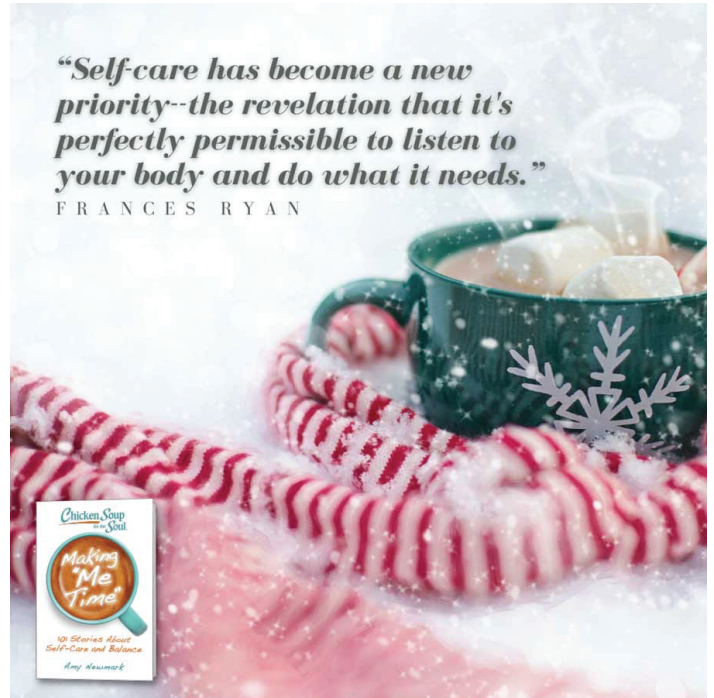


Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 1 of 85

- [1- Upcoming Events](#)
- [2- 1440 Headlines](#)
- [4- NSU Women's Basketball](#)
- [5- NSU Men's Basketball](#)
- [6- NSU Wrestling](#)
- [8- South Dakota Average Gas Prices](#)
- [9- Drought Monitor](#)
- [10- GHS Boys' Basketball \(Dolan recognized for 100th win, Tietz sets scoring record, boys have clean sweep over Clark/Willow Lake\)](#)
- [15- Brown County Commission Agenda](#)
- [16- SD SearchLight: One in five SD students is chronically absent. The state is awarding millions to address it.](#)
- [18- SD SearchLight: Ex-legislator repaying money as conflict question she sparked goes to state Supreme Court](#)
- [19- SD SearchLight: Presidential candidates largely mum about details on how to 'save' Social Security](#)
- [22- SD SearchLight: State lawmakers seek to limit property tax increases as home values soar](#)
- [25- Weather Pages](#)
- [30- Daily Devotional](#)
- [31- Subscription Form](#)
- [32- Lottery Numbers](#)
- [33- News from the Associated Press](#)



"Self-care has become a new priority--the revelation that it's perfectly permissible to listen to your body and do what it needs."
FRANCES RYAN

hour, 9:30 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:30 a.m.

St. John's Lutheran: Worship with communion at St. John's at 9 a.m. and at Zion at 11 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:45 a.m.

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship with communion, 9 a.m.; Sunday School, 10:15 a.m.

Saturday, Jan. 6

Robotics at Groton Area Gym, 8 a.m.
Girls Varsity Wrestling at Lyman.
Boys JV Invitational at Madison, 9 a.m.
Boys Varsity Invitational at Garretson, 9:30 a.m.
Thrift Store open 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.
Catholic: SEAS Confession, 3:45-4:15 p.m.; SEAS Mass, 4:30 p.m.

Sunday, Jan. 7

Groton CM&A: Sunday School at 9:15 a.m., Worship Service at 10:30 a.m.
Catholic: SEAS Mass, 4 p.m. and 8 p.m.; St. Joseph, Turton, Mass, 6 p.m.
First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11 a.m.
United Methodist: Worship with communion: (Conde at 8:30 a.m., Groton at 10:30 a.m.), Coffee

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

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

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~~
- Tiospa Zina Girls JV
- Tiospa 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

Text Paul at
605-397-7460

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 2 of 85

1440

The Food and Drug Administration, for the first time Friday, approved a two-year plan allowing Florida to import certain prescription drugs from Canada at a lower price than in the US. The approval is seen as a step toward reducing the cost of medications for American consumers and paves the way for other states to request permission to import prescription drugs from Canada.

In partnership with [smartasset™](#)

Israeli defense minister outlines plans for Gaza after the war.

Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant's proposals envision Gaza being run by a Palestinian body under the overall control of Israeli security and include a multinational task force taking charge of rebuilding the enclave. Relatedly, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken arrived in the Middle East Friday for talks about postwar plans for Gaza, marking his fourth trip to the region since the war began. See updates on the war [here](#).

US Supreme Court to hear Trump's Colorado ballot disqualification case.

The Supreme Court agreed to review whether former President Donald Trump is ineligible for Colorado's GOP primary ballot. Oral arguments are scheduled for Feb. 8. The high court's move comes two days after Trump appealed the Colorado Supreme Court's December ruling, which disqualified Trump from the state's ballot under a 14th Amendment clause that bars those supporting government uprising.

NRA CEO Wayne LaPierre steps down ahead of civil corruption trial.

The 74-year-old LaPierre, who led the National Rifle Association for more than three decades, announced his resignation Friday, citing health reasons. The news comes as the gun rights group is set to begin a corruption trial in New York Monday. A lawsuit filed by New York Attorney General Letitia James accused the NRA's leadership of diverting millions of dollars for their personal use. LaPierre and ex-NRA President Oliver North are expected to testify in the trial.

"Starsky & Hutch" actor David Soul dies at 80.

Born as David Richard Solberg in Chicago in 1943, Soul rose to fame in the 1970s when he starred as the blonde half of the crime-fighting duo in the TV series "Starsky & Hutch." The series inspired a 2004 film starring Ben Stiller and Owen Wilson. Soul also released music albums in the 1970s and 1980s, which included his No. 1 single "Don't Give Up on Us." He later moved to the UK and became a British citizen in 2004.

US adds 216,000 jobs in December, more than expected.

The figure is above the 170,000 jobs economists had expected and up from November's downwardly revised 173,000 jobs, according to the latest government data. The unemployment rate held at 3.7%, marking a two-year period in which the unemployment rate has been below 4%, a feat last seen in the late 1960s (see chart). Overall, the US labor market in 2023 added 2.7 million jobs.

Fire engulfs historic Singer sewing machine factory in New Jersey.

More than 100 firefighters were tackling the blaze at the industrial building Friday, which sits along the waterfront of Elizabeth, New Jersey, near the Newark Liberty International Airport. The fire, which broke out early morning Friday, caused the warehouse to partially collapse and is expected to burn through the weekend. The cause of the fire is under investigation. The building was once home to the first large Singer sewing machine factory in the US. See photos from the fire [here](#).

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 3 of 85

The 81st Golden Globes airs tomorrow after undergoing revamp.

The Golden Globes returns to its Sunday night slot (8 pm ET, CBS) after two years. The awards show wasn't broadcast in 2022 and was aired on a Tuesday in 2023 because of football. Since then, the Hollywood Foreign Press Association, which organized the Golden Globes, shut down after selling the show's rights to a private owner. The changes include a new diversified voting body of more than 300 entertainment journalists. See predictions for tomorrow's awards [here](#).

Burger King employee, who never missed a day of work for 27 years, buys his first house after going viral and receiving donations from strangers.

Maui jewelry store owner restores jewelry damaged by last year's wildfires for free.

Letter from 1943 delivered to surviving family member after resurfacing in Illinois post office.

US veteran celebrates his 101st birthday at a California Air Force base.

Today, we're sharing a story from reader Fritz S. in Memphis, Tennessee.

"It was a Sunday afternoon in the early 1970s and I was in my freshman year of college. My roommate and I had driven his car from Providence, Rhode Island, to his home in North Carolina for spring break, and we were headed back up I-95 to Rhode Island. Suddenly, at the exit for Newark, Delaware, the car died. It just stopped. We pushed it off the interstate and into the first service station that we could find. Gas stations often worked on cars in those days We had two problems: first, the gas station was closing in a half-hour and it was getting dark, and, second, we had a total of about \$3 between us and no credit cards."

"We began calling everyone we knew back at school, scrabbling for ideas. Eventually, someone got to my dorm's Resident Advisor, whose parents just happened to live in Newark, Delaware. He called his parents, who knew neither of us, and they drove over to the gas station, picked us up, fed us a delightful dinner, and gave us each a bedroom for the night. The next morning, they drove us back to the gas station and loaned us the money for the repairs and we were on our way. It has been 50 years; I have never forgotten their kindness."

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 4 of 85

NSU Women's Basketball

Costly Turnovers Led to Wolves Loss Against the Mavericks

Mankato, Minn. – The Northern State women's basketball team dropped to Minnesota State Friday night, 48-69. The Wolves responded back in the second quarter out-scoring the Mavericks by three, however an early lead by the Mavericks kept the win out of reach for the Wolves.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 48, MSU 69

Records: NSU 9-4 (5-2 NSIC), MSU 10-4 (7-1 NSIC)

Attendance: 1098

HOW IT HAPPENED

Northern State tallied 12 points in the first quarter, 16 in the second, 11 in the third, and nine in the fourth. The Wolves made 33.3 % of shots from the floor along with 17.6 % from the 3-point arc and shot 64.7 % from the free throw line.

NSU notched 26 points in the paint, 39 rebounds, 13 assists, seven steals, and five blocks in the contest.

Madelyn Bragg led the Wolves offense with 16 points, five rebounds, and two blocks.

In addition, Bragg led the team on the floor with a 70.0 field goal percentage.

Rianna Fillipi and Abbey Holmes both notched eight points each, with Fillipi dishing out a team leading eight rebounds and three steals in the contest.

NORTHERN STATE STATISTICAL STANDOUTS

Madelyn Bragg: 16 points, 70.0 field-goal %, 5 rebounds, 2 blocks

Rianna Fillipi: 8 points, 8 rebounds, 3 steals, 2 assists

Abbey Holmes: 8 points, 3 assists

UP NEXT

Northern State returns to action on Saturday evening against Winona State. Tip-off time is set for 5:30 p.m. on January 6th from Winona, Minn. to end the weekend.

Broton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 5 of 85

NSU Men's Basketball

Northern State Men Fall to No. 3 Minnesota State

Mankato, Minn. – The Northern State University men's basketball team faced off against the third ranked team in the country Friday evening, falling 81-66. The Wolves held with the Mavericks for a majority of the first half with Minnesota State notching their largest lead of the frame with under two minutes to play.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 66, MSU 81

Records: NSU 5-8 (3-4 NSIC), MSU 14-0 (8-0 NSIC)

Attendance: 1876

HOW IT HAPPENED

Northern tallied 36 points in the first and 30 in the second, shooting 36.8% from the floor, 30.0% from the 3-point line, and 87.5% from the foul line

Minnesota State recorded 43 points in the first and 38 in the second, shooting 54.2% from the floor, 31.8% from the 3-point line, and 71.4% from the foul line

The Wolves notched a game high nine made 3-pointers and added 35 rebounds, 13 assists, three steals, and two blocks

They scored 20 points in the paint, eight second chance points, seven points off turnovers, and seven points off the bench

Jacksen Moni led three Wolves in double figures, notching a double-double with 20 points and 11 rebounds

NORTHERN STATE STATISTICAL STANDOUTS

Jacksen Moni: 20 points, 44.4 field goal%, 11 rebounds, 2 assists

Josh Dilling: 19 points, 46.7 field goal%, 8 rebounds, 2 assists

Augustin Reede: 11 points, 2 assists

UP NEXT

Northern remains on the road this afternoon at Winona State. Tip-off time is set for 3:30 p.m. against the Warriors.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 6 of 85

NSU Wrestling

No. 18 Northern State Battle Through Three Dual Day from Cedar Falls

Cedar Falls, Iowa – The No. 18 Northern State University wrestling team went 1-2 from the NWCA National Duals on Friday evening facing off against a trio of ranked opponents in No. 1 West Liberty, No. 17 Augustana, and No. 12 Upper Iowa.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 30, WLU 14

Records: NSU 4-3, WLU 7-3

Final Score: NSU 9, AU 29

Records: NSU 4-4, AU 5-3

Final Score: NSU 6, UIU 31

Records: NSU 4-5, UIU 3-1

HOW IT HAPPENED | #1 WEST LIBERTY

In the first meeting between the Wolves and the Hilltoppers, Northern tallied a 16-point upset victory. Landen Fischer kicked off the match with a 6-3 decision win over Alexander Crane and Teagan Block followed that with a 15-0 technical fall over Matt Englehardt.

West Liberty broke through in the 141-pound match with a decision win, however Northern responded with four straight bonus point victories.

No. 1 Wyatt Turnquist extended the Wolves lead with a victory by fall at 4:33 over No. 5 Nico Taddy.

No. 5 Devin Bahr battled and secured an injury win over Jamar Williams for six team points.

With the Wolves up 20-3, Chase Bloomquist tallied an upset major decision win (13-4) over No. 10 Alec Cook.

Mason Fey grabbed the final win for NSU in the opener, pinning Breagan Pearson at 2:35.

The Hilltoppers took the final three weights by injury default and decision, however, were unable to overcome the middle weight deficit.

FINAL RESULTS | #1 WEST LIBERTY

Weight Summary	NSU	WLU
125 Landen Fischer (Northern State) over Alexander Crane (West Liberty) Dec 6-3	3.0	0
133 Teagan Block (Northern State) over Matt Englehardt (West Liberty) TF 15-0	5.0	0
141 Khyvon Grace (West Liberty) over Braydon Mogle (Northern State) Dec 4-2	0	3.0
149 #1 Wyatt Turnquist (Northern State) over #5 Nico Taddy (West Liberty) Fall 4:33	6.0	0
157 #5 Devin Bahr (Northern State) over Jamar Williams (West Liberty) Inj 4:41	6.0	0
165 Chase Bloomquist (Northern State) over #10 Alec Cook (West Liberty) Maj 13-4	4.0	0
174 Mason Fey (Northern State) over Breagan Pearson (West Liberty) Fall 2:35	6.0	0
184 #1 Ty McGearry (West Liberty) over Treyton Cacek (Northern State) Inj 4:17	0	6.0
197 Mason Christian (West Liberty) over Ryan Hirschhorn (Northern State) Dec 7-3	0	3.0
285 Jamie Kilmer (West Liberty) over Ayden Viox (Northern State) Dec 8-3	0	3.0
Un-sportsman like conduct head coach		-1.0
Dual Meet Score	30.0	14.0

HOW IT HAPPENED | #17 AUGUSTANA

The Wolves moved on to the quarterfinal round and faced off against Augustana for the third time in dual action this season.

NSU recorded three decision victories at 133, 157, and 285 pounds but ultimately fell to AU 29-9.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 7 of 85

Block tallied a 5-4 decision win over Jack Huffman, No. 5 Bahr defeated Payton Handevidt (2-0), and Nathan Schauer notched his first win of the day over Max Balow (4-2)

FINAL RESULTS | #17 AUGUSTANA

Weight Summary	AUG	NSU
125 #1 Jaxson Rohman (Augustana) over Landen Fischer (Northern State) Maj 9-1	4.0	0
133 Teagan Block (Northern State) over Jack Huffman (Augustana) Dec 5-4	0	3.0
141 #11 Hunter Burnett (Augustana) over Braydon Mogle (Northern State) Maj 10-2	4.0	0
149 #10 Cael Larson (Augustana) over #1 Wyatt Turnquist (Northern State) Dec 3-2	3.0	0
157 #5 Devin Bahr (Northern State) over Payton Handevidt (Augustana) Dec 2-0	0	3.0
165 Tyler Wagener (Augustana) over Chase Bloomquist (Northern State) Maj 11-3	4.0	0
174 Coy Gunderson (Augustana) over Tyler Voorhees (Northern State) Maj 15-3	4.0	0
184 #7 Cade Mueller (Augustana) over Mason Fey (Northern State) TF 15-0	5.0	0
197 Max Ramberg (Augustana) over Ryan Hirschorn (Northern State) TF 16-1	5.0	0
285 Nathan Schauer (Northern State) over Max Balow (Augustana) Dec 4-2	0	3.0
Dual Meet Score	29.0	9.0

HOW IT HAPPENED | #12 UPPER IOWA

Northern moved to the consolation side of the bracket in win or go home territory, facing off against 12th ranked Upper Iowa

Fischer kicked off the dual for the Wolves with a 9-6 sudden victory win over Treyton Ackman

The Peacocks tied the dual at 133 pounds and took the 6-3 lead at 141 pounds

No. 1 Turnquist bounced back from the Augustana dual with a 4-0 decision win over Ethen Doty; the Wolves final victory of the competition

FINAL RESULTS | #12 UPPER IOWA

Weight Summary	NSU	UIU
125 Landen Fischer (Northern State) over Treyton Ackman (Upper Iowa) SV-1 9-6	3.0	0
133 James Davis (Upper Iowa) over Teagan Block (Northern State) SV-1 4-1	0	3.0
141 #4 Tate Murty (Upper Iowa) over Braydon Mogle (Northern State) Dec 1-0	0	3.0
149 #1 Wyatt Turnquist (Northern State) over Ethen Doty (Upper Iowa) Dec 4-0	3.0	0
157 #7 Eric Faught (Upper Iowa) over Carter Ban (Northern State) Fall 2:39	0	6.0
165 #2 Chase Luensman (Upper Iowa) over Chase Bloomquist (Northern St.) Dec 4-1	0	3.0
174 Lawson Losee (Upper Iowa) over Mason Fey (Northern State) Fall 2:06	0	6.0
184 #12 Colter Bye (Upper Iowa) over Tyler Voorhees (Northern State) Maj 14-2	0	4.0
197 Cameron Lopez (Upper Iowa) over Ryan Hirschorn (Northern State) Dec 11-4	0	3.0
285 Jordan Baumler (Upper Iowa) over Nathan Schauer (Northern State) SV-1 4-1	0	3.0
Dual Meet Score	6.0	31.0

UP NEXT

Northern returns to NSIC dual action next Thursday, January 11 on the road at MSU Moorhead. The Wolves and Dragons will face off at 7 p.m. from Nemzek Hall.

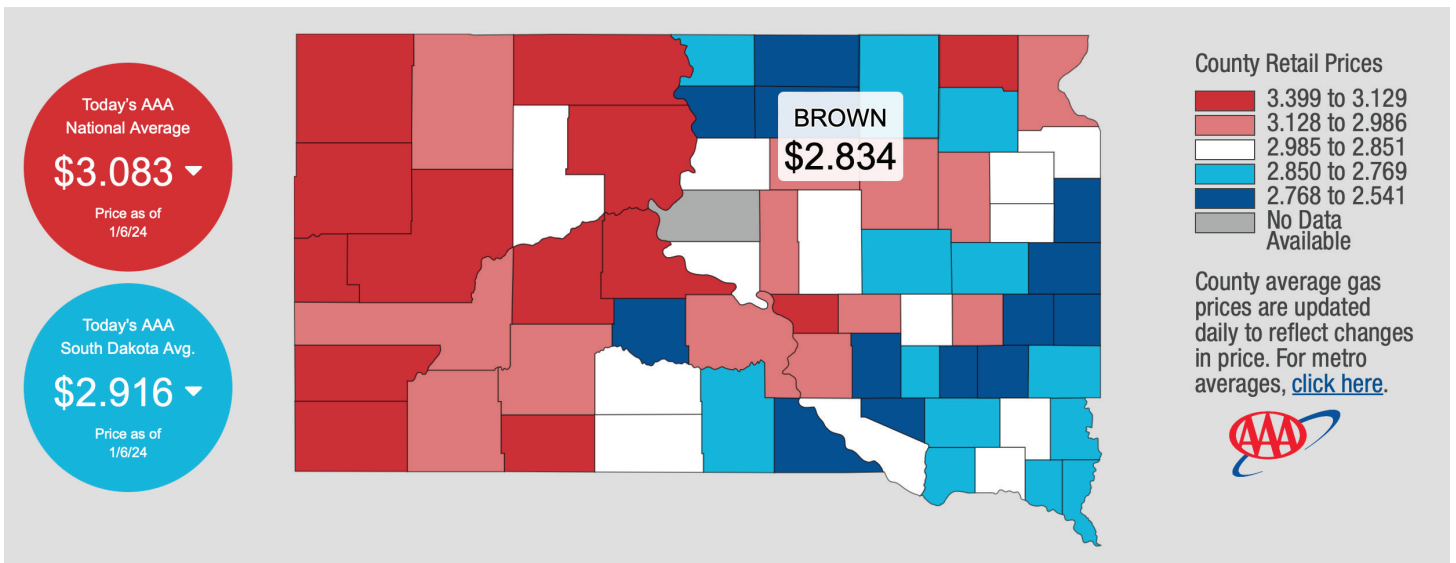
Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 8 of 85

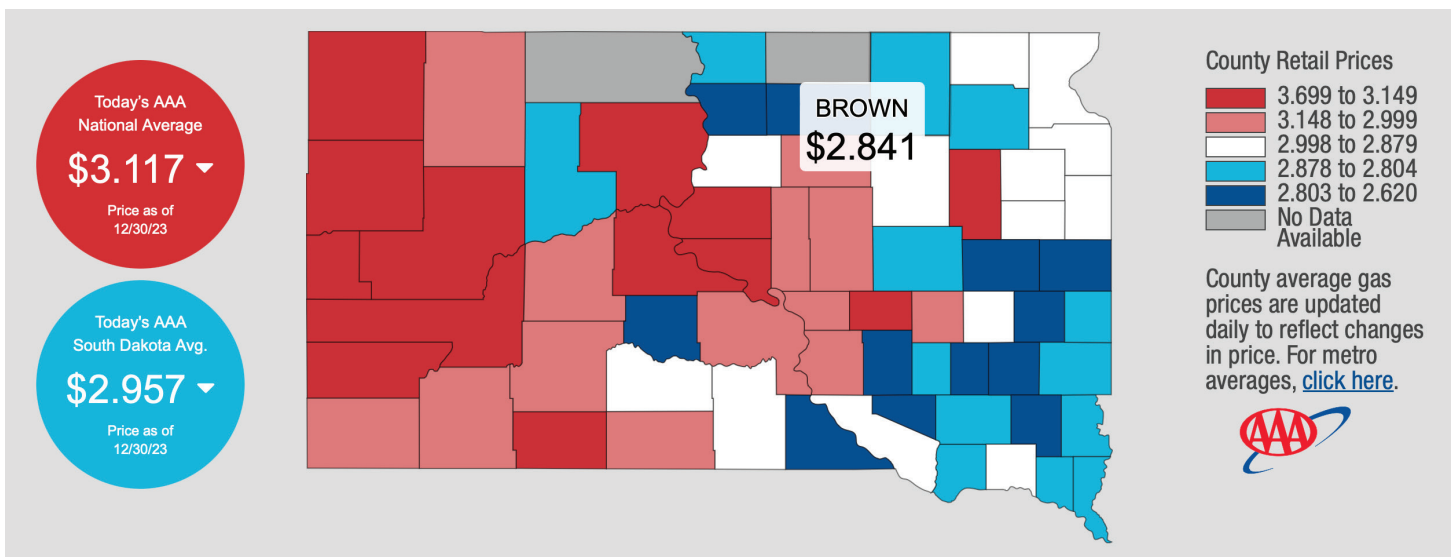
South Dakota Average Gas Prices

	Regular	Mid-Grade	Premium	Diesel
Current Avg.	\$2.916	\$3.068	\$3.562	\$3.709
Yesterday Avg.	\$2.918	\$3.092	\$3.554	\$3.718
Week Ago Avg.	\$2.957	\$3.127	\$3.591	\$3.766
Month Ago Avg.	\$3.118	\$3.300	\$3.758	\$3.955
Year Ago Avg.	\$3.212	\$3.364	\$3.832	\$4.340

This Week



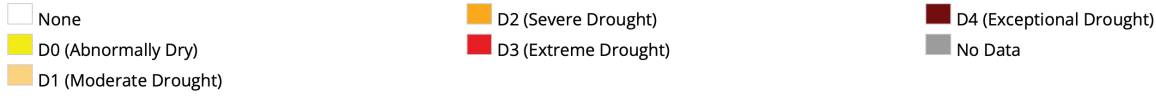
Two Weeks Ago



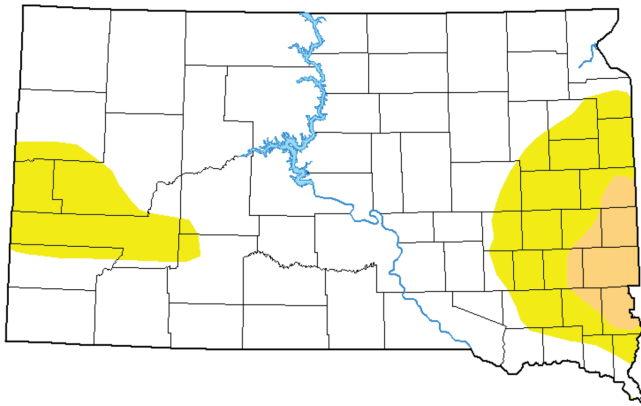
Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 9 of 85

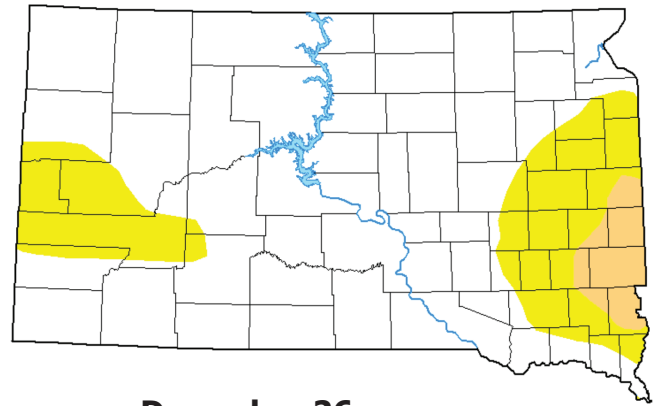
Drought Classification



Drought Monitor



January 2



December 26

A weather system bringing rain and snow moved through the High Plains midweek last week. Central and northern states experienced up to 400% of normal precipitation. Northeastern Colorado and eastern Colorado saw improvements in Exceptional (D4), Extreme (D3), and Severe (D2) drought conditions. These improvements are a continuation of improvements seen last week. The weather system that brought improvements to much of the High Plains largely missed north-central Colorado. Conditions worsened, introducing abnormal dryness and degrading from Abnormally Dry (D0) to Moderate Drought (D1). Northern Wyoming experienced similar conditions to Montana, leading to small Abnormally Dry (D0) and Moderate Drought (D1) expansions along the northern border with Montana.



