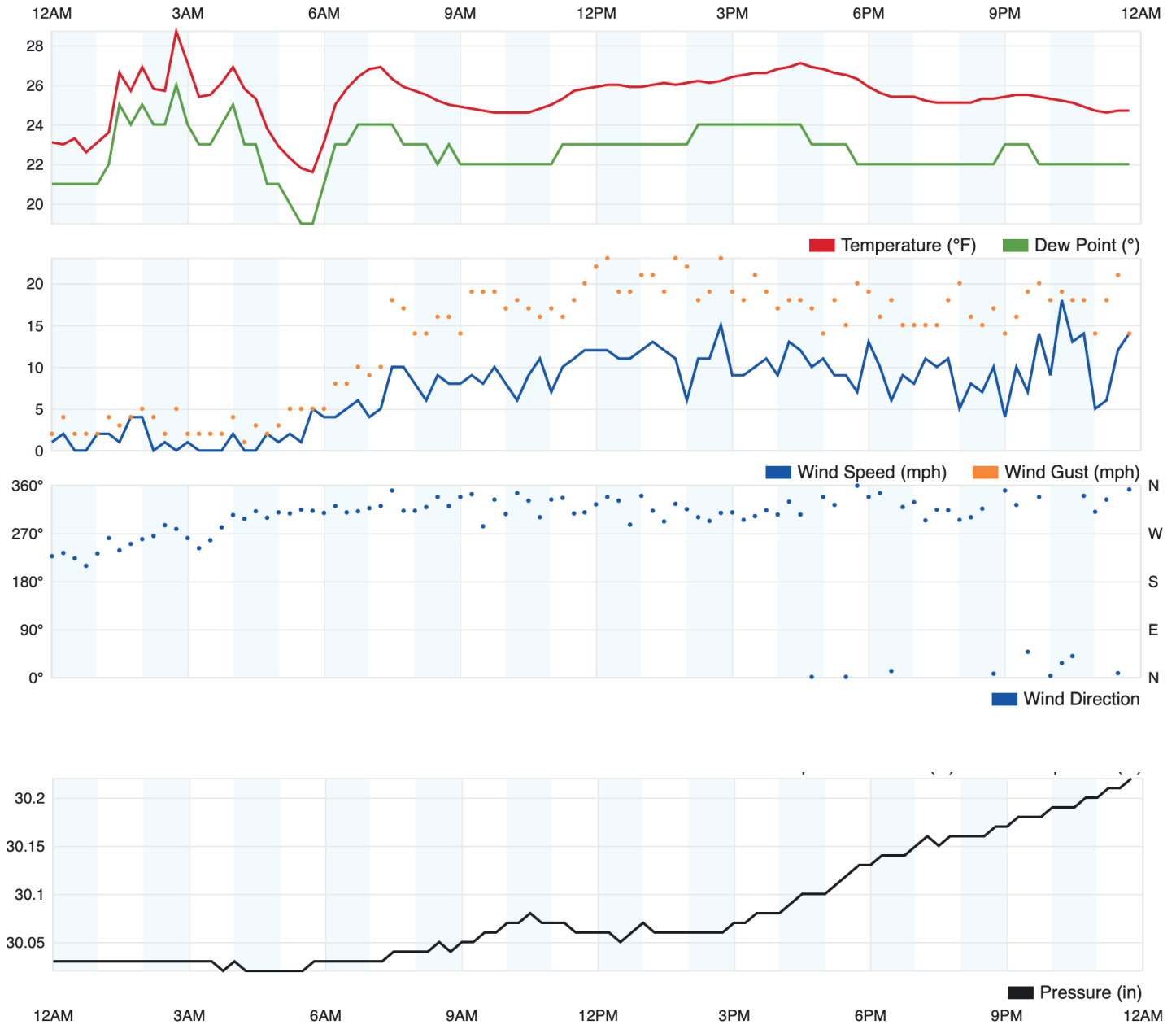


A recent national inventory shows the U.S. has more old-growth forest left than researchers originally thought. Credit: Roddy Scheer.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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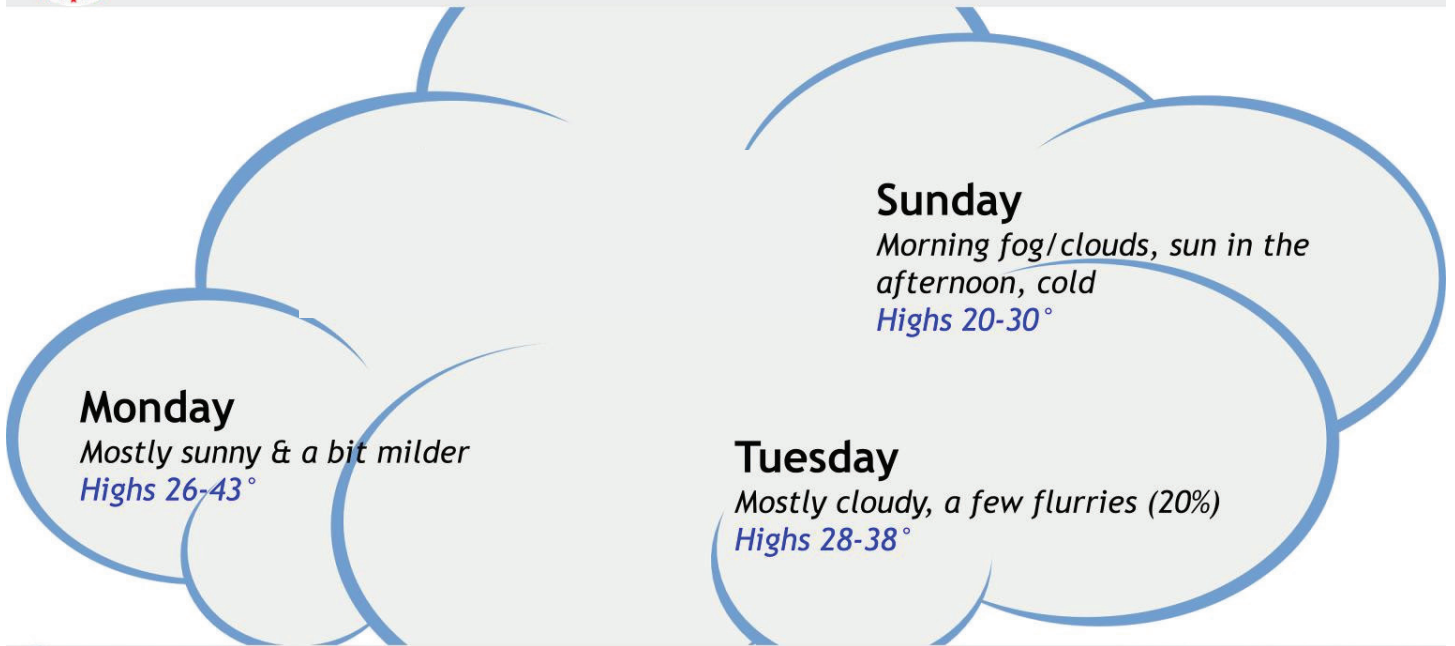
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Sun Dec 31	Mon Jan 1	Tue Jan 2	Wed Jan 3	Thu Jan 4	Fri Jan 5	Sat Jan 6
23°F 12°F	27°F 19°F	29°F 17°F	23°F 10°F	24°F 17°F	24°F 14°F	25°F 13°F
N 10 MPH	SSW 14 MPH	WNW 11 MPH	NNW 12 MPH	S 14 MPH	N 10 MPH	E 7 MPH
						10%



Forecast Through Early Next Week

December 30, 2023
1:37 PM



National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
U.S. Department of Commerce

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Surface high pressure will bring chilly temperatures to the area through Sunday night. Flurries and patchy freezing drizzle are also possible into the evening hours over the Prairie Coteau.

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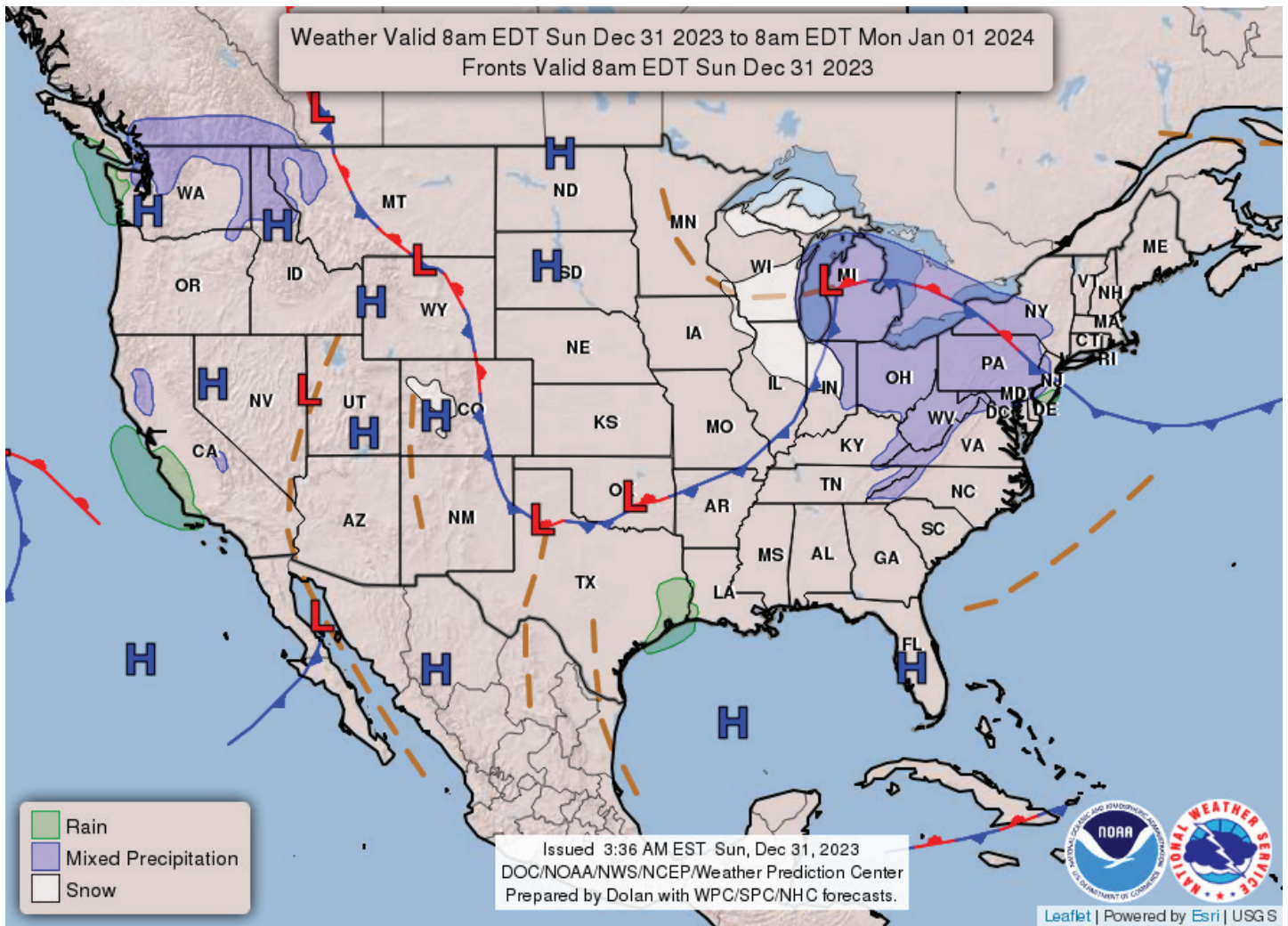
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 29 °F at 2:42 AM
Low Temp: 22 °F at 5:43 AM
Wind: 23 mph at 11:46 AM
Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 8 hours, 49 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 47 in 1999
Record Low: -39 in 1967
Average High: 24
Average Low: 4
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.61
Precip to date in Dec.: 1.85
Average Precip to date: 21.82
Precip Year to Date: 25.02
Sunset Tonight: 5:00:21 pm
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:10:27 am



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Today in Weather History

2010: An area of low pressure moved across the Northern Plains on New Year's Eve bringing widespread heavy snowfall along with blizzard conditions. Bitter cold northwest winds of 25 to 40 mph combined with additional snowfall of 6 to 10 inches brought reduced visibility to near zero across much of the region. This storm was the second blizzard in two days across the area. The blizzard conditions continued into early New Year's Day. Both Interstates 29 and 90 were closed from the 31st until Sunday, January 2nd. There were several stranded motorists along Highway 83 with five people being rescued. The total snowfall amounts from the two storms ranged from 6 to 15 inches across the region.

1876: A heavy snowstorm hit southern Arkansas, with amounts well over 20 inches in places. 28 inches was reported near Warren, and 24–28 inches was reported at Arkansas City.

1880 - The temperature at Charlotte, NC, plunged to an all-time record cold reading of 5 degrees below zero, a record which was equalled on the 21st of January in 1985. (The Weather Channel)

1882: Downtown San Francisco saw 3.5 inches of snow.

1890: According to the National Meteorological Library and Archive from the United Kingdom, during December 1890, Westminster, England saw zero hours of sunshine.

1917 - A great cold wave set many records in the northeastern U.S. The mercury plunged to 13 degrees below zero at New York City, and to 15 degrees below zero at Boston. Temperature readings dipped below zero at Boston five nights in a row. Berlin NH hit 44 degrees below zero in the "Great World War I Cold Wave," and Saint Johnsbury VT reached 43 degrees below zero. (David Ludlum)

1933: During the last week of December, a series of winter storms pounded the mountainside with 12 inches of rain near Los Angeles. More rain occurred on New Year's Eve, including 4.86 inches in downtown Los Angeles. The 4.86 inches is currently the fourth most rainfall to occur in one day in downtown Los Angeles since 1877. Around midnight, hillsides in at least three mountain locations collapsed sending millions of tons of mud and debris into the Crescenta Valley neighborhoods below. Crescenta Valley is a few miles north of Los Angeles. This mudslide destroyed more than 400 homes. Following the disaster, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the County of Los Angeles built a flood control system of catch basins, and concrete storm drains, designed to prevent a repeat of the 1934 disaster.

1955 - Anchorage, AK, reported an all-time record snow depth of 47 inches. (30th-1st) (The Weather Channel)

1967: The kickoff temperature for the NFL Championship Game between the Dallas Cowboys and the Green Bay Packers was -13°F with a wind chill of -36°F. This game is known as the "Ice Bowl."

1987 - A storm in the western U.S. produced heavy snow in Utah, with 28 inches reported in the Mount Holly and Elk Meadows area. Strong winds prevailed ahead of a cold front in the central U.S. Winds gusted to 46 mph at Dodge City KS, and reached 80 mph at Ruidoso NM. Strong northerly winds, ushering arctic cold into the north central U.S., created blizzard conditions in western Minnesota and central and eastern South Dakota. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Unseasonably cold weather prevailed in the southwestern U.S. A week of subfreezing temperatures in southern California claimed the lives of five people. Redding CA was blanketed with four inches of snow. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Extreme cold continued across northern Maine. Milo ME was the cold spot in the nation with a morning low of 38 degrees below zero, and the low of 31 degrees below zero at Caribou ME was a December record for that location. Freezing rain spread across much of Lower Michigan, knocking out electrical power to 1.9 million customers in southeastern Lower Michigan. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2000: The "Snow Bowl" was played between Mississippi St and Texas A&M at Independence Stadium in Shreveport, Louisiana. Snow began about a half hour before kickoff and didn't stop until well after the bowl game.

2008 - Severe to extreme drought was observed across parts of the Hawaiian Islands, the western continental U.S., and parts of Georgia and South Carolina. Meanwhile, severe to exceptional drought conditions were present across southern Texas. (NCDC)

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

SOME FINAL WORDS

Often what we find depends on what we look for. Here are a few things to look for in the days we will face in the year to come:

Look for God's presence. When fear grips us or failure would defeat us, or if life's challenges seem to be larger than we are, or the nights are longer than usual, remember, we are never alone if Jesus rules and reigns in our lives. He promised that "He will never leave us nor forsake us." When life turns to shambles, He will wrap His loving arms around us and protect us because He is with us.

Look for God's power. The psalmist said that "God is our refuge and strength." Often we look to people for insights and advice when we are faced with difficult problems. But their solutions are never as good as the solutions that come from God. God is the greatest asset any Christian has but we must go to Him and draw from His strength and power.

Look for God's provision. "My God shall supply all your needs." Though we may fail Him, He will not fail us. Though we may fail to claim His promises, it does not mean they are not available. If we look to and trust in Him, He will not let us down.

Prayer: Father, we look to You in faith believing that You will meet our every need if we trust You. Lord, help our unbelief! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scriptures For Today: 1 Kings 8:56-58; Psalm 46:1-3; Philippians 4:19



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

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2023 Community Events

- 01/29/2023 Groton Robotics Pancake Feed, 10am-1pm, Community Center
- 01/29/2023 85th Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm (Last Sunday of January)
- 01/31/2023-02/03/2023 Lion's Club Prom & Formal Dress Consignment Drop Off 6-9pm, Community Center
- 02/04/2023-02/05/2023 Lion's Club Prom & Formal Dress Consignment Sale 1-5pm, Community Center
- 02/25/2023 Littles and Me, Art Making 10-11:30am, Wage Memorial Library
- 03/25/2023 Spring Vendor Fair, 10am-3pm, Community Center
- 04/01/2023 Dueling Duo Baseball/Softball Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
- 04/06/2023 Groton Career Development Event
- 04/08/2023 Lion's Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter)
- 04/22/2023 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
- 04/23/2023 Princess Prom 4:30-8pm (Sunday after GHS Prom)
- 05/06/2023 Lion's Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
- 05/29/2023 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
- 06/16/2023 SDSU Alumni and Friends Golf Tournament
- 06/17/2023 Groton Triathlon
- 07/04/2023 Couples Firecracker Golf Tournament
- 07/09/2023 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
- 07/26/2023 GGA Burger Fundraiser Lunch at Olive Grove Golf Course
- 08/04/2023 Wine on Nine 6pm
- 08/10/2023 Family Fun Fest, 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.
- 08/11/2023 GHS Basketball Golf Tournament
- 09/08/2023 Family Fun Fest 3:30-5:30pm
- 09/09/2023 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm
- 09/09-10/2023 Groton Airport Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport
- 09/10/2023 Couples Sunflower Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 10am
- 09/10/2023 Emmanuel Lutheran Church Sunday School Rally 9:00am
- 09/10/2023 7th Annual Doggie Day at the Swimming Pool 4-6pm
- 09/15/2023 Homecoming Parade
- 10/13/2023 Lake Region Marching Band Festival 10am
- 10/14/2023 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm
- 10/31/2023 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm
- 10/31/2023 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
- 11/05/2023 St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Catholic Church Fall Dinner, 5 p.m. to 7 p.m.
- 11/11/2023 Groton American Legion Annual Turkey Party 6:30 pm.
- 11/23/2023 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm
- 11/26/2023 Snow Queen Contest, 4 p.m.
- 12/02/2023 Live & Silent Auctions at Olive Grove Golf Course 4pm-close

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.29.23

11 27 30 62 70 10

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$114,000,000

NEXT DRAW:

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.30.23

9 10 11 30 44 7

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$2,050,000

NEXT DRAW:

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.30.23

6 13 17 37 44 17

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 56 Mins 28 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.30.23

1 15 17 21 22

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$20,000

NEXT DRAW:

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.30.23

1 4 5 6 42 8

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW:

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 12.30.23

10 11 26 27 34 7

Power Play: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$810,000,000

NEXT DRAW:

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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News from the  Associated Press

Saturday's Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Arlington 48, Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 39
Baltic 57, Deubrook 37
Brandon Valley 64, Thunder Basin, Wyo. 46
Brookings 53, Yankton 46
Castlewood 71, Madison 39
Clark-Willow Lake 62, Chamberlain 47
Crazy Horse 63, Mitchell Christian 45
DeSmet 52, Chester 24
Elk Point-Jefferson 73, Irene-Wakonda 37
Estelline-Hendricks 60, Deuel 53
Faulkton 55, Burke 53
Flandreau 61, Colman-Egan 40
Garretson 64, Iroquois-Lake Preston 50
Hamlin 73, Dell Rapids 42
Harding County 77, Edgemont 21
Howard 70, James Valley Christian 52
Ipswich 58, Timber Lake 40
Lower Brule 55, Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 49
Pierre T F Riggs High School 78, Bismarck, N.D. 73
Potter County 58, Bridgewater-Emery 56
Rapid City Christian 78, Campbell County, Wyo. 61
Rapid City Stevens 64, Rapid City Central 32
Red Cloud 57, Belle Fourche 54
Sioux Falls Lincoln High School 53, Sioux Falls Jefferson 50
Sioux Falls Roosevelt 72, Sioux Falls Washington 49
Sioux Valley 59, Dell Rapids St. Mary 47
Spearfish 47, Hot Springs 46
Thunder Basin, Wyo. 54, Aberdeen Central 49
Waverly-South Shore 53, Elkton-Lake Benton 47
Wessington Springs 67, Jones County 27
West Central 60, Hill City 45
Chadron Holiday Tournament=
Championship=
Custer 62, Chadron, Neb. 55
Mitchell Hoop City Classic=
Mitchell 44, DeLaSalle, Minn. 41
Waconia, Minn. 68, Lennox 65

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

Australians and New Zealanders preparing to be among first nations to ring in 2024 with fireworks

by The Associated Press undefined

Australians and New Zealanders are making final preparations on New Year's Eve to become among the first nations to ring in 2024 as ongoing wars in Ukraine and Gaza cast a pall over celebrations and heightened tensions across parts of the world.

Rain in New Zealand's largest city Auckland is expected to ease by midnight when downtown Sky Tower, the country's tallest structure, erupts with fireworks as the centerpiece of a spectacular annual light show.

Two hours later in neighboring Australia, the Sydney Harbor Bridge will become the focal point of a renowned midnight fireworks display and light show viewed annually by around 425 million people worldwide, according to city authorities.

More police than ever have been deployed throughout Sydney to ensure safety as more than 1 million people — equivalent to one in five of the city's population — converge on the harbor waterfront for the best available views, state government authorities said in a statement.

Many revelers have been camping at the best vantage points since Sunday morning.

The waterfront has been the scene of heated pro-Palestinian protests after the sails of the Sydney Opera House were illuminated in the colors of the Israeli flag in response to the Oct. 7 attack by Palestinian militant group Hamas that triggered the war.

In New York's Times Square, officials and party organizers say they are prepared to welcome crowds of revelers and ensure their safety.

At a security briefing Friday, New York City Mayor Eric Adams said there were "no specific threats" to the annual New Year's Eve bash, which is expected to draw tens of thousands of people to the heart of midtown Manhattan.

The celebrity-filled event will include live performances from Flo Rida, Megan Thee Stallion and LL Cool J, as well as televised appearances from Cardi B and others. Organizers said in-person attendance is expected to return to pre-COVID levels, even as foot traffic around Times Square remains down slightly since the pandemic.

Amid near-daily protests in New York sparked by the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza, police said they would expand the security perimeter around the party, creating a "buffer zone" that will allow them to head off potential demonstrations.

"We will be out here with our canines, on horseback, our helicopters, our boats," Adams said. Officials will also monitor protests with drones, he said. "But as we saw last year, after having no specific threats, we get a threat."

During last year's New Year's Eve party, a machete-wielding man attacked three police officers a few blocks from Times Square.

Security will also be heightened across France on Sunday, with 90,000 law enforcement officers set to be deployed, domestic intelligence chief Céline Berthon said Friday.

Of those, 6,000 will be in Paris, where French Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin said over 1.5 million people are expected to attend celebrations on the Champs-Élysées.

Speaking at a press conference, Darmanin cited a "very high terrorist threat" because, in part, of "what is happening in Israel and Palestine," referring to the Israel-Hamas war.

Darmanin said that police for the first time will be able to use drones as part of security work and that tens of thousands of firefighters and 5,000 soldiers would also be deployed.

New Year's Eve celebrations in the French capital will center on the 2024 Paris Olympic Games, including DJ sets, fireworks and video projections on the Arc de Triomphe, highlighting "changes in the city and faces of the Games," according to the press service of the City of Paris. Other planned events include "the largest Mexican wave ever performed" and a "giant karaoke." Local authorities have instituted a ban on the sale of alcohol on and around the Champs-Élysées on New Year's Eve, and the public will not be able to access the area with glass bottles and flasks.

The security challenge ahead of the Olympics was highlighted when a tourist was killed in a knife attack near the Eiffel Tower on Dec. 2. Large-scale attacks — such as that at the Bataclan in 2015, when Islamic extremists invaded the music hall and shot up cafe terraces, killing 130 people — also loom in memory.

The knife attack raised concern in France and abroad about security for the Games that begin July 26, in just under seven months. But law enforcement officials appear eager to show off a security-ready Paris.

In Muslim-majority Pakistan, the government has banned all New Year's Eve celebrations as an act of solidarity with the Palestinians.

In an overnight televised message, caretaker Prime Minister Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar urged Pakistanis to "show solidarity with the oppressed people of Gaza" by beginning the new year with simplicity.

Kakar said Muslims across the world were saddened over Israel's attacks on Gaza that resulted in the killings of thousands of innocent people.

North Korea's Kim vows to launch 3 more spy satellites and produce more nuclear materials in 2024

By HYUNG-JIN KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korean leader Kim Jong Un vowed to launch three additional military spy satellites, produce more nuclear materials and introduce modern attack drones in 2024, as he called for "overwhelming" war readiness to cope with U.S.-led confrontational moves, state media reported Sunday.

Kim's comments, made during a key ruling Workers' Party meeting to set state goals for next year, suggest he'll intensify a run of weapons tests ahead of the U.S. presidential elections in November. Observers say Kim believes a boosted nuclear capability would give him another chance for high-stakes diplomacy with the U.S. to win sanctions relief if former President Donald Trump returns to the White House.

During the five-day meeting that ended Saturday, Kim said "vicious" anti-North Korea moves by the United States and its followers "have reached the extremes unprecedented in history," pushing the Korean Peninsula to the brink of a nuclear war, according to the official Korean Central News Agency. Kim cited the expansion of U.S.-South Korean military exercises and the temporary deployment of powerful U.S. military assets such as bombers and a nuclear-armed submarine in South Korea — steps the allies have taken in response to the North's weapons testing spree since last year.

Kim called for "the overwhelming war response capability" to deter potential enemy provocations, KCNA said.

He set forth plans to launch three more military spy satellites next year in addition to the country's first reconnaissance satellite launched in November. He underscored the need to establish "a reliable foundation" to build more nuclear weapons, an apparent reference to facilities producing fissile materials like weapons-grade plutonium and highly enriched uranium. Kim also ordered authorities to enhance submarine capabilities and develop various types of modern unmanned combat equipment such as armed drones.

"Pyongyang might be waiting out the U.S. presidential election to see what its provocations can buy it with the next administration," said Leif-Eric Easley, a professor at Ewha University in Seoul.

"The Kim regime has closed the political door on denuclearization negotiations but could offer rhetorical restraint and a testing freeze in exchange for sanctions relief," Easley said. "Although North Korea has no intention of giving up nuclear weapons, it might try to extract payment for acting like a so-called responsible nuclear power."

Kim has been focusing on modernizing his nuclear arsenal since his diplomacy with Trump broke down in 2019 due to wrangling over how much sanctions relief the North could get for a partial surrender of its nuclear program. Experts say Kim likely thinks that Trump, if elected for a second term, could make concessions as the U.S. is preoccupied with the Russia-Ukraine war and the Israel-Hamas fighting.

Nam Sung-wook, a professor at Korea University in South Korea, said if President Joe Biden is reelected, North Korea won't get what it wants. But he predicted a Trump win could revive diplomacy, saying Trump will likely say during his campaign that he can convince North Korea to suspend intimidating weapons tests.

He said Kim's vow to ramp up production of plutonium and uranium is meant to strengthen his negoti-

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ating cards. Nam said North Korea will also test-launch more intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of reaching the continental U.S. this year.

"North Korea will act to the fullest extent under its timetable for provocation until the U.S. election day," Nam said.

During his speech at the party meeting, Kim used bellicose, derisive rhetoric against South Korea, calling it "a hemiplegic malformation and colonial subordinate state" whose society is "tainted by Yankee culture." He said South Korea must not be considered as a partner for reconciliation or unification. He ordered the military to use all available means including nuclear weapons to conquer South Korea in the event of a conflict.

South Korea's Unification Ministry responded Sunday saying it strongly condemns North Korea for advancing its nuclear program and displaying hostility toward its neighbors. A statement said South Korea will try to overwhelmingly deter North Korean threats based on a solid alliance with the United States.

Some analysts have speculated that limited clashes between the Koreas along their tense land and sea border could happen in the coming year. South Korea's spy agency said last week that North Korea will likely launch military provocations and cyberattacks ahead of South Korean parliamentary elections in April and the U.S. presidential election in November.

Kim also maintained that North Korea must solidify cooperation with "anti-imperialist, independent" countries that he said oppose U.S.-led Western hegemony.

Kim didn't name the countries. But North Korea has been seeking to beef up its cooperation with Russia and China, which have repeatedly blocked attempts by the U.S. and allies to toughen U.N. sanctions on the North over its banned missile tests. The U.S. and South Korea accuse North Korea of supplying artillery and ammunition to Russia in return for high-tech Russian technologies for its own military programs.

Julianne Smith, U.S. permanent representative to NATO, said earlier this month the U.S. assessed that the suspected Russian technologies North Korea seeks are related to fighter aircraft, surface-to-air missiles, armored vehicles, ballistic missile production equipment or materials of that kind. Smith said U.S. intelligence indicates that North Korea had provided Russia with more than 1,000 containers of military equipment and munitions.

South Korean officials said Russian support likely enabled North Korea to put its spy satellite into orbit for the first time on Nov. 21. Many foreign experts are skeptical about the satellite's ability but South Korean Defense Minister Shin Wonsik said in November that Russia could help North Korea produce higher-resolution satellite photos.

Yang Uk, an analyst at Seoul's Asan Institute for Policy Studies, said that North Korea hasn't yet obtained functioning ICBMs that can launch nuclear strikes on the continental U.S. But he said North Korea's shorter-range nuclear-armed missiles can reach South Korea and Japan, where a total of 80,000 American troops are stationed.

Estimates on the size of North Korea's nuclear arsenal vary, ranging from 20-30 bombs to more than 100. The U.N. atomic agency and foreign experts recently said North Korea appears to have started operating a light-water reactor at its main nuclear complex in a possible attempt to secure a new source for weapons-grade plutonium.

Meanwhile, Kim said during the meeting that North Korea made "eye-opening" economic achievements by fulfilling or exceeding set quotas in major areas such as farming, housing construction and fisheries. Nam, the professor, said the self-praise appears aimed at burnishing Kim's image as a leader who cares about public livelihoods as well as military issues.

US forces shoot down ballistic missiles in Red Sea, kills gunmen in attack by Yemen's Houthi rebels

BEIRUT (AP) — The U.S. military said Sunday it shot down two anti-ship ballistic missiles fired toward a container ship by Yemen's Houthi rebels in the Red Sea. Hours later, four boats tried to attack the same ship, but U.S. forces opened fire, killing several of the armed crews, the U.S. Central Command said. No one was injured on the ship.

The Singapore-flagged MAERSK HANZGHOU reported they had already been hit by a missile Saturday night while transiting the Southern Red Sea and requested assistance, CENTCOM said in a statement. The USS GRAVELY and USS LABOON responded to the call for help, and the Denmark-owned vessel was reportedly seaworthy and no injuries were noted, the statement added.

"This is the 23rd illegal attack by the Houthis on international shipping since Nov. 19," CENTCOM said.

In another statement, CENTCOM said the same ship issued an additional distress call about a second attack "by four Iranian-backed Houthi small boats." The attackers fired small arms weapons at the MAERSK HANZGHOU, getting to within 20 meters (about 65 feet) of the vessel, and attempted to hit it, CENTCOM said.

A contract-embarked security team on the ship returned fire, the central command said. U.S. helicopters from the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower aircraft carrier and GRAVELY responded to the distress call and while issuing verbal warnings to the attackers, the small boat crews opened fire on the helicopters using small arms, the statement said.

"The U.S. Navy helicopters returned fire in self-defense," sinking three of the four boats, killing the crews while the fourth boat fled the area, CENTCOM said, and no damage to U.S. personnel or equipment was reported.

The Iran-backed Houthis have claimed attacks on ships in the Red Sea that they say are either linked to Israel or heading to Israeli ports. They say their attacks aim to end Israel's air-and-ground offensive targeting the Gaza Strip following the attack by the Palestinian militant group Hamas on Oct. 7.

On Saturday, the top commander of U.S. naval forces in the Middle East said Houthi rebels have shown no signs of ending their "reckless" attacks on commercial ships in the Red Sea even as more nations join the international maritime mission to protect vessels in the vital waterway and trade traffic begins to pick up.

Since the Pentagon announced Operation Prosperity Guardian to counter the attacks just over 10 days ago, 1,200 merchant ships have traveled through the Red Sea region, and none has been hit by drone or missile strikes, Vice Adm. Brad Cooper said in an Associated Press interview.