Former players came back to recognize Coach Brian Dolan for his 100th win coach boys basketball. Pictured left to right are Cade Larson, Tate Larson, Tristan Traphagen, Tyson Parrow, Jayden Zak, Austin Jones, Brody DeHoet, Cole Simon, Wyatt Hearnen and Coach Brian Dolan. (Courtesy Photo)

GHS Boys' Basketball

Tigers stun Clark/Willow Lake in a clean sweep Tietz breaks scoring record

Dolan recognized for his 100th win at Warner

It was a historical night Friday in Groton with so many things at play. It has been many years since the Groton Area boys have beaten Clark/Willow Lake, but this was the year and it was in big fashion with 84-20 final score.

Head Coach Brian Dolan was recognized for his 100th win at Warner which includes his coaching time at Aberdeen Roncalli. Dolan said, "It was a nice touch to have those kids back. It's all about them. We have the luxury of sitting there, not have to run or do the hard work. Those kids do all the hard work. Same as the kids at Roncalli - those kids are just as much a part of this. It's been a journey - never thought I'd be coaching high school basketball, but we're here."

Lane Tietz broke the school record that was held by JR Johnson back in 1998 or 1999. Johnson's record was 44 points. Tietz. Hit 47 points with just over four minutes left in the game.

"When he got to 36, he's was too close to not have a shot at it," Dolan said. "We were ready to take him out but we thought we'd give him a couple of minutes in the fourth quarter. I had Rozell (official) tell Jerome (Clark head coach) what we were doing. They did a great job trying to preventing him from getting it, which they should. He deserves it. He played a very good team game tonight and I thought it was the right thing to do.

Senior Lane Tietz said, "For the past four years, even before I was playing high school basketball we haven't beaten Clark. To finally have a game like this against them is awesome. Yes, I got the school record, but I couldn't have done it without my teammates. Once they saw that I was getting close, they just got me the ball. It's always been a goal of mine to get it, but I didn't think it was possible. It was so fun."



Lane Tietz with the game ball after breaking the school record in most points scored in a game. (Courtesy Photo)

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 11 of 85

Groton Area had a 17-point run in the first half and an 18-point run in the second and third period that was propelled by the Tiger defense. Tietz ended up with a double-double on the night with 47 points and 10 steals. Tietz said, "We've been going so hard in practice on our defense, and that's all coach Dolan is asking. Let the defense create our offense."

Clark/Willow Lake made just two field goals in the second half, which included allowing Cayden Binger to come off the bench and everyone stood there until he made a shot. Binger made the fourth shot after he got some direction from teammate Masyn Knock.

Quarter scores were 22-4, 48-14 and 72-15.

Dolan was surprised but the final score. "I thought we would win. I thought we were the better team. Our guards would give them a lot of trouble. We've been practicing too good lately. Our guys on the bench are getting better, better and better and it's making us deeper and deeper. Turner Thompsom has come out of no where and playing great. JD Schwan, Logan Warrington, Colby has been great since Gage has been out. Those two eighth graders (Karson Zak and Easton Weber) can play with anybody. We're growing. After Pine Ridge, that's what's we've been talking about. We're growing together as a team. The younger kids are growing in with the older kids. It's a fun process."

Tietz finished the night, making eight of 10 two-pointers, nine of 15 three-pointers, four of five free throws, had four rebounds, five assists and 10 steals. Jacob Zak had 13 points, one assist and two steals. Ryder Johnson had eight points, four rebounds, two assists and one steal. Keegen Tracy had five points, three rebounds and one steal. Colby Dunker had five points, two rebounds and one steal. Turner Thompson had three points, one rebounds and one assist. JD Schwan had three points and one rebound. Taylor Diegel had three assists and four steals. Blake Pauli had one rebound, two assists and one steal. Kassen Keough had one rebound. Holden Sippel had one assist. Karson Zak had one steal and Easton Weber had one block shot.

Groton Area made 19 of 29 two-pointers for 66 percent, made 13 of 24 three-pointers for 54 percent, made seven of nine free throws for 78 percent, had 23 rebounds, six turnovers, 15 assists, 21 steals, 13 fouls and one block shot.

Three-Pointers: Zak 1, Tietz 9, Johnson 1, Thompson 1, Schwan 1.

Jack Hellenen led Clark/Willow Lake with five points while Emerson Larson, Jakob Steen and Griffin Muster each had three points and William Hove, Aaron Zemlicka and Cayden Binger each had two points. The Cyclones made seven of 28 field goals for 25 percent, three of eight free throws for 38 percent, had 10 team fouls and 29 turnovers.

Three-Pointers: Hellen 1.

At the end, Tietz added, "The main goal is to go to the state tournament. If that means I score 47 points or six, if my teammates are scoring, we're moving the ball and playing well together, that's all that matters."

Groton Area is now 5-2 on the season while Clark/Willow Lake goes to 3-3. The Tigers will be playing a pair of double headers next week with Tiospa Zina on Thursday and Dakota Valley on Saturday.

Groton Area won the junior varsity game, 50-18, leading at the quarter stops at 10-8, 28-12 and 41-16. Teylor Diegel led the Tigers with 12 points followed by Logan Warrington with 10, Turner Thompson had seven, Kassen Keough and Easton Weber each had six, Blake Pauli five, and Karson Zak and Ethan Kroll each had two points.

Three-Pointers: Pauli 1, Keough 1, Diegel 2, Thompson 2, Weber 2.

Mato Denoyer led Clark/Willow Lake with six points and Masyn Knock added five.

Three-Pointers: Sullivan Felberg 1.

Groton Area made it a clean sweep with a 37-10 win in the C game. Quarterscores were 17-4, 22-5 and 35-5.

Karson Zak led Groton Area with 10 points followed by Easton Weber with eight, Logan Warrington seven, Jayden Schwan six, Ryder Schelle four and Jace Johnson two.

Three-Pointers: Zak 2, Weber 1.

Talon Huber and Levi Atkins each had three points two lead the Cyclones.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 12 of 85



Above: The Groton Area dance team performed.
Below: The Middle School Drum line performed.



Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 13 of 85



Former players came back to honor Coach Brian Dolan for his 100th career basketball win.

Last night's GDILIVE.COM broadcasts

All of the events from last night were broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM. The C game was sponsored for all of the grandparents watching. The junior varsity game was sponsored by Ed and Connie Stauch. The varsity game was sponsored by Agtegra, Avantara Groton, Bary Keith at Harr Motors, BK Custom Ts & More, Bierman Farm Service, Blocker Construction, Dacotah Bank, Full Circle Ag, Groton Ag Partners, Groton Chamber, Groton Ford, John Sieh Agency, Krueger Brothers, Locke Electric, Rix Farms/R&M Farms and Spanier Harvesting and Trucking. Paul Kosel did the play-by-play and Jeslyn Kosel ran the camera.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 14 of 85



The cheerleaders performed the school song pictured above. The Groton Area Pep Band played as well pictured below.



Broton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 15 of 85

BROWN COUNTY
BROWN COUNTY COMMISSION AGENDA
REGULAR MEETING TUESDAY

January 9, 2024 8:45 A.M.

COMMISSIONER'S CHAMBERS, COURTHOUSE ANNEX - 25 MARKET STREET, ABERDEEN SD

1. Call To Order - Pledge of Allegiance
2. Approval of Agenda
3. Opportunity for Public Comment
4. Rachel Kippley – Fair/Fairgrounds/Parks Manager
 - a. Open Bids for Richmond Youth Camp House
 - b. Discuss Options for Funding Expo Replacement Roof Costs
5. Discuss Certificates of Deposit
6. Mariann Malsom – Register of Deeds
 - a. Discuss Fees for Transfers
7. Scott Bader – Planning & Zoning Director
 - a. Approve the Planning & Zoning Application Fee Schedule
 - b. Approve the Planning & Zoning Permit Fee Schedules
 - c. Adopt the Zoning Map
8. Approve Board for Edward's Preserve Nature Area
9. Authorize Chairman to sign Contract Agreement with Building Restoration Corp. for Tuckpointing
10. Appoint Board Member for Hockey Improvement Fund & Approve the Board
11. Approve Housing & Redevelopment Commission of Brown County
12. Approve Regional Railroad Authority Commission
13. Consent Calendar
 - a. Approval of Reorganization Meeting Minutes of January 2, 2024
 - b. Claims
 - c. HR Report
 - d. 4th Quarter Interest Statement
 - e. Lease
 - f. Abatements
 - g. Travel Requests
 - h. Landfill Tonnage Report
14. Executive Session (if requested per SDCL 1-25-2)
15. Adjourn

Brown County Commission Meeting

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Public comment provides an opportunity for the public to address the county commission but may not exceed 3 minutes.

Public comment will be limited to 10 minutes (or at the discretion of the board).

Public comment will be accepted virtually when the virtual attendance option is available.

Official Recordings of Commission Meetings along with the Minutes can be found at

<https://www.brown.sd.us/node/454>



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

One in five SD students is chronically absent. The state is awarding millions to address it.

'You can't educate kids who aren't there,' Department of Education secretary says

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - JANUARY 5, 2024 5:38 PM

Student absenteeism is one of the biggest problems facing South Dakota public education, said state Secretary of Education Joseph Graves.

Chronic absenteeism among South Dakota students jumped from 14% during the 2018-2019 school year to 21% during the 2022-2023 school year. That increase is more pronounced among Native American students, whose chronic absenteeism rates jumped from 31% to 54% in the same timeframe.

Chronic absenteeism is when a student misses 10% or more days of school within the school year.

Attendance and academic performance are directly correlated.

"School is how we bring kids to understand their role in the world. You can't educate kids who aren't there," Graves told South Dakota Searchlight. "The key to the American Dream is a great education. If you get a great education, you can go anywhere in life."

The state Department of Education is handing out millions of dollars in grants to school districts over the next three years to address student absenteeism through research-based programs.

'Doesn't feel right': Some schools with significant Native American representation miss out on grants

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated absenteeism in school districts across South Dakota.

"The pandemic put education as a lower priority over other issues," Graves said. "That sunk in with a lot of people, and we saw a definite decline in attendance rates of students."

Recovery is taking longer than expected — both in South Dakota and nationally, Graves said. Some demographic groups are faring worse than others — including Native American children, Hispanic or Latino children, and economically disadvantaged children.

Sioux Falls will be awarded \$1.5 million over the next three years to address absenteeism. The district was one of nine to receive awards, including Pierre, Wilmot, Waubay, Sisseton, Watertown, Mitchell, Leola and Spearfish — all at varying amounts.

Out of the school districts selected, Sisseton has the highest representation of Native American students at 54% of its student body, according to 2023 enrollment reports from the department. Waubay and Wilmot's student bodies are 34% and 22% Native American. All of the other schools receiving grants have Native American student populations lower than 20%. School districts that serve majority Native American student bodies, such as Oglala Lakota County, Todd County and White River, were not awarded the grants.

Superintendent Roberta Bizardie of the Todd County School District said the district applied and was surprised when it was not awarded a grant. Native American students make up 94% of the student body, and the school district has a chronic absenteeism rate of 40%.

"I just didn't feel right," Bizardie said when she saw which schools were awarded grants.

There are three social workers serving the school district's 2,000 children — many of whom are economically disadvantaged. The application planned to use money to hire more social workers and attendance liaisons dedicated to absenteeism issues.

Since the district was not awarded a grant, Bizardie plans to work with the Rosebud Sioux Tribe's truancy

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 17 of 85

department to reach out to families. They'll continue using their social workers, sending daily calls to parents when their child isn't in school, creating more family engagement events and encouraging attendance with incentives for students.

A representative from the Department of Education told the district that the reason it did not receive a grant was because some of the line-item expenses listed in the budget weren't "clearly listed in our narrative," Bizardie said.

While Native American students, on average, have higher chronic absenteeism rates and lower academic achievement rates than other demographic groups, it goes hand in hand with socioeconomic status, Graves said.

Out of the demographic groups, low socioeconomic status is the most important to address, he added. Graves said Native American education is seeing a "small renaissance" through private programming closely connected with culture and language. He plans to keep an eye on those programs.

"What I think public schools need to do, and what I'm hoping they'll do, is that they'll watch that renaissance of private education and think about what we can do to adapt and serve students who attend public education," Graves said.

Districts spend grants on transportation, mentoring & engagement

The student absenteeism grant effort is funded through the federal Bipartisan Safer Communities Act of 2022. The schools will report on progress at the end of each school year until the grant is finished.

The awarded districts are addressing absenteeism differently, though all will spend some of the money on transportation, mentoring or engagement activities to entice students to attend school.

Sioux Falls will target elementary and middle schools with predominantly economically disadvantaged students. Working with younger children will "catch them at an early age" before a student loses too much ground or incentive to attend school, said Assistant Superintendent James Nold.

"A significant way out of poverty is through education," Nold said. "We can encourage attendance, have staff and programs in place all to give a meaningful education and pull children out of poverty. Education hits on so many fronts; it's so important to have a child in school on a daily basis."

Attendance liaisons focus on relationships, mentoring

The most popular use of the grant funds is hiring an attendance liaison or advocate to build connections with students and families who struggle with attendance.

In Sisseton, the school district hired Michelle Greseth to implement the national intervention program "Check and Connect," which focuses on relationship building between a mentor and a student. During the 2021-2022 school year, 26% of Sisseton high school students were chronically absent. So far during the 2023-2024 school year — after implementing the program and an attendance awareness campaign for students and families — 11% of high school students are chronically absent.

Greseth or other trained staff plan to work with students and families for a minimum of two years, reviewing data and educational progress, behaviors, attendance and intervention efforts.

Greseth said she's already seeing progress in the nearly dozen middle school and high school students she began meeting weekly during the fall semester.

"If you don't have the relationship then the data isn't that meaningful because they're not willing to buy in — you really want to know the kid and what drives them and motivates them," Greseth said. "They won't care about how much you know until they know how much you care."

Sioux Falls hired six liaisons committed to student attendance and one recovery teacher to help middle school students who have fallen behind in their academics. Wilmot School District Superintendent Larry Hulscher said about 10% of its students are chronically absent.

Hiring just one attendance advocate for the small school district will help alleviate the burden on already overworked staff, Hulscher said. Principals, teachers and school resource officers across the state have attempted to build those attendance relationships in years past.

"Quite honestly, we haven't been able to dedicate much time to that as the other responsibilities that come with those jobs," Hulscher said. "This person can dedicate all of their time to this."

Watertown plans to hire three family support specialists. Watertown's chronic absenteeism rate has hovered around 20% over the last three years, said Superintendent Jeff Danielsen.

"The principal represents authority and the SRO represents authority," Danielsen said, using the abbreviation for "school resource officers," the law enforcement officers present in some schools. "This position is for someone who won't have those titles; someone who can catch more flies with honey than vinegar."

Enhancing extracurricular activities

Getting students involved in at least one extracurricular activity they're passionate about — sports, theater, debate, student government — will help carry them through school and to graduation, Graves said.

"Almost nobody liked every subject in school, but almost everybody got through it even though they didn't like them," Graves said. "Like a student who isn't fond of English but has to pass the class because he loves football and can't play otherwise. That engagement is huge. If you're not engaging kids, you're missing a large part of the boat."

Graves served as the Mitchell superintendent before joining Gov. Kristi Noem's administration.

The Mitchell School District plans to hire an attendance liaison and social worker like other awarded schools, but Superintendent Joe Childs also plans to build a "robust offering" of extracurriculars in the district's "Kernel Club," which is an after-school program for children transitioning from elementary school to middle school. The school district has an 18% chronic absenteeism rate.

Kernel Club activities are currently limited to two sports: volleyball and basketball. Childs plans to expand offerings to cover more sports, performing arts and visual arts opportunities.

Graves hopes school districts across the state will continue to invest in Career and Technical Education and Jobs for America's Graduates programs, which have also led to higher attendance rates and student participation rates.

The goal, Graves said, is to course-correct and bring statewide chronic absenteeism and general absenteeism rates back down to pre-pandemic numbers.

The hope for Sioux Falls, Nold said, is that the programs implemented by the district are "so effective that we can't do without them in three years."

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.

Ex-legislator repaying money as conflict question she sparked goes to state Supreme Court

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - JANUARY 5, 2024 4:14 PM

As the state Supreme Court prepares to hear arguments Monday about what constitutes a conflict of interest, the former legislator whose situation sparked the question is repaying money her business received from the government.

Jessica Castleberry, R-Rapid City, resigned from the state Senate last year. Gov. Kristi Noem had publicly revealed that Castleberry's business, Little Nest Preschool, received about \$603,000 in federal pandemic relief funds routed through the state.

Noem and Attorney General Marty Jackley alleged that the situation violated a state constitutional ban on legislators having a direct or indirect interest in a state contract.

Castleberry resigned and signed a settlement agreement in August. She will ultimately pay \$499,129.79 plus interest to the state, at a rate of \$2,390.94 per month, which is nearly \$29,000 per year.

She has so far paid over \$7,000, on schedule. Her repayments go into the state's general fund to be spent as legislators see fit.

Meanwhile, Noem has declined to appoint Castleberry's successor or fill another open legislative seat in the Black Hills. Noem has said she's waiting until the state Supreme Court issues her requested advisory opinion clarifying the meaning of the constitution's conflict-of-interest language.

That means the two seats will be open when the Legislature convenes Tuesday for its annual lawmaking session.

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.

Presidential candidates largely mum about details on how to 'save' Social Security

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - JANUARY 5, 2024 1:38 PM

WASHINGTON — The winner of next year's presidential election could very well be holding the reins when it comes time to address Social Security's complicated financial situation.

The program, which millions of retirees depend on for income stability, will see benefits cut by nearly a quarter in 2033 if Congress and the White House haven't reached agreement before then.

And while both Democrats and Republicans say they want to "save" Social Security, there's very little agreement or specifics in their campaign platforms about how lawmakers should avoid a reduction in benefits, or even when negotiations should begin.

Social Security is one of the more important topics a political candidate can talk about, given that 57% of voters said "securing Social Security" was a top priority for them when Pew Research Center surveyed adults in 2022.

And Social Security recipients are more likely than many other age groups to vote.

The longer lawmakers wait to address the solvency crisis, the harder it will be to fix the problem, a frustrating situation for those who have been talking about it for years.

"We have to redefine what the third rail is," Louisiana Republican Sen. Bill Cassidy said during a discussion on Social Security last year. "The third rail, according to our leading presidential candidates, is that you pretend there's nothing wrong with Social Security."

The third rail, a long-used metaphor for policy areas that politicians don't want to touch, should instead be about the consequences of allowing Social Security to go past that fiscal cliff, triggering a sharp decrease in benefits and doubling "the rate of poverty among the elderly," Cassidy said.

"That should be the third rail," he said. "The conversation has to change to that."

Cassidy, the top Republican on the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, criticized the leading presidential contenders during that April discussion for not having more detailed, proactive plans for avoiding a reduction in Social Security benefits.

"It's going to require a president to provide leadership in bringing a bipartisan group together to avoid this 24% cut that's scheduled to occur," Cassidy said.

Little but talking points

Whoever wins the presidential election in November would hold the title until at least January 2029, just a few years before the cliff is set to take effect, absent action by Congress.

But, neither President Joe Biden nor any of the top Republican primary contenders have laid out detailed proposals or gone beyond talking points.

Dan Adcock, director of government relations & policy at the National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare, said during an interview with States Newsroom that it "behooves the president to try to come up with a proposal that would extend solvency and not have to wait until the last minute."

The longer the next president and Congress put off negotiations about potentially changing benefits or

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 20 of 85

possibly increasing revenue, or both, "the effectiveness of those proposals go down as you get closer to the solvency day," Adcock said.

One of the main obstacles once talks do begin, he said, is that Democrats and Republicans "seem to be diametrically opposed to the other side's solution."

Then, the politics will come into play, potentially causing issues for those in the GOP.

"Especially on the Republican side, there is a growing understanding that proposals to cut benefits are deeply unpopular, even amongst their own political base," Adcock said. "And so they're trying to come up with other ideas to suggest 'Well, let's grow the economy' and 'Let's drill for oil,' and 'Let's find other sources of revenue.' But I'm skeptical that those are really what you need to extend solvency."

Polling suggests Americans would rather see Social Security taxes increased than have benefits cut. According to those surveyed in December by Gallup, 61% said the federal government should raise Social Security taxes, while 31% said it should cut benefits. The remaining people said they had no opinion.

That trend has existed for nearly 20 years, according to prior polling from Gallup.

Here's what the leading contenders for president have said about addressing Social Security's financial problems.

Biden

Biden's latest budget proposal said his administration "is committed to protecting and strengthening Social Security and opposes any attempt to cut Social Security benefits for current or future recipients."

"The Administration looks forward to working with the Congress to responsibly strengthen Social Security by ensuring that high-income individuals pay their fair share," it said.

The budget request, however, didn't include details about how Biden wants lawmakers to address the looming solvency issue with Social Security. And the White House hasn't taken steps to begin serious negotiations with lawmakers.

The Biden campaign website has no policy section and no proposals regarding his plans for Social Security. The campaign did not respond to a request for details.

Trump

During a town hall with Fox News' Sean Hannity in early December, former President Donald Trump suggested the United States should sell more fossil fuels to address Social Security finances.

"You don't have to touch Social Security," Trump said. "We have money laying in the ground far greater than anything we can do by hurting senior citizens with their Social Security."

Trump criticized other GOP presidential candidates for suggesting that the United States should increase the eligibility age for Social Security, saying that raising it to 75 would lead to people being "devastated."

The Trump campaign's website does have a policy section but doesn't include any proposals for Social Security. The campaign did not respond to a request asking for information about what he would do if elected.

Haley

In a September speech laying out her economic proposals, former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley said she promised to "protect those receiving Social Security and Medicare."

"We'll keep these programs the same for anyone who's in their 40s, 50s, 60s, or older, period," Haley said. "And we'll preserve Social Security and Medicare for the next generation."

Haley said she would change the eligibility age "for younger people who are just entering the system" and that she planned to "limit benefits for wealthy people."

"I recognize that Social Security and Medicare are the last thing the political class wants to talk about. Well, I just did," Haley said. "Any candidate who refuses to address them should be disqualified."