Russia launches fresh drone strikes on Ukraine after promising retaliation for Belgorod attack

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russia launched a fresh drone assault on Ukraine on Saturday night, after promising that strikes on the Russian border city of Belgorod earlier in the day "would not go unpunished".

The Ukrainian Air Force said Sunday that it had shot down 21 of 49 drones launched by Russian forces overnight.

Twenty-eight people were wounded in an attack on the eastern city of Kharkiv, regional Gov. Oleh Syniehubov said Sunday. A central hotel, apartment buildings, kindergarten, shops and administrative buildings sustained damage, according to the regional prosecutor's office.

Russia's Defense Ministry said that it had hit "decision-making centers and military facilities" in Kharkiv, reporting that its strike on the Kharkiv Palace Hotel had "destroyed representatives of the Main Intelligence Directorate and Ukrainian Armed Forces" involved in the "terrorist attack" in Belgorod.

In the Kyiv region that surrounds the capital, a Russian drone attack caused a fire to break out at a critical infrastructure facility, local officials said. They did not identify the facility further.

Shelling in the center of the Russian border city of Belgorod Saturday killed 24 people, including three children. A further 108 people were wounded in the strike, regional governor Vyacheslav Gladkov said Sunday, making it one of the deadliest attacks on Russian soil since the start of Moscow's invasion of

Ukraine 22 months ago.

Russian authorities accused Kyiv of carrying out the attack, which took place the day after an 18-hour Russian aerial bombardment across Ukraine killed at least 41 civilians.

Russia's Defense Ministry said it identified the ammunition used in the strike as Czech-made Vampire rockets and Olkha missiles fitted with cluster-munition warheads. It provided no additional information, and The Associated Press was unable to verify its claims.

"This crime will not go unpunished," the ministry said in a statement on social media.

In an emergency meeting at the U.N. Security Council demanded by Russia Saturday night, envoy Vasiliy Nebenzya accused Kyiv of a "terrorist attack." In comments carried by Russian state media, Nebenzya claimed Ukraine had launched "a deliberate act of terrorism directed against civilians."

Ukrainians are bracing for further attacks. A blistering New Year's Eve assault by Russia last year killed at least three civilians.

Displaced, repatriated and crossing borders: Afghan people make grueling journeys to survive

By EBRAHIM NOROOZI Associated Press

TORKHAM, Afghanistan (AP) — The barren desert plain among the mountains of eastern Afghanistan is filled with hundreds of thousands of people.

Some live in tents. Others live out in the open, among the piles of the few belongings they managed to take as they were forced from neighboring Pakistan.

The sprawling camp of people returning to Afghanistan through the Torkham border crossing is the latest facet of Afghans' long, painful search for a stable home.

More than 40 years of war, violence and poverty in Afghanistan have created one of the world's most uprooted populations. Some 6 million Afghans are refugees outside the country. Another 3.5 million people are displaced within the country of 40 million, driven from their homes by war, earthquakes, drought or resources that are being depleted.

Over the course of months, an Associated Press photographer traveled across Afghanistan from its eastern border with Pakistan to its western border with Iran, getting to know displaced people and returned refugees and capturing their images.

Afghanistan is already a poor country, especially after the economic collapse that followed the takeover by the Taliban two years ago. More than 28 million people — two-thirds of the population — rely on international aid to survive.

The displaced are among the poorest of the poor. Many live in camps around the country, unable to afford enough food or firewood for heat in the winter. Women and children often turn to begging. Others marry off their young daughters to families willing to pay them money.

In a camp for internally displaced people outside Kabul, it was 15-year-old Shamila's wedding day. She stood in a bright-red dress among the family's women, who congratulated her. But the girl was miserable.

"I have no choice. If I don't accept, my family will be hurt," said Shamila, whose father did not give the family's name because he feared being identified by the Taliban. Her groom's family is giving her father money to pay off the debts he's had to take on to support his wife and children.

"I wanted to study and work, I should have gone to school," Shamila said. "I have to forget all my dreams ... so at least I can help my father and my family a little and maybe I can take the burden off their shoulders."

Pakistan's decision earlier this year to deport Afghans who entered illegally struck hard. Many Afghans have lived for decades in Pakistan, driven there by successive wars at home. When the order was announced, hundreds of thousands feared arrest and fled back to Afghanistan. Often Pakistani authorities prevented them from taking anything with them, they say.

Their first stop has been the camp in Torkham, where they might spend days or weeks before Taliban officials send them to a camp elsewhere. With little food and little to protect them from the mountain

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cold, many in the camp are sick.

In one corner of the camp at the foot of a mountain, 55-year-old Farooq Sadiq sat among some of his belongings, wrapped in cloth, with his wife and children on the ground beside them. Sadiq said he had been living in the Pakistani city of Peshawar for 30 years and owned a home there. Now they had nothing, not even a tent, and had been sleeping on the ground for the past eight nights.

"I have nothing in Afghanistan, no house, no place to live, not enough money to buy a house," he said. He hopes to settle somewhere in Afghanistan and get a visa to Pakistan so he can go sell his home there to use the money for his family.

The expulsions from Pakistan have swelled the already large numbers of Afghans who try to migrate into Iran, hoping to find work.

Every month, thousands cross into Iran at the border near Zaranj. It's a risky route: In the dark of night, with the help of smugglers, they clamber over the border wall using ladders and jump down the other side.

Mostly young men, from 12 to their 20s, use this route, planning to work in Iran and send money home to their families. Many are caught by Iranian border guards and sent back.

The other way is longer — a drive by car for hours to Afghanistan's southwest border, where they cross into Pakistan to make their way to its border with Iran, passing through mountains and deserts. In Pakistan, fighters from the Sunni militant group Jundallah often attack the migrants, killing or kidnapping Shiites among them.

Laws banning semi-automatic weapons and library censorship to take effect in Illinois

By JOHN O'CONNOR AP Political Writer

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. (AP) — With the calendar-page turn to 2024 on Monday comes 320 new state laws that Illinois residents will need to navigate.

Some will have a widespread effect, including a law banning semi-automatic rifles and another requiring paid time off. But others won't have an immediate or noticeable impact, including a law that lets county governments consider a potential contractor's participation in an approved apprenticeship program in determining the winning low bid for a project.

One law that took effect in 2019 but is still impacting tens of thousands of workers is an increase in the minimum wage. It increases to \$14 an hour on Jan. 1 for non-tipped workers and will reach \$15 in a year.

Here are some of the other major changes to Illinois state law as of New Year's Day:

BAN ON SEMI-AUTOMATIC WEAPONS

The U.S. Supreme Court has failed to take up the case of Illinois' ban on the sale, possession or manufacture of automatic weapons like the type used in a mass shooting at a 2023 July Fourth parade in the Chicago suburb of Highland Park.

The law bans dozens of specific brands or types of rifles and handguns, including .50-caliber guns, attachments and rapid-firing devices. No rifle will be allowed to accommodate more than 10 rounds, with a 15-round limit for handguns.

Those who previously purchased such guns must register them with the Illinois State Police by Jan. 1.

BOOK-BAN PROHIBITION

Libraries that indiscriminately ban books will not be eligible for state funds. They must adopt the American Library Association's Library Bill of Rights stating "materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation."

The library association reported that attempts to censor books reached a 20-year high in 2022, especially those with LGBTQ+ themes and those written by people of color.

PAID TIME OFF

Employers will be required to offer paid vacation for any reason. Workers will accrue one hour of paid leave for every 40 hours worked, up to 40 hours total. Employers may offer more than 40 hours and employees may take time off after working for 90 days.

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AIR FRESHENERS ALLOWED

Police will no longer be able to pull over a motorist solely because there is an object hanging from their rearview mirror. The law was approved after Daunte Wright was pulled over in Minnesota in 2021 for having a dangling air freshener. He was shot when the officer, reaching for her stun gun, instead grabbed her sidearm.

NO VIDEOCONFERENCING ON THE ROAD

Video meetings, streaming or accessing a social media website while driving will be prohibited. There will be an exception for video on a hands-free or voice-activated device or an application requiring the push of no more than a single button to activate or terminate it.

NO INDOOR VAPING

Vaping or smoking an electronic cigarette or cigar in a public indoor space will be prohibited. The law adds electronic smoking devices to the list of items prohibited in indoor public places under the 2008 Smoke Free Illinois Act, which banned regular tobacco products' indoor use.

LICENSE-PLATE READER RESTRICTIONS

Interstate agreements between law enforcement agencies must specify that license-plate reader technology not be used on cars driven by women coming into Illinois to have abortions.

SURVEILLANCE DRONES

Following the Highland Park parade shooting, lawmakers approved the use of drones by law enforcement to surveil "routed" or "special events." The drones may not be equipped with weapons or facial-recognition technology.

DEEPFAKE PORN

Victims of digital forgeries known as deepfake pornography may file civil lawsuits against anyone who shares or threatens to share an image that falsely depicts a person exposing genitalia or other private parts or engaging in a sex act. Identifying the image as materially altered is not a defense to liability.

RESTROOMS MAY BE ALL-GENDER MULTIOCCUPANCY

Businesses have the option of installing restrooms that may be used by any gender simultaneously. Current restrooms may be renovated to accommodate all genders. Urinals may not be included and stalls must have floor-to-ceiling, locking dividers.

VOTER REGISTRATION FOR TEENS

Teenagers may pre-register to vote at age 16 or 17 while obtaining a driver's license or state identification card at a drivers' services office run by the secretary of state. When turning 18, the legal voting age, they will already be registered to vote.

Maine state official who removed Trump from ballot was targeted in swatting call at her home

By MARK THIESSEN Associated Press

A fake emergency call to police resulted in officers responding Friday night to the home of Maine Secretary of State Shenna Bellows just a day after she removed former President Donald Trump from the state's presidential primary ballot under the Constitution's insurrection clause.

She becomes the latest elected politician to become a target of swatting, which involves making a phone call to emergency services with the intent that a large first responder presence, including SWAT teams, will show up at a residence.

Bellows was not home when the swatting call was made, and responding officers found nothing suspicious.

Suppects in swatting cases are being arrested and charged as states contemplate stronger penalties.

Republican U.S. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene was the target of a swatting attempt at her Georgia residence on Christmas morning, the congresswoman and local police said.

A man in New York called the Georgia suicide hotline claiming he had shot his girlfriend at Greene's home and was going to kill himself. Police said investigators were working to identify the caller and build a criminal case.

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Another New York man was sentenced in August to three months in prison for making threatening phone calls to Greene's office in Washington, D.C.

While the Maine Department of Public Safety did not share a suspected motive for the swatting attempt against Bellows, she had no doubts it stemmed from her decision to remove Trump from the ballot. The swatting attempt came after a conservative activist posted her home address on social media.

"And it was posted in anger and with violent intent by those who have been extending threatening communications toward me, my family and my office," Bellows told The Associated Press in a phone call Saturday.

A call was made to emergency services from an unknown man saying he had broken into a house in Manchester, according to the Maine public safety department.

The address the man gave was Bellows' home. Bellows and her husband were away for the holiday weekend. Maine State Police responded to what the public safety department said ultimately turned out to be a swatting call.

Police conducted an exterior sweep of the house and then checked inside at Bellows' request. Nothing suspicious was found, and police continue to investigate.

"The Maine State Police is working with our law enforcement partners to provide special attention to any and all appropriate locations," the public safety statement said.

Bellows said the intimidation factors won't work. "Here's what I'm not doing differently. I'm doing my job to uphold the Constitution, the rule of law."

Beyond Bellows and Greene, other high-profile politicians who have been swatting call targets include U.S. Sen. Rick Scott of Florida, Boston Mayor Michelle Wu and Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost.

Bellows said she, her family and her office workers have been threatened since her decision to remove Trump from the ballot. At least one Republican lawmaker in Maine wants to pursue impeachment against her.

"Not only have there been threatening communications, but there have been dehumanizing fake images posted online and even fake text threads attributed to me," said Bellows, who has worked in civil rights prior to becoming secretary of state.

"And my previous work taught me that dehumanizing people is the first step in creating an environment that leads to attacks and violence against that person," she said. "It is extraordinarily dangerous for the rhetoric to have escalated to the point of dehumanizing me and threatening me, my loved ones and the people who work for me."

She said the people of Maine have a strong tradition of being able to disagree on important issues without violence.

"I think it is extraordinarily important that everyone deescalate the rhetoric and remember the values that make our democratic republic and here in Maine, our state, so great," she said.

The Trump campaign said it would appeal Bellows' decision to Maine's state courts, and Bellows suspended her ruling until that court system rules on the case.

The Colorado Supreme Court earlier this month removed Trump from that state's ballot, a decision that also was stayed until the U.S. Supreme Court decides whether he would be barred under the insurrection clause, a Civil War-era provision which prohibits those who "engaged in insurrection" from holding office.

Mexico and Venezuela restart repatriation flights amid pressure to curb soaring migration to U.S.

By MEGAN JANETSKY Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — Mexico and Venezuela announced Saturday that they have restarted repatriation flights of Venezuelans migrants in Mexico, the latest move by countries in the region to take on a flood of people traveling north to the United States.

The move comes as authorities say at least 10,000 migrants a day have been arriving at the U.S.-Mexico

border, many of them asylum seekers. It also comes as a migrant caravan of thousands of people from across the region — largely Venezuelans — has trekked through southern Mexico this week.

The repatriation flights are part of an agreement made between regional leaders during a summit in Mexico in October that aimed to seek solutions for migration levels that show few signs of slowing down.

Mexico's Ministry of Foreign Relations said the two countries began repatriations with a flight on Friday and a second on Saturday in an effort to "strengthen their cooperation on migration issues." The statement also said the two countries plan to implement social and work programs for those repatriated to Venezuela.

"Mexico and Venezuela reiterate their commitment to address the structural causes that fuel irregular migration in the region, and to achieve a humanitarian management of such flows," the statement read.

Mexico's government said it previously carried out a similar repatriation flight last Jan. 20 with 110 people.

Venezuelan authorities said Saturday that 207 Venezuelans had landed in Caracas on one of the latest flights.

Gustavo Vizcaino, director of Venezuela's migration agency, said the migrants came on a "voluntary return flight," part of a 2018 program of President Nicolas Maduro's government seeking to bring back Venezuelans who have fled the country's economic and political crisis.

As migration has soared in recent years, the U.S. government has pressured Latin American nations to control the movement of migrants north, but many transit countries have struggled to deal with the quantities of people.

This week, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and other Biden administration officials were in Mexico City to meet with Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador about the high levels of migrants landing on the U.S.-Mexico border.

López Obrador said he also spoke about the issue in a phone call with President Joe Biden on Dec. 20.

"He asked — Joe Biden asked to speak with me — he was worried about the situation on the border because of the unprecedented number of migrants arriving at the border," Mexico's leader said. "He called me, saying we had to look for a solution together."

López Obrador has said he is willing to help, but in exchange he wants the U.S. to send more development aid to migrants' home countries and to reduce or eliminate sanctions against Cuba and Venezuela.

Mexico's president and other critics of American foreign policy have cited the sanctions on Cuba and Venezuela as one of the root causes of high migration.

Paula Abdul accuses 'American Idol' producer Nigel Lythgoe of sexual assault in lawsuit

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Paula Abdul has accused former "American Idol" producer Nigel Lythgoe of sexually assaulting her in the early 2000s when she was a judge on the reality competition show, according to a new lawsuit.

The lawsuit filed Friday in Los Angeles also accuses Lythgoe of sexually assaulting Abdul after she left "American Idol" and became a judge on Lythgoe's other competition show "So You Think You Can Dance."

The Associated Press generally does not identify alleged victims of sexual assault unless they come forward publicly, as Abdul has done.

In a statement Saturday, Abdul's lawyer Douglas Johnson applauded the singer and dancer for speaking out publicly.

"It was clearly a difficult decision to make, but Ms. Abdul knows that she stands both in the shoes and on the shoulders of many other similarly situated survivors, and she is determined to see that justice is done," Johnson said.

Lythgoe said in a statement that he was "shocked and saddened" to hear of the allegations made by Abdul, who he said he considered a "dear" and "entirely platonic" friend.

"While Paula's history of erratic behavior is well known, I can't pretend to understand exactly why she would file a lawsuit that she must know is untrue," Lythgoe said in the statement. "But I can promise that I will fight this appalling smear with everything I have."

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The lawsuit states Abdul remained silent for years about the alleged assaults out of fear of retaliation by "one of the most well-known producers of television competition shows."

Before "American Idol" and "So You Think You Can Dance," on which Lythgoe served as a judge for 16 seasons, he was a producer on the British show "Pop Idol," which became a global franchise that includes the U.S. iteration starring Abdul.

According to the lawsuit, the first sexual assault occurred while Abdul and Lythgoe were on the road filming auditions for an earlier season of "American Idol," which premiered in 2002.

Abdul says Lythgoe groped her in the elevator of their hotel after a day of filming and "began shoving his tongue down her throat." Abdul pushed him away and ran to her hotel room when the elevator doors opened.

"In tears, Abdul quickly called one of her representatives to inform them of the assault," the lawsuit says, "but ultimately decided not to take action for fear that Lythgoe would have her fired from American Idol."

Abdul, a Grammy- and Emmy-winning artist, starred as a judge for the first eight seasons, leaving in 2009.

In 2015, Abdul became a judge on "So You Think You Can Dance," appearing alongside Lythgoe.

Around that time, Abdul alleged in the lawsuit, Lythgoe forced himself on top of her during a dinner at his home and tried to kiss her. Abdul said she again pushed Lythgoe away and immediately left.

Abdul left the reality show after two seasons. She has not worked with Lythgoe since.

The lawsuit also accuses Lythgoe of taunting Abdul about the alleged assaults, saying to her years later that "they should celebrate" because "the statute of limitations had run."

Abdul filed the suit days before the Dec. 31 deadline of a California law that opened a one-year window for victims to file lawsuits involving sexual abuse claims after the statute of limitations has run out.

More than 3,700 legal claims were filed under a similar law in New York that expired last month.

No. 6 Georgia wins matchup of teams missing CFP, routs No. 4 Florida State 63-3 in Orange Bowl

By The Associated Press undefined

MIAMI GARDENS, Fla. (AP) — Carson Beck passed for 203 yards and two touchdowns, backup QB Gunnar Stockton passed for two more scores and No. 6 Georgia routed previously undefeated and fourth-ranked Florida State 63-3 in the Orange Bowl on Saturday night in a matchup of teams missing out on the College Football Playoff.

Georgia scored on nine of 12 drives and gained 673 total yards against the short-handed Seminoles, who were without more than two dozen players because of opt-outs and transfers, including five starters in their defensive front seven, their top two running backs and top three receivers.

The Bulldogs (13-1), who won the last two national titles, charged out to a 39-point halftime lead, the largest in the bowl's 90-year history, beating West Virginia's 29-point halftime lead over Clemson in 2012. It was also the largest margin of defeat in Florida State's history.

Beck had touchdown passes of 12 and 2 yards and did not play in the second half. Stockton, a freshman, started in the third quarter and immediately ushered another touchdown drive. He finished with 96 yards passing and 46 yards rushing. The Bulldogs became the first program to score at least 55 points in back-to-back bowl games (they beat TCU 65-7 in the Peach Bowl last season).

The Bulldogs' Kendall Milton rushed for 104 yards on nine carries and had two touchdowns. Daijun Edwards added two more rushing scores and 62 yards. Both were part of a senior class that picked up its school-record 50th win.

Florida State (13-1) quarterback Brock Glenn struggled in his second career start, completing 9 of 26 passes for 139 yards with two interceptions.

PEACH BOWL

NO. 11 MISSISSIPPI 38, NO. 10 PENN STATE 25

ATLANTA (AP) — Jaxson Dart passed for 379 yards and three touchdowns, including two to tight end

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Caden Prieskorn, and ran for a score as Mississippi bullied Penn State's proud defense in the Peach Bowl. Ole Miss (11-2) gained 540 yards against Penn State (10-3), which led the nation with its average of 223 yards allowed. It was the most yards and points allowed by the Nittany Lions this season.

The win gave coach Lane Kiffin's Rebels their first 11-win season.

Prieskorn had 10 receptions for 136 yards. He added a 2-point conversion catch to his touchdown receptions of 6 and 37 yards.

For Penn State, Drew Allar shared time at quarterback with Beau Pribula, who threw a 48-yard touchdown pass to Nicholas Singleton late in the first half.

Allar threw an interception in the second quarter and lost a fumble when sacked in the fourth. He completed 19 of 39 passes for 295 yards and two touchdowns.

MUSIC CITY BOWL

MARYLAND 31, AUBURN 13

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — Billy Edwards Jr. ran for a touchdown and threw for a score as Maryland routed Auburn in the Music City Bowl and won a program-record third straight bowl.

Maryland (8-5) hadn't even played three consecutive bowls since 2006-08, and the Terrapins added this victory to their win over Virginia Tech at the Pinstripe Bowl and last year's Duke's Mayo Bowl win over North Carolina State.

This game essentially was over before the end of the first quarter, even without Maryland's Taulia Tagovailoa, the Big Ten's passing leader this season opting out for the NFL draft.

Auburn (6-7) ended coach Hugh Freeze's first season back in the SEC losing three straight. The Tigers also lost a fourth straight bowl. Payton Thorne (13 for 27, 84 yards) and Hank Brown (7 for 9, 132) handled the bulk of the quarterbacking duties for Auburn.

Maryland dominated from the opening snap, taking a 21-0 lead as the Terrapins outgained Auburn 226-13 within the first 12 minutes. Edwards was 6 for 20 passing for 126 yards, and rushed for a team-best 50 yards on 13 carries.

ARIZONA BOWL

WYOMING 16, TOLEDO 15

TUSCON, Ariz. (AP) — John Hoyland kicked a 24-yard field goal as time expired and Wyoming sent coach Craig Bohl into retirement a winner with a victory over Toledo in the Arizona Bowl.

Bohl is retiring after 42 years of coaching — the last 10 in Laramie — and defensive coordinator Jay Sawvel will take over next season.

Toledo (11-3) shut down Wyoming's offense most of the afternoon before the Cowboys started to find an offensive rhythm in the fourth quarter.

Playing in a third straight bowl game for the first time, the Cowboys (9-4) trailed 15-6 after giving up a safety and a field goal in the third quarter.

Evan Svoboda scored on a 1-yard touchdown sneak after Andrew Peasley was injured in the fourth quarter to pull Wyoming within two.

Peasley returned to throw a 26-yard pass after the Cowboys forced a punt, but went down again without being hit. Svoboda then moved the Cowboys quickly down the field — with the help of an unnecessary roughness penalty on Ronald Delancy III — and Hoyland split the uprights to finish off Wyoming's best season since going 10-2 in 1996.

Both teams were able to move the ball in the first half. Neither was able to reach the end zone until Jacquez Stuart raced through a big hole and dodged a tackle along the sideline for an 80-yard touchdown that put the Rockets up 10-6.

Before that, Hoyland kicked two field goals, including a 52-yarder that hit the crossbar and trundled over. Toledo's Luke Pawlak also hit one from 33 yards out.

Houthis show no sign of ending 'reckless'

Red Sea attacks as trade traffic picks up, commander says

By REBECCA SANTANA Associated Press

CHRISTIANSTED, U.S. Virgin Islands (AP) — Yemen's Houthi rebels show no signs of ending their "reckless" attacks on commercial ships in the Red Sea, the top commander of U.S. naval forces in the Middle East said Saturday, even as more nations join the international maritime mission to protect vessels in the vital waterway and trade traffic begins to pick up.

Since Operation Prosperity Guardian was announced just over 10 days ago, 1,200 merchant ships have traveled through the Red Sea region, and none has been hit by drone or missile strikes, Vice Adm. Brad Cooper said in an Associated Press interview. He said additional countries are expected to sign on. Denmark was the latest, announcing Friday it plans to send a frigate to the mission that Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin announced during a visit to Bahrain, where the Navy's 5th Fleet is based, saying that "this is an international challenge that demands collective action."

The Iran-backed Houthis say their attacks are aimed at Israel-linked ships in an effort to stop the Israeli offensive in Gaza.

The narrow Bab el-Mandeb Strait connects the Gulf of Aden to the Red Sea and then the Suez Canal. The crucial trade route links markets in Asia and Europe. The seriousness of the attacks, several of which have damaged vessels, led multiple shipping companies to order their vessels to hold in place and not enter the strait until the security situation improved. Some major shippers were sending their ships around Africa and the Cape of Good Hope, adding time and costs to the journeys.

Currently there are five warships from the United States, France, and the United Kingdom patrolling the waters of the southern Red Sea and the western Gulf of Aden, said Cooper, who heads the 5th Fleet. Since the operation started, the ships have shot down a total of 17 drones and four anti-ship ballistic missiles, he said.

Just two days ago, the USS Mason, a Navy destroyer, downed a drone and anti-ship ballistic missile that were fired by the Houthis, according to U.S. Central Command. The U.S. said the 22nd attack on international shipping by the Houthis since Oct. 19 caused no damage to any of the 18 ships in the area or any reported injuries.

"I expect in the coming weeks we're going to get additional countries," Cooper said, noting Denmark's recent announcement.

The U.S. has said that more than 20 nations are participating, but a number of those nations have not acknowledged it publicly.

On Saturday, Austin discussed the ongoing illegal Houthi attacks in a call with Netherlands' defense minister, Kaja Ollongren, according to the Pentagon. Both condemned the attacks as unacceptable and "profoundly destabilizing" to international order and global commerce, with Austin stressing that they constitute "a significant international problem that demands collective action."

Cooper said the coalition is in direct communication with commercial ships to provide guidance on "maneuvering and the best practices to avoid being attacked," and working closely with the shipping industry to coordinate security.

An international task force had been set up in April 2022 to improve maritime security in the region. But Cooper said Operation Prosperity Guardian has more ships and a persistent presence to assist vessels.

Since the operation started, the Houthis have stepped up their use of anti-ship ballistic missiles, Cooper said. "We are cleareyed that the Houthi reckless attacks will likely continue," he said.

The Houthis seized Yemen's capital, Sanaa, in 2014, launching a grinding war against a Saudi-led coalition that sought to restore the government. The militants have sporadically targeted ships in the region, but the attacks increased since the start of the Israel-Hamas war.

The Houthi threatened to attack any vessel they believe is either going to or coming from Israel. That has escalated to apparently any vessel, with container ships and oil tankers flagged to countries such as Norway and Liberia being attacked or drawing missile fire.

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The shipping company Maersk had announced earlier that it had decided to re-route its ships that have been paused for days outside the strait and Red Sea, and send them around Africa instead. Maersk announced Dec. 25 that it was going to resume sending ships through the strait, citing the operation. Cooper said another shipping company had also resumed using the route.

"Commerce is definitely flowing," Cooper said.

Netanyahu says Gaza war on Hamas will go on for 'many more months,' thanks US for new weapons sales

By WAFAA SHURAF, SAMY MAGDY and ABBY SEWELL Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Saturday that Israel's war on Hamas in Gaza will continue for "many more months," pushing back against persistent international cease-fire calls after mounting civilian deaths, hunger and mass displacement in the besieged enclave.

Netanyahu thanked the Biden administration for its continued backing, including approval for a new emergency weapons sale, the second this month, and prevention of a U.N. Security Council resolution seeking an immediate cease-fire. Israel argues that ending the war now would mean victory for Hamas, a stance shared by the Biden administration, which at the same time urged Israel to do more to avoid harm to Palestinian civilians.

In new fighting, Israeli warplanes struck the urban refugee camps of Nuseirat and Bureij in the center of the territory Saturday as ground forces pushed deeper into the southern city of Khan Younis.

The Health Ministry in Gaza said Saturday that more than 21,600 Palestinians have been killed in Israel's unprecedented air and ground offensive since the deadly Oct. 7 Hamas attack on southern Israel. The ministry, which does not distinguish between the deaths of civilians and combatants, said 165 Palestinians were killed over the past 24 hours. It has said about 70% of those killed have been women and children.

The number of Israeli soldiers killed in Gaza combat rose to 170, after the military announced two more deaths Saturday.

The war has displaced some 85% of Gaza's 2.3 million residents, sending swells of people seeking shelter in Israeli-designated safe areas that the military has nevertheless bombed. Palestinians are left with a sense that nowhere is safe in the tiny enclave.

With Israeli forces expanding their ground offensive this week, tens of thousands more Palestinians streamed into the already crowded city of Rafah at the southernmost end of Gaza.

Thousands of tents and makeshift shacks have sprung up on Rafah's outskirts next to U.N. warehouses. Displaced people arrived in Rafah on foot or on trucks and carts piled high with mattresses. Those who did not find space in overwhelmed shelters pitched tents on roadsides.

"We don't have water. We don't have enough food," Nour Daher, a displaced woman, said Saturday from the sprawling tent camp. "The kids wake up in the morning wanting to eat, wanting to drink. It took us one hour to find water for them. We couldn't bring them flour. Even when we wanted to take them to toilets, it took us one hour to walk."

In the Nuseirat camp, resident Mustafa Abu Wawee said a strike hit the home of one of his relatives, killing two people.

"The (Israeli) occupation is doing everything to force people to leave," he said over the phone while helping to search for four people missing under the rubble. "They want to break our spirit and will, but they will fail. We are here to stay."

MORE U.S. WEAPONS FOR ISRAEL

The State Department said Friday that Secretary of State Antony Blinken told Congress he approved a \$147.5 million sale for equipment, including fuses, charges and primers, that is needed for 155 mm shells Israel bought previously.

It marked the second time this month that the Biden administration is bypassing Congress to approve an emergency weapons sale to Israel. Blinken made a similar decision on Dec. 9 to approve the sale to

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Israel of nearly 14,000 rounds of tank ammunition worth more than \$106 million.

Both moves have come as President Joe Biden's request for a nearly \$106 billion aid package for Ukraine, Israel and other national security needs remains stalled in Congress, caught up in a debate over U.S. immigration policy and border security. Some Democratic lawmakers have spoken of making the proposed \$14.3 billion in American assistance to its Mideast ally contingent on concrete steps by Netanyahu's government to reduce civilian casualties in Gaza during the war with Hamas.

THE WAR'S TIMELINE

Blinken, who has repeatedly traveled to the Middle East during the war, was expected back in Israel and other countries in the region in January. U.S. officials have urged Israel to start shifting from high intensity combat to more targeted operations, but said they were not imposing a deadline.

Netanyahu said Israel needs more time.

"As the chief of staff said this week, the war will continue many more months," he told a televised news conference Saturday. "My policy is clear. We will continue to fight until we have achieved all the objectives of the war, first and foremost the annihilation of Hamas and the release of all the hostages."

More than 120 hostages remain in Gaza, after militants seized more than 240 in the Oct. 7 assault that also killed some 1,200 people, mostly civilians.

Netanyahu is also at odds with the Biden administration over who should run Gaza after the war. He has rejected the U.S.-backed idea that a unified Palestinian government should run both Gaza and parts of the Israeli-occupied West Bank as a precursor to eventual statehood. Instead, he has insisted on open-ended Israeli security control in Gaza, without saying what would come next.

TRADING FOR HOSTAGES

Families of hostages and their supporters have demanded that the government prioritize hostage releases over other war objectives, and have staged large protests every weekend, including Saturday.

Egypt, one of the mediators between Israel and Hamas, has proposed a multistage plan that would kick off with a swap of hostages for prisoners, accompanied by a temporary cease-fire — along the lines of an exchange during a weeklong truce in November.

Hamas insists the war must end before it will discuss hostage releases. Osama Hamdan, a senior Hamas official in Beirut, reiterated that position Saturday, but also told The Associated Press that "we have not given any final answer so far" to the Egyptian proposal.

Asked about reports of possible progress toward a deal, Netanyahu said Saturday that "we see a possibility, maybe, for movement" but that he did not want to raise "exaggerated expectations."

DIFFICULTIES IN DELIVERING AID

More than a week after a U.N. Security Council resolution called for the unhindered delivery of aid at scale across besieged Gaza, conditions have only worsened, U.N. agencies warned.

Aid officials said the aid entering Gaza remains woefully inadequate. Distributing goods is hampered by long delays at two border crossings, ongoing fighting, Israeli airstrikes, repeated cuts in internet and phone services and a breakdown of law and order that makes it difficult to secure aid convoys, they said.

Nearly the entire population is fully dependent on outside humanitarian aid, said Philippe Lazzarini, head of UNRWA, the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees. A quarter of the population is starving because too few trucks enter with food, medicine, fuel and other supplies — sometimes fewer than 100 trucks a day, according to U.N. daily reports.

Family of 4 found dead in apparent murder-suicide by New York police sergeant

By JAKE OFFENHARTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A husband and wife and their two sons, ages 10 and 12, were found dead in a suburban New York home Saturday in what authorities described as a murder-suicide by a police sergeant.

Police officials said Watson Morgan, a sergeant with the Bronxville Police Department, fatally shot his wife, Ornella Morgan, 43, and their sons before taking his own life.

The four bodies were discovered by police just after midnight on Friday at the family's home in New City, a suburb of New York City, after Morgan failed to show up for his evening shift at the Bronxville Police Department.

"At this phase in the investigation it is believed that Watson killed his wife and two children, prior to killing himself with a self-inflicted gunshot wound," the Clarkstown Police Department said.