Haley's campaign website doesn't include any proposals about Social Security and the campaign didn't return a request for details about whether one exists or what it might propose.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 21 of 85

DeSantis

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis indicated during an interview on Fox News that he doesn't support changing Social Security benefits for current retirees, though he would be open to altering how the program works for younger people.

"I'm a governor of Florida; of course we're going to protect people's Social Security," DeSantis said. "My grandma passed away when she was 91. That was her sole source of income. That's true for millions of seniors. So that goes without saying."

It would be a "much different thing" to talk "about making changes for people in their 30s or 40s so that the program is viable," DeSantis said.

"And that's something that I think there's going to need to be discussions on," he said.

DeSantis' campaign website doesn't include any policy proposals for Social Security.

Christie

Former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie said during the GOP debate in November that the biggest factors affecting Social Security are eligibility for the program, the age when people can begin collecting either partial or full benefits and taxes.

Christie said Americans are already "overtaxed" and ruled out that change. On eligibility, he said that wealthy people shouldn't be able to collect Social Security, but didn't list a threshold for cutting off access to the program for those with high incomes.

Christie declined to go into specifics about raising the eligibility age, but said his 30-year-old son should be able to adjust his retirement savings if the federal government were to increase the age when Americans can begin collecting either partial or full Social Security benefits.

"We have to deal with this problem," Christie said, suggesting an increase to the eligibility age by a "few years" for people in their 30s and 40s.

"I have a son who's in the audience tonight who's 30 years old," Christie said. "If he can't adjust to a few years increase in the Social Security retirement age over the next 40 years, I've got bigger problems with him than his Social Security payments."

Christie's campaign website doesn't include any policy proposals or details about how he would address Social Security's future if elected president.

Ramaswamy

Entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy has said during debates and on the campaign trail that he doesn't want to see any cuts to Social Security for retirees, but he hasn't released a proposal for how to avoid the reduction in benefits that will take effect in a decade if the government doesn't address the program's financial situation.

"So this is really important right now," he said in response to a question about Social Security during the November debate. "We're working within the last window, I believe we will have to actually fix this problem while still leaving Social Security and Medicare benefits for current seniors intact."

He said preserving Social Security could be achieved with proposals that are highly unlikely to ever move through Congress, including reducing the number of federal employees by 75%. He also proposed eliminating military assistance and foreign aid.

"I believe this is our last best window to be able to take care of our national debt problem through those severe measures, including sacrificing the foreign wars that many bloodthirsty members of both parties have a hunger for," he said.

Ramaswamy's campaign website doesn't have any proposals addressing Social Security's solvency.

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

State lawmakers seek to limit property tax increases as home values soar

Relief bill already introduced ahead of SD legislative session

BY: KEVIN HARDY, STATELINE - JANUARY 5, 2024 6:00 AM

Soaring home values have increased property taxes for millions of homeowners in recent years, prompting action from state lawmakers to lighten the burden.

"The biggest problem was they just went up so quickly. ... I think that's one of the reasons why it became this rallying cry from the people asking for tax relief," said Idaho state Rep. Jason Monks, a Republican.

The typical home value in Idaho increased from \$275,852 in November 2019 to \$434,224 this November — a 57% increase over four years, according to data provided by real estate giant Zillow, which tracks the average of the middle one-third of home values. During the same period in South Dakota, the typical home value rose from \$205,406 to \$291,081, which was a 42% increase.

Rising home prices typically lead to higher property tax assessments, potentially pushing up tax bills even when tax rates remain steady. Those rates are generally set by local governments, not legislatures. But public pressure has compelled lawmakers in several states, including Idaho, to use surplus state revenues to mitigate property tax hikes.

In Ada County, home to Boise and Idaho's most populous county, the measure that Monks and his colleagues approved in March delivered nearly \$100 million in property tax relief. That amounted to a median cut of more than \$500 per home, the Idaho Capital Sun reported.

"I think it was wildly successful," Monks said. "Really everybody across the state received tax relief, which was the objective of the bill."

In South Dakota last winter, legislators introduced multiple tax-relief bills. They ultimately rejected property tax relief in favor of a temporary reduction of the state sales tax rate. A new bill to limit annual tax valuation increases for owner-occupied homes has already been filed ahead of the beginning of this year's legislative session.

Jared Walczak, vice president of state projects at the Tax Foundation, a pro-business research organization, said he expects many other states — both blue and red — to tackle the issue this year.

"In virtually every state where the legislature meets this year, property tax relief bills will be filed," Walczak said. "This is a front-of-mind issue for many legislators across the country."

But property taxes are intrinsically complex.

States can set broad property tax policies — such as tinkering with assessment rates on real estate. But it's generally local governments, including school districts and municipalities, that set specific tax rates and heavily rely on the revenue for day-to-day operations.

The effort across the country to provide property tax relief has sparked some concern that states could go too far, jeopardizing revenue for school districts and local governments. And some policymakers worry about overly broad relief that could benefit the wealthiest property owners at the expense of those most in need.

In Idaho, legislators had to override a veto from Republican Gov. Brad Little, who was worried about jeopardizing funding for transportation projects and the cutting of a local election date. After the veto override, the governor said he was satisfied with legislative cleanups and overall was supportive of the property tax changes.

The issue is particularly ripe in the Mountain West, where home values skyrocketed after remote work gave Americans more residential freedom. Many well-heeled workers fled the East Coast and California for the mountains, pushing up housing prices.

In December, Montana Republican Gov. Greg Gianforte launched a task force charged with proposing a property tax relief plan for legislators to consider at their next regular session in 2025. Recent legislation authorized up to \$675 in property tax rebates for 2023 and 2024, but Gianforte said the state needs "long-term reforms to keep property taxes as low as possible."

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 23 of 85

In Wyoming, organizers aim to put a property tax relief measure on the statewide ballot after legislative efforts fizzled. Lawmakers already have introduced several alternative measures ahead of the 2024 session.

And Colorado lawmakers will once again attempt to deliver lasting property tax relief after the failure of a ballot initiative pushed by Democratic Gov. Jared Polis prompted a short-term legislative cut during a special session in November.

Nebraska Republican Gov. Jim Pillen has proposed to reduce local property taxes by increasing the state sales tax rate by 2 cents, from 5.5 cents to 7.5 cents, the Nebraska Examiner reported.

Home values spark urgency

Generally, American home values increase incrementally each year.

The Case-Shiller U.S. National Home Price Index, a benchmark of average single-family home prices, shows a steady increase from the 1980s to the beginning of 2020.

But those values shot up nearly 40% over the past three years — far outpacing inflation rates for food, energy and other consumer purchases.

“So, they [homeowners] could be facing 40% higher property taxes. Even after you account for inflation, this is a very significant increase,” Walczak, of the Tax Foundation, said. “And they recognize they’re not getting 40% more or better government for these additional tax payments. ... So there is a public outcry.”

That outcry is especially pronounced among retired and low-income homeowners who often struggle to keep up with rising property taxes.

“I think the main reason people get frustrated with property taxes is that they’re often disconnected from their ability to pay,” said Aidan Davis, the state policy director at the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy, a research group that supports tax policies to create a “racially and economically equitable tax system.”

As with the recent wave of state income tax cuts, it’s unclear whether deep property tax cuts can be sustained over time as state revenues likely begin to decline.

Nearly every state has enacted some form of property tax limit since the 1970s. Some implemented caps on how much valuations of a home can rise each year. Other states have pushed local jurisdictions to restrict rate increases.

But Davis said across-the-board cuts don’t necessarily provide relief to those most in need. Her organization recommends lawmakers consider so-called circuit breakers, which prevent homeowners and renters from being overloaded by property taxes. While programs vary greatly, 29 states and the District of Columbia have enacted circuit breakers that cap property tax bills if they represent too large a share of a homeowner’s income.

Property taxes are generally more regressive than other taxes, Davis said, meaning they take a larger percentage of income from lower-income residents. But circuit breakers can protect people whose home values have surged even if their incomes haven’t.

The role of local governments

Idaho lawmakers last year diverted state surplus revenues to fund property tax relief — sending cash directly to local school systems to make up for lost property taxes.

The legislation also increased the income limit and assessed valuation cap for residents participating in the state’s circuit breaker program, allowing more older, widowed or disabled homeowners to qualify. Homeowners saw an average property tax cut of 18% late last year, according to the governor’s office.

To dissuade local school systems from raising taxes, the legislation cut the most popular of four annual election dates that schools largely had relied on to ask voters to raise revenues.

That was a key reason the law was opposed by the Idaho School Boards Association.

Idaho school systems rely on local levies to fund not only facility costs but also operational expenses such as teacher salaries, athletics and special education, said Quinn Perry, the association’s director of policy and government affairs.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 24 of 85

While lawmakers touted the law as a historic state investment in education, Perry noted that the state simply swapped school funding sources. And it's unclear how sustainable the tax cut will prove over time as pandemic relief dries up and the economy remains uncertain.

In October, Idaho budget officials announced state revenues came in nearly \$40 million below projected levels as sales and income taxes were weaker than expected.

"I think there is a good question about sustainability," Perry said, "because it's essentially taking a lot of general fund dollars to pay for home relief."

Texas voters in November overwhelmingly approved a constitutional amendment under which the state will send \$7.1 billion to school districts so they can lower property taxes. The amendment, which passed with 80% support, also doubles the homestead exemption and caps property tax increases on certain business properties.

At \$18 billion, Texas delivered the nation's largest-ever property tax cut, said state Sen. Paul Bettencourt, who worked on the plan with fellow Republican Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick.

But he said it also helped those struggling the most: The homestead exemption means homeowners won't have to pay taxes on the first \$100,000 value of their homes, a provision that will mean the most to those at the lower end of the market.

"It's good tax policy but it's also good public policy to keep people in their homes," Bettencourt said. "And quite frankly, I think it's a moral responsibility. Because with all the pressures in modern society, you want to keep as many families as possible in their own home."

Finding the right balance

In Colorado, the landscape ranges from rural ranching communities to booming urban and suburban markets.

And property taxes can prove a double-edged sword: a wealthy homeowner or investor could cash in on a home value that has doubled in just a few years' time. But a cash-strapped or low-income homeowner could be at risk of losing their house over skyrocketing valuations and taxes.

"I've been struggling with this," said Democratic state Rep. Marc Snyder. "It's really hard to come up with a statewide solution when you have such a variety of situations in Colorado."

Lawmakers grappled with the issue after the November failure of Proposition HH, which would have reduced property tax rates over 10 years and exempted part of a home's value for its assessment. In a four-day special session that month, the Democratic-controlled legislature provided about \$430 million in property tax relief — but only for 2023.

"It worked for a short-term solution," said Democratic state Rep. Chris deGruy Kennedy.

Kennedy is a member of a task force that began studying the issue in December. That group also includes representatives of local governments. He says many of those leaders want the state to stay away from the issue of property tax rates.

"The state doesn't get any property tax revenue so, why should it decide how much money the local governments collect?" he said. "And I think that's a pretty persuasive argument."

Kennedy said he wants to ensure that Colorado's school and fire districts have the revenue sources they need to operate well. But he's wary of tax relief that is overly broad.

"I want to make sure that whatever we do to provide property tax or rent assistance is done in the most targeted way possible," he said, "so that we're actually giving the dollars to the people that need them, rather than doing across-the-board cuts."

The task force aims to report its recommendations to the legislature in March. That should give lawmakers time to craft legislation before the session ends in May, said Snyder, who is running for a state Senate seat.

"I would not relish the thought of going out and knocking on doors if we haven't done anything," he said.

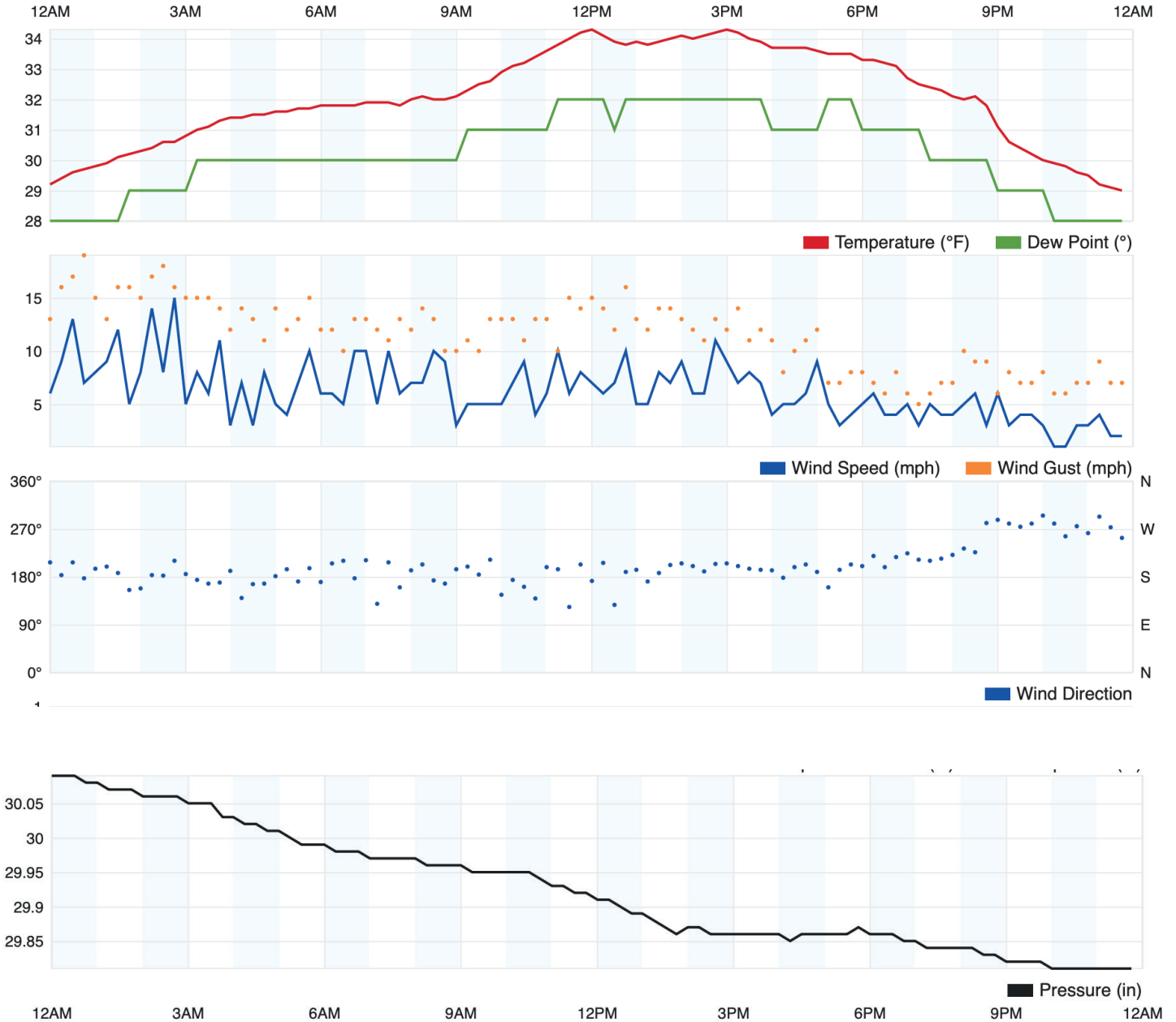
— *The staff of South Dakota Searchlight contributed to this report.*

Kevin Hardy covers business, labor and rural issues for Stateline from the Midwest.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 25 of 85

Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 26 of 85

Sat Jan 6	Sun Jan 7	Mon Jan 8	Tue Jan 9	Wed Jan 10	Thu Jan 11	Fri Jan 12
27°F 11°F	22°F 15°F	23°F 9°F	21°F 14°F	27°F 1°F	5°F -6°F	1°F -7°F
NW 15 MPH	ESE 7 MPH	NE 10 MPH	NNW 5 MPH	SSE 10 MPH	WNW 16 MPH	NNW 15 MPH
20%		40%		40%	20%	20%



Upcoming Winter Weather & Arctic Cold

January 6, 2024
3:19 AM

Snow Timing

An active pattern, with a few weak systems, will result in on-off chances for snow and near normal temperatures...until mid-week when we see a much colder air move into the region

Key Messages

- Light Snow This Morning (Accumulations 1" or less)
- Another Round Of Light Snow Sunday Night/Monday
- Near Normal Temperatures Followed By An Arctic Blast...
- ...Wind Chills 20 to 35 Below For Late Next Week/Weekend

	Sat			Sun			Mon				Tue				Wed				
	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm
Aberdeen	35%							20%	35%	25%					20%	35%	45%	35%	35%
Britton	60%	15%						15%	45%	40%					10%	30%	60%	55%	40%
Brookings	60%	60%						35%	70%	50%	15%						25%	25%	20%
Chamberlain	35%	15%				15%		45%	40%	15%						10%	10%	15%	20%
Clark	50%	20%						30%	60%	35%	15%					20%	45%	35%	30%
Eagle Butte						15%		20%	15%						40%	40%	25%	20%	20%
Ellendale	40%							10%	30%	25%					20%	35%	50%	45%	30%
Eureka	25%							20%	25%	15%					35%	50%	45%	40%	30%
Gettysburg	20%					10%		30%	30%	15%					30%	45%	35%	25%	25%
Huron	35%	25%						40%	50%	25%					10%	25%	25%	25%	25%
Kennebec	20%					10%		40%	35%	15%					15%	20%	15%	15%	20%
McIntosh						15%		25%	15%						60%	60%	25%	30%	25%
Milbank	65%	35%						10%	55%	50%	15%					10%	50%	45%	30%
Miller	35%							45%	50%	20%					10%	30%	30%	25%	25%
Mobridge						10%		25%	20%	10%					40%	50%	35%	30%	25%
Murdo	10%					15%		35%	25%	10%					20%	30%	15%	15%	20%
Pierre	10%							25%	25%	10%					20%	30%	20%	15%	20%
Redfield	40%							35%	45%	20%					10%	30%	35%	25%	30%
Sisseton	70%	30%							45%	45%	10%					20%	55%	55%	40%
Watertown	55%	35%						25%	65%	50%	20%					15%	50%	40%	30%
Webster	60%	20%						20%	55%	35%	10%					20%	55%	40%	35%
Wheaton	70%	40%							35%	35%	10%					10%	45%	50%	35%



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

We'll be under an active pattern with off and on chances for light snow before we see arctic air move into the region. This will be the coldest airmass of the season with dangerous cold and wind chills.

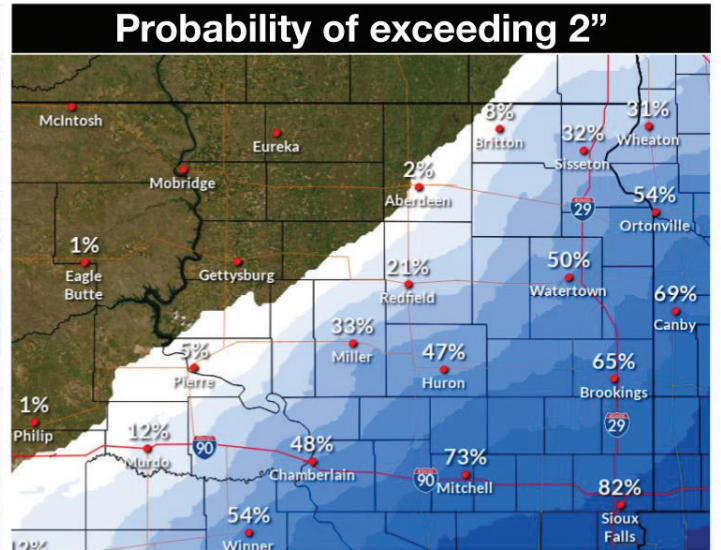
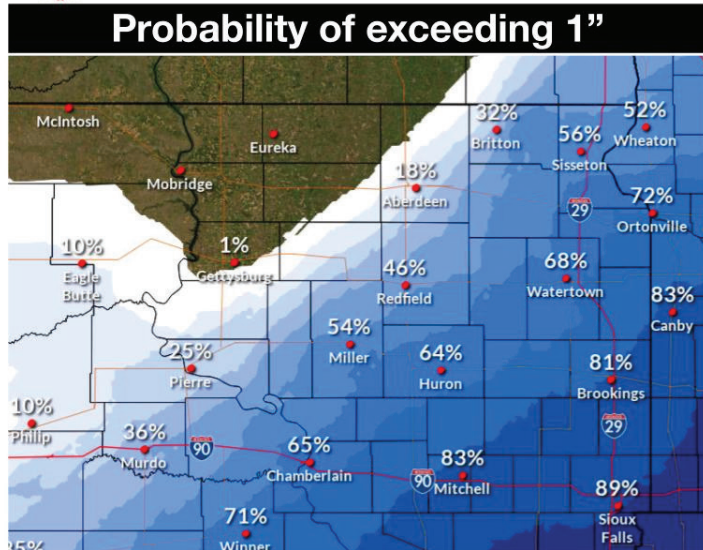
Broton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 27 of 85



Snow Probabilities Through Monday Night

January 6, 2024
3:24 AM



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

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD



Highs & Lows Through Mid January

January 6, 2024
3:27 AM

Wind Chills Down To
20 to 35 Below

	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
Aberdeen	28	23	22	21	25	6	2	2
Britton	27	20	21	21	23	9	2	0
Brookings	30	24	26	20	23	9	6	5
Chamberlain	30	24	22	21	28	9	4	5
Clark	26	22	23	19	23	6	4	2
Eagle Butte	26	23	22	26	23	4	0	-2
Ellendale	25	20	19	19	23	4	0	-2
Eureka	25	21	20	21	24	3	-1	-2
Gettysburg	26	21	20	21	22	3	-1	-2
Huron	30	24	26	20	25	9	5	5
Kennebec	28	25	23	21	29	6	2	3
McIntosh	26	23	22	28	22	4	-1	-3
Milbank	30	21	25	21	24	12	6	5
Miller	28	21	21	18	26	9	1	2
Mobridge	28	24	23	25	23	5	2	0
Murdo	27	26	21	26	29	5	1	0
Pierre	30	26	23	25	26	7	3	3
Redfield	29	23	23	19	25	7	4	3
Sisseton	29	21	23	21	24	11	3	2
Watertown	28	22	24	20	23	6	4	3
Webster	26	21	22	20	22	9	2	0
Wheaton	29	20	24	20	23	12	5	3

	Sat	Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
Aberdeen	14	7	11	5	10	-4	-8	-7
Britton	13	8	12	7	10	-3	-7	-7
Brookings	18	11	18	12	11	0	-2	-2
Chamberlain	15	8	12	4	8	0	-5	-5
Clark	16	10	15	9	11	0	-3	-5
Eagle Butte	12	11	10	4	5	-4	-7	-14
Ellendale	13	6	9	4	7	-6	-9	-10
Eureka	12	7	8	4	6	-5	-9	-12
Gettysburg	12	7	8	0	6	-5	-7	-10
Huron	15	9	14	7	9	0	-4	-3
Kennebec	14	8	9	2	7	-2	-7	-8
McIntosh	13	11	11	7	4	-5	-9	-15
Milbank	18	12	16	13	13	1	-2	-2
Miller	13	6	10	0	10	-3	-7	-7
Mobridge	14	9	10	2	7	-3	-7	-13
Murdo	10	10	9	5	8	-2	-7	-8
Pierre	15	9	10	2	9	-1	-5	-7
Redfield	14	6	12	5	10	-2	-6	-6
Sisseton	16	10	16	11	12	-1	-3	-4
Watertown	17	9	15	11	10	-2	-4	-5
Webster	14	10	14	9	10	-3	-5	-6
Wheaton	16	11	16	12	13	0	-1	-2

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

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Temperatures will remain near normal for the next few days, however much colder air will pour into the region late next week with the coldest air of the season and potentially dangerous cold and wind chills.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 28 of 85