All four had gunshot wounds, police said. A handgun was recovered at the scene.

Watson, 49, began his career with the New York Police Department in 2000 before joining the force in Bronxville, a village in Westchester County, seven years later, according to a department biography. He was promoted to sergeant in 2016.

In a statement, Bronxville Police Chief Christopher Satriale said the killings left the department with "profoundly broken hearts at the senseless loss of innocent lives."

"Our hearts go out to Sergeant Morgan's extended family," he said. "Our thoughts and prayers are also with his Bronxville Police Department family."

Shelling kills 21 in Russian city of Belgorod following Moscow's aerial attacks across Ukraine

By The Associated Press undefined

Shelling in the center of the Russian border city of Belgorod Saturday killed 21 people, including three children, local officials reported.

A further 110 people were wounded in the strike, said regional governor Vyacheslav Gladkov, making it one of the deadliest attacks on Russian soil since the start of Moscow's invasion of Ukraine 22 months ago.

Russian authorities accused Kyiv of carrying out the attack, which took place the day after an 18-hour aerial bombardment across Ukraine killed at least 41 civilians.

Images of Belgorod on social media showed burning cars and plumes of black smoke rising among damaged buildings as air raid sirens sounded. One strike hit close to a public ice rink in the very heart of the city, which lies 25 miles (40 kilometers) north of the Ukrainian border and 415 miles (670 kilometers) south of Moscow. While previous attacks have hit the city, they have rarely taken place in daylight and have claimed fewer lives.

Russia's Defense Ministry said it identified the ammunition used in the strike as Czech-made Vampire rockets and Olkha missiles fitted with cluster-munition warheads. It provided no additional information, and The Associated Press was unable to verify its claims.

"This crime will not go unpunished," the ministry said in a statement on social media.

The Kremlin said Russian President Vladimir Putin had been briefed on the situation, and that the country's health minister, Mikhail Murashko, was ordered to join a delegation of medical personnel and rescue workers traveling to Belgorod from Moscow.

Russian diplomats also called for a meeting of the U.N. Security Council in connection with the strike. Speaking to Russia's state news agency, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said that Britain and the United States were guilty of encouraging Kyiv to carry out what she described as a "terrorist attack." She also placed blame on EU countries who had supplied Ukraine with weapons.

"Silence in response to the unbridled barbarity of Ukraine's Nazis and their puppeteers and accomplices from 'civilized democracies' will be akin to complicity in their bloody deeds," the ministry said in a statement.

Earlier Saturday, Moscow officials reported shooting down 32 Ukrainian drones over the country's Moscow, Bryansk, Oryol, and Kursk regions.

They also reported that cross-border shelling had killed two other people in Russia. A man died and four other people were wounded when a missile struck a private home in the Belgorod region late Friday evening and a 9-year-old was killed in a separate incident in the Bryansk region.

Cities across western Russia have come under regular attack from drones since May, with Russian officials blaming Kyiv. Ukrainian officials never acknowledge responsibility for attacks on Russian territory or the Crimean Peninsula. However, larger aerial strikes against Russia have previously followed heavy

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assaults on Ukrainian cities.

Russian drone strikes against Ukraine continued Saturday, with the General Staff of the Ukrainian Armed Forces reporting that 10 Iranian-made Shahed drones had been shot down across the Kherson, Khmelnytskyi, and Mykolaiv regions.

Local officials reported that three people had been killed by Russian missiles: a 55-year-old man in the Kherson region, a 43-year-old man in Stepanohirsk, a town in Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia region, and a 32-year-old in the Chernihiv region.

On Friday, Moscow's forces launched 122 missiles and dozens of drones across Ukraine, an onslaught described by one air force official as the biggest aerial barrage of the war.

As well as the 39 deaths, at least 160 people were wounded and an unknown number were buried under rubble in the assault, which damaged a maternity hospital, apartment blocks, and schools.

Western officials and analysts recently warned that Russia limited its cruise missile strikes for months in an apparent effort to build up stockpiles for massive strikes during the winter, hoping to break the Ukrainians' spirit.

Fighting along the front line is largely bogged down by winter weather after Ukraine's summer counter-offensive failed to make a significant breakthrough along the roughly 1,000-kilometer (620-mile) line of contact.

Russia's ongoing aerial attacks have also sparked concern for Ukraine's neighbors.

Poland's defense forces said Friday that an unknown object had entered the country's airspace before vanishing off radars, and that all indications pointed to it being a Russian missile.

Speaking to Russian state news agency RIA Novosti, Russia's charge d'affaires in Poland, Andrei Ordash, said Saturday that Moscow would not comment on the event until Warsaw had given the Kremlin evidence of an airspace violation.

"We will not give any explanations until we are presented with concrete evidence because these accusations are unsubstantiated," he said.

Dart leads No. 11 Ole Miss to 38-25 Peach Bowl route of No. 10 Penn State's proud defense

By CHARLES ODUM AP Sports Writer

ATLANTA (AP) — Lane Kiffin wants Mississippi's dominant win over Penn State to be seen as just the start of more success to come for his Rebels.

Jaxson Dart passed for 379 yards and three touchdowns, including two to tight end Caden Prieskorn, and ran for a score as No. 11 Ole Miss bullied No. 10 Penn State's proud defense 38-25 in the Peach Bowl on Saturday.

"I really do believe we're just getting started," Kiffin said. "I think that we're doing something. We're on our way to something really special."

Ole Miss (11-2) gained 540 yards against Penn State (10-3), which led the nation with its average of 223 yards allowed. It was the most yards and points allowed by the Nittany Lions this season.

"Too many moving parts, staff and players, to have the type of success that we wanted to have today," said Penn State coach James Franklin, referring to the combination of players opting out to prepare for the NFL draft and recent changes to his offensive and defensive coordinators.

The victory gave Kiffin's Rebels their first 11-win season.

Prieskorn had 10 receptions for 136 yards. He added a 2-point conversion catch to his touchdown receptions of 6 and 37 yards.

The dominant performance by Prieskorn was a surprise. Prieskorn had 20 catches, including two for touchdowns, for 313 yards in the regular season.

Dart visited the injury tent following the Rebels' first possession and had his left ankle taped on the sideline. He remained in the game and added a 2-yard scoring run for a 38-17 lead in the fourth quarter. Ole Miss chanted "S-E-C! S-E-C!" as it celebrated the Southeastern Conference's win in the matchup against

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the Big Ten's Nittany Lions.

Ole Miss defensive tackle Zxavian Harris blocked a 51-yard field goal attempt by Alex Felkins early in the fourth quarter.

Each team used tight ends in prominent roles. Prieskorn's 6-yard touchdown catch gave Ole Miss a 10-3 lead late in the first quarter. Penn State pulled even on Drew Allar's 2-yard scoring pass to tight end Theo Johnson on a fourth-down play early in the second.

Prieskorn's second scoring catch, a 37-yarder, gave Ole Miss a 20-10 lead. The Penn State defense bought in on Dart's fake pitch to Judkins, leaving Prieskorn open on the right sideline.

2 TURNOVERS FOR ALLAR

Allar shared time at quarterback with Beau Pribula, who threw a 48-yard touchdown pass to Nicholas Singleton late in the first half.

Allar threw an interception in the second quarter and lost a fumble when sacked in the fourth. He completed 19 of 39 passes for 295 yards and two touchdowns.

PRIESKORN'S PROMISE

Kiffin said he had to check after the game to make sure some of his players including Prieskorn, who have promised to return next season, would stick with their pledge after their success in the bowl game.

Kiffin joked that Prieskorn agreed to return for his final year of eligibility in 2024 only if he would be featured in the Peach Bowl.

"He said 'Coach, I'll come back, but you've got to make sure I've got 10 catches in the Peach Bowl,'" Kiffin said with a smile.

THIRD-QUARTER DOMINANCE

The Rebels led 20-17 at halftime and then scored the first 18 points after halftime. Ole Miss running back Quinshon Judkins provided balance to the offense in the second half.

Judkins had 34 carries for 106 yards and added a 14-yard touchdown catch in the third quarter.

Before the bowl game, the Nittany Lions had outscored opponents 115-3 in the third quarter.

MISSING STARTERS

Each team had top defensive ends, Cedric Johnson for Ole Miss and Chop Robinson for Penn State, opt out to prepare for the draft. The Nittany Lions also were missing their usual starting cornerbacks, Johnny Dixon and Kalen King.

"When you watch their game plan, they went after some guys that had not played a lot for us this year," Franklin said.

Said Kiffin: "They pay us a lot of money as coaches, so I would think we wouldn't be really good coaches if we didn't realize that and obviously go in and attack where they're missing guys."

THE TAKEAWAY

Ole Miss: The Rebels, who were beaten up front in their losses to Alabama and Georgia in the regular season, appeared to have similar problems with Penn State's offensive line early in the game. The Ole Miss defense gave up 85 rushing yards in the first quarter before gaining strength. DT J.J. Pegues gained 8 yards on a fourth-and-1 run on a direct snap from the Ole Miss 36 late in the third quarter.

Penn State: The Nittany Lions gave up more than their average of 223 yards allowed by the midpoint of the second quarter. Ole Miss had 340 yards by halftime as Penn State struggled to defend Prieskorn and wide receiver Tre Harris, who had seven catches for 134 yards. Linebacker Abdul Carter left the game with an apparent right ankle injury and appeared limited when he returned in the second half.

UP NEXT

Ole Miss: The Rebels, bolstered by a top-ranked transfer portal class, open their 2024 season at home against Furman on Aug. 31.

Penn State: The Nittany Lions open their 2024 season at West Virginia on Aug. 31.

Venezuela says troops will stay deployed until British military vessel leaves waters off Guyana

MEGAN JANETSKY Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — Venezuela said Saturday it will continue to deploy nearly 6,000 troops until a British military vessel sent to neighboring Guyana leaves the waters off the coast of the two South American nations.

In a video posted to X, Venezuelan Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino appeared surrounded by military officers in front of a marked up map of Venezuela and Guyana, a former British colony.

Padrino said the forces are “safeguarding our national sovereignty.”

“Armed forces have been deployed not just in the east of the country, but across the entire territory,” he said. “They will be there until this British imperialist boat leaves the disputed waters between Venezuela and Guyana.”

The Defense Ministry confirmed to The Associated Press that the video was made at a military base in Venezuela’s capital, Caracas.

The video comes after weeks of tensions between the two countries over Venezuela’s renewed claim to a region in Guyana known as Essequibo, a sparsely populated stretch of land roughly the size of Florida that is rich in oil and minerals. Operations generate some \$1 billion a year for the impoverished country of nearly 800,000 people that saw its economy expand by nearly 60% in the first half of this year.

Venezuela has long argued it was cheated out of the territory when Europeans and the U.S. set the border. Guyana, which has controlled the zone for decades, says the original agreement was legally binding and the dispute should be decided by the International Court of Justice in the Netherlands.

The century-old dispute was recently reignited with the discovery of oil in Guyana, and has escalated since Venezuela reported that its citizens voted in a Dec. 3 referendum to claim Essequibo, which makes up two-thirds of its smaller neighbor.

Critics of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro say the socialist leader is using the tensions to distract from internal turmoil and stoke nationalism in the lead up to presidential elections next year.

In recent weeks, the leaders of Guyana and Venezuela promised in a tense meeting that neither side would use threats or force against the other, but failed to reach agreement on how to address the bitter dispute.

Tensions came to another head with Friday’s arrival in Guyana of the Royal Navy patrol ship HMS Trent, which officials said had been taking part in an operation combatting drug smuggling in the Caribbean near the coast of Guyana. Most recently used to intercept pirates and drug smugglers off Africa, the ship is equipped with cannons and a landing pad for helicopters and drones and can carry around 50 marines.

Maduro said the ship’s deployment violates the shaky agreement between Venezuela and Guyana, calling its presence a threat to his country. In response, Maduro ordered Venezuela’s military — including air and naval forces — to conduct exercises near the disputed area.

“We believe in diplomacy, in dialogue and in peace, but no one is going to threaten Venezuela,” Maduro said. “This is an unacceptable threat to any sovereign country in Latin America.”

Guyana’s government rejected Maduro’s claims, with officials saying that the visit was a planned activity aimed at improving the nation’s defense capabilities and that the ship’s visit would continue as scheduled.

During talks earlier in December, Guyanese President Irfaan Ali said his nation reserved its right to work with partners to ensure the defense of his country. Guyana has a military of only 3,000 soldiers, 200 sailors and four small patrol boats known as Barracudas, while Venezuela has about 235,000 active military personnel in its army, air force, navy and national guard.

“Nothing that we do or have done is threatening Venezuela,” Guyana’s vice president, Bharrat Jagdeo, told reporters in Georgetown, the nation’s capital.

Revelers set to pack into Times Square for annual New Year's Eve ball drop

NEW YORK (AP) — The confetti has been tested for airiness. The giant numerals – 2 0 2 4 – are in place. And the luminous ball, bedazzled with 2,688 crystal triangles, is fixed to the pole from which it makes its 60-second descent at 11:59 p.m.

With throngs of revelers set to usher in the new year under the bright lights of Times Square, officials and organizers say they are prepared to welcome the crowds and ensure their safety.

At a security briefing Friday, New York City Mayor Eric Adams said there were “no specific threats” to the annual New Year's Eve bash, which is expected to draw tens of thousands of people to the heart of midtown Manhattan on Sunday.

The celebrity-filled event will include live performances from Flo Rida, Megan Thee Stallion and LL Cool J, as well as televised appearances from Cardi B and others. Organizers said in-person attendance is expected to return to pre-COVID levels, even as foot traffic around Times Square remains down slightly since the pandemic.

Amid near-daily protests in New York sparked by fighting between Israel and Hamas militants in Gaza, police said they would expand the security perimeter around the party, creating a “buffer zone” that will allow them to head off potential demonstrations.

Pro-Palestinian marches have disrupted recent events in New York, including the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade and the ceremonial lighting of the Rockefeller Center Christmas tree.

“We will be out here with our canines, on horseback, our helicopters, our boats,” Adams said. Officials will also monitor protests with drones, he said. “But as we saw last year, after having no specific threats, we get a threat.”

During last year's New Year's Eve party, a machete-wielding man attacked three police officers a few blocks from Times Square.

On Saturday, as organizers practiced raising and lowering the iconic ball, Times Square Alliance President Tom Harris said he was confident the painstaking preparations would contribute to a seamless night.

“The star of the show just had a dress rehearsal and performed marvelously,” he said. “I'm confident that everything is going to go fantastic in Times Square tomorrow night.”

His advice for those planning to attend the countdown: “Come early.”

Prosecutors urge appeals court to reject Trump's immunity claims in election subversion case

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Special counsel Jack Smith urged a federal appeals court Saturday to reject former President Donald Trump's claims that he is immune from prosecution, saying the suggestion that he cannot be held to account for crimes in office “threatens the democratic and constitutional foundation” of the country.

The filing from Smith's team was submitted ahead of arguments next month on the legally untested question of whether a former president can be prosecuted for acts taken while in the White House.

Though the matter is now being considered by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, it's likely to come again before the Supreme Court, which earlier this month rejected prosecutors' request for a speedy ruling in their favor holding that Trump can be forced to stand trial on charges that he plotted to overturn the results of the 2020 election.

The outcome of the dispute is critical for both sides especially since the case has been effectively paused while Trump advances his immunity claims in the appeals court.

Prosecutors are hoping a swift judgment rejecting those arguments will restart the case and keep it on track for trial, currently scheduled for March 4 in federal court in Washington. But Trump's lawyers stand to benefit from a protracted appeals process that could significantly delay the case and potentially push

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it beyond the November election.

Trump's lawyers maintain that the appeals court should order the dismissal of the case, arguing that as a former president he is exempt from prosecution for acts that fell within his official duties as president.

Smith's team has said no such immunity exists in the Constitution or in case law and that, in any event, the actions that Trump took in his failed effort to cling to power aren't part of a president's official responsibilities.

The four-count indictment charges Trump with conspiring to disrupt the certification in Congress of electoral votes on Jan. 6, 2021, when rioters motivated by his falsehoods about the election results stormed the U.S. Capitol in a violent clash with police. It alleges that he participated in a scheme to enlist slates of fake electors in battleground states who would falsely attest that Trump had won those states and encouraged then-Vice President Mike Pence to thwart the counting of votes.

Those actions, prosecutors wrote, fall well outside a president's official duties and were intended solely to help him win reelection.

"A President who unlawfully seeks to retain power through criminal means unchecked by potential criminal prosecution could jeopardize both the Presidency itself and the very foundations of our democratic system of government officials to use fraudulent means to thwart the transfer of power and remain in office," Smith's team wrote.

In their brief, prosecutors also said that though the presidency plays a "vital role in our constitutional system," so, too, does the principle of accountability in the event of wrongdoing.