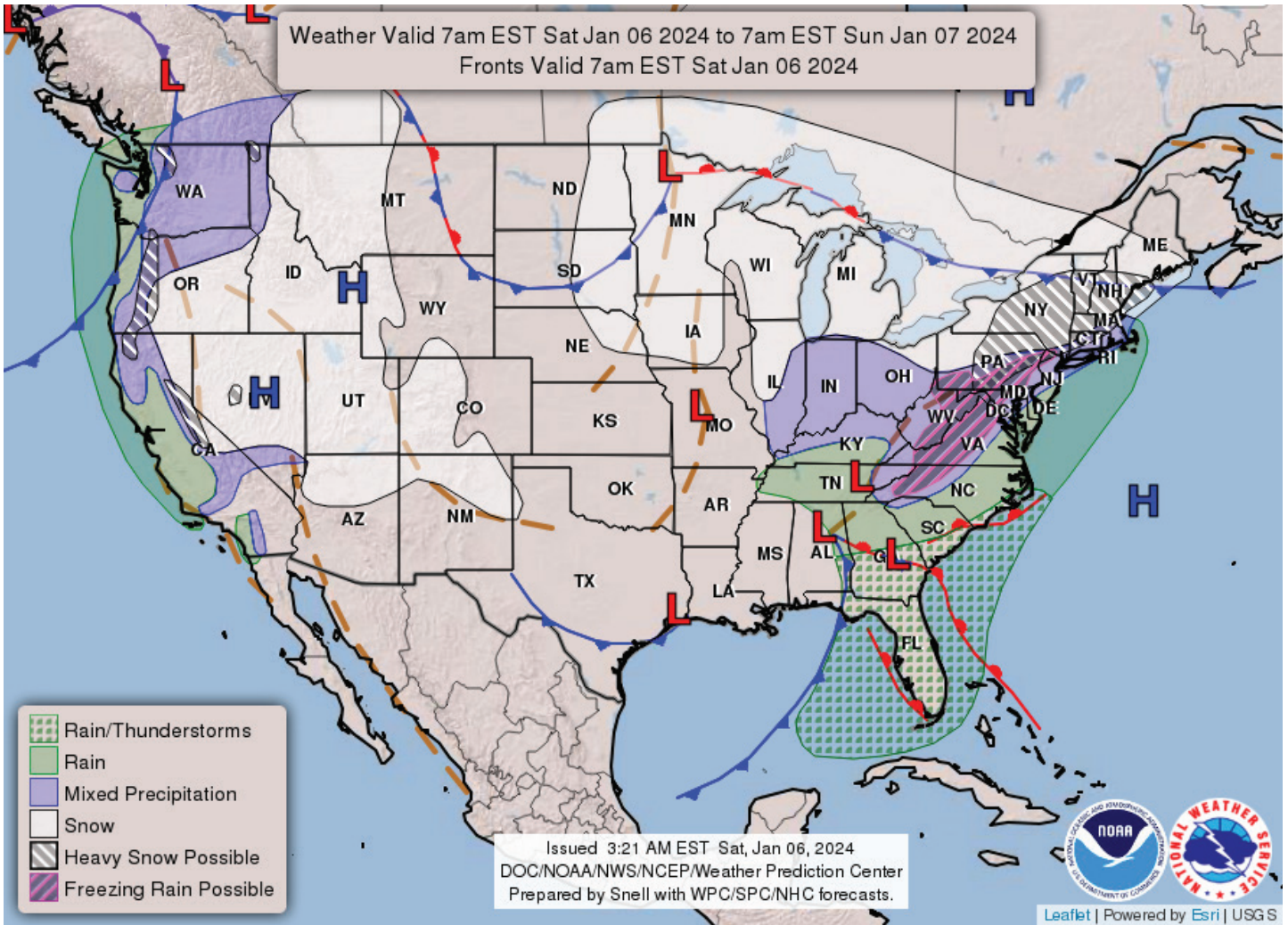
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 34 °F at 3:00 PM
Low Temp: 29 °F at 11:27 PM
Wind: 19 mph at 12:40 AM
Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 8 hours, 56 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 49 in 2012
Record Low: -30 in 1909
Average High: 24
Average Low: 3
Average Precip in Jan.: 0.13
Precip to date in Jan.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 0.13
Precip Year to Date: 0.00
Sunset Tonight: 5:06:08 pm
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:09:55 am



Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 29 of 85

Today in Weather History

January 6, 1962: Snow, high winds, sub-zero temperatures, and near blizzard conditions caused hazardous driving conditions across the area from the 6th into the 9th. Snowfall of generally 2 to 6 inches with winds of 30 to 40 mph caused widespread low visibilities along with drifts up to 4 foot high across central and northeast South Dakota.

January 6, 2010: A strong Alberta Clipper system tracked southeast through the northern plains on Tuesday night, January 5th through Thursday, January 7th. Sufficient Pacific moisture interacted with bitter cold Arctic air surging south from Canada, resulting in widespread snowfall over northeast South Dakota. Snowfall amounts ranged from 6 to 11 inches. The snow began across northeastern South Dakota in the late evening of the 5th into the early morning hours of the 6th. Many schools closed on the 6th and the 7th. Some snowfall amounts included 6 inches in Andover and Doland; 7 inches in Britton, Sisseton, and near Milbank; 8 inches in Aberdeen, Bryant, and near Summit; 9 inches at Wilmot and Castlewood; 10 inches in Clear Lake and 11 inches at Watertown. [Click HERE](#) for more information.

January 6, 2014: The coldest air in recent history moved into the region during the early morning hours of the 5th and continued into the afternoon hours of the 6th. The combination of sub-zero temperatures with north winds produced dangerously cold wind chills from 40 below to around 55 degrees below zero. Winds gusted to over 40 mph at times. Several area activities were canceled, as well as many schools on Monday the 6th. Some of the coldest wind chills include; 56 below in Summit; 55 below near Hillhead; 54 below in Brandt and Webster; 53 below in Clear Lake; 52 below in Herreid; 51 below in Leola; 50 below in Watertown, Sisseton, Bowdle, and McIntosh. [Click HERE](#) for more reports.

1880 - Seattle, WA, was in the midst of their worst snowstorm of record. Hundreds of barns were destroyed, and transportation was brought to a standstill, as the storm left the city buried under four feet of snow. (David Ludlum)

1884 - The temperature dipped to one degree below zero at Atlanta, GA. It marked the final day of a severe arctic outbreak in the South and Midwest. (David Ludlum)

1886: The "Great Blizzard of 1886" struck the Midwest with high winds, subzero temperatures, and heavy snowfall. These conditions caused as many as 100 deaths, and 80% of the cattle in Kansas perished.

1987 - A storm moving across the western U.S. spread heavy snow into the Central Rockies. Casper WY received 14 inches of snow in 24 hours, a January record for that location. Big Piney WY reported 17 inches of snow. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - It was a bad day for chickens. Heavy snow in Arkansas, with totals ranging up to 16 inches at Heber Springs, claimed the lives of 3.5 million chickens, and snow and ice up to three inches thick claimed the lives of another 1.75 million chickens in north central Texas. Up to 18 inches of snow blanketed Oklahoma, with Oklahoma City reporting a record 12 inches of snow in 24 hours. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - A "bonafide blizzard" ripped through south central and southeastern Idaho. Strong winds, gusting to 60 mph at the Fort Hall Indian Reservation, whipped the snow into drifts five feet high, and produced wind chill readings as cold as 35 degrees below zero. The blizzard prompted an Idaho Falls air controller to remark that "the snow is blowing so hard you can't see the fog". (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Rain and gale force winds prevailed along the Northern Pacific Coast. Winds at Astoria OR gusted to 65 mph. Unseasonably warm weather prevailed over Florida. Five cities reported record high temperatures for the date, including Miami with a reading of 86 degrees. The hot spot in the nation was West Palm Beach with a high of 87 degrees. (National Weather Summary)

1996: A severe nor'easter paralyzed the East Coast from January 6 to the 8. In Washington D.C., this storm is also known as the "Great Furlough Storm" because it occurred during the 1996 federal government shutdown. Snowfall amounts from this event include 47 inches in Big Meadows, Virginia; 30.7" in Philadelphia; 27.8" in Newark; 24.6" at the Dulles International Airport; 24.2" in Trenton; 24" in Providence; 22.5" in Baltimore; 18.2" in Boston; 17.1" in D.C.; and 9.6" in Pittsburgh.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 30 of 85

Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

GREAT MEN - GREAT GOD

When General Ulysses S. Grant lay dying, he called for his pastor. As his pastor stood by his bedside, Grant asked, "Tell me, will God receive me?"

"Yes," he replied, "for the Lord said, 'Him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out.'"

General Grant, at that moment, came to the Lord. The pastor, both amazed and grateful for this startling conversation, said, "God's Kingdom has just gained a great man!"

Quietly, but with great sincerity and dignity, Grant said to his pastor, "God does not need great men, but great men need God."

General Grant put things in the proper perspective. It is not uncommon for those who achieve status and power, prestige and importance, to believe that God needs their help to keep the universe orderly. We hear much about the résumés and financial statements of prominent people who dominate the news. We offer our respect and esteem to those who move across the world's stage, attempting to control events. We speak of the efforts and accomplishments of influential people as though they are the ones who keep our planet in orbit.

But, in the final analysis, even the most famous need God's grace, mercy, and salvation as do those of lesser status. God, without man, is still God. But without God, we are nothing, and life becomes meaningless and empty. He alone can bring purpose and dignity into our lives.

Prayer: Father, we thank You with grateful hearts for Your salvation through Jesus Christ, Your Son. May we recognize our need for You, and serve You faithfully. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: However, those the Father has given me will come to me, and I will never reject them. John 6:37



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

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 31 of 85

The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 32 of 85



WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.05.24

5 23 26 38 44 25

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$165,000,000

NEXT DRAW:

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.03.24

10 17 31 47 51 4

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$2,150,000

NEXT DRAW: 14 Hrs 16 Mins 41 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.05.24

15 21 29 35 41 18

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 14 Hrs 31 Mins 42 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.03.24

9 10 21 30 31

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$20,000

NEXT DRAW: 14 Hrs 31 Mins 42 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.03.24

8 9 17 31 56 23

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 42 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.03.24

30 31 38 48 68 8

Power Play: 10x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$35,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 42 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 33 of 85

News from the  Associated Press

Friday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Beresford 63, McCook Central-Montrose 54
Brandon Valley 49, Brookings 42
Centerville 71, Burke 45
Dakota Valley 64, Viborg-Hurley 62
Dickinson Trinity, N.D. 55, Rapid City Christian 33
Elkton-Lake Benton 44, Waubay/Summit 19
Ethan 61, Wessington Springs 48
Gayville-Volin High School 44, Irene-Wakonda 43
Great Plains Lutheran 45, Britton-Hecla 27
Herreid/Selby Area 60, Langford 34
Highmore-Harrold 58, Sully Buttes 42
Hill City 64, Philip 60, OT
James Valley Christian 46, Deubrook 43
Marty Indian 82, Crazy Horse 14
McLaughlin 39, Crow Creek Tribal School 37
Mitchell 51, Yankton 41
New Underwood 27, Lead-Deadwood 23
Potter County 53, Timber Lake 37
Rapid City Stevens 58, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 41
Sioux Falls Christian 45, Garretson 34
Sioux Falls Jefferson 47, Rapid City Central 20
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 66, Watertown 26
Sisseton 62, Aberdeen Roncalli 55
Vermillion 57, Parkston 50
Wagner 60, Bon Homme 56
Wall 70, Jones County 41
Warner 50, North Central Co-Op 34

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Brandon Valley 70, Brookings 48
Canistota 60, Alcester-Hudson 25
Centerville 63, Burke 43
Colman-Egan 78, Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 43
Crazy Horse 67, Marty Indian 61
DeSmet 73, Arlington 17
Deubrook 73, James Valley Christian 42
Faulkton 59, Hitchcock-Tulare 38
Flandreau 58, Baltic 51
Gayville-Volin High School 57, Irene-Wakonda 33
Great Plains Lutheran 57, Britton-Hecla 19
Groton Area 84, Clark-Willow Lake 20
Herreid/Selby Area 53, Langford 51
Hill City 61, Philip 47

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 34 of 85

McCook Central-Montrose 47, Beresford 45
McLaughlin 53, Crow Creek Tribal School 45
Mitchell 49, Yankton 45, OT
Parker 46, Garretson 43
Rapid City Christian 71, Dickinson Trinity, N.D. 46
Sioux Falls Jefferson 66, Rapid City Central 43
Sioux Falls Roosevelt 53, Rapid City Stevens 41
Sioux Valley 66, Chester 52
Takini 67, Bison 63
Tea Area 59, Madison 46
Tiospa Zina 63, Hankinson, N.D. 56
Vermillion 59, Parkston 51
Wagner 65, Bon Homme 51
Wall 82, Jones County 39
Warner 68, North Central Co-Op 36
Watertown 72, Sioux Falls O'Gorman 67
Waubay/Summit 48, Elkton-Lake Benton 42
Wessington Springs 49, Ethan 38

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

South Dakota State seeking FCS title repeat, Montana in first championship game since '09

By STEPHEN HAWKINS AP Sports Writer

FRISCO, Texas (AP) — Jimmy Rogers never dreamed of playing at South Dakota State, and certainly never anticipated becoming coach of the Jackrabbits.

The kid from Arizona who was a standout linebacker and captain of their first playoff team in 2009, then defensive coordinator for their first national title last season, is now the first-year head coach as the top-seeded Jackrabbits (14-0) try to repeat in the Football Championship Subdivision. They take a 28-game winning streak into Sunday's game against No. 2 seed Montana (13-1).

"My reality becoming a dream means I wanted to do it at the highest level, and we've taken South Dakota State to the highest level," Rogers said. "To be the head coach of it, I never envisioned that 18 years ago. ... But I did envision winning national championships here."

Less than two weeks after the Jackrabbits beat Missouri Valley Conference rival North Dakota State last January to become champions in John Stiegelmeier's 26th season as head coach, he retired and Rogers was immediately named his successor.

"I don't think during the season there was ever really kind of that we're playing for his last year-type vibe," linebacker Adam Bock said.

Rogers' coaching career began as an SDSU grad assistant in 2010. He played his final game in the first round of the 2009 playoffs, when the Jackrabbits led 48-21 late in the third quarter before Montana scored 40 unanswered points. — "It sticks with me," Rogers said.

The Big Sky champion Grizzlies then went on to lose in the FCS title game for the second year in a row, ending coach Bobby Hauck's first stint as their coach. They are in their first title game since, and first in Frisco, where the championship game has been played since the 2010 season.

"Each of the last two teams, '21 and '22, had potential to be where we're sitting now," said Hauck who returned to the Griz in 2018. "Last year in particular, I think it was a matter of playing four of the top five (teams) on the road over a six-week span. That's a tall task, especially for a team that was injured as we were."

THE QBS

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 35 of 85

Mark Gronowski will start his third national title game as South Dakota State's quarterback. The AP FCS All-American has thrown for 2,883 yards and 28 touchdowns with only four interceptions.

Gronowski was a true freshman during the pandemic-affected season when SDSU made its first title game in the unusual spring finale in May 2021. He tore the ACL in his left knee on the opening series, and missed the entire 2021 fall before returning last season.

Texas native and Central Arkansas transfer Clifton McDowell is 11-0 as Montana's starter. His 751 yards rushing are a modern-day Griz record for a quarterback, and he has 1,861 yards and 13 TDs passing.

RUNNING JACK

Isaiah Davis has consecutive 1,400-yard rushing seasons for the Jackrabbits since missing the last half of the 2021 fall season injured. He had 305 all-purpose yards (178 yards rushing, 114 kickoff return yards and 13 yards receiving) as a true freshman in that spring 2021 title game.

TITLE CHANCES

The Grizzlies' 27 playoff appearances are the most in the second-tier of Division I football. They were national champs in 1995 and 2001, and runner-ups in 1996, 2000, 2004, 2008 and 2009 — the last three of those under Hauck.

All three of South Dakota State's title games have come in the past four seasons.

SOME EASIER THAN OTHERS

South Dakota State has two lopsided shutout victories in this playoff run — 41-0 over Mercer and 59-0 over Albany. Those games sandwiched a 23-12 win over Villanova in a game affected by 45-mph wind gusts.

After opening the playoffs with a 30-point win over Delaware, the Griz needed overtime to beat Furman, and two overtimes to win their semifinal against North Dakota State.

"We're a hard-nosed tough team that fights our tail off," said Grizzlies senior defensive tackle Alex Gubner, a first-teamer on AP FCS All-America team.

ON TV, ABC

For the fourth time in five years, ABC will broadcast the FCS title game. It will remain on that over-the-air network as part of a \$920 million, eight-year agreement between the NCAA and ESPN announced this week that includes exclusive rights to 40 championships.

"Sometimes people think, well, ABC's not that big a deal. It's a big deal," said Ty Halpin, the NCAA director of championships and alliances for Division I football. "Montana fans and SDSU fans are going to find the game wherever it is. ... We're trying to get to those people that maybe don't really watch FCS football very often to grow what we're doing."

REMEMBERING COACH READ

Former Montana coach Don Read, who retired after leading the Griz to their first national title in 1995, died Wednesday. He was 90.

Trump returns to Iowa 10 days before the caucuses with a commanding lead over the Republican field

By HANNAH FINGERHUT, STEVE PEOPLES and JILL COLVIN Associated Press

SIoux CENTER, Iowa (AP) — Former President Donald Trump urged his supporters Friday evening not to be complacent in the face of a commanding polling lead as he kicked off the sprint to the Iowa caucuses with his first events of the election year.

"Ten days from now, the people of this state are going to cast the most important vote of your entire lives," Trump told several hundred supporters gathered in Sioux Center. He implored them to turn out on caucus night, warning, "Bad things happen when you sit back."

Trump held a pair of commit-to-caucus events, one in the far northwest corner of the state on the border with South Dakota and one in north-central Mason City. He'll spend Saturday in Newton in central Iowa before heading to Clinton in the state's far east.

The visit came the day before the third anniversary of Jan. 6, 2021, when a violent mob of Trump's supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol as part of a desperate bid to keep him in power after his 2020 election

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 36 of 85

loss. Trump did not acknowledge the date Friday, but railed against the treatment of those who have been jailed for participating in the riot, labeling them "hostages" and saying it will "go down as one of the saddest things in the history of our country."

More than 1,230 people have been charged with federal crimes for their participation, including felonies like assaulting police officers and seditious conspiracy.

Trump also asked at one point in Sioux Center whether there was anyone in the friendly room who wasn't planning to vote for him, but then quickly warned them not to raise their hands.

"They're going to say he incited an insurrection," he said to laughs.

And over and over, he repeated his false claims that the 2020 election was stolen — the same lies that motivated the rioters.

Trump also spent much of the night lashing out at President Joe Biden, who earlier Friday delivered a speech warning that Trump's efforts to retake the White House pose a grave threat to the country and democracy.

"We all know who Donald Trump is," Biden said near Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, where George Washington and the Continental Army spent a bleak winter nearly 250 years ago. "The question we have to answer is: Who are we?"

Biden said Jan. 6 marked a moment where "we nearly lost America — lost it all."

Trump, who faces 91 criminal charges stemming from his efforts to overturn his loss to Biden and other state and federal cases, continued to argue that it is, instead, Biden who poses the threat.

"He is a danger to democracy," Trump charged in Mason City.

The former president and his campaign have spent months accusing Biden and other Democrats of using the justice system to damage their chief political rival. There is no evidence that Biden has influenced the investigations led by state officials or the Justice Department — which has also indicted his son, Hunter Biden, twice.

"Joe Biden's record is an unbroken streak of weakness, incompetence, corruption, and failure," Trump told the crowd in Sioux Center. "That's why Crooked Joe is staging his pathetic fearmongering campaign event in Pennsylvania today."

Trump's team is hoping for a knockout win in Iowa on Jan. 15 that will deny his rivals an opportunity to seize momentum and set the table for him to lock up the nomination by the spring. They also hope to turn out a wave of new voters who have never caucused before in a show of strength ahead of an increasingly likely general election rematch against Biden.

"You have to get out and vote because it sets the tone. It even sets the tone, frankly, for November," Trump said in Mason City.

While he remains far ahead in Iowa and other early state and national polls, Trump also continued to lash out at his top Republican rivals, unleashing some of his most pointed attacks to date against former United Nations Ambassador Nikki Haley, who has seen growing support in recent months following a series of well-reviewed debate performances.

Trump tried to cast both her and Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, who was once the only rival he criticized, as "establishment pawns," alleging they would "sell" voters "out." DeSantis, who has staked his campaign on Iowa, entered the race with sky-high expectations but has struggled to gain traction against Trump.

"Sadly, the establishment losers and sellouts lagging far behind us in the Republican primary cannot be trusted on taxes, on trade, or anything else," Trump charged. "They'll betray you just like they betrayed me."

Haley's campaign has been celebrating Trump's recent attention — including a new attack ad — arguing it reflects his growing concern that she is gaining on him.

DeSantis and Haley needled each other at their own events in Iowa Friday, with DeSantis leaning into his opponent's flippant comment about the role of Iowa among the early-voting states. DeSantis, appearing with Texas Rep. Chip Roy and Kentucky Rep. Thomas Massie, hounded Haley for "insulting" Iowans by suggesting New Hampshire voters could "correct" the caucus results.

Haley, who held morning and evening events in Des Moines, described the comment as good-natured

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 37 of 85

ribbing among early-voting states. She is the former governor of South Carolina, which will vote third.

DeSantis, campaigning across central and northeastern parts of the state, also repeatedly told his crowds of about 100 people that Trump failed to follow through with his previous campaign promises and accused the former president of running a campaign all about himself.

While Trump last visited Iowa before Christmas, his allies have been fanning out across the state, holding their own events on his behalf. Georgia Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene and South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem, who are both considered potential vice presidential picks, have been working to get out the vote in recent days, as has his son Eric Trump.

Trump's team has repeatedly argued that any margin of victory larger than 12 percentage points would be a historic win in an open caucus. Trump lost the state in 2016 to Texas Sen. Ted Cruz but ultimately won the nomination and the presidency.

This time, Trump is facing criminal charges across four separate jurisdictions. But those charges have only solidified his support.

Michael Grevengoed, 34, from Doon, Iowa, is planning to caucus for Trump on Jan. 15 and said he isn't concerned about Trump's legal woes.

"They're brought against him, yes, and he may be indicted for them, but I don't think they're legitimate reasons for him not to be president," he said.

In addition to his criminal charges, Trump is also facing efforts to remove him from the ballot over his attempts to overturn his 2020 election loss. The Supreme Court said Friday it would take up the question of whether states can bar him from the ballot.

Marj Wichers, who lives in Sioux Center and said her backseat was full of Trump gear she bought for her grandchildren outside the venue, criticized efforts to disqualify him.

"He's got to get back in there," said Wichers, after standing in line for four hours to attend the first event. "If they don't want to put him on the ballot, I'll write his name down."

Wichers, 58, said she works the night shift so she might not be able to caucus on Jan. 15.

"I think he's going to get in anyway, so I'm not too worried about it," she said.

Frisco becoming for NCAA FCS football what Omaha is for baseball or Oklahoma City for softball

By STEPHEN HAWKINS AP Sports Writer

FRISCO, Texas (AP) — North Dakota State athletic director Matt Larsen believes Frisco is becoming for FCS football what Omaha is for NCAA Division I baseball or Oklahoma City for softball.

"When you think about a championship location, every FCS program at the beginning of the year, their goal is to get to Frisco," Larsen, vice chair of the FCS committee, said Friday.

This is the 14th time that the Football Championship Subdivision title will be decided in the 20,500-seat professional soccer stadium in North Texas. This is only the fourth time that the Bison haven't made the trip from Fargo to Frisco.

The Bison got knocked out of the 24-team playoff by a double-overtime loss in the semifinal round at No. 2 seed Montana (13-1), which plays defending champion and top-seeded South Dakota State (14-0) in Sunday's title game.

Montana last played for the FCS championship at the end of the 2009 season, the year before the game moved from Chattanooga, Tennessee, to Frisco, and switched to an early January date with some added time between the semifinals and the title game.

"Had a tinge of jealousy that our fans have not had an opportunity, and our team has not had an opportunity to be here in Frisco for a championship," said Montana AD Kent Haslam, the FCS committee chair. "The format now is just so much better, where you have time in between, and just the experience here is so outstanding that I possibly have over-hyped it."

The NCAA contract for the game in Frisco has two more years after this, plus an option for the game at

the end of the 2026 season.

Ty Halpin, the NCAA director of championships and alliances for Division I football, said there is an open bid process in place for the games after that.

"Frisco, obviously, is interested in retaining the game. We do have interest from others. ... We're way ahead of talking about any of that," Halpin said Friday. "Our experience here in Frisco has been unbelievable."

With its 14th game Sunday, Frisco becomes the longest-serving host of the FCS championship game. Chattanooga was the site for 13 games from 1997-2009.

The FCS title game is again being played the day before the College Football Playoff national championship game. That likely won't be the case moving forward because the CFP is expanding from four to 12 teams next season, which will push its final game further into January.

Haslam said the FCS oversight committee has moved to lock in the first weekend after New Year's Day for its championship game, and not lengthening the time between the semifinal games and the championship, regardless of what happens with the CFP finale.

"Certainly a healthy FCS is good for college football. It just is. It is a great spot to play," Haslam said. "In all of the confusion that's happening right now, we have a 24-team playoff, we're sitting here with the 1 and 2 seed playing for a national championship that have worked their way through."

A B-1 bomber crashes while trying to land at a South Dakota Air Force base. The crew safely ejects

By TARA COPP Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A B-1 Lancer bomber from Ellsworth Air Force Base in South Dakota crashed while trying to land and all four crew members ejected safely, the Air Force said.

The B-1 was on a training mission when the crashed occurred Thursday evening, the 28th Bomb Wing at Ellsworth said in a statement.

Visibility was poor, with freezing temperatures and low clouds, according to automated weather reporting equipment recording airfield conditions. The military is investigating the crash.

Three crew members were treated on base for minor injuries and released, according to a statement Friday. The fourth crew member was at a local hospital with non-life-threatening injuries.

The B-1 is a conventional supersonic bomber that first came into service in the 1980s. It has been used to support the U.S. bomber presence in the Asia-Pacific region and to conduct close air support missions in U.S. operations in Afghanistan. It does not carry nuclear weapons.

While 100 were originally built, fewer than 60 remain in service at Dyess Air Force Base in Texas and Ellsworth.

South Korea says the North has again fired artillery shells near their sea border

By HYUNG-JIN KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korea conducted a new round of artillery drills near the disputed sea boundary with South Korea on Saturday, officials in Seoul said, a day after the North's similar exercises prompted South Korea to respond with its own firing drills in the same area.

The North's back-to-back firing exercises come after North Korean leader Kim Jong Un repeatedly called for stronger war readiness to cope with what he called deepening confrontation led by the U.S.

Experts say North Korea is likely to continue its provocative run of weapons tests to boost its leverage in potential future negotiations with Washington as the U.S. heads into November elections.

South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said in a statement the North fired more than 60 rounds near the western sea boundary on Saturday afternoon. South Korea strongly urged North Korea to halt acts that heighten tensions and warned it will "overwhelmingly" deal with any provocations by North Korea, the statement said.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 39 of 85

The Joint Chiefs of Staff said South Korea will take corresponding military steps if North Korea continues artillery drills that pose a threat to South Korean nationals. The statement didn't say whether South Korea would respond with its own drills.

The Koreans' firing exercises were a violation of a 2018 inter-Korean agreement that was meant to ease front-line military tensions. Struck during a brief period of rapprochement, the accord calls for a halt in live-fire exercises in front-line buffer zones. But rising animosities over the North's first military spy satellite launch in November has left the military agreement in tatters, with both Koreas taking steps to breach the deal.

On Friday, North Korea fired about 200 artillery shells near the area in its first maritime firing exercise in the buffer zone in about a year.

In response, South Korea's Defense Ministry said troops on two border islands fired artillery rounds south of the sea boundary. Local media said South Korea fired 400 rounds.

Ahead of the South Korean drills, South Korean authorities asked residents on five major islands near the western sea boundary to evacuate to safe places due to worries that North Korea would fire back. The evacuation order was lifted a few hours later.

North Korea's military said later Friday that its drills were in response to South Korea's military training earlier this week. It warned that North Korea will launch "tough counteraction on an unprecedented level" if South Korea engages in provocations.

The Koreans' poorly marked western sea boundary was the site for bloody naval skirmishes between the Koreas in 1999, 2002 and 2009. The North's alleged torpedoing of a South Korean warship killed 46 South Korean sailors in March 2010, and the North's artillery bombardment of Yeonpyeong Island killed four South Koreans in November 2010.

In a recent key ruling party meeting, Kim fired off fierce, derisive rhetoric against South Korea, saying 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.

Since 2022, North Korea has conducted more than 100 missile tests, many of them nuclear-capable weapons targeting the U.S. mainland and South Korea. The U.S. and South Korea have responded by expanding their military training, which North Korea calls an invasion rehearsal.

Blinken opens latest urgent Mideast tour in Turkey as fears grow that Gaza war may engulf region

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

ISTANBUL (AP) — U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken kicked off his latest urgent Middle East diplomatic mission in Turkey on Saturday, as fears mount that Israel's war against Hamas in Gaza may explode into a broader conflict.

Blinken's fourth visit in three months comes amid worrying developments outside of Gaza, including in Lebanon, northern Israel, the Red Sea and Iraq, that have put intense strains on what had been a modestly successful U.S. push to prevent a regional conflagration in the weeks after the war began, and growing international criticism of Israel's military operation.

Blinken met with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan to discuss what Turkey and others can do to exert influence, particularly on Iran and its proxies, to ease soaring tensions, speed up humanitarian aid deliveries to Gaza and begin in earnest to plan for reconstruction and governance of postwar Gaza, much of which has been reduced to rubble by three months of intense Israeli bombardments.

The immediate difficulty of Blinken's task was underscored just hours before his talks with Erdogan as Lebanon's Iran-backed Hezbollah militia fired dozens of rockets at northern Israel, warning that the barrage was just an initial response to the targeted killing, presumably by Israel, of a top leader from the allied Hamas group in Lebanon's capital earlier this week.

Meanwhile, stepped-up attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea by Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 40 of 85

rebels have disrupted international trade and led to increased efforts on the part of the U.S. and its allies to patrol the area and respond to threats, including possibly taking direct action against the group at its bases in Yemen. The Houthis have carried out at least two dozen attacks in response to the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza just since Dec. 19, which have further heightened tensions and raised risks for the global economy.

In Istanbul, U.S. officials said Blinken would be seeking Turkish buy-in, or at least consideration, of potential monetary or in-kind contributions to reconstruction efforts and some form of participation in a proposed multi-national force that could operate in or adjacent to the territory. Turkey, and Erdogan in particular, have been harshly critical of Israel and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for the prosecution of the war and the impact it has had on Palestinian civilians.

In addition, officials said, Blinken will stress the importance the U.S. places on Turkey ratifying Sweden's membership in NATO, a long-delayed process that the Turks have said they will complete soon. Sweden's accession to the alliance is seen as one critical response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

From Turkey, Blinken will travel to Turkish rival and fellow NATO ally Greece to meet Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis at his residence on the Mediterranean island of Crete. Mitsotakis and his government have been supportive of U.S. efforts to prevent the Gaza war from spreading and have signaled their willingness to assist should the situation deteriorate further. Greece has also shown patience in waiting for the delivery of advanced U.S. fighter jets as the issue of Sweden's accession to NATO is worked out with Turkey.

Blinken will end his Saturday in Jordan, which apart from Israel has been the secretary's most frequent stop on his recent Middle East tours. Jordan will be the first Arab nation on Blinken's current tour, and will be followed by Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia on Sunday and Monday. Blinken will then visit Israel and the West Bank on Tuesday and Wednesday before wrapping up the trip in Egypt.

"We don't expect every conversation on this trip to be easy," State Department spokesman Matthew Miller said shortly before Blinken departed Washington late Thursday. "There are obviously tough issues facing the region and difficult choices ahead. But the secretary believes it is the responsibility of the United States of America to lead diplomatic efforts to tackle those challenges head-on, and he's prepared to do that in the days to come."

As well as pressing Israel for dramatic increases in humanitarian aid to Gaza, a shift toward less intense military operations and a concerted effort to rein in violence against Palestinians in the occupied West Bank by Jewish settlers, Blinken will be urging reluctant Gulf Arab nations to work with the U.S. on the future of Gaza.

Hezbollah fires rockets at Israel in 'initial response' to killing of top leader from allied Hamas

By BASSEM MROUE, SAMY MAGDY and NAJIB JOBAIN Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Lebanon's Hezbollah militia fired dozens of rockets at northern Israel on Saturday, warning that the barrage was its initial response to the targeted killing, presumably by Israel, of a top leader from the allied Hamas group in Lebanon's capital earlier this week.

The rocket attack came a day after Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah said that his group must retaliate for the killing of Saleh Arouri, the deputy political leader of Hamas in a Hezbollah stronghold south of Beirut. Nasrallah said that if Hezbollah did not strike back, all of Lebanon would be vulnerable to Israeli attack. He appeared to be making his case for a response to the Lebanese public, even at the risk of escalating the fighting between Hezbollah and Israel as the war between Israel and Hamas rages on.

Hezbollah said Saturday that it launched 62 rockets toward an Israeli air surveillance base on Mount Meron and that it scored direct hits. The group said rockets also struck two army posts near the border. The Israeli military said about 40 rockets were fired toward Meron and that a base was targeted, but made no mention of the base being hit. It said it struck the Hezbollah cell that fired the rockets.

The cross-border escalation came as U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken was kicking off an urgent Middle East diplomatic tour, his fourth to the region since the Israel-Hamas war erupted three months ago. The war was triggered by a deadly Hamas attack on southern Israel in which militants killed about

1,200 people, mostly civilians, and took some 250 hostages.

In recent weeks, Israel has been scaling back its military assault in the north of the territory and pressing its heavy offensive in the south, vowing to crush Hamas. In the south, most of Gaza's 2.3 million Palestinians are being squeezed into smaller areas in a humanitarian disaster, while still being pounded by Israeli airstrikes.

On Saturday, the Health Ministry in Hamas-run Gaza said 122 Palestinians were killed over the past 24 hours, bringing the total since the start of the war to 22,722. The count does not differentiate between combatants and civilians. The ministry has said two-thirds of those killed have been women and children. The overall number of wounded rose to 58,166, the ministry said.

In the southern city of Khan Younis, the focus of Israel's ground offensive, the local European Hospital received the bodies of 18 people killed in an overnight airstrike on a house in the city's Maan neighborhood, said Saleh al-Hamms, head of the nursing department at the hospital. Citing witnesses, he said more than three dozen people had been sheltering in the house, including those displaced, when it was hit.

Israel has held Hamas responsible for civilian casualties, saying the group has embedded within in Gaza's civilian infrastructure. Still, international criticism of Israel's conduct in the war has grown more persistent because of the rising civilian death toll in Gaza. The United States has urged Israel to do more to prevent harm to civilians, even as it keeps sending weapons and munitions, while shielding its close ally against international censure.

Blinken began his latest Mideast trip in Turkey on Saturday. The Biden administration believes that Turkey and others can exert influence, particularly on Iran and its proxies, to tamp down fears of a regional conflagration. Those fears have spiked in recent days with incidents in the Red Sea, Lebanon, Iraq and Iran.

In talks with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, Blinken will also be seeking Turkish support for still nascent plans for post-war Gaza that could include monetary or in-kind contributions to reconstruction efforts and some form of participation in a proposed multinational force that could operate in or adjacent to the territory.

From Turkey, Blinken will travel to Turkish rival and fellow NATO ally Greece to meet Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis at his residence on the Mediterranean island of Crete. Mitsotakis and his government have been supportive of U.S. efforts to prevent the Israel-Hamas war from spreading and have signaled their willingness to assist should the situation deteriorate.

Other stops on the trip include Jordan, followed by Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia on Sunday and Monday. Blinken will visit Israel and the West Bank next week before wrapping up the trip in Egypt.

Myanmar confirms a key northeastern city on border with China has been seized by an ethnic alliance

By GRANT PECK Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — Myanmar's military government has acknowledged that it withdrew its forces from a key city on the northeastern border with China after it was taken over by an alliance of ethnic armed groups it has been battling for months.

The fall of Laukkaing late Thursday is the biggest in a series of defeats suffered by Myanmar's military government since the ethnic alliance launched an offensive Oct. 27. It underlines the pressure the government is under as it battles pro-democracy guerrillas in the wake of a 2021 military takeover as well as ethnic minority armed groups across the country.

Ethnic armed organizations have battled for greater autonomy for decades, but Myanmar has been wracked by what amounts to civil war since the army seized power in February 2021 from the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi, sparking nationwide armed resistance by pro-democracy forces.

The Three Brotherhood Alliance that took Laukkaing is composed of the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army and the Arakan Army. The MNDA is a military force

of the Kokang minority, who are ethnic Chinese.

Photos and videos on social media showed a vast amount of weapons that the alliance claimed to have captured.

Laukkaing is the capital of the Kokang Self-Administered Zone, which is geographically part of northern Shan state in Myanmar.

Myanmar government spokesperson Maj. Gen. Zaw Min Tun told the Popular News Journal, a pro-army website, on Saturday that the military and its local commanders relinquished control of Laukkaing after considering many aspects, including the safety of the family members of the soldiers stationed there.

He said the military also took into consideration Myanmar's relationship with China, which is just across the border from Laukkaing. China, which has good relations with both the military and the ethnic alliance, has been seeking an end to the fighting.

Beijing protested after artillery shells landed in its territory on Wednesday, wounding five people. Zaw Min Tun said the alliance had fired the shells and that it tried to blame the military in order to damage its relationship with China.

A statement posted by the alliance on social media late Friday declared that the entire Kokang region had become a "Military Council-free area," referring to Myanmar's ruling junta,

It said 2,389 military personnel — including six brigadier generals — and their family members had surrendered by Friday and that all were evacuated to safety.

Video clips circulating on social media purportedly showed the soldiers and their family members being transported in various vehicles. The Shwe Phee Myay News Agency, an online news site reporting from Shan state, reported that many of them were taken to Lashio, the capital of Shan's northern region, under an agreement with the MNDAA for their repatriation.

It's unclear whether the Three Brotherhood Alliance will try to extend its offensive outside of Shan state, but it has vowed to keep fighting against military rule.

The alliance cast its offensive as a struggle against military rule and an effort to rid the region of major organized criminal enterprises. China has publicly sought to eradicate cyberscam operations in Laukkaing that have entrapped tens of thousands of Chinese nationals, who have been repatriated to China in recent weeks.

But the offensive was also widely recognized as an effort by the MNDAA to regain control of the Kokang Self-Administered Zone by ousting a rival Kokang group backed by the military government from its seat of power.

Peng Deren, the MNDAA commander, said in a New Year's speech published by The Kokang, an affiliated online media site, that the alliance had seized over 250 military targets and five border crossings with China. He said more than 300 cyberscam centers were raided and more than 40,000 Chinese involved in the operations were repatriated.

Alaska Airlines grounds 737-9 aircraft after midair window blowout on flight from Portland, Oregon

By AUDREY McAVOY Associated Press

Alaska Airlines grounded all of its Boeing 737-9 aircraft late Friday, hours after a window and piece of fuselage on one such plane blew out in midair and forced an emergency landing in Portland, Oregon. No one was seriously hurt.

The incident occurred shortly after takeoff and the gaping hole caused the cabin to depressurize. Flight data showed the plane climbed to 16,000 feet (4,876 meters) before returning to Portland International Airport. The airline said the plane landed safely with 174 passengers and six crew members.

"Following tonight's event on Flight 1282, we have decided to take the precautionary step of temporarily grounding our fleet of 65 Boeing 737-9 aircraft." Alaska Airlines CEO Ben Minicucci said in a statement. "My heart goes out to those who were on this flight – I am so sorry for what you experienced."

Each of the aircraft will be returned to service after full maintenance and safety inspections, which Mini-

cucci said the airline anticipated completing within days.

"We are working with Boeing and regulators to understand what occurred tonight, and will share updates as more information is available," he said.

The airline provided no immediate information about injuries. However, KPTV reported that according to the Port of Portland, the fire department responded and treated minor injuries at the scene. One person was taken for more treatment but wasn't seriously hurt.

The plane was diverted about about six minutes after taking off at 5:07 p.m., according to flight tracking data from the FlightAware website. It landed at 5:26 p.m. The pilot told Portland air traffic controllers the plane had an emergency, was depressurized and needed to return to the airport, according to a recording made by the website LiveATC.net.

A passenger sent KATU-TV a photo showing the hole in the side of the airplane next to passenger seats. Video shared with the station showed people wearing oxygen masks and passengers clapping as the plane landed.

Passenger Evan Smith was on the flight and described the moment the blowout occurred.

"You heard a big loud bang to the left rear. A whooshing sound and all the oxygen masks deployed instantly and everyone got those on," he told KATU.

Smith said a boy and his mother were sitting in the row where the window blew out. The boy's shirt was sucked off him and out of the plane, he said.

The National Transportation Safety Board and Federal Aviation Administration said they will investigate the incident.

The plane involved rolled off the assembly line and received its certification just two months ago, according to online FAA records. The plane had been on 145 flights since entering commercial service on Nov. 11, said FlightRadar24, another tracking service. The flight from Portland was the aircraft's third of the day.

Boeing said it was aware of the incident, working to gather more information and ready to support the investigation.

The Max is the newest version of Boeing's venerable 737, a twin-engine, single-aisle plane frequently used on U.S. domestic flights. The plane went into service in May 2017.

Two Max 8 jets crashed in 2018 and 2019, killing 346 people and leading to a near two-year worldwide grounding of all Max 8 and Max 9 planes. The planes returned to service only after Boeing made changes to an automated flight control system implicated in the crashes.

Last year, the FAA told pilots to limit use of an anti-ice system on the Max in dry conditions because of concern that inlets around the engines could overheat and break away, possibly striking the plane.

Max deliveries have been interrupted at times to fix manufacturing flaws. The company told airlines in December to inspect the planes for a possible loose bolt in the rudder-control system.

Stephen Curry scores 26 points to help Warriors hold off Pistons, 113-109

By JANIE McCAULEY AP Sports Writer

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Moments after a hard-fought victory to finish back-to-back games at home, the Golden State Warriors found out they will be without veteran leader Chris Paul for the unforeseeable future.

Paul fractured his left hand in a 113-109 win over the Detroit Pistons on Friday night and will require surgery next week. He's expected to return this season.

"I feel for him but at the same time it's next man up," rookie Trayce Jackson-Davis said. "Chris never loses his voice and so being on the bench, being able to talk to us, that's one of his biggest attributes and that's something that he won't lose. He'll still be invested in the game."

Stephen Curry scored 12 of his 26 points over the final 1:32 with a pair of 3-pointers, emphatically answering after Bojan Bogdanovic's go-ahead 3 with 1:41 to play as the Warriors held on to beat the last-place Pistons.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 44 of 85

The 38-year-old Paul missed a 3-pointer from the right wing with 6:08 left in the third quarter and moved to try to corral the long rebound when he made contact with Detroit's Jaden Ivey. Paul grabbed at his hand and went to the locker room.

Curry called it a freak injury — and just the latest in a series of hand issues for the 19th-year veteran through his career. Curry credits Paul for constantly "giving everybody on the team something motivational or inspirational."

"I guess in the short term hopefully he can be on the bench and be vocal," Curry said.

Paul had started the past four games but has also guided the reserves so far this season.

"It's going to take a collective effort," said guard Brandin Podziemski, an option to move back into the starting lineup during Paul's absence.

Detroit's Cade Cunningham made a driving reverse layup with 2:10 to play that tied it at 100 and wound up with 30 points. He also scored five straight points down the stretch to pull the Pistons to 95-94 at the 4:20 mark of the fourth.

Klay Thompson had 19 points while carrying the scoring load until Splash Brother Curry got going. Dario Saric added 17 points off the bench.

Curry shot 7 for 19 while missing eight of his first nine 3-point tries before hitting from the baseline with 2:58 remaining.

Jonathan Kuminga had 11 points and six rebounds making his 12th straight start during Draymond Green's indefinite league suspension after the third-year forward didn't play the final 18 minutes during Thursday night in a last-second loss to the Nuggets — something coach Steve Kerr said was based on Andrewiggins' strong play in the second half.

Golden State pulled this one off 24 hours after squandering a late 18-point lead following a 44-point third quarter and watching Nikola Jokic hit a 40-footer as defending champion Denver won it 130-127.

Kerr struggled to get over it, so shocked at what had happened.

"There wasn't a whole lot of sleep last night I can tell you that," he said. "That's about as tough a loss as I can remember since I've been here. But it's part of the NBA, you go through the 82 and there's just nights like this where you can't believe what just happened."

The Pistons (3-32) played yet another close game as James Wiseman made his first return to Chase Center to face his former Golden State team since being traded last February. The big man received a warm welcome back greeting upon entering the game in the first quarter.

Warriors guard Moses Moody felt the love from the fans, too, when he entered the game in the fourth quarter to a standing ovation following three straight games not getting on the floor. There were chants of "Moody! Moody!" all game long.

Moody will be called upon to play more now.

Kerr was immediately concerned about Paul.

"I saw him holding it and instantly was worried. Just got the word after walking off the floor. So I feel terrible for Chris and obviously guys will step up and be ready to play," Kerr said. "We've got to hold down the fort without him."

Golden State went 1 for 9 on 3s in the opening period and 3 of 15 by halftime before finishing 16 of 38.

UP NEXT

Pistons: At Denver on Sunday.

Warriors: Host Toronto on Sunday.

Banchero records 1st triple-double, hits go-ahead free throws as Magic hold off Nuggets 122-120

By PAT GRAHAM AP Sports Writer

DENVER (AP) — Paolo Banchero was pleased with his first career triple-double. What made it even better was its central role in a stirring comeback.

Banchero hit a pair of go-ahead free throws with 9.7 seconds remaining and the short-handed Orlando

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 45 of 85

Magic rallied Friday night for a 122-120 win over the Denver Nuggets.

The young Magic forward finished with 32 points, 10 rebounds and 11 assists. He hit four free throws in the last 34.6 seconds in a game where the Magic trailed by as many as 18 points in the third quarter.

"Just the power of just positive energy and just pushing each other," said Banchemo, who was 15 of 19 from the free throw line. "We just told each other, 'We're all we got. We're going to live with the result, whatever it is, but we're not just going to roll over and let these guys blow us out.'"

With the game tied at 120, the Nuggets had a chance to take the lead. But Moritz Wagner stole a pass from Kentavious Caldwell-Pope and fed it to Banchemo, who drew a foul and made the free throws.

The final play of the game was designed to go to either Jamal Murray or Nikola Jokic, but the Magic defended it well. Murray's 10-foot floater rimmed out at the buzzer.

"Sometimes, we miss," Jokic explained. "Sometimes, we make."

Like the night before, when the Nuggets rallied from an 18-point deficit in the fourth quarter to beat the Golden State Warriors on Jokic's buzzer-beating 40-foot jumper.

Trailing 78-60 midway through the third, the Magic found their rhythm against a Nuggets team that showed signs of fatigue down the stretch. Orlando hit 17 3-pointers and went 23 of 34 from the free-throw line.

"We lost this game in the third quarter," said Nuggets coach Michael Malone, whose team was outscored 41-31 in the pivotal quarter. "It's back-to-back nights where our third-quarter defense has been just completely nonexistent. ... As I told our guys, whatever you're doing at halftime, it's not working — individually and collectively.

"Disappointing outcome."

Jalen Suggs had a career-high 27 points for an Orlando team that went 1-3 in a four-game swing out West.

The Magic had a lengthy list of players sitting out Friday, including Markelle Fultz (left knee), Gary Harris (right calf), Wendell Carter Jr. (right knee), Joe Ingles (left ankle), Jonathan Isaac (right hamstring), Goga Bitadze (illness) and Franz Wagner (right ankle).

"It speaks volumes to the character that we have on this team," said Suggs, who was 7 of 9 from 3-point range. "Not only next man up, but the confidence to trust and believe in each other. We weren't walking out there like, 'Oh, let's just get it over with and go back home.' We wanted to go win the game."

Jokic led Denver with 29 points in a game where Malone utilized 11 players to spread out the minutes. Michael Porter Jr. had 22 and Murray 20. They're still working on getting everyone involved within the flow of the offense.

"It's tough, because we do have a lot of guys who game-to-game, it could be a different hot hand," Porter said. "That's a blessing and a curse, sometimes. Maybe the answer is staggering a couple starters with the bench unit. I don't really know the answer. I do feel like there are times in the game where Aaron (Gordon) doesn't touch the ball for an extended period of time. Or myself ... It's definitely a tough balance to find.

"That's really up to the coaches. That's their job. That's not our job. So we just do what we're told, try to space the floor the right way, play through big fella. That's all we can do. As the season goes on, we'll continue to get better and better at finding that balance."

UP NEXT

Magic: Return home to play Atlanta on Sunday night.

Nuggets: Host the Detroit Pistons on Sunday night.

Orthodox Christmas: Why it's celebrated by some believers 13 days after Dec. 25

By PETER SMITH Associated Press

While much of the world has Christmas in the rearview mirror by now, people in some Eastern Orthodox traditions will celebrate the holy day on Sunday.

Certain Eastern Orthodox churches, including those in Russian and other traditions, follow the ancient

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 46 of 85

Julian calendar, which runs 13 days later than the Gregorian calendar, used by Catholic and Protestant churches as well as by much of the secular world for everyday use.