"Rather than vindicating our constitutional framework, the defendant's sweeping immunity claim threatens to license Presidents to commit crimes to remain in office," they wrote. "The Founders did not intend and would never have countenanced such a result."

While Trump's lawyers have argued that the indictment threatens "the very bedrock of our Republic," prosecutors say the defense has it backwards.

"It is the defendant's claim that he cannot be held to answer for the charges that he engaged in an unprecedented effort to retain power through criminal means, despite having lost the election, that threatens the democratic and constitutional foundation of our Republic," they said.

A three-judge panel is set to hear arguments on Jan. 9. Two of the judges, J. Michelle Childs and Florence Pan, were appointed by President Joe Biden. The third, Karen LeCraft Henderson, was assigned to the bench by former President George H.W. Bush.

U.S. District Judge Tanya Chutkan earlier rejected the immunity arguments, asserting that the office of the presidency does not confer a "get-out-of-jail free card." Trump's lawyers then appealed that decision, prompting Smith to seek to bypass the court and request an expedited decision from the Supreme Court.

The justices last week denied that request without explanation, leaving the matter with the appeals court.

Trump faces three other criminal prosecutions. He is charged in Florida with illegally retaining classified documents at his Mar-a-Lago estate and faces a state prosecution in Georgia that accuses him of trying to subvert that state's 2020 presidential election and a New York case that accuses him of falsifying business records in connection with a hush money payment to a porn actress.

Russia wants evidence before giving explanations about an object that entered Poland's airspace

WARSAW, Poland (AP) — Russia will not provide any explanations about an unidentified object that briefly entered Poland's airspace until it receives evidence that shows the object was a Russian missile, Russia's top diplomat in Poland said Saturday.

Poland's defense forces said an unknown object traveled 40 kilometers (24 miles) into the country's airspace Friday from the direction of Ukraine before leaving minutes later and vanishing off radars. The head of the Polish armed forces, Gen. Wiesław Kukuła, said "everything indicates" it was a Russian missile.

Poland's Foreign Ministry demanded explanations from Moscow. Russia's charge d'affaires in Warsaw, Andrei Ordash, told Russian state news agency RIA Novosti on Saturday that Poland's claims were "un-

substantiated.”

“We will not give any explanations until we are presented with concrete evidence, because these accusations are unsubstantiated,” Ordash told RIA Novosti.

Some 500 Polish Territorial Defense troops combed an area between the city of Zamosc and the border with Ukraine for any traces of the object Saturday, but officials said nothing suspicious was found.

Poland’s border with Ukraine is also the European Union and NATO’s border with Ukraine.

States set to enact new laws on guns, pornography, taxes and even fuzzy dice

By DAVID A. LIEB and GEOFF MULVIHILL Associated Press

Fuzzy dice finally will be free to dangle in Illinois.

Starting Monday, police there no longer will be allowed to pull over motorists solely because they have something hanging from the rearview mirror of the windshield. That means air fresheners, parking placards and, yes, even those dice are fair game to hang.

The revised Illinois windshield rule is one of hundreds of new laws taking effect with the new year in states across the U.S. While some may seem a bit pedestrian, others have real practical effects or touch on controversial issues such as restrictions on weapons and medical treatments for transgender people.

Though the original Illinois windshield law was meant to improve roadway safety, it came to be seen by some as an excuse for pulling over drivers. The new law still prohibits objects that obstruct a driver’s view but forbids law enforcement officers from conducting stops or searches solely because of suspected violations.

“With this new law, we are sending a powerful message that the state does not tolerate racial profiling or other forms of discrimination,” said Democratic state Sen. Christopher Belt, one of the bill’s sponsors.

Another new Illinois law seeks to stifle a more modern form of distracted driving by prohibiting people from participating in video conferences or scanning social media while behind the wheel.

GUNS AND PORNOGRAPHY

Several states have new laws regulating guns and online activity.

A Minnesota law will allow authorities to ask courts for “extreme risk protection orders” to temporarily take guns from people deemed to be an imminent threat to others or themselves. Minnesota will be at least the 20th state with such a red-flag law.

Colorado will become one of a dozen states banning so-called ghost guns. The new law prohibits firearms that are assembled at home or 3D-printed without serial numbers, practices that have allowed owners to evade background checks.

The U.S. Supreme Court declined to block an Illinois law from taking effect Monday that bans high-powered semiautomatic rifles and high-capacity magazines. But a federal judge recently blocked a California law that would have banned carrying concealed guns in many public places.

Several state laws delve into acceptable online activities. A new Connecticut law requires online dating operators to adopt policies for handling harassment reports by or between users.

A North Carolina law will require pornographic website operators to confirm viewers are at least 18 years old by using a commercially available database. The law lets parents sue companies if their children were allowed to access the pornography. Another new Illinois law will allow lawsuits from victims of deepfake pornography, in which videos or images are manipulated without their consent.

LGBTQ+ ISSUES

Over the past few years, there has been a major push by conservatives to restrict access to gender-affirming treatments for transgender minors. Bans are on the books in 22 states, including some where judges have paused enforcement as they consider challenges to the policies.

New bans on access for minors to puberty blockers, hormone therapy and surgery, which is rare, are scheduled to take effect Jan. 1 in Idaho, Louisiana and West Virginia. The West Virginia law contains an exception: Teens could still access treatment with parental consent and a diagnosis of severe gender

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dysphoria from two doctors.

While many Republican-led legislatures have imposed restrictions, many Democrat-dominated states have responded with transgender protections. A law taking effect Monday in Hawaii requires new marriage certificates to be issued to people who request to change how their sex is listed. The state also is replacing gender-specific terms in state law; "mother" is being replaced with "birthing parent" and "father" with "non-birthing parent."

In Colorado, new buildings wholly or partly owned by government entities will be required to have on every floor where there are public restrooms at least one that does not specify the gender of the users.

The conservative push on LGBTQ+ policies also has come with efforts to keep certain books out of school or public libraries. An Indiana law taking effect makes it easier for parents and others to challenge books in school libraries. By contrast, a new Illinois law would block state funding for public libraries that ban or restrict books.

TAXES AND WAGES

The new year brings a variety of new laws on taxes and wages — perennial issues for state governments.

More than 20 states will raise minimum wages for workers, further widening the gap between state requirements and the federal minimum, which has been static at \$7.25 an hour since July 2009. In several states, the new minimum wage will more than double that rate.

Maryland's minimum wage will be set at \$15 an hour. In New Jersey, it will be \$15.13 an hour for most employees. In Connecticut, \$15.69 per hour. In New York City, \$16 an hour, though it will be \$15 in most of the rest of the state. California's statewide minimum wage also will rise to \$16 per hour. And in Washington, the minimum rate will be \$16.28.

Residents in some states will gain money by paying less in taxes, continuing a three-year trend in which nearly every state has reduced, rebated or suspended some type of broad-based tax.

In Kansas, the sales tax on groceries will drop from 4% to 2% in its next step toward eventual elimination, producing a savings of \$208 annually for a family spending an average of \$200 weekly on groceries.

About 1 million tax filers are expected to benefit from Connecticut's first income tax rate reduction since the mid-1990s. Lower-income workers and retirees also stand to benefit from expanded tax breaks.

Missouri also will reduce its income tax rate while expanding tax exemptions for Social Security benefits and military training pay. Businesses will be able to claim tax credits for hiring interns or apprentices.

Alabama will exempt overtime pay from the state's income tax, though that lasts only until June 2025 unless renewed by lawmakers.

Taiwan's presidential candidates emphasize peace in relations with Beijing

By SIMINA MISTREANU Associated Press

TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — Taiwan's presidential candidates expressed desire for peaceful relations with Beijing, which has described Jan. 13 elections on the self-ruled island as a choice between war and peace and stepped up harassment of the territory that China claims as its own.

William Lai, the front-runner and currently Taiwan's vice president from the ruling Democratic People's Party, said in a televised debate Saturday that he was open to communicating with the government in Beijing, which has refused to talk to him or President Tsai Ing-wen.

Beijing favors the candidate from the more China-friendly Nationalist, or Kuomintang, Party, and has accused Lai and Tsai of being "separatists" who are trying to provoke a Chinese attack on Taiwan.

Taiwan split from China amid civil war in 1949, but Beijing continues to regard the island of 23 million with its high-tech economy as Chinese territory and has been steadily increasing its threat to achieve that goal by military force if necessary.

Tensions with China have featured strongly in the presidential campaign.

China has also stepped up military pressure on the island by sending military jets and ships near it almost daily. Taiwan's Defense Ministry this month also reported Chinese balloons, which could be used

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for spying, flying in its vicinity.

Differences over Taiwan are a major flashpoint in U.S.-China relations. U.S. relations with the island are governed by the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, which makes it American policy to ensure Taiwan has the resources to defend itself and to prevent any unilateral change of status by Beijing.

Lai -- who tops most opinion polls -- promised to help strengthen Taiwan's defense and economy if elected.

"As long as there is equality and dignity on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, Taiwan's door will always be open," he said during the debate. "I am willing to conduct exchanges and cooperation with China to enhance the well-being of the people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait."

"The international community has realized the threat China poses to Taiwan and the international community," Lai said. "In fact, everyone is already preparing to respond. We should ... unite and cooperate to ensure peace."

Hou Yu-ih, the Kuomintang candidate, also said he sought peaceful relations with Beijing.

The Kuomintang previously endorsed unification with China but has shifted its stance in recent years as Taiwan's electorate is increasingly identifying as Taiwanese -- as opposed to Chinese -- and wants to maintain the status quo in relations with Beijing.

Hou said he opposed Taiwan's independence but also a potential unification under China's "one country, two systems" framework, which Beijing has used to govern Hong Kong, a former British colony that returned to China in 1997. Hou said he sought "democracy and freedom" for Taiwan.

The third candidate, Ko Wen-je, from the smaller Taiwan People's Party, referenced a quote by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken regarding U.S.-China relations, saying that "Taiwan and China will cooperate if they can cooperate, compete if there's a need to compete, and confront each other if they must confront each other."

"The people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait are of the same race and have the same history, language, religion and culture, but at this stage, we have a different political system and way of life," Ko said, adding that "Taiwan needs self-reliance, and both sides of the Taiwan Strait need peace."

"We have to make it clear to the Chinese government that my bottom line is that Taiwan must maintain its current democratic and free political system and way of life," Ko said. "Only if these conditions are met can we have dialogue."

Israeli-French hostage recounts harrowing experience in captivity

JERUSALEM (AP) — An Israeli woman who recently returned from captivity in the Gaza Strip says she was groped by her Palestinian kidnapper and lived in constant fear throughout the weeks she was held hostage.

Mia Schem, a 21-year-old dual citizen of Israel and France, was attending a music festival in southern Israel when Hamas militants burst across the border and raided the event site on Oct. 7. More than 300 people were killed and dozens taken hostage.

She was released on Nov. 30 during a weeklong cease-fire.

In an interview broadcast Friday on Israel's Channel 13 TV, Schem said she was captured after she got out her friend's burning car. She said her captor began touching her upper body inappropriately and only stopped after she screamed and he noticed that she had been shot in the arm and badly wounded.

"I started screaming, going crazy," she said. "There were burnt vehicles, bodies."

While in captivity, she was held in a house with a family and watched around the clock by the father, Schem said. She said his constant staring made her uncomfortable and fearful that he might try to harm her. The man's wife did not like her and sometimes denied her food for days at a time, she said.

Israeli authorities have said that sexual violence was part of the Hamas rampage into southern Israel, and they accused the international community of playing down or ignoring the pain of the victims.

The Associated Press generally does not identify victims of sexual violence, but Schem spoke out publicly about her experience.

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Schem made international headlines when Hamas released a video of her in captivity days after she was taken hostage. In the video, she lay in bed as someone bandaged her right arm, and she says she wants to go home. At the time, it was the first sign of life from the hostages.

Schem said she barely slept during her time as a hostage because she was so terrified, and that she also did not shower or receive any medications. She said her captor's children occasionally came in to look at her "like I'm some animal in a petting zoo."

Schem said she was taken from the home into a tunnel and held with other hostages during her final days in captivity.

During this time, she said she knew she would soon be released. Schem said she was kept with six or seven people in a small room and received just one piece of pita bread a day. She said she feels guilty because of the other hostages she left behind.

Schem broke down during the interview, saying she still has not come to terms with her return as she processes the ordeal. "I can't get it out of my head," she said.

Retirements could tip control of the House majority. It's Republicans who have the early edge

By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A chaotic year for the House is coming to a close with more Democrats than Republicans deciding to leave the chamber, a disparity that could have major ramifications in next year's elections.

About two dozen Democrats have indicated they won't seek reelection, with half running for another elected office. Meanwhile, only 14 Republicans have said they are not seeking another term, with three seeking elected office elsewhere.

More retirements can be expected after the holidays, when lawmakers have had a chance to spend time with families and make decisions ahead of reelection deadlines. But so far, the numbers don't indicate the dysfunction in the House is causing a mass exodus for either party.

"Members sort of knew that this is what the institution is currently like when they chose to run for office," said Molly Reynolds, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, a think tank that maintains a database of vital statistics on Congress, including retirements. "Some of them may well be feeling frustrated at this point in time, but anybody who has been elected to Congress in recent years, they're not surprised at what they're finding when they are getting to Washington."

Republicans certainly had the most high-profile exits. Rep. George Santos, R-N.Y., became only the third lawmaker to be expelled by colleagues since the Civil War. Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., was the first-ever speaker removed from that office by his colleagues. He opted to leave effective Dec. 31 rather than serve among the rank-and-file.

But it's the departure of a handful of Democrats in competitive districts that has Republicans thinking the overall retirement picture gives them an advantage in determining who will control the House after the 2024 elections.

Reps. Katie Porter of California, Elissa Slotkin of Michigan and Abigail Spanberger of Virginia proved they could win toss-up congressional districts in good election cycles for Democrats and not-so-good cycles. They are all seeking higher office within their home states. Porter and Slotkin are running for the U.S. Senate. Spanberger is running for governor in 2025.

Democrats are also losing six-term Rep. Dan Kildee of Michigan to retirement, leaving them with another competitive open seat to defend in a state that will be crucial in the presidential election. Rep. Jennifer Wexton, D-Va., is not seeking reelection due to health challenges in a district that leans Democratic but is more competitive than most.

On the other side of the aisle, the Republicans leaving office generally represent districts that Democrats have little chance of flipping. They'll be replaced by Republicans, predicted Rep. Richard Hudson, the chairman of the House Republican campaign arm.

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"Retirements are a huge problem for the Democrats. They're not a problem for us," Hudson said.

The exception is Santos, who represented a competitive New York district. Democrats hope former Rep. Tom Suozzi can win back the seat, which he gave up when he ran unsuccessfully for governor in 2022.

Republican Rep. Tom Cole of Oklahoma said he found it "a bit of a surprise" that the number of Democrats leaving office exceeded the Republican exits given all that has transpired this year.

"Politically, I think we're very well positioned for 2024," Cole said. "I just think the margins are going to remain narrow no matter who wins. The number of competitive seats is so much lower than it was even a decade ago, the polarization is so much greater, that it's hard to move big numbers. Whoever wins the presidency probably wins the House."

Sometimes, legislators in the states tip the scales in determining the makeup of Congress. It's one reason there are so few competitive races.

Three incumbent House Democrats from North Carolina have essentially been left with little opportunity to return after GOP lawmakers in the state drew new boundaries for their congressional districts. What were once competitive seats became near locks for whichever Republican emerges from the state's primary elections.

Democratic Rep. Jeff Jackson decided to run for attorney general rather than attempt to run again for a Charlotte-area seat that he had just won in the 2022 midterms. Rep. Wiley Nickel, a fellow freshman who flipped a toss-up district in the last election, also announced he would not be running, and would focus instead on a potential U.S. Senate bid in 2026. And Rep. Kathy Manning said she won't file for reelection under the current maps but would run if a federal lawsuit seeking to overturn the new districts is successful.

Manning said the city of Greensboro in her district was split into three pieces and combined with rural counties. She won in 2022 by a margin of 9 percentage points, but she said the new district gives a 16-point advantage to a Republican candidate.

Democrats are hoping court-ordered redistricting in Alabama and Louisiana will favor their side and effectively make the redistricting battles a wash.

Ambition is also playing a role in the retirement trends. About half of the Democrats not seeking reelection to the House are seeking office elsewhere. That includes three members running for the seat once held by California Sen. Dianne Feinstein, who entered the Senate in 1992 and served more than three decades before her death in September. Slotkin is running for the seat Sen. Debbie Stabenow has held for more than two decades. Rep. Dean Phillips of Minnesota is running for president against fellow Democrat Joe Biden.