Other Orthodox, including those in the Greek tradition and, now, some Ukrainian churches, celebrate Christmas on the same date as Western churches.

Why are there different dates for Christmas?

Technically, there aren't. All Eastern Orthodox agree that Dec. 25 is the date of Christmas, or the Feast of the Nativity, as they call it. The question is whether Dec. 25 falls on Dec. 25 or Jan. 7. That requires a little unpacking.

The ancient church set its religious feasts based on the Julian calendar, but after more than a millennium, that calendar had increasingly gotten out of alignment with the solar year. Sixteenth century Pope Gregory XIII approved a revised, more astronomically precise calendar, which bears his name. It abruptly shifted the calendar several days forward to make up for lost time (literally) and added a more precise calculation of leap years. Protestant churches eventually followed the Catholic lead in adopting the calendar, as did secular governments.

All Eastern Orthodox kept to the old calendar until 1923, when an inter-Orthodox gathering adopted a revised Julian calendar that essentially mirrors the Gregorian. Most (but not all) churches in the Greek Orthodox tradition have adopted this, as have those in Romanian, Bulgarian and other traditions.

But the Russian Orthodox Church, the largest communion in Eastern Orthodoxy, has stayed on the old calendar, observing Christmas on Jan. 7 on the new calendar, as have Serbian, Georgian and some other Orthodox.

Complications in Ukraine

In Ukraine, which traditionally has observed Christmas on Jan. 7, the matter has taken on political dimensions in a time of war and schism. The government of Ukraine declared Dec. 25 to be Christmas in an assertion of national identity and cultural independence from Russia and its associations with the later date. The newer Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which received recognition from the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople in 2019, observed Christmas on Dec. 25. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church — which claims independence but has historic ties to Moscow and faces an effective ban in pending legislation — is observing Christmas on Jan. 7.

What about North America?

In the United States, observances vary — even within traditions. Churches in the Greek and Antiochian traditions, along with the Orthodox Church in America, observed Christmas on Dec. 25. Some churches in the Slavic tradition, including Serbian and smaller Russian churches, will observe it Jan. 7.

In the small American Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Diocese of North America — with roots in present-day Ukraine and Slovakia — parishes can choose their date. About a third are on the new calendar.

"I have the difficulty or excitement of celebrating twice," said its leader, Metropolitan Gregory of Nyssa, based in Johnstown, Pennsylvania. Some parishes are observing Theophany (Epiphany) on Saturday, marking Jesus' baptism, while others will be celebrating his birth the following day.

How do Eastern Orthodox observe Christmas?

Traditions vary, but typically the big worship service is the night before — this year on Saturday night. In Serbian Orthodox churches, worship often begins with a short outdoor ceremony involving the burning of an oak branch or young oak tree, accompanied by a full-throated proclamation of the birth of Christ.

A push to expand Medicaid has Kansas governor embracing politics and cutting against her brand

By JOHN HANNA AP Political Writer

TOPEKA, Kan. (AP) — Democratic Gov. Laura Kelly is more aggressive and openly political in pushing to expand Medicaid in Kansas as the Republican-controlled Legislature prepares to open its annual session Monday following five years of failed efforts to provide state health coverage to another 150,000 people.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 47 of 85

Kelly faces leaders of GOP supermajorities whose priorities are to cut income taxes and rein in local property taxes, not to expand Medicaid.

But Kelly's new plan includes hitting expansion-opposing Republicans hard later this year during races for legislative seats, an approach that cuts against years of self-branding as a bipartisan problem-solver who doesn't care about politics.

"My previous approach, which has always been to try to bring people together and work collaboratively and come up with consensus and then get good policy on the books — that hasn't worked," Kelly said during a recent interview.

"Taking a more aggressive approach and — to be direct, a more political approach to it — might be the answer," she added.

For months, Kelly has toured the state for news conferences and roundtables to build support for Medicaid expansion. She said she modeled her campaign on one by Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper in North Carolina, where a GOP-dominated legislature expanded coverage as of Dec. 1.

Kansas is among only 10 states that have not expanded Medicaid in line with the 2010 federal Affordable Care Act, which promises federal funds to cover 90% of the new costs. In two other states, Georgia and Mississippi, top Republicans have signaled willingness to discuss expansion this year so the issue isn't a dead letter.

In Kansas, conservative opposition is rooted in small-government beliefs and decades of skepticism about social services. In the fall, House Speaker Dan Hawkins and Senate President Ty Masterson, both Wichita-area Republicans, derided Kelly's events with business leaders, hospital administrators and health advocates as a "Welfare Express Tour" for "more government dependency."

"It's about not using taxpayer dollars to fund free healthcare for a new population of able-bodied childless adults who don't want to work," Hawkins said in an email.

For some Kansas residents, the issue is getting by.

In Newton, 46-year-old Robyn Adams works 15 to 20 hours a week while she cares for her 15-year-old daughter and uses a manufacturer's program to avoid paying \$1,500 every two weeks for shots to manage her rheumatoid arthritis.

She lost Medicaid coverage by working more hours, but not enough to qualify for federal subsidies for private insurance. Even covering a \$40 copay before a doctor's visit can be a financial challenge, so paying a larger monthly insurance premium is out of the question, she said.

"We need insurance, too," she said of low-income families. "Without the expansion, I don't know — a lot of families are going to be in trouble."

To attract GOP votes, Kelly has mandated that those who would newly qualify for Medicaid verify annually they are working. But Masterson told reporters, "It really doesn't change the underlying facts."

In Kansas, childless adults without disabilities don't qualify for Medicaid. Parents like Adams aren't covered when their household incomes hit 38% of the federal poverty level. For a single parent of one child, it's less than \$7,500; for a family of four, it's \$11,400.

An expansion would make both groups eligible if they earn up to 138% of the federal poverty level. A single, childless adult could earn \$20,100; a single parent and one child, about \$27,200; and a family of four, \$41,400.

Of the people who would qualify, 73% are in families with at least one full- or part-time worker, according to KFF, the research organization formerly known as the Kaiser Family Foundation. Many work in services and others are independent contractors, said Sean Gatewood, a former Kansas House member and spokesperson for the KanCare Advocates Network, a pro-expansion coalition.

Kelly's plan would increase the cost of the Kansas Medicaid program by 31%, about \$1.35 billion a year. However, federal funds would cover all but \$135 million, with the state imposing fees on hospitals and large private health insurance companies for most of the rest.

The federal government also is offering remaining non-expansion states another financial bonus. A promise of an additional \$1.8 billion over two years was crucial for GOP lawmakers in North Carolina. Kelly's office expects Kansas to receive a total bonus of between \$370 million and \$450 million.

But even if there is enough support to pass a bill expanding eligibility, Hawkins, Masterson and their allies can keep a plan from even clearing committees. Democrats' attempts to offer expansion plans during debates on other measures have been ruled out of order, and even Republicans backing expansion have stood with their leaders on that point.

Yet Kelly and other advocates see plenty of reasons to keep pushing, including North Carolina Gov. Cooper's success.

Cooper argued GOP lawmakers in his state felt pressure from an unusual coalition that included rural chambers of commerce and "tough-on-crime Republican sheriffs" who felt they were dealing with too many people who simply needed access to health care, "not handcuffs."

As for non-expansion states, Cooper said in a news conference: "I hope that they can take some of the lessons of the coalitions of people that we've been able to put together to try to succeed."

To plead or not to plead? That is the question for hundreds of Capitol riot defendants

By MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press

Hundreds of Donald Trump supporters charged with storming the U.S. Capitol have faced the same choice in the three years since the attack: either admit their guilt and accept the consequences or take their chances on a trial in hopes of securing a rare acquittal.

Those who have who gambled — and lost — on a trial have received significantly longer prison sentences than those who took responsibility for joining the Jan. 6, 2021 attack, an Associated Press review of court records shows.

The AP's analysis of Capitol riot sentencing data reinforces a firmly established tenet of the U.S. criminal justice system: Pleading guilty and cooperating with authorities carries a substantial benefit when it comes time for sentencing.

"On one hand, the Constitution guarantees the accused a right to a jury trial. It's a fundamental constitutional right. But the reality is that if you exercise that right ... you're likely to be punished more severely than you would have been had you pled guilty to the offense," said Jimmy Gurulé, a University of Notre Dame law professor and former federal prosecutor.

More than 700 defendants have pleaded guilty to federal charges related to the Jan. 6 attack, while over 150 others have opted for a trial decided by a judge or jury in Washington, D.C. It's no surprise most cases have ended in a plea deal — many rioters were captured on video inside the Capitol and later gloated about their actions on social media, making it difficult for their lawyers to mount much of a defense.

The average prison sentence for a Jan. 6 defendant who was convicted of a felony after a contested trial is roughly two years longer than those who pleaded guilty to a felony, according to the AP's review of more than 1,200 cases. The data also show that rioters who pleaded guilty to misdemeanors were far less likely to get jail time than those who contested their misdemeanor charges at a trial.

Lawyers for some Jan. 6 defendants who went to trial have complained about what has long been described as a "trial tax"—a longer sentence imposed on those who refused to accept plea deals. A defense lawyer made that argument last year after a landmark trial for former leaders of the far-right Proud Boys extremist group convicted of seditious conspiracy.

A judge sentenced four ex-Proud Boys leaders to prison terms ranging from 15 to 22 years. Prosecutors had recommended prison terms ranging from 27 to 33 years for a plot to stop the peaceful transfer of presidential power from Donald Trump to Joe Biden.

After the sentencings, defense attorney Norm Pattis filed plea offers that prosecutors made before the Proud Boys went to trial. Prosecutors' sentencing recommendations after the trial were three or four times higher than what they had estimated the defendants would face if they had pleaded guilty to seditious conspiracy before the trial.

Prosecutors persuaded the judge to apply a "terrorism enhancement" that significantly increased the range of prison terms recommended under sentencing guidelines. Pattis argued that the government's

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 49 of 85

recommendations amounted to a trial tax that violated the Sixth Amendment.

"In effect, the defendants were punished because they demanded their right to trial," he wrote.

In the federal court system overall, nearly 98 percent of convictions in the year that ended Sept. 30 were the result of a guilty plea, according to data collected by the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts. Few criminal cases make it to a jury because defendants have a powerful incentive to plead guilty and spare the government from spending time and limited resources on a trial.

But advocates for reform have long complained that plea bargaining is unfairly coercive and can even push people who are innocent to take a deal out of fear of a lengthy prison sentence if they take their chances at trial.

As of Jan. 1, at least 157 defendants have been sentenced after pleading guilty to felony charges for serious crimes related to the Capitol attack. They received an average prison sentence of approximately two years and five months, according to the AP's data.

At least 68 riot defendants have been convicted of a felony after trials with contested facts. They have been sentenced to an average of approximately four years and three months behind bars.

The AP's comparison excludes 10 sentences for seditious conspiracy convictions because nobody who pleaded guilty to the same charge has been sentenced yet. The analysis also excludes convictions from over a dozen "stipulated bench trials," in which the judge decided the cases based on facts that both sides agreed to before the trial started.

The gap is similarly wide for a subset of felony cases in which a Capitol rioter was convicted of assault. The average prison sentence for 83 rioters who pleaded guilty to an assault charge was approximately three years and five months. The average prison sentence for 28 rioters convicted of an assault charge at trial was roughly six years and one month.

The trend also applies to misdemeanor cases against Capitol rioters who didn't engage in violent or destructive behavior. Of 467 riot defendants who pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor, more than half avoided jail time. Meanwhile, judges handed down terms of imprisonment to 22 of 23 defendants who went to trial and were convicted only of misdemeanors.

After the first trial for a Jan. 6 case, U.S. District Judge Dabney Friedrich sentenced a Texas man to more than seven years in prison after a jury convicted him of storming the Capitol with a holstered handgun, helmet and body armor. Prosecutors had recommended a 15-year prison sentence for Guy Reffitt, but before the trial, prosecutors presented him with a possible plea deal that would have recommended less than five years in prison.

Reffitt's attorney, F. Clinton Broden, said in a court filing that the government's 15-year recommendation "makes a mockery of the criminal justice system."

"One of the things when we talk about our democracy and our Constitution is this idea that you have a right to go to trial. You're not sentenced to three times as high of a sentence if you go to trial," Broden said during the hearing, according to a transcript.

Justice Department prosecutor Jeffrey Nestler told the judge that the government wasn't seeking "a trial penalty in any stretch of the imagination," adding, "It's because of the defendant's conduct here."

The judge said Reffitt's sentencing guidelines range would have been roughly two years lower if he had accepted responsibility early and pleaded guilty.

"There's a cost for going to trial, and the guidelines make pretty clear what that cost is," Friedrich said.

The risks of going to trial also are illustrated by the case against Dr. Simone Gold, a leading figure in the anti-vaccine movement. Gold entered the Capitol with John Strand, a boyfriend who worked for a group that Gold founded.

Both were charged with the same crimes. Gold pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor. Strand went to trial and was convicted of five charges, including a felony obstruction charge.

U.S. District Judge Christopher Cooper sentenced Gold to two months in prison and sentenced Strand to two years and eight months behind bars. Prosecutors had sought a prison sentence of six years and six months in prison for Strand.

Strand's lawyer, Stephen Brennwald, questioned why the government's sentencing recommendation for Strand was nearly 40 times longer than Gold's prison sentence. Strand was following Gold's lead on Jan. 6, the attorney argued.

"It would stand to reason that Mr. Strand should receive a lesser sentence. After all, they both engaged in exactly the same conduct that day, though Dr. Gold was the reason that both of them went into the Capitol," Brennwald wrote in court papers.

The judge told Strand that he wasn't getting a trial penalty for exercising his constitutional rights. Unlike Gold, Strand didn't get credit for accepting responsibility for his conduct on Jan. 6.

"And to the contrary, you've not accepted responsibility in a pretty remarkable way. You have professed not just that the government didn't prove its case, but you have professed your innocence numerous times," Cooper said, according to a transcript.

Pedro Pascal, Melanie Lynskey, the Obamas among nominees at creative arts Emmy Awards

By ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Pedro Pascal and Melanie Lynskey are up for two of the most coveted Emmy Awards on Jan. 15, but both are also among this weekend's nominees at the creative arts Emmys.

Pascal, nominated for best actor in a drama for "The Last of Us," is up for best guest actor in a comedy series for hosting "Saturday Night Live" and for his narration of a CNN documentary on Patagonia.

Lynskey, nominated for best actress in a drama for "Yellowjackets," is up for best guest actress in a drama for her one-episode appearance on Pascal's "The Last of Us." That series and "Succession" are the two top overall Emmy nominees. In fact, all of the dozen nominees in Lynskey's category and best guest actor in a drama come from the two HBO shows.

The Saturday and Sunday ceremonies are a precursor to the main Emmy ceremony that will air at 8 p.m. EST Jan. 15 on Fox, with "black-ish" star Anthony Anderson as host. Just like the main telecast, the creative arts ceremonies arrive after a four-month delay because of Hollywood's writers and actors strikes.

This weekend nearly 100 trophies are handed out in a pair of marathon sessions that are, in general, a chance for less famous players, from hairdressers to stunt performers, to have their moment at the podium. But a handful of awards annually claim major names among their nominees.

Among them this year is Barack Obama, who can repeat as best narrator, this time for adding his voice to the Netflix documentary series, "Working: What We Do All Day." He's in a star-studded category that also includes Morgan Freeman, Angela Bassett, and Pascal. (The former president previously won for narrating a Netflix series on national parks.)

Michelle Obama is also up for an Emmy alongside Oprah Winfrey. Each are nominated for best hosted nonfiction series or special for their Netflix show "The Light We Carry."

It would be Michelle Obama's first, while Winfrey would be adding a second primetime Emmy on top of her 18 daytime Emmys. Both "Working" and "The Light We Carry" come from the Obamas' production company, Higher Ground.

On Jan. 6 many Republicans blamed Trump for the Capitol riot. Now they endorse his presidential bid

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — In the follow-up to their 2018 bestseller "How Democracies Die," authors Daniel Ziblatt and Steven Levitsky write about three rules that political parties must follow: Accept the results of fair elections, reject the use of violence to gain power and break ties to extremists.

In the aftermath of the 2020 election, they write, only one U.S. political party "violated all three."

Saturday marks the third anniversary of the Jan. 6, 2021 attack on the Capitol, and Donald Trump, the former president, is far-and-away the leading Republican candidate in 2024. He still refuses to acknowledge

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 51 of 85

his earlier loss to President Joe Biden. Far from rejecting the rioters, he has suggested he would pardon some of those who have been convicted of violent crimes. Rather than distance himself from extremists, he welcomes them at his rallies and calls them patriots.

And Trump is now backed by many of the Republican leaders who fled for their lives and hid from the rioters, even some who had condemned Trump. Several top GOP leaders have endorsed his candidacy.

The support for Trump starkly highlights the divisions in the aftermath of the deadly storming of the Capitol and frames the question about whose definition of governance will prevail — or if democracy will prevail at all.

“If our political leaders do not stand up in defense of democracy, our democracy won’t be defended,” said Levitsky, one of the Harvard professors whose new book is “Tyranny of the Minority.”

“There’s no country in the world, no country on Earth in history, where the politicians abdicated democracy but the institutions held,” he told The Associated Press. “People have to defend democracy.”

The third anniversary of the Jan. 6 attack comes during the most convulsive period in American politics in at least a generation, with Congress barely able to keep up with the basics of governing, and the start of the presidential nominating contests just over a week away.

Trump’s persistent false claims that the election of 2020 was stolen — which has been rejected in at least 60 court cases, every state election certification and by the former president’s one-time attorney general — continue to animate the presidential race as he eyes a rematch with Biden.

Instead, Trump now faces more than 90 criminal charges in federal and state courts, including the federal indictment brought by special counsel Jack Smith that accused Trump of conspiring to defraud the U.S. over the election.

Biden, speaking Friday near Pennsylvania’s Valley Forge, commemorated Jan. 6, saying on that day “we nearly lost America — lost it all.”

While the Congress returned that night to certify the election results and show the world democracy was still standing, Biden said Trump is now trying to revise the narrative of what happened that day — calling the rioters “patriots” and promising to pardon them. And he said some Republicans in Congress were complicit.

“When the attack on Jan. 6 happened there was no doubt about the truth,” Biden said. “Now these MAGA voices — who know the truth about Trump and Jan. 6 — have abandoned the truth and abandoned the democracy.”

At a quieter Capitol, without much ceremony planned for Saturday, it will be the last time the anniversary will pass before Congress is called upon again, on Jan. 6, 2025, to certify the results of the presidential election -- democracy once more put to the test.

Rep. Jamie Raskin, the Maryland Democrat who led Trump’s impeachment over the insurrection, said Biden’s 306-232 electoral victory in 2020 remains “the hard, inescapable, irradicable fact that Donald Trump and his followers have not been able to accept — to this day.”

Raskin envisions a time when there will be a Capitol exhibit, and tours for visitors, to commemorate what happened Jan. 6, 2021. Five people died during the riot and the immediate aftermath, including Trump supporter Ashli Babbitt, who was shot and killed by police.

All told, 140 police officers were injured in the Capitol siege, including U.S. Capitol Police officer Brian Sicknick who died later. Several others died later by suicide.

One officer, Harry Dunn, has announced he is running for Congress to “ensure it never happens again.”

Trump’s decision to reject the results of the 2020 election was the only time Americans have not witnessed the peaceful transfer of presidential power, a hallmark of U.S. democracy.

A giant portrait of George Washington resigning his military commission hangs in the U.S. Capitol, a symbol of the voluntary relinquishing of power — a move that was considered breathtaking at the time. He later was elected the first U.S. president.

Trump opened his first rally of his 2024 presidential campaign with a popular recording of the J6 Prison Choir --- riot defendants singing “The Star-Spangled Banner” recorded over a phone line from jail, interspersed with Trump reciting the Pledge of Allegiance.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 52 of 85

More than 1,200 people have been charged in the riot, with nearly 900 convicted, including leaders of the extremist groups the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers who are serving lengthy terms for seditious conspiracy.

Trump has called Jan. 6 defendants "hostages" and said there was so much love at the "Stop the Steal" rally he held near the White House that day before he encouraged the mob to march down Pennsylvania Avenue, assuring he would be with them at the Capitol, though he never did join.

Allies of Trump scoff at the narrative of Jan. 6 that has emerged. Mike Davis, a Trump ally sometimes mentioned as a future attorney general, has mocked the Democrats and others for turning Jan. 6 into a "religious holiday."

Republican Kevin McCarthy, who went on to become House speaker, had called Jan. 6 the "saddest day" he ever had in Congress. But when he retired last month he endorsed Trump for president and said he would consider joining his cabinet.

Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell has said he would back whomever becomes the Republican Party nominee, despite a scathing speech at the time in which he called Trump's actions "disgraceful" and said the rioters "had been fed wild falsehoods by the most powerful man on Earth because he was angry he lost an election."

Asked about Trump's second-term agenda, GOP lawmakers brushed off his admission that he would be a dictator on "day one."

"He's joking," said Trump ally Byron Donalds, R-Fla.

"Just bravado," said Rep. Tim Burchett, R-Tenn. "There's still checks and balances."

Levitsky said when he and his colleague wrote their earlier book, they believed that the Republicans in Congress would be a "bulwark against Trump."

But with so many of the Trump detractors having retired or been voted out of office, "We were much less pessimistic than we are today."

Carnival begins in New Orleans with Phunny Phorty Phellows, king cakes, Joan of Arc parade

By KEVIN MCGILL Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — The countdown to Mardi Gras begins Saturday in New Orleans as Carnival season kicks off with dozens of costumed revelers and a brass band set to crowd onto a streetcar for a nighttime ride down historic St. Charles Avenue. Meanwhile, a walking club in the French Quarter will march in its annual procession honoring Joan of Arc.

WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT

While it's a secular celebration, Carnival in New Orleans — and around the world — is strongly linked to Christian and Roman Catholic traditions. The season begins on Jan. 6, the 12th day after Christmas, and continues until Mardi Gras, known as Fat Tuesday, which is the final day of feasting, drinking and revelry before Ash Wednesday and the fasting associated with Lent.

New Orleans has the largest and best-known Carnival celebrations in the U.S., with street parties, fancy balls and parades from simple neighborhood-based walking clubs to elaborate high-tech extravaganzas with massive floats laden with flashing lights and giant animated figures.

Other Louisiana and Gulf Coast communities also celebrate. Mobile, Alabama, lays claim to the nation's oldest Mardi Gras observances.

THE PARTY BEGINS

Saturday's events include the annual streetcar ride by the Phunny Phorty Phellows, a group of masked and costumed men and women aboard a New Orleans streetcar that rumbles out of the cavernous public transit barn in the Carrollton neighborhood before rolling onto St. Charles Avenue.

Like much of New Orleans Carnival, it's a tradition that has evolved. The current Phellows first assembled in 1981, a rebirth of a satirical Carnival krewe that took to the streets in 1878 and ceased parading in 1898, according to history provided by the group.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 53 of 85

In the French Quarter, the yearly parade by the Krewe de Jeanne d' Arc marking the birthday of the French hero marches on a route that carries them past a golden statue of their namesake. This year's guests include a delegation from Orléans, France.

While the parade is cast as a tribute to Joan of Arc, participants end the parade with a ceremony marking the end of the Christmas season and the arrival of Carnival, krewe captain Antoinette Alteriis said.

A POST-COVID JOLT FOR TOURISM

Locals embrace the traditions of Mardi Gras but the event also is a much-welcome generator of commerce in a city famous for its bars, restaurants and a tourism-dependent economy. That economy took a big hit when parades and other festivities were largely shut down in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mark Romig of tourism agency New Orleans & Co. said there has been a strong rebound.

"It's been a very dramatic return," Romig said. "We saw it steadily increase beginning in '22. This past year, '23, was amazing, we felt very good about it."

ABBREVIATED SEASON

Romig said he is optimistic Carnival tourism numbers will be even better this year, even though the season is relatively brief.

New Orleans always starts celebrating on Jan. 6 but the end-date each season varies, depending on the variable dates of Easter and Lent. This year, it's a relatively short season, culminating on Feb. 13.

Saturday's parades in New Orleans are a prelude to other small parades set for January and the series of larger, major parades that roll over a 12-day period beginning this year on Feb. 2.

SWEET SIGN OF THE TIMES

When the Joan of Arc parade ends, participants will mark the coming of Carnival with a ceremony including king cake, according to Alteriis. The rings of pastry adorned with purple, green and gold sugar or icing are a signature delicacy of the season.

Local grocery stores, bakeries and restaurants annually do brisk business in king cake sales, some offering them up days before the arrival of Carnival, despite a venerable if loosely followed custom holding that it isn't proper to snack on king cake before Jan. 6.

CRIME CONCERNS

In 2022, some parade routes were shortened due to a depleted police force and crime concerns. Routes were restored in 2023 as the city got help with crowd control from neighboring police jurisdictions, as well as the usual contingent of Louisiana State Police that comes in each year to beef up the law enforcement presence.

Trump returns to Iowa 10 days before the caucuses with a commanding lead over the Republican field

By HANNAH FINGERHUT, STEVE PEOPLES and JILL COLVIN Associated Press

SIoux CENTER, Iowa (AP) — Former President Donald Trump urged his supporters Friday evening not to be complacent in the face of a commanding polling lead as he kicked off the sprint to the Iowa caucuses with his first events of the election year.

"Ten days from now, the people of this state are going to cast the most important vote of your entire lives," Trump told several hundred supporters gathered in Sioux Center. He implored them to turn out on caucus night, warning, "Bad things happen when you sit back."

Trump held a pair of commit-to-caucus events, one in the far northwest corner of the state on the border with South Dakota and one in north-central Mason City. He'll spend Saturday in Newton in central Iowa before heading to Clinton in the state's far east.

The visit came the day before the third anniversary of Jan. 6, 2021, when a violent mob of Trump's supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol as part of a desperate bid to keep him in power after his 2020 election loss. Trump did not acknowledge the date Friday, but railed against the treatment of those who have been jailed for participating in the riot, labeling them "hostages" and saying it will "go down as one of the saddest things in the history of our country."

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 54 of 85

More than 1,230 people have been charged with federal crimes for their participation, including felonies like assaulting police officers and seditious conspiracy.

Trump also asked at one point in Sioux Center whether there was anyone in the friendly room who wasn't planning to vote for him, but then quickly warned them not to raise their hands.

"They're going to say he incited an insurrection," he said to laughs.

And over and over, he repeated his false claims that the 2020 election was stolen — the same lies that motivated the rioters.

Trump also spent much of the night lashing out at President Joe Biden, who earlier Friday delivered a speech warning that Trump's efforts to retake the White House pose a grave threat to the country and democracy.

"We all know who Donald Trump is," Biden said near Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, where George Washington and the Continental Army spent a bleak winter nearly 250 years ago. "The question we have to answer is: Who are we?"

Biden said Jan. 6 marked a moment where "we nearly lost America — lost it all."

Trump, who faces 91 criminal charges stemming from his efforts to overturn his loss to Biden and other state and federal cases, continued to argue that it is, instead, Biden who poses the threat.

"He is a danger to democracy," Trump charged in Mason City.

The former president and his campaign have spent months accusing Biden and other Democrats of using the justice system to damage their chief political rival. There is no evidence that Biden has influenced the investigations led by state officials or the Justice Department — which has also indicted his son, Hunter Biden, twice.

"Joe Biden's record is an unbroken streak of weakness, incompetence, corruption, and failure," Trump told the crowd in Sioux Center. "That's why Crooked Joe is staging his pathetic fearmongering campaign event in Pennsylvania today."

Trump's team is hoping for a knockout win in Iowa on Jan. 15 that will deny his rivals an opportunity to seize momentum and set the table for him to lock up the nomination by the spring. They also hope to turn out a wave of new voters who have never caucused before in a show of strength ahead of an increasingly likely general election rematch against Biden.

"You have to get out and vote because it sets the tone. It even sets the tone, frankly, for November," Trump said in Mason City.

While he remains far ahead in Iowa and other early state and national polls, Trump also continued to lash out at his top Republican rivals, unleashing some of his most pointed attacks to date against former United Nations Ambassador Nikki Haley, who has seen growing support in recent months following a series of well-reviewed debate performances.

Trump tried to cast both her and Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, who was once the only rival he criticized, as "establishment pawns," alleging they would "sell" voters "out." DeSantis, who has staked his campaign on Iowa, entered the race with sky-high expectations but has struggled to gain traction against Trump.

"Sadly, the establishment losers and sellouts lagging far behind us in the Republican primary cannot be trusted on taxes, on trade, or anything else," Trump charged. "They'll betray you just like they betrayed me."

Haley's campaign has been celebrating Trump's recent attention — including a new attack ad — arguing it reflects his growing concern that she is gaining on him.

DeSantis and Haley needled each other at their own events in Iowa Friday, with DeSantis leaning into his opponent's flippant comment about the role of Iowa among the early-voting states. DeSantis, appearing with Texas Rep. Chip Roy and Kentucky Rep. Thomas Massie, hounded Haley for "insulting" Iowans by suggesting New Hampshire voters could "correct" the caucus results.

Haley, who held morning and evening events in Des Moines, described the comment as good-natured ribbing among early-voting states. She is the former governor of South Carolina, which will vote third.

DeSantis, campaigning across central and northeastern parts of the state, also repeatedly told his crowds of about 100 people that Trump failed to follow through with his previous campaign promises and accused

the former president of running a campaign all about himself.

While Trump last visited Iowa before Christmas, his allies have been fanning out across the state, holding their own events on his behalf. Georgia Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene and South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem, who are both considered potential vice presidential picks, have been working to get out the vote in recent days, as has his son Eric Trump.

Trump's team has repeatedly argued that any margin of victory larger than 12 percentage points would be a historic win in an open caucus. Trump lost the state in 2016 to Texas Sen. Ted Cruz but ultimately won the nomination and the presidency.

This time, Trump is facing criminal charges across four separate jurisdictions. But those charges have only solidified his support.

Michael Grevenoged, 34, from Doon, Iowa, is planning to caucus for Trump on Jan. 15 and said he isn't concerned about Trump's legal woes.

"They're brought against him, yes, and he may be indicted for them, but I don't think they're legitimate reasons for him not to be president," he said.

In addition to his criminal charges, Trump is also facing efforts to remove him from the ballot over his attempts to overturn his 2020 election loss. The Supreme Court said Friday it would take up the question of whether states can bar him from the ballot.

Marj Wichers, who lives in Sioux Center and said her backseat was full of Trump gear she bought for her grandchildren outside the venue, criticized efforts to disqualify him.

"He's got to get back in there," said Wichers, after standing in line for four hours to attend the first event. "If they don't want to put him on the ballot, I'll write his name down."

Wichers, 58, said she works the night shift so she might not be able to caucus on Jan. 15.

"I think he's going to get in anyway, so I'm not too worried about it," she said.

New round of Epstein documents offer another look into his cesspool of sexual abuse

NEW YORK (AP) — More than 130 additional court files were unsealed Friday in a lawsuit involving Jeffrey Epstein, providing yet more detail about the late millionaire financier's sexual abuse of underage girls and interactions with celebrities.

The latest round of documents included excerpts of testimony from people who worked for Epstein, copies of phone messages he received — including one from Harvey Weinstein — and lots of legal memos from lawyers discussing who could potentially have been called as a witness if the lawsuit ever went to trial.

No blockbuster revelations were apparent. Lots of the records covered material that has been the subject of many past news stories about Epstein and his victims. But like other documents previously made public in lawsuits related to Epstein, they provide a window into the rarified world he inhabited.

The records are all related to a defamation lawsuit that one of Epstein's victims, Virginia Giuffre, filed in 2015 against the millionaire's girlfriend, Ghislaine Maxwell, who was accused by multiple women of helping Epstein recruit underage victims. The suit was settled in 2017. Maxwell was later prosecuted and is serving a 20-year prison sentence.

Here are some takeaways from the latest batch of released documents:

PRINCE ANDREW

The records released Friday include the 2009 deposition of a former housekeeper at Epstein's home in Palm Beach, Florida, who talked about how much time the financier spent with Prince Andrew, the British royal who was a longtime friend of Maxwell's.

Juan Alessi testified that "Prince Andrew spent weeks with us" and when he visited, he would receive daily massages at the mansion.

Alessi said Andrew would stay in the main guest bedroom, which he described as "the blue room." He recalled seeing Andrew's former wife, Sarah Ferguson, on one occasion, but added, "I don't think she slept in there."

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 56 of 85

Alessi also remembered seeing other celebrities including Donald Trump and "a lot of queens and other famous people that I can't remember."

Trump, whose Mar-a-Lago club is also in Palm Beach, would come over to Epstein's home for dinner, Alessi said, but he "never sat at the table," dining instead with Alessi in the kitchen. Asked whether Trump ever received massages, he said, "No. Because he's got his own spa."

Alessi, who worked at Epstein's sprawling home from 1990 to 2002, previously testified at Maxwell's 2021 trial that he saw "many, many, many" young adult female visitors, often lounging topless by the pool. He also admitted to stealing \$6,300 from Epstein's desk.

Prince Andrew was publicly criticized when photos emerged of him visiting Epstein in New York even after the financier was imprisoned in Florida for a sex crime.

Giuffre sued Andrew, accusing him of sexually abusing her when she was 17. Andrew said he didn't remember ever meeting Giuffre. The lawsuit was settled in 2022 without ever going to trial, but the allegations damaged his public standing and led Andrew to withdraw from some royal duties.

The Associated Press typically does not name people who say they are the victims of sexual abuse unless they have come forward publicly with their stories, as Giuffre has.

PHONE RECORDS

One document unsealed Friday contains copies of phone messages Epstein received, handwritten by staffers, in 2004, a year before police in Palm Beach started investigating allegations that he was paying underage girls for sex.

At the time, Epstein was getting attention for hobnobbing with the rich and powerful, offering free rides on his private jet to celebrities including former President Bill Clinton and actor Kevin Spacey.

The phone messages, while mostly mundane, give a small taste of those associations.

"She had on the phone Mr. Harvey Weinstein," reads one message about a missed call.

Weinstein, then a force in Hollywood, was once part of a media investment group that included Epstein.

"At the time, Epstein was seen as a wealthy power broker with access to many people of various industries and for many reasons," said Weinstein's spokesman, Juda Engelmayer. "It wasn't uncommon for people of that caliber to talk, as we see from the lists that have been coming out. There was and remains nothing more to that."

Weinstein would be charged years later with raping and sexually assaulting women in the entertainment business and is serving lengthy prison terms after convictions in New York and Los Angeles.

Epstein also got several messages about missed calls from Jean-Luc Brunel, a French modeling agent who was close to Epstein. Brunel was awaiting trial on charges that he raped underage girls when he killed himself in a Paris jail in 2022.

RECRUITING YOUNG GIRLS

When Epstein was initially investigated by Palm Beach police in 2005, detectives spoke to a number of girls from an area high school who said they had been paid money to give massages to Epstein.

Tony Figueroa, who worked as a driver for Epstein and once dated Giuffre, talked about the effort to recruit those girls during his 2016 deposition.

"Jeffrey was giving us \$200 apiece for every one that we brought over," he said. "I would get friends that I went to school with and I would take them over there and introduce them, and then I would just leave."

He said Maxwell would also call him occasionally, "asking me to get girls."

Figueroa has told the same story in media interviews in the years since that deposition.

"HAVE MY BABY"

A woman who worked for Epstein, Johanna Sjoberg, testified in her 2016 deposition that Epstein asked her to perform sexualized massages.

He also told her he wanted her to be the mother of his baby, a request she said he made several times.

"I don't believe that I said flat-out no. I didn't agree to it. I would just say, 'Oh, yeah, really? Okay,'" Sjoberg testified, according to a transcript of her deposition.

Later in her questioning, Sjoberg was asked if Maxwell ever made the same request. Sjoberg said no.

Maxwell was also asked about that in her 2016 deposition, and she called the claim “completely rubbish.” “I can’t testify to anything Jeffrey did or didn’t do when I am not present, but I have never asked anybody to carry a baby for me,” Maxwell said. She added that she didn’t remember having any conversations with Epstein about babies.

Sjoberg also testified that Epstein took her on a shopping trip to Victoria’s Secret where he “picked out everything and went into the room with me, the fitting room, which was very odd.”

Sjoberg said that while in the room, Epstein joked that he’d previously been in there with another girl who called him “Dad.”

Sjoberg, like Giuffre, has previously gone public with her story in media interviews.

PUBLIC RELATIONS DISASTER

The legal storm that Epstein and Maxwell were facing is captured well in a Jan. 11, 2015, email by her attorney Philip Barden, who referred to Maxwell as “G,” and to Epstein as “JE.”

He urged a strong public response to Giuffre’s claims because silence was “reputational suicide.”

“Now it is reported that G engaged in direct abuse — as I feared would happen. Next reports to the authorities will be made,” Barden wrote in a message to an individual whose name was blacked out, with Maxwell copied on the missive.

“It is necessary from a litigation, investigatory and reputational reason to issue a cogent denial. I can see why JE doesn’t want this as it may not suit him but he is already toast,” he added.

Four years later Epstein would be dead by suicide, found in a jail cell after he was arrested in July 2019 on sex trafficking charges. It would be two more years before a jury in New York agreed that Maxwell helped Epstein recruit and groom teenage girls for sexual abuse and sometimes joined in the abuse.

Ex-cop gets 14 months in jail in death of Elijah McClain, whose mom calls him ‘bully with a badge’

By COLLEEN SLEVIN and MEAD GRUVER Associated Press

DENVER (AP) — A judge sentenced an ex-Colorado police officer to 14 months in jail for his role in the death of Elijah McClain after hearing the young Black man’s mother on Friday call the officer a “bully with a badge” who will always have blood on his hands.

The officer, Randy Roedema, was the most senior law enforcement member to initially respond to the scene and the only one found guilty. A jury convicted him in October of criminally negligent homicide, which is a felony, and third-degree assault, which is a misdemeanor.

The 23-year-old’s killing on Aug. 24, 2019, received little attention at the time but gained renewed interest the following year as mass protests swept the nation over the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police. McClain’s death became a rallying cry for critics of racial injustice in policing.

In a separate trial, two paramedics were recently convicted for injecting McClain with an overdose of the sedative ketamine after police put him in a neck hold. Sentencing for the paramedics will come in March.

Before Judge Mark Warner handed down the sentence, McClain’s mother, Sheneen McClain, raged against Roedema after he expressed remorse but stopped short of apologizing.

“Randy Roedema stole my son’s life,” she said. “All the belated apologies in the world can’t remove my son’s blood from Randy Roedema’s hands.”

Protecting the community was “the furthest thing from his mind” the night her son was stopped walking home from the store, she said.

She hugged a supporter and wiped tears as she sat back down.

Senior Assistant Attorney General Jason Slothouber described how, in the last minutes of McClain’s life, he struggled to breathe through vomit yet still faced violence from Roedema who picked him up, slammed him down, and dug his knee into his back.

The lack of compassion was all the more startling, Slothouber said, after he read all 76 letters friends, relatives and associates wrote in Roedema’s support.

“I don’t know why that compassion and that care that his friends and his family, the people who served

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 58 of 85

with him, talk about, was not there for Elijah McClain. But it clearly wasn't," Slothouber said.

Roedema also spoke at the hearing, as well as his sister and former military colleagues. Roedema was a U.S. Marine who was wounded in Iraq.

"I want the McClain family to know the sadness I feel about Elijah being gone. He was young," Roedema said.

Roedema said he wished the initial 911 call that reported McClain looking suspicious that night had never been made. But he didn't comment about anything he could have done differently.

"We all responded to that incident in a way that we were all trained to do. Needless to say, the situation had a horrible outcome that nobody intended or wanted to happen," Roedema said.

Roedema's sister, Kayleine Roedema, talked about how he helps her care for their mother "without hesitation" and continues to be a "big brother" who is relied upon by their whole family.

"It hurts me because I know him and I know better. He's a loving husband and father, son and brother, cousin and friend. It's so hard for me to imagine how it could be beneficial for him to serve time in jail," Kayleine Roedema said.

Roedema's lawyer Don Sisson declined to comment on the sentence as he left court with Roedema and his wife. A deputy escorted them to their cars.

McClain was stopped by police after a 911 caller reported that he looked suspicious. Another officer put his hands on McClain within seconds, beginning a struggle and restraint that lasted about 20 minutes before paramedics injected him with the ketamine.

Experts say the sedative ultimately killed McClain, who was already weakened from struggling to breathe while being pinned down after inhaling vomit into his lungs.

Roedema helped hold McClain down while paramedics administered the ketamine. He was often visible in the body camera footage shown over and over to jurors, and he could be heard directing others how to restrain him.

"I don't think anybody who's been involved in this case can unsee what was on the videos or what was depicted on those videos," Warner said before sentencing Roedema.

Warner, who said he was shocked by what appeared to be indifference to McClain's suffering after he was handcuffed, could have sentenced Roedema to up to three years in prison for his felony conviction but chose instead to give him four years of parole and for the felony and a jail sentence for the misdemeanor.

Warner said that would lead to Roedema being behind bars longer since he would likely be paroled after about a year if he was sent to state prison. He also could have been eligible to be sent to a halfway house before that too, under prison rules.

The sentencing includes the option of work release. He must report to jail by March 22.

Sheneen McClain called the sentence afterward "a slap on the wrist." Roedema's attorney has said he will appeal the conviction.

The same jury that convicted Roedema acquitted former officer Jason Rosenblatt, whose lawyers stressed that he wasn't close to McClain when the ketamine was injected.

A different jury acquitted officer Nathan Woodyard a few weeks later, after he testified that he put McClain in a neck hold, briefly rendering him unconscious. Woodyard testified that he feared for his life after Roedema said McClain had grabbed for one of their guns. Prosecutors say the gun grab never happened.

Aurora Fire Rescue paramedics Jeremy Cooper and Peter Cichuniec were convicted last month. Cichuniec, the senior officer, was found guilty of the most serious charge faced by any of the first responders: felony second-degree assault. It carries a prison sentence of between five and 16 years in prison.

Though tragic, Elijah McClain's death has brought about positive changes in Colorado, including laws barring police from directing ketamine to be used, requiring first responders to intervene if they see someone put in danger by other first responders, and requiring police to wear body cameras, Slothouber said.

"Elijah McClain's life mattered," he said.

Biden warns against Trump reelection after Jan. 6 Capitol riot, a day 'we nearly lost America'

By COLLEEN LONG and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

BLUE BELL, Pa. (AP) — President Joe Biden warned Friday that Donald Trump's efforts to retake the White House in 2024 pose a grave threat to the country, the day before the third anniversary of the violent riot at the U.S. Capitol by then-President Trump's supporters aiming to keep him in power.

Speaking near Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, where George Washington and the Continental Army spent a bleak winter nearly 250 years ago, Biden said that Jan. 6 2021, marked a moment where "we nearly lost America — lost it all." He said the presidential race — a likely rematch with Trump, who is the far and away GOP frontrunner — is "all about" whether American democracy will survive.

The speech, the president's first political event of the election year, was intended to clarify the expected choice for voters this fall. Biden, who reentered political life because he felt he was best capable of defeating Trump in 2020, believes focusing on defending democracy to be central to persuading voters to reject Trump once again.

"We all know who Donald Trump is," Biden said. "The question we have to answer is who are we?"

Biden, laid out Trump's role in the Capitol attack, as a mob of the Republican's supporters overran the building while lawmakers were counting Electoral College votes that certified Democrat Biden's win. More than 100 police officers were bloodied, beaten and attacked by the rioters who overwhelmed authorities to break into the building.

"What's Trump done? He's called these insurrectionists 'patriots,'" Biden said, "and he promised to pardon them if he returns to office." He excoriated Trump for "glorifying" rather than condemning political violence.

At least nine people who were at the Capitol that day died during or after the rioting, including several officers who died of suicide, a woman who was shot and killed by police as she tried to break into the House chamber, and three other Trump supporters who authorities said suffered medical emergencies.

Biden said that by "trying to rewrite the facts of Jan. 6, Trump is trying to steal history the same way he tried to steal the election."

Trump, who faces 91 criminal charges stemming from his efforts to overturn his loss to Biden and three other felony cases, argues that Biden and top Democrats are themselves seeking to undermine democracy by using the legal system to thwart the campaign of his chief rival. The Supreme Court on Friday agreed to decide whether Trump could be kept off the ballot because of his efforts to overturn his 2020 election loss.

Speaking in Iowa Friday, Trump repeated his false claims that he won the 2020 election and his assertion that the Capitol rioters were patriotic, and called the long prison sentences handed down for some offenders — whom Trump calls "hostages" and were convicted of crimes like assaulting police officers on Jan. 6 or seditious conspiracy — "one of the saddest things."

Biden, in his remarks, seized on Trump's grievances and his pledges to get retribution on his political enemies.

"Donald Trump's campaign is about him," Biden said. "Not America. Not you. Donald Trump's campaign is obsessed with the past, not the future."

He added: "There's no confusion about who Trump is or what he intends to do."

Before his remarks, Biden, joined by his wife Jill, participated in a wreath-laying ceremony at Valley Forge National Arch, which honors the troops who camped there from December 1777 to June 1778. He also toured the home that served as Washington's headquarters.

Biden invoked Washington's decision to resign his commission as the leader of the Continental Army after American independence was won — and the painting commemorating that moment that resides in the Capitol Rotunda — to cast Trump as unworthy of Washington's legacy.

"He could have held onto that power as long as he wanted," Biden said of Washington. "But that wasn't the America he and the American troops of Valley Forge had fought for. In America, our leaders don't hold on to power relentlessly. Our leaders return power to the people — willingly."

Vice President Kamala Harris was headed to South Carolina Saturday, where she too was to address the

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 60 of 85

Jan. 6 riot.

"On that day, we saw violence, chaos, and lawlessness, even though some so-called leaders still say it was a peaceful protest led by, quote, 'great patriots,'" she will say, according to her prepared remarks.

Although the chaos of Jan. 6 came down on members of both political parties, it is being remembered in a largely polarized fashion now, like other aspects of political life in a divided country.

In the days after the attack, 52% of U.S. adults said Trump bore a lot of responsibility for Jan. 6, according to the Pew Research Center. By early 2022, that had declined to 43%. The number of Americans who said Trump bore no responsibility increased from 24% in 2021 to 32% in 2022.

A Washington Post-University of Maryland poll released this week found that about 7 in 10 Republicans say too much is being made of the attack. Just 18% of GOP supporters say that protesters who entered the Capitol were "mostly violent," down from 26% in 2021, while 77% of Democrats and 54% of independents say the protesters were mostly violent, essentially unchanged from 2021.

Biden said that "politics, fear, money" have led many Republicans to abandon their criticism of Trump after the Jan. 6 attack.

"These MAGA voices who know the truth about Trump and Jan. 6th have abandoned the truth and abandoned democracy," Biden said. "They've made their choice. Now the rest of us – Democrats, Independents, mainstream Republicans – we have to make our choice. I know mine. And I believe I know America's."

Biden has frequently invoked the dangers of Jan. 6 since his 2021 inauguration on the same Capitol steps where police officers were struggling to battle back rioters just two weeks earlier. On the first anniversary of the Jan. 6 attack, Biden had stood in the Capitol's Statuary Hall, a historic spot where the House of Representatives used to meet before the Civil War. On Jan. 6, rioters filled the area, some looking for lawmakers who had run for cover.

"They weren't looking to uphold the will of the people," Biden said of the rioters. "They were looking to deny the will of the people."

On the second anniversary, Biden presented the nation's second-highest civilian award to 12 people who were involved in defending the Capitol during the attack.

Friday's appearance included supporters and young people motivated by the attack to get involved in politics, campaign advisers said.

NY seeks \$370 million in penalties in Trump's civil fraud trial. His response: 'They should pay me'

By JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — New York state lawyers increased their request for penalties to over \$370 million Friday in Donald Trump's civil business fraud trial. He retorted, "They should pay me."

The exchange came as lawyers for both sides filed papers highlighting their takeaways from the trial in court filings ahead of closing arguments, set for next Thursday. Trump is expected to attend, though plans could change.

It will be the final chance for state and defense lawyers to make their cases. The civil lawsuit, which accuses the leading Republican presidential hopeful of deceiving banks and insurers by vastly inflating his net worth, is consequential for him even while he fights four criminal cases in various courts.

The New York civil case could end up barring him from doing business in the state where he built his real estate empire. On top of that, state Attorney General Letitia James is seeking the \$370 million penalty, plus interest — up from a pretrial figure of \$250 million, nudged to over \$300 million during the proceeding.

The state says the new sum reflects windfalls from wrongdoing, chiefly \$199 million in profits from property sales and \$169 million in savings on interest rates, as calculated by an investment banking expert hired by James' office.