"If you are interested in a higher office, you're going to be sensitive to when those things come up. They don't always come up," Reynolds said.

Still, a few lawmakers do attribute their leaving, at least in part, to the dysfunction they've witnessed in Congress.

Democratic Rep. Brian Higgins of New York doesn't plan to wait for the election to get out. He's retiring sometime in February.

"We're spending more time doing less. And the American people aren't served," he said when announcing his retirement last month.

Republican Rep. Ken Buck, R-Colo., described a similar sense of frustration in his retirement announcement. He's been critical of Republican leaders for "lying to America" that the 2020 election was stolen and downplaying the Jan. 6 insurrection.

"Our nation is on a collision course with reality and a steadfast commitment to the truth," Buck said.

Consulting firm McKinsey agrees to \$78 million settlement with insurers over opioids

By DEE-ANN DURBIN AP Business Writer

Consulting firm McKinsey and Co. has agreed to pay \$78 million to settle claims from insurers and health care funds that its work with drug companies helped fuel an opioid addiction crisis.

The agreement was revealed late Friday in documents filed in federal court in San Francisco. The settlement must still be approved by a judge.

Under the agreement, McKinsey would establish a fund to reimburse insurers, private benefit plans and others for some or all of their prescription opioid costs.

The insurers argued that McKinsey worked with Purdue Pharma – the maker of OxyContin – to create and employ aggressive marketing and sales tactics to overcome doctors' reservations about the highly addictive drugs. Insurers said that forced them to pay for prescription opioids rather than safer, non-addictive and lower-cost drugs, including over-the-counter pain medication. They also had to pay for the opioid addiction treatment that followed.

From 1999 to 2021, nearly 280,000 people in the U.S. died from overdoses of prescription opioids, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control. Insurers argued that McKinsey worked with Purdue Pharma even after the extent of the opioid crisis was apparent.

The settlement is the latest in a years-long effort to hold McKinsey accountable for its role in the opioid epidemic. In February 2021, the company agreed to pay nearly \$600 million to U.S. states, the District of Columbia and five U.S. territories. In September, the company announced a separate, \$230 million settlement agreement with school districts and local governments.

Asked for comment Saturday, McKinsey referred to a statement it released in September.

"As we have stated previously, we continue to believe that our past work was lawful and deny allegations to the contrary," the company said, adding that it reached a settlement to avoid protracted litigation.

McKinsey said it stopped advising clients on any opioid-related business in 2019.

Air raids over eastern Syria near Iraqi border kill 6 Iran-backed militants

By QASSIM ABDUL-ZAHRA and KAREEM CHEHAYEB Associated Press

BAGHDAD (AP) — Three overnight airstrikes on eastern Syria near a strategic border crossing with Iraq killed six Iran-backed militants Saturday, two members of Iraqi militia groups told The Associated Press.

The strikes on the border region of Boukamal came hours after an umbrella group of Iran-backed Iraqi militants known as the Islamic Resistance claimed an attack on a U.S. military base in northern Iraq's city of Irbil.

The group has conducted over a hundred attacks on U.S. positions in Iraq and eastern Syria since the onset of the Israel-Hamas war on Oct. 7.

Four of the militants killed were from Lebanon's powerful Hezbollah group, while the other two were Syrian, the militia group members said. Another two were injured, they added. They spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not cleared to speak with journalists.

Meanwhile, an activist collective that covers news in the area, Deir Ezzor 24, said the airstrikes hit two militant posts and a weapons warehouse that it says was recently stocked with rocket launchers and munitions.

Britain-backed opposition war monitor the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said that in addition to the weapons warehouse, the strikes targeted a militants' convoy that had arrived in Syria from Iraq and a location where a militia affiliated with Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard was training.

The monitoring group reported that the strikes killed nine people — three Syrians and six people from other nationalities.

A U.S. official said the United States did not carry out the strikes. The official spoke on condition of

anonymity to discuss military operations.

Washington has confirmed previous strikes on Iran-backed militia positions following the surge of attacks over the past two months.

President Joe Biden last week ordered the U.S. military to carry out strikes on Iranian-backed Iraqi groups following a rocket attack that wounded three U.S. troops.

The spike in tension has put Baghdad in a delicate situation. Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani has tried to ease the strain between the militant groups that helped him reach power and the U.S. where Iraq's foreign reserves are housed.

The Boukamal region in Deir el-Zour, Syria, located along the Iraqi border, has been a strategic area for Iran-backed militants since it was taken back from the extremist Islamic State group in 2019. U.S. coalition forces conducted strikes targeting convoys there before the recent spike in tensions.

Later, Syrian state media reported that Israeli airstrikes over areas south of the city of Aleppo caused damage, but no casualties were reported. Pro-government radio station Sham FM said the strikes were near Aleppo's airport but did not damage it.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said just one of six Israeli missiles landed near the airport and that the rest landed in areas where Iran-backed militants and weapons warehouses were present. It said the strikes killed or wounded seven people, without giving further details.

Israel has carried out hundreds of strikes on targets inside government-controlled parts of war-torn Syria in recent years.

It does not usually acknowledge such airstrikes. When it has, however, it said it was targeting Iran-backed groups there that supported Syrian President Bashar Assad's government.

A British warship arrives in Guyana as tensions heat up in border dispute with Venezuela

By MANUEL RUEDA Associated Press

BOGOTA, Colombia (AP) — A British warship arrived in Guyana on Friday afternoon amid rising tensions from a border dispute between the former British colony and Venezuela.

The HMS Trent's visit led Venezuela to begin military exercises a day earlier in the eastern Caribbean near its border with Guyana as the Venezuelan government presses its claim to a huge swath of its smaller neighbor.

Brazil's Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed concern Friday about the situation and urged the two South American countries to return to dialogue. It said other nations should avoid "military activities" that support either side.

Brazil's statement called on Guyana and Venezuela to stay true to the Argyle Declaration, an agreement signed earlier this month in which their leaders said they would solve the border dispute through nonviolent means.

The dispute is over Essequibo, a sparsely populated region that is the size of Florida and rich in oil and minerals. Venezuela has long claimed it was cheated out of the territory when Europeans and the U.S. set the border.

The U.K. Defense Ministry has said that the ship is visiting Guyana as part of a series of engagements in the region and that the vessel will conduct training exercises with Guyana's military.

On its account on X, formerly Twitter, the ship posted photos of sailors welcoming Britain's ambassador to Guyana and the chief of staff of Guyana's Defense Force, Brig. Gen. Omar Khan. They were hosted at a formal lunch and provided with a tour of the ship's capabilities.

In an interview with The Associated Press, Khan said such operations "remain an important part of the regional security spectrum of activities. It has been so in the past and will continue in the future."

Officials have been tight-lipped on the nature of the exercises.

The warship is generally used to intercept pirates and drug smugglers, and it recently conducted joint exercises with the navies of several West African nations. It is equipped with cannons and a landing pad

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for helicopters and drones and can carry around 50 marines.

In a statement late Thursday, Guyanese President Irfaan Ali said Venezuela "had nothing to fear" from the ship's activities in Guyanese waters.

"Guyana has long been engaged in partnerships with regional and international states aimed at enhancing internal security," Ali said. "These partnerships pose a threat to no one and are in no way intended to be aggressive."

But Venezuela on Thursday began military exercises involving 5,000 troops in the eastern Caribbean, citing the visit by the British patrol ship.

In a nationally televised speech, Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro accused Guyana of betraying the spirit of the Argyle Declaration.

"We will not let anyone push us around," Maduro said, surrounded by military commanders. He described Britain's decision to send a warship as a threat from a "decaying former empire."

Guyana has controlled Essequibo for decades, but Venezuela revived its historical claim to the region earlier this month through a referendum in which voters were asked whether the territory should be turned into a Venezuelan state.

Critics of Maduro say the socialist leader has reignited the border dispute to draw attention from the nation's internal problems as Venezuela prepares for a presidential election next year. Maduro intends to run for a third term.

Venezuela says it was the victim of a land theft conspiracy in 1899, when Guyana was a British colony and arbitrators from Britain, Russia and the United States decided the boundary.

Venezuelan officials also argue that an agreement among Venezuela, Britain and the then colony of British Guiana signed in 1966 to resolve the dispute effectively nullified the original arbitration.

Guyana maintains the initial accord is legal and binding and asked the United Nations' top court in 2018 to rule it as such, but a decision is years away.

Venice is limiting tourist groups to 25 people starting in June to protect the popular lagoon city

MILAN (AP) — The Italian city of Venice announced new limits Saturday on the size of tourist groups, the latest move to reduce the pressure of mass tourism on the famed canal city.

Starting in June, groups will be limited to 25 people, or roughly half the capacity of a tourist bus, and the use of loudspeakers, "which can generate confusion and disturbances," will be banned, the city said in a statement.

The city official charged with security, Elisabetta Pesce, said the policies were aimed at improving the movement of groups through Venice's historic center as well as the heavily visited islands of Murano, Burano and Torcello.

The city previously announced plans to test a new day-tripper fee this year. The 5 euros (\$5.45) per person fee will be applied on 29 peak days between April and mid-July, including most weekends. It is intended to regulate crowds, encourage longer visits and improve the quality of life for Venice residents.

The U.N. cultural agency cited tourism's impact on the fragile lagoon city as a major factor in it twice considering placing Venice on UNESCO's list of heritage sites in danger.

The city escaped the first time by limiting the arrival of large cruise ships through the Giudecca Canal and again in September when it announced the roll-out of the day-tripper charge, which had been delayed when tourism declined during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thousands accuse Serbia's ruling populists of election fraud at a Belgrade rally

By JOVANA GEC Associated Press

BELGRADE, Serbia (AP) — Thousands of people rallied in Serbia's capital on Saturday, chanting "Thieves!" and accusing the populist authorities of President Aleksandar Vucic of orchestrating a fraud during a recent general election.

The big rally in central Belgrade capped nearly two weeks of street protests against reported widespread irregularities during the Dec. 17 parliamentary and local ballot that were also noted by international election observers.

The ruling Serbian Progressive Party was declared the election winner but the main opposition alliance, Serbia Against Violence, has claimed the election was stolen, particularly in the vote for the Belgrade city authorities.

Serbia Against Violence has led daily protests since Dec. 17 demanding that the vote be annulled and rerun. Tensions have soared following violent incidents and arrests of opposition supporters at a protest last weekend.

The crowd at the rally on Saturday roared in approval at the appearance of Marinika Tepic, a leading opposition politician who has been on a hunger strike since the ballot. Tepic's health reportedly has been jeopardized and she was expected to be hospitalized after appearing at the rally.

"These elections must be rerun," a frail-looking Tepic told the crowd, waving feebly from the stage and saying she doesn't have the strength to make a longer speech.

Another opposition politician, Radomir Lazovic, urged the international community "not to stay silent" and set up a commission to look into the irregularities and pressure authorities to hold a new election that's free and fair.

After the speeches, participants marched by the headquarters of the state electoral commission toward Serbia's Constitutional Court that will ultimately rule on electoral complaints.

A protester from Belgrade, Rajko Dimitrijevic, said he came to the rally because he felt "humiliation" and the "doctoring of the people's will."

Ivana Grobic, also from Belgrade, said she had always joined protests "because I want a better life, I want the institutions of this country to do their job."

It was not immediately clear if or when opposition protests would resume. The rally on Saturday was organized by an independent civic initiative, ProGlas, or pro-vote, that had campaigned for high turnout ahead of the ballot.

Ruling party leader Milos Vucevic said the "small number of demonstrators" at the rally on Saturday showed that "people don't want them (the opposition.)"

The opposition has urged an international probe of the vote after representatives of several global watchdogs reported multiple irregularities, including cases of vote-buying and ballot box stuffing.

Local election monitors also alleged that voters from across Serbia and neighboring countries were registered and bused in to cast ballots in Belgrade.

Vucic and his party have rejected the reports as "fabricated."

Saturday's gathering symbolically was organized at a central area in Belgrade that in the early 1990s was the scene of demonstrations against strongman Slobodan Milosevic's warmongering and undemocratic policies.

Critics nowadays say that Vucic, who was an ultranationalist ally of Milosevic in the 1990s, has reinstated that autocracy in Serbia since coming to power in 2012, by taking full control over the media and all state institutions.

Vucic has said the elections were fair and his party won. He accused the opposition of inciting violence at protests with the aim of overthrowing the government under instructions from abroad, which opposition leaders have denied.

On Sunday evening, protesters tried to enter Belgrade city hall, breaking windows, before riot police

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pushed them back using tear gas, pepper spray and batons. Police detained at least 38 people.

Serbia is formally seeking membership in the European Union, but the Balkan nation has maintained close ties with Moscow and has refused to join Western sanctions imposed on Russia over the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Russian officials have extended full support to Vucic in the crackdown against the protesters and backed his claims that the vote was free and fair.

What does Watch Night mean for Black Americans today? It dates back to the Emancipation Proclamation

Associated Press undefined

The tradition of Watch Night services in the United States dates back to Dec. 31, 1862, when many Black Americans gathered in churches and other venues, waiting for President Abraham Lincoln to sign the Emancipation Proclamation into law, and thus free those still enslaved in the Confederacy.

It's still being observed each New Year's Eve, at many multiracial and predominantly Black churches across the country.

What is the historical background of Watch Night services?

As the Civil War raged on, Lincoln issued an executive order on Sept. 22, 1862, declaring that enslaved people in the rebellious Confederate states were legally free. However, this decree — the Emancipation Proclamation — would not take effect until the stroke of midnight heralding the new year.

Those gathering on the first Watch Night included many African Americans who were still legally enslaved as they assembled, sometimes in secrecy.

"At the time, enslaved Black people could find little respite from ever-present surveillance, even in practicing their faith," explains the National Museum of African American History and Culture. "White enslavers feared that religion, which was often used to quell slave resistance, could incite the exact opposite if practiced without observance."

How have Watch Night traditions evolved?

Over its 160-year history, Watch Night has evolved into an annual New Year's Eve tradition — it not only commemorates freedom from slavery, but also celebrates the importance of faith, community and perseverance.

This description from the African American museum offers some details:

"Many congregants across the nation bow in prayer minutes before the midnight hour as they sing out 'Watchman, watchman, please tell me the hour of the night.' In return the minister replies 'It is three minutes to midnight'; 'it is one minute before the new year'; and 'it is now midnight, freedom has come.'"

The museum notes that the Watch Night worship services were traditionally followed by a "fortuitous meal" on New Year's Day, often featuring a dish called Hoppin' John.

"Traditionally, Hoppin' John consists of black-eyed peas, rice, red peppers, and salt pork, and it is believed to bring good fortune to those who eat it," the museum says. "Some other common dishes include: candied yams, cornbread, potato salad, and macaroni and cheese."

How are congregations observing Watch Night this year?

Some of this year's services will be conducted virtually, without in-person attendance. Beulah Baptist Church in Philadelphia and First Congregational Church in Atlanta are among those choosing this option.

Among the many churches offering in-person services are Abyssinian Baptist Church in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City, Reid Temple AME Church in Glenn Dale, Maryland; and Shiloh Baptist Church in Trenton, New Jersey.

In Salem, North Carolina, the Rev. William Barber II, a prominent anti-poverty and social-justice activist, will be leading an interfaith Watch Night service at Union Baptist Church along with its senior pastor, Sir Walter Mack. The event is billed as a "service of lament, hope and call to action."

Activists who engage with voters of color are looking for messages that will resonate in 2024

BY AYANNA ALEXANDER and GARY FIELDS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — This year's elections in Louisiana didn't go the way that voting rights advocate Ashley Shelton had hoped, with the far-right conservative attorney general replacing a term-limited Democratic governor and consolidating Republican control in the state.

Turnout was just 37%, despite the efforts of activists like her.

"Even when you work hard and you do all the things you're supposed to, you get an unfortunate outcome, which was these statewide elections," said Shelton, the executive director of Power Coalition for Equity & Justice in Louisiana.

She said it will be a challenge to regain trust from the communities of color she typically focuses on, mostly because of a constant drumbeat of disappointments in recent years, from attacks on voting rights to the failure of a sweeping student loan forgiveness plan. While Louisiana is not a battleground for national races, Shelton's experience in the state serves as a window into some of the challenges President Joe Biden faces as his reelection campaign plans strategies to engage the diverse communities that helped him win in 2020.

Shelton and other activists say they already are looking for messages that will resonate with voters, despite fighting through their own fatigue. That follows recent polling showing that adults in the United States are broadly unenthusiastic about a rematch between Biden and former President Donald Trump at the top of the ticket.

"I don't have the luxury of being tired or frustrated or exasperated," she said. "I have to just get back in the community with folks and understand how to reconnect them to the power in their voice."