Trump bristled at the proposed penalty, calling it "a disgrace" at a campaign stop in Sioux Center, Iowa. "There was no victim. There was no default. There was no damages. No nothing," he said. In an all-caps post hours earlier on his Truth Social platform, he complained that the attorney general was seeking \$370

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 61 of 85

million and instead "should pay me," asserting that businesses are fleeing New York.

(According to the state Labor Department, the number of private sector jobs in New York increased 1% in the year that ended this past November, compared to 1.6% nationally.)

James' office argued in a filing Friday that Trump, his company and executives clearly intended to defraud people.

"The myriad deceptive schemes they employed to inflate asset values and conceal facts were so outrageous that they belie innocent explanation," state lawyer Kevin Wallace wrote.

The state alleges Trump and his company ginned up exorbitant values for golf courses, hotels, and more, including Trump's former home in his namesake tower in New York and his current home at the Mar-a-Lago club in Palm Beach, Florida. The numbers were listed on personal financial statements that netted him attractive rates on loans and insurance, leaving him money to invest in other projects and even his 2016 presidential campaign, James' office says.

The defendants, including Trump's sons Donald Jr. and Eric, deny any wrongdoing. The former president has painted the case as a political maneuver by James, Judge Arthur Engoron and other Democrats, saying they're abusing the legal system to try to cut off his chances of winning back the White House this year.

He asserts that his financial statements actually came in billions of dollars low, and that any overestimations — such as valuing his Trump Tower penthouse at nearly three times its actual size — were mere mistakes and made no difference in the overall picture of his fortune.

He also says the documents are essentially legally bulletproof because they said the numbers weren't audited, among other caveats. Recipients understood them as simply starting points for their own analyses, the defense says.

None of Trump's lenders testified that they wouldn't have made the loans or would have charged more interest if his financial statements had shown different numbers, and 10-plus weeks of testimony produced "no factual evidence from any witness that the gains were ill-gotten," attorneys Michael Madaio and Christopher Kise wrote in a filing Friday. Nor, they said, was there proof that insurers were ripped off.

Separately, defense lawyers argued that claims against Executive Vice Presidents Eric Trump and Donald Trump Jr. should be dismissed because they never had "anything more than a peripheral knowledge or involvement in the creation, preparation, or use of" their father's financial statements.

The sons relied on the work of other Trump Organization executives and an outside accounting firm that prepared those documents, attorneys Clifford Robert and Michael Farina said, echoing the scions' own testimony.

Their father also took the stand, disputing the allegations, decrying the case as political and criticizing the judge and the attorney general. James' office argued in its filing Friday that Trump was "not a credible witness."

"He was evasive, gave irrelevant speeches and was incapable of answering questions in a direct and credible manner," Wallace wrote.

The verdict is up to the judge because James brought the case under a state law that doesn't allow for a jury. Engoron has said he hopes to decide by the end of this month.

He will weigh claims of conspiracy, insurance fraud and falsifying business records. But he ruled before trial on the lawsuit's top claim, finding that Trump and other defendants engaged in fraud for years. With that ruling, the judge ordered that a receiver take control of some of the ex-president's properties, but an appeals court has frozen that order for now.

During the trial, Engoron fined Trump a total of \$15,000 after finding that he violated a gag order. The order, imposed after Trump maligned a law clerk, barred all trial participants from commenting publicly on the judge's staff.

Trump's lawyers are appealing the gag order.

The Supreme Court will decide if Donald Trump can be kept off 2024 presidential ballots

By MARK SHERMAN and NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court said Friday it will decide whether former President Donald Trump can be kept off the ballot because of his efforts to overturn his 2020 election loss, inserting the court squarely in the 2024 presidential campaign.

The justices acknowledged the need to reach a decision quickly, as voters will soon begin casting presidential primary ballots across the country. The court agreed to take up Trump's appeal of a case from Colorado stemming from his role in the events that culminated in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol.

Underscoring the urgency, arguments will be held on Feb. 8, during what is normally a nearly month-long winter break for the justices. The compressed timeframe could allow the court to produce a decision before Super Tuesday on March 5, when the largest number of delegates are up for grabs in a single day, including in Colorado.

Trump, speaking at a campaign event in Iowa, said: "All I want is fair. I just hope that they're going to be fair."

The court will be considering for the first time the meaning and reach of a provision of the 14th Amendment barring some people who "engaged in insurrection" from holding public office. The amendment was adopted in 1868, following the Civil War. It has been so rarely used that the nation's highest court had no previous occasion to interpret it.

Colorado's Supreme Court, by a 4-3 vote, ruled last month that Trump should not be on the Republican primary ballot. The decision was the first time the 14th Amendment was used to bar a presidential contender from the ballot.

Trump is separately appealing to state court a ruling by Maine's Democratic secretary of state, Shenna Bellows, that he was ineligible to appear on that state's ballot over his role in the Capitol attack. Both the Colorado Supreme Court and the Maine secretary of state's rulings are on hold until the appeals play out.

The high court's decision to intervene, which both sides called for, is the most direct involvement in a presidential election since *Bush v. Gore* in 2000, when a conservative majority effectively decided the election for Republican George W. Bush. Only Justice Clarence Thomas remains from that court.

Three of the nine Supreme Court justices were appointed by Trump, though they have repeatedly ruled against him in 2020 election-related lawsuits, as well as his efforts to keep documents related to Jan. 6 and his tax returns from being turned over to congressional committees.

At the same time, Justices Amy Coney Barrett, Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh have been in the majority of conservative-driven decisions that overturned the five-decade-old constitutional right to abortion, expanded gun rights and struck down affirmative action in college admissions.

Some Democratic lawmakers have called on Thomas to step aside from the case because of his wife's support for Trump's effort to overturn the results of the election, which he lost to Democrat Joe Biden. Thomas is unlikely to agree, and there was every indication Friday that all the justices are participating. Thomas has recused himself from only one other case related to the 2020 election, involving former law clerk John Eastman, and so far the people trying to disqualify Trump haven't asked him to recuse.

The 4-3 Colorado decision cites a ruling by Gorsuch when he was a federal judge in that state. That Gorsuch decision upheld Colorado's move to strike a naturalized citizen from the state's presidential ballot because he was born in Guyana and didn't meet the constitutional requirements to run for office. The court found that Trump likewise doesn't meet the qualifications due to his role in the U.S. Capitol attack on Jan. 6, 2021. That day, the Republican president had held a rally outside the White House and exhorted his supporters to "fight like hell" before they walked to the Capitol.

The two-sentence provision in Section 3 of the 14th Amendment states that anyone who swore an oath to uphold the constitution and then "engaged in insurrection" against it is no longer eligible for state or federal office. After Congress passed an amnesty for most of the former confederates the measure targeted in 1872, the provision fell into disuse until dozens of suits were filed to keep Trump off the ballot

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 63 of 85

this year. Only the one in Colorado was successful.

Trump had asked the court to overturn the Colorado ruling without even hearing arguments. "The Colorado Supreme Court decision would unconstitutionally disenfranchise millions of voters in Colorado and likely be used as a template to disenfranchise tens of millions of voters nationwide," Trump's lawyers wrote.

They argue that Trump should win on many grounds, including that the events of Jan. 6 did not constitute an insurrection. Even if it did, they wrote, Trump himself had not engaged in insurrection. They also contend that the insurrection clause does not apply to the president and that Congress must act, not individual states.

Critics of the former president who sued in Colorado agreed that the justices should step in now and resolve the issue, as do many election law experts.

"This case is of utmost national importance. And given the upcoming presidential primary schedule, there is no time to wait for the issues to percolate further. The Court should resolve this case on an expedited timetable, so that voters in Colorado and elsewhere will know whether Trump is indeed constitutionally ineligible when they cast their primary ballots," lawyers for the Colorado plaintiffs told the Supreme Court.

The issue of whether Trump can be on the ballot is not the only matter related to the former president or Jan. 6 that has reached the high court. The justices last month declined a request from special counsel Jack Smith to swiftly take up and rule on Trump's claims that he is immune from prosecution in a case charging him with plotting to overturn the 2020 presidential election, though the issue could be back before the court soon depending on the ruling of a Washington-based appeals court.

And the court has said that it intends to hear an appeal that could upend hundreds of charges stemming from the Capitol riot, including against Trump.

Hezbollah leader says his group must retaliate for suspected Israeli strike in Beirut

By BASSEM MROUE, WAFAA SHURAFI and NAJIB JOBAIN Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — The leader of the Lebanese militia Hezbollah said Friday that his group must retaliate after a presumed Israeli strike hit a Beirut neighborhood this week, killing a senior Hamas official, or else all of Lebanon would be vulnerable to Israeli attack.

Hassan Nasrallah appeared to be making the case for a response to the Lebanese public, even at the risk of escalating the fighting between Hezbollah and Israel. But he gave no indication of how or when the militants would act.

The strike that killed Hamas' deputy political leader, Saleh Arouri, threatened months of efforts by the United States to prevent the war in Gaza from spiraling into a regional conflict.

Nasrallah said it was the first strike by Israel in the Lebanese capital since 2006.

"We cannot keep silent about a violation of this seriousness," he said, "because this means that all of our people will be exposed (to targeting). All of our cities, villages and public figures will be exposed."

The repercussions of silence are "far greater" than the risks of retaliating, he added.

Tensions are rising on multiple fronts as U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken arrives in the region. Iraqis are furious after an American airstrike killed a militia leader in Baghdad. At the same time, the U.S. is struggling to deter attacks by Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels on commercial Red Sea shipping.

In Gaza, Israel is moving to scale down its military assault in the north of the territory and pressing its heavy offensive in the south, vowing to crush Hamas. In the south, most of Gaza's 2.3 million Palestinians are being squeezed into smaller areas in a humanitarian disaster, while still being pounded by Israeli airstrikes.

Since the start of the Gaza war, Hezbollah has fired rockets and missiles into northern Israel, bringing a return bombardment from Israel in near daily cross-border exchanges. After the strike Tuesday in Beirut, the Lebanon-Israel front appeared to be at a critical juncture, with the potential to veer into an all-out war.

On Friday, Israeli aircraft, tanks and artillery struck several areas in Lebanon after rockets and missiles were fired toward Israel, the military said.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 64 of 85

But Hezbollah has held back from a dramatic escalation, wary of a repeat of the two sides' 2006 war in which Israeli bombardment wreaked extensive destruction in Lebanon.

Nasrallah said Friday that the details of Hezbollah's response "will be decided on the battlefield." He did not elaborate.

The Beirut strike is not the only thing threatening a wider fight between Israel and Lebanon.

Israeli officials have threatened greater military action against Hezbollah unless it withdraws its fighters from Lebanese territory near their shared border.

A pullback — called for under a 2006 U.N. truce but never implemented — is necessary to stop barrages and allow the return of tens of thousands of Israelis to homes they evacuated near the border, Israel says.

Nasrallah boasted about the evacuations, saying that after Israel forced Lebanese to flee in past conflicts, Hezbollah had now done the same to Israelis, putting political pressure on the government.

Hezbollah's cross-border attacks aim to engage Israeli forces away from Gaza, Nasrallah said, and the only way to stop them is "to stop the aggression on Gaza."

Israel says it aims to destroy Hamas' military capabilities and remove it from power in Gaza after the militants' Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel, in which they killed around 1,200 people, mainly civilians, and abducted around 250 others.

The army's chief spokesperson, Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari, said Friday the military plans an investigation into failures connected with the Hamas attack, which generated heavy criticism of military, intelligence and political leaders for being caught off guard. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has insisted the government must focus on the war first and answer questions later.

Israel's onslaught in Gaza has killed more than 22,600 people, more than two-thirds of them women and children, according to the territory's Health Ministry. The ministry's count does not differentiate between civilians and combatants.

Much of northern Gaza — the most urbanized part of the tiny territory — has been flattened by bombardment and fighting. Most of its population has fled south, joining its residents who have largely been driven from their homes as well. The risk of famine is increasing daily, according to the U.N. humanitarian office, known by the acronym OCHA.

The ground offensive threatens to bring further destruction in the south, particularly in the main battleground city Khan Younis.

Footage aired on Al Jazeera TV showed devastation in downtown Khan Younis. No building in the city's central Sunneya Square has been left untouched. Some structures have been leveled, while others have been partially destroyed or scorched.

Almost every day this week, strikes have hit in and around Khan Younis' Al Amal Hospital and a hospital run by the Palestinian Red Crescent, killing dozens of people, the OCHA said.

Martin Griffiths, the U.N. humanitarian chief, said in a statement Friday that the humanitarian community is facing an "impossible mission" of supporting more than 2 million people in Gaza while aid workers are killed, communications blackouts continue, roads are damaged and truck convoys carrying vital supplies shot at. Gaza's handful of partially functioning hospitals are overwhelmed and infectious diseases are spreading, he said.

Israeli bombardment continued around the territory. At least 13 people were killed when an apartment building was leveled in Maghazi refugee camp in central Gaza, hospital officials said.

In Rafah, at Gaza's southernmost end, relatives and friends wept over the bodies of six people killed in a strike on a house overnight, including three children.

Sohad al-Derbashi, whose sister was killed in the strike, said the owner of the house had evacuated, fearing he would be targeted since he works as a civil servant in Gaza's Hamas-led administration, as do thousands of others in the territory. When he came to visit the house last night, the strike hit, she said. Her sister, living on the floor below, was crushed.

"They were civilians, innocent people, with no connection to anything. Even the target who was with Hamas was a civil employee. What did he do wrong?" el-Derbashi said.

PepsiCo products are being pulled from some Carrefour grocery stores in Europe over price hikes

By SYLVIE CORBET and DEE-ANN DURBIN Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — Global supermarket chain Carrefour will stop selling PepsiCo products in its stores in France, Belgium, Spain and Italy over price increases for popular items like Lay's potato chips, Quaker Oats, Lipton Iced Tea and its namesake soda.

The French grocery chain said it pulled PepsiCo products from shelves in France on Thursday and added small signs in stores that say, "We no longer sell this brand due to unacceptable price increases."

It comes as a new French law meant to fight the rising cost of living has supermarkets facing millions in fines if they don't reach a deal with suppliers on prices by the end of the month.

The ban also will extend to Belgium, Spain and Italy, but Carrefour, which has 12,225 stores in more than 30 countries, didn't say when it would take effect in those countries.

PepsiCo products were still on shelves Friday in Rome and Barcelona. Carrefour Italia's press office said information will be posted for customers in their stores in Italy in the next days.

PepsiCo said in a statement that it has "been in discussion with Carrefour for many months and we will continue to engage in good faith in order to try to ensure that our products are available."

The company behind Cheetos, Mountain Dew and Rice-A-Roni has raised prices by double-digit percentages for seven straight quarters, most recently hiking by 11% in the July-to-September period.

Its profits are up, though higher prices have dragged down sales as people trade down to cheaper brands. PepsiCo also has said it's been shrinking package sizes to meet consumer demand for convenience and portion control.

"I do think that we see the consumer right now being more selective," PepsiCo Chief Financial Officer Hugh Johnston told investors in October.

The Purchase, New York-based company said price increases should ease and largely align with inflation, which has fallen considerably worldwide since crunched supply chains during the COVID-19 pandemic and then Russia's war in Ukraine sent prices surging.

However, the 20 European Union countries that use the euro currency saw consumer prices rise to 2.9% in December from a year earlier, rebounding after seven straight monthly declines, according to numbers released Friday.

Prices for food and non-alcoholic drinks have eased from a painful 17.5% in the 20-country euro area in March but were still up by 6.9% in November from a year earlier.

The government of French President Emmanuel Macron has fought back on the rising cost of living for households, passing a November law to implement "emergency measures" to fight high prices.

The law moved up annual negotiations between supermarkets and their suppliers on setting prices and more to Jan. 31 from March 1. Fines have been increased to 5 million euros (\$5.5 million) for grocery companies that fail to meet the new deadline for setting prices.

Burt Flickinger III, managing director of grocery consultancy Strategic Resource Group, said he thinks PepsiCo was targeted because the company has been one of the most aggressive in raising prices. He thinks other big brand names could be next and that other European retailers could follow Carrefour's lead.

Pulling products off shelves over prices is rare, but it happens. Flickinger noted that Kraft Heinz stopped supplying British retailer Tesco with some of its items in 2022 for a week over a pricing spat.

Rob Dongoski, agribusiness and food lead in the consumer practice of management consultancy Kearney, said the showdown between the two big brands represents the ultimate test of customer loyalty.

"Are you loyal to your store or loyal to your brand?" he said.

In the U.S., several grocery sellers including Walmart have expressed displeasure at consumer product companies' moves to keep pushing up prices even as overall inflation has come down. Particular problem areas had been packaged foods and household goods.

Walmart's CEO Doug McMillon said in May that, "We all need those prices to come down."

Stew Leonard Jr., president and CEO of Stew Leonard's, a supermarket chain with stores in Connecti-

cut, New York and New Jersey, said in July that he warned the big consumer product companies that he wouldn't accept any more price increases because he believed customers had reached a tipping point. But he noted on Friday that price increases have eased for many items, except for meat.

"It's hard to justify price increase when overall costs are coming down," Leonard said.

For its part, PepsiCo has pointed to higher costs for grain and cooking oil for its rising prices. Costs for those food commodities surged following Russia's invasion in Ukraine but fell considerably on global markets last year from record highs in 2022.

The U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization said Friday that its food price index was 13.7% lower in 2023 than the year before, but its measures of sugar and rice prices grew in that time. That overall relief still is not being felt by families at supermarkets.

NRA chief, one of the most powerful figures in US gun policy, says he's resigning days before trial

By MICHAEL R. SISAK, LINDSAY WHITEHURST and JAKE BLEIBERG Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The longtime head of the National Rifle Association said Friday he is resigning, just days before the start of a civil trial over allegations he treated himself to millions of dollars in private jet flights, yacht trips, African safaris and other extravagant perks at the powerful gun rights organization's expense.

Wayne LaPierre, the executive vice president and chief executive officer, said his departure is effective Jan. 31. The trial is scheduled to start Monday in New York Attorney General Letitia James' lawsuit against him, the NRA and two others who've served as executives. LaPierre was in court this week for jury selection and is expected to testify at the trial. The NRA said it will continue to fight the lawsuit, which could result in a further shakeup of its leadership and the appointment of an independent monitor to oversee its finances.

"With pride in all that we have accomplished, I am announcing my resignation from the NRA," LaPierre said in a statement released by the organization, which said he was exiting for health reasons. "I've been a card-carrying member of this organization for most of my adult life, and I will never stop supporting the NRA and its fight to defend Second Amendment freedom. My passion for our cause burns as deeply as ever."

James, a Democrat, heralded LaPierre's resignation as an "important victory in our case" and confirmed the trial will go on as scheduled. His exit "validates our claims against him, but it will not insulate him or the NRA from accountability," James said in a statement.

Andrew Arulanandam, a top NRA lieutenant who has served as LaPierre's spokesperson, will assume his roles on an interim basis, the organization said.

LaPierre, 74, has led the NRA's day-to-day operations since 1991, acting as the face and vehement voice of its gun-rights agenda and becoming one of the most influential figures in shaping U.S. gun policy. He once warned of "jack-booted government thugs" seizing guns, brought in movie star Charlton Heston to serve as the organization's president, and condemned gun control advocates as "opportunists" who "exploit tragedy for gain."

In one example of the NRA's evolution under LaPierre, after the Columbine High School shooting in Littleton, Colorado, in 1998, the NRA signaled support for expanded background checks for gun purchases. But after a gunman killed 26 people at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, in 2012, LaPierre repudiated background checks and called for armed guards in every school. He blamed video games, lawmakers and the media for the carnage, remarking: "The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun."

"The post-Sandy Hook apocalyptic speech was kind of the talismanic moment when, for him and the NRA, there was no going back," Robert Spitzer, a political science professor at the State University of New York-Cortland and author of several books on gun politics.

The NRA remains a strong political force, with Republican presidential hopefuls flocking to its annual con-

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 67 of 85

vention last year. In recent years, though, the organization has been beset by financial troubles, dwindling membership, and infighting among its 76-member board along with lingering questions about LaPierre's leadership and spending.

After reporting a \$36 million deficit in 2018, fueled mostly by misspending, the NRA cut back on long-standing programs that had for decades been core to its mission, including training and education, recreational shooting and law enforcement initiatives. In 2021, the organization filed for bankruptcy and sought to incorporate in Texas instead of New York, where it was founded as a nonprofit charity in 1871 — but a judge rejected the move, saying it was a transparent attempt to duck James' lawsuit.

"(LaPierre) is, more than any other single person, responsible for putting the NRA in the dumpster situation it is right now," Spitzer said.

Gun control advocates lauded LaPierre's resignation, mocking his oft-repeated talking point in the wake of myriad mass shootings over the years.

"Thoughts and prayers to Wayne LaPierre," said Kris Brown, president of the gun-control advocacy group Brady: United Against Gun Violence. "He's going to need them to be able to sleep at night. Wayne LaPierre spent three decades peddling the Big Lie that more guns make us safer — all at the expense of countless lives. He has blood on his hands, and I won't miss him."

Another advocacy group, March For Our Lives, said that when it was founded in 2018 after a mass shooting at a Parkland, Florida, high school, the NRA "was an untouchable and seemingly all-powerful political juggernaut." Months later, the group sent a letter to the New York attorney general's office raising questions about alleged financial misdeeds involving NRA executives, including LaPierre. The letter sparked the investigation that led to James' lawsuit.

"All it took was some meddling kids and a whole lot of determination to take down one of the largest and most powerful lobbying machines in American history," March for Our Lives said in a statement.

James sued LaPierre and three co-defendants — NRA general counsel John Frazer, retired finance chief Wilson Phillips and LaPierre's ex-chief of staff Joshua Powell — in 2020, alleging they cost the organization tens of millions of dollars from questionable expenditures including lucrative consulting contracts for ex-employees, and gifts for friends and vendors.

LaPierre is accused of setting himself up with a \$17 million contract with the NRA if he were to exit the organization, and spending NRA money on travel consultants, luxury car services, and private flights for himself and his family — including more than \$500,000 on eight trips to the Bahamas over a three-year span.

As punishment, James is asking that LaPierre and the other defendants be ordered to pay the NRA back and that they be banned from serving in leadership positions of any charitable organizations conducting business in New York, which would bar them from any NRA involvement.

Powell, who wrote of "staggering" waste and corruption in his 2020 book "Inside the NRA," settled with James' office late Friday. He agreed to testify at the trial, pay the NRA \$100,000 and forgo further nonprofit involvement. Frazer and Phillips have denied wrongdoing.

Defending himself in prior testimony, LaPierre said that cruising the Bahamas on a vendor's 108-foot (33-meter) yacht was a "security retreat" because he was facing threats after the Sandy Hook and Parkland shootings. LaPierre also took steps to purchase a \$6.5 million "safe house" for him and his wife in Texas through the NRA after the Parkland shooting, but the deal fell through, the lawsuit said.

LaPierre conceded not reporting the yacht trips on conflict-of-interest forms, testifying: "It's one of the mistakes I've made." Some expenses related to the trips were covered by the NRA, the lawsuit said.

Phillip Journey, an ex-NRA board member who clashed with LaPierre and is expected to testify at the New York trial, said LaPierre's resignation doesn't resolve open questions before the court or fix persistent rot within the organization.

"Honestly, the grifters are a snake with many heads and this is just one," said Journey, a Kansas judge who is running to rejoin the NRA board.

Journey also testified at the NRA's bankruptcy trial in Texas and said he anticipates there is enough evidence for the James to prove her case. "It's a tragic end to a career that had many high points," Journey

said of LaPierre stepping down. "It's one of his own making."

A magnitude 4.2 earthquake shakes a wide area of Southern California. No injuries are reported

By JOHN ANTCZAK and STEFANIE DAZIO Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A magnitude 4.2 earthquake was felt widely across the nation's second largest city Friday and shook things off shelves near the epicenter in a small mountain community east of Los Angeles, but there were no reports of major damage or injuries.

The U.S. Geological Survey said the 10:55 a.m. quake was centered about a mile (1 kilometer) northwest of Lytle Creek, in the San Gabriel Mountains about 45 miles (70 kilometers) east of downtown Los Angeles. The depth was put at 5.5 miles (8.8 kilometers).

It came less than a week after a similar quake with a magnitude of 4.1 also hit the Los Angeles area and was felt by people watching the Rose Parade in Pasadena on New Year's Day.

Michael Guardado, who works at the front desk of the San Bernardino National Forest's Lytle Creek Ranger Station, said after Friday's quake the "building shook hard" and he had heard that "a lot of rocks" had fallen onto