Voting advocacy groups that were essential to Biden's victory are coming into the new year expecting to have a difficult time rebuilding the same level of support, especially among voters of color and younger voters.

Just 33% of nonwhite adults under age 45 approve of Biden's job performance, according to the most recent Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs research poll. Just as concerning for the Biden camp is the precipitous drop he has seen overall among Black and Hispanic adults from his first months in office, when his approval rating was 86% among Black adults, 63% among Hispanic adults and 49% among white adults. Now those approval rates stand at 50%, 36% and 40%, respectively.

Democratic campaign strategists say they are encouraging more robust outreach to Black voters in key states. Biden's campaign said it already is laying the groundwork for just such an effort.

Voting activists said they know voters of color are essential for Biden and cited myriad reasons for the drop in support. Among them is the failure to pass a law that would have strengthened voting rights, after numerous Republican-controlled states passed restrictions in the past few years, and Biden's promise about student loan forgiveness, only to see the Supreme Court kill it.

The Rev. Frederick Haynes, president of the Rainbow PUSH Coalition, the Chicago-based civil rights group founded more than 50 years ago by the Rev. Jesse Jackson, said the Democratic Party needs to tell voters what it has accomplished and what it plans to do beyond next year's election.

"Rainbow PUSH will be challenging the administration: What are you doing to get the message through the appropriate mediums to the communities that you say you're serving?" he said.

The Biden campaign agrees and said it is highlighting gains that include delivering on broadband internet access, especially in communities of color, reducing unemployment rates and diversifying the federal judiciary, said Quentin Fulks, the principal deputy campaign manager.

"There's a lot at stake here, and our job as a campaign is to communicate that. But it has to be mixed with also, 'What have you done for me and what has the administration done and what will this administration continue to do to try to improve the lives of people?'" Fulks said.

The Trump campaign did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

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The Georgia Black Republican Council is planning a radio and billboard campaign highlighting issues it thinks are pertinent to Black voters in a state expected to be closely contested. Among the topics are school choice, immigration and abortion.

Other voting advocates say their messages to communities of color will range from successes, such as continued low unemployment, to explanations about why priorities such as federal voting and police overhaul legislation failed. Statewide issues will be a critical part of their messaging, highlighting book bans, gerrymandered districts and abortion.

Yterenickia Bell, senior director of the And Still I Vote Program at the Leadership Conference Education Fund, will be targeting women of color between age 18 and 35 in 11 states.

"We have to remind them when we go to that door that the country is only as successful as the young people who are engaged," she said, pointing out that many of the front-line civil rights activists of the 1960s were their age at the time.

Student debt, climate change, health care, abortion and reproductive care will be the selling points to that targeted group, Bell said.

"Black voters are pragmatic voters" and the younger ones are less party-centric and more focused on issues, said LaTosha Brown, co-founder of Black Voters Matter. "At the end of the day, this cannot be an election just around the candidates. It can't be just Trump. It can't be just about Biden. It really has to be, 'How does democracy protect us?'"

As long as the messaging is tailored to meet the needs of a diverse audience and prioritizes the issues they care most about — rather than focusing on personalities and candidates — it will be successful, said Rev. William Barber, co-founder of the Poor People's Campaign.

The questions should be about who supports health care, higher wages, voting rights and bodily autonomy, he said.

The ground troops might be worn down, Barber said, but "there's two kinds of tired: There's a tired when I'm going to quit, and there's a sick-and-tired but I'm not going to quit because I know I have the power to change this."

Activists who engage with voters of color are looking for messages that will resonate in 2024

BY AYANNA ALEXANDER and GARY FIELDS Associated Press

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Democratic campaign strategists say they are encouraging more robust outreach to Black voters in key states. Biden’s campaign said it already is laying the groundwork for just such an effort.

Voting activists said they know voters of color are essential for Biden and cited myriad reasons for the drop in support. Among them is the failure to pass a law that would have strengthened voting rights, after numerous Republican-controlled states passed restrictions in the past few years, and Biden’s promise about student loan forgiveness, only to see the Supreme Court kill it.

“The candidates who are predicted to be at the top of the ballot in 2024 do pose an issue,” said Lily Trieu, executive director of Asian Texans for Justice. “A lot of young people, especially, are feeling really disillusioned with Biden.”

The Rev. Frederick Haynes, president of the Rainbow PUSH Coalition, the Chicago-based civil rights group founded more than 50 years ago by the Rev. Jesse Jackson, said the Democratic Party needs to tell voters what it has accomplished and what it plans to do beyond next year’s election.

“Rainbow PUSH will be challenging the administration: What are you doing to get the message through the appropriate mediums to the communities that you say you’re serving?” Haynes said.

The Biden campaign agrees and said it is highlighting gains that include delivering on broadband internet access, especially in communities of color, reducing unemployment rates and diversifying the federal judiciary, said Quentin Fulks, the principal deputy campaign manager.

Fulks added that the campaign also has begun organizing programs in two crucial states, Arizona and Wisconsin, to communicate with Latino, Black and young voters.

“There’s a lot at stake here, and our job as a campaign is to communicate that. But it has to be mixed with also, ‘What have you done for me and what has the administration done and what will this administration continue to do to try to improve the lives of people?’” Fulks said. “Our campaign is not taking our foot off the gas, nor are we taking any of these voters for granted.”

The Trump campaign did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

The Georgia Black Republican Council also is planning a radio and billboard campaign highlighting issues it thinks are pertinent to Black voters in a state expected to be closely contested. Among the topics are school choice, immigration and abortion. The organization has plans to conduct listening sessions at Black churches across the state.

Other voting advocates say their messages to communities of color will range from successes, such as continued low unemployment, to explanations about why priorities such as federal voting and police overhaul legislation failed. Statewide issues will be a critical part of their messaging, highlighting book bans, gerrymandered districts and abortion.

Elsie Cooke-Holmes, international president of Delta Sigma Theta, a historically Black sorority, said her organization is developing a national strategy and will hold webinars with members to fashion strategies for local communities.

Even if voters are not excited about the presidential race, they have to be educated about how issues will affect them “not only at the top of the ticket but all the way up and down the ballot,” Cooke-Holmes said. “So much of what has been decided, especially with these voter suppression laws, is certainly at the state level and the local level. We want to make sure that that education happens and that message is crafted.”

The groups also plan to highlight some of the direct attacks on their efforts and priorities. Since 2021, for example, about 10 states have attempted to create or increase criminal penalties and fines for individuals

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and groups that assist voters. Several of those laws faced legal challenges.

Recently, a panel of three federal appeals court judges ruled that private individuals and groups do not have the ability to sue under a key section of the Voting Rights Act. It's another example of an attack on the tools that remain to protect voters, said Cesar Ruiz, an associate counsel with a focus on voting rights for LatinoJustice.

Yterenickia Bell, senior director of the And Still I Vote Program at the Leadership Conference Education Fund, will be targeting women of color between age 18 and 35 in 11 states, including Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.

"We have to remind them when we go to that door that the country is only as successful as the young people who are engaged," she said, pointing out that many of the front-line civil rights activists of the 1960s were their age at the time.

Student debt, climate change, health care, abortion and reproductive care will be the selling points to that targeted group, Bell said.

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Mishara Davis, director of issue and electoral organizing at State Voices, said the message cannot be one size fits all.

"The same messaging that we use for young Black students in Georgia may look a little different than when we're speaking to white women in Wyoming," Davis said. "Or we're speaking to a church congregation in Arkansas compared to someone in Detroit."

That method was proved in Ohio last fall when voters approved a constitutional amendment that guaranteed the right to abortion, said Prentiss Haney, co-executive director of the Ohio Organizing Collaborative. He said the group registered at least 20,000 people, 90% of whom were Black voters, and knocked on more than 200,000 doors, making their outreach the largest Black voter engagement program in the state.

The key was not treating the Black community as if it was monolithic, he said. The group is aiming to take a similar approach in 2024, when Ohio will have one of the most closely watched Senate races in the country.

"What we did is understand that there's diversity in values and ideology, especially in Black voters anywhere in the country, and especially in Ohio," Haney said.

As long as the messaging is tailored to meet the needs of a diverse audience and prioritizes the issues they care most about — rather than focusing on personalities and candidates — it will be successful, said Rev. William Barber, co-founder of the Poor People's Campaign.

The questions should be about who supports health care, higher wages, voting rights and bodily autonomy, he said.

The ground troops might be worn down, Barber said, but "there's two kinds of tired: There's a tired when I'm going to quit, and there's a sick-and-tired but I'm not going to quit because I know I have the power to change this."

US seizes more illegal e-cigarettes, but thousands of new ones are launching

By MATTHEW PERRONE AP Health Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Federal officials are seizing more shipments of unauthorized electronic cigarettes at U.S. ports, but thousands of new flavored products continue pouring into the country from China, according to government and industry data reviewed by The Associated Press.

The figures underscore the chaotic state of the nation's \$7 billion vaping market and raise questions about how the U.S. government can stop the flow of fruit-flavored disposable e-cigarettes used by 1 in 10

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American teens and adolescents.

More than 11,500 unique vaping products are being sold in U.S. stores, up 27% from 9,000 products in June, according to tightly held industry data from analytics firm Circana.

"FDA whacks one product and then the manufacturers get around it and the kids get around it," said Bonnie Halpern-Felsher, a Stanford University psychologist who develops anti-vaping educational materials. "It's too easy to change your product a little bit and just relaunch it."

Halpern-Felsher says she is "constantly" updating her curriculum to keep pace with new vaping brands and trends.

Nearly all the new products are disposable e-cigarettes, according to the sales data gathered from gas stations, convenience stores and other shops. The products generated \$3.2 billion in the first 11 months of this year.

The FDA has authorized a handful of e-cigarettes for adult smokers and is still reviewing products from several major companies, including Juul. Regulators consider nearly all other e-cigarettes to be illegal.

"Those committing illegal acts don't advertise their crimes, and those trying to import illegal tobacco products into the United States are no different," said FDA's tobacco director, Brian King, in a written response to AP questions. "The FDA and our federal partners are using tools, like import alerts, to stop these illegal tobacco products at the border and to deter countless others."

The rise in e-cigarettes sold continues despite a record number of products detained.

An FDA database shows officials "refused" entry to 148 containers or pallets of "tobacco" goods last month, consisting almost entirely of vaping products from China. Refused imports are typically destroyed.

Through the end of November, U.S. officials had refused 374 such shipments this year, more than double the 118 refused in 2022.

This year's items included \$400,000 worth of Esco Bars, a disposable brand placed on a list of banned imports in May. The agency's posted data is often preliminary because it takes time to finalize refusals.

But recent history shows how easily companies can maneuver around import bans.

In July 2022, the FDA barred dozens of e-cigarettes from Chinese manufacturer Fume, including flavors Pineapple Ice and Blue Razz.

Fume sales dipped after the ban, but the company launched a slew of new products, posting \$42 million in U.S. sales in the third quarter of 2023, the data shows. Roughly 98% of sales came from products not on the FDA's "red list" of products that can be detained.

Industry shipping tactics are also challenging the usefulness of import restrictions.

In July, FDA and customs officials intercepted \$18 million worth of illegal vapes, including leading brand Elf Bar. But the shipments were mislabeled as shoes, toys and other items — not e-cigarettes — requiring officials to individually open and verify the contents of more than two dozen containers.

Circana, formerly IRI, restricts access to its data, which it sells to companies and researchers. A person not authorized to share it gave the AP access on condition of anonymity.

The FDA has no schedule for updating its import lists but said it is "closely monitoring" instances where companies try to avoid detection.

"The FDA has a variety of tools at our disposal to take action against these tactics," FDA's King said.

The agency has limited powers to penalize foreign companies. Instead, regulators have sent hundreds of warning letters to U.S. stores selling their products, but those are not legally binding.

Even as the FDA attempts to work with customs officials, it is struggling to complete a yearslong review of applications submitted by manufacturers hoping to market their products to adults.

The few tobacco-flavored products currently authorized by FDA are deeply unpopular. Their combined sales were just \$174 million, or 2.4% of the vaping marketplace this year, according to Circana.

"Nobody wants them," says Marc Silas, owner of 906 Vapor shop in Michigan. "If people wanted them, they'd be on the shelves and they're not."

Deeply frustrated with the pace of FDA's review, public health groups have successfully sued the agency to speed up the process. The agency aimed to complete all major outstanding applications this year, but it recently said the process would stretch into next year.

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The delays have raised questions about the viability of the the current regulatory framework for e-cigarettes.

"FDA is trying to operate with an old model when the whole environment has changed," said Scott Ballin, a health policy consultant who previously worked for the American Heart Association. "They have this long line of products that have to be reviewed one by one and now they're in a giant hole."

One alternative approach would be to make decisions about entire classes of e-cigarettes, rather than individual products.

The idea initially came from small vaping manufacturers who did not have the money to conduct the large studies typical of FDA applications. Public health advocates concerned about the persistence of underage vaping have embraced it.

Halpern-Felsher, of Stanford University, is among those urging the FDA to ban all flavored disposable e-cigarettes, the products used by most of the 2 million underage teens who vape.

"If we continue down this path that we're on, we're just going to have new and continuing generations of young people addicted to nicotine," she said.

Today in History: December 31 Chinese city Wuhan investigates mystery illness

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Sunday, Dec. 31, the 365th and final day of 2023.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 31, 2019, the health commission in the central Chinese city of Wuhan announced that experts were investigating an outbreak of respiratory illness and that most of the victims had visited a seafood market in the city; the statement said 27 people had become ill with a strain of viral pneumonia and that seven were in serious condition.

On this date:

In 1879, Thomas Edison first publicly demonstrated his electric incandescent light by illuminating some 40 bulbs at his laboratory in Menlo Park, New Jersey.

In 1904, New York's Times Square saw its first New Year's Eve celebration, with an estimated 200,000 people in attendance.

In 1951, the Marshall Plan expired after distributing more than \$12 billion in foreign aid.

In 1972, Major League baseball player Roberto Clemente, 38, was killed when a plane he had chartered and was traveling on to bring relief supplies to earthquake-devastated Nicaragua crashed shortly after takeoff from Puerto Rico.

In 1974, private U.S. citizens were allowed to buy and own gold for the first time in more than 40 years.

In 1978, Taiwanese diplomats struck their colors for the final time from the embassy flagpole in Washington, D.C., marking the end of diplomatic relations with the United States.

In 1985, singer Rick Nelson, 45, and six other people were killed when fire broke out aboard a plane that was taking the group to a New Year's Eve performance in Dallas.

In 1986, nearly 100 people were killed when fire broke out in the Dupont Plaza Hotel in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

In 1987, Robert Mugabe was sworn in as Zimbabwe's first executive president.

In 1995, the syndicated comic strip "Calvin and Hobbes," created by Bill Watterson, came to an end after a 10-year run.

In 1999, Russian President Boris Yeltsin announced his resignation.

In 2017, the Cleveland Browns joined the 2008 Detroit Lions as the only teams in NFL history to go 0-and-16, losing to the Pittsburgh Steelers 28-24.

In 2020, Britain completed its economic break from the European Union.

In 2021, Betty White, a television mainstay for more than 60 years on series including "The Mary Tyler

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Moore Show" and "The Golden Girls," died less than three weeks before she would have turned 100.

In 2022, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, who had become the first pontiff in 600 years to resign from the job, died at age 95.

Today's Birthdays: TV producer George Schlatter is 94. Actor Sir Anthony Hopkins is 86. Actor Sarah Miles is 82. Actor Barbara Carrera is 82. Rock musician Andy Summers is 81. Actor Sir Ben Kingsley is 80. Producer-director Taylor Hackford is 79. Fashion designer Diane von Furstenberg is 77. Actor Tim Mathe-son is 76. Pop singer Burton Cummings is 76. Actor Joe Dallesandro is 75. Rock musician Tom Hamilton (Aerosmith) is 72. Actor James Remar is 70. Actor Bebe Neuwirth is 65. Actor Val Kilmer is 64. Singer Paul Westerberg is 64. Actor Don Diamont is 61. Rock musician Scott Ian (Anthrax) is 60. Actor Gong Li is 58. Author Nicholas Sparks is 58. Pop singer Joe McIntyre is 51. Rock musician Mikko Siren (Apocalyptica) is 48. Donald Trump Jr. is 46. Rapper PSY (Park Jae-sang) is 46. Rock musician Bob Bryar is 44. Rock musician Jason Sechrist (Portugal. The Man) is 44. Actor Ricky Whittle is 44. Republican Sen. Josh Hawley of Missouri is 44. Actor/singer Erich Bergen is 38. DJ/vocalist Drew Taggart (The Chainsmokers) is 34. U.S. Olympic beach volleyball gold medalist Alix Klineman is 34. U.S. Olympic gold medal gymnast Gabby Douglas is 28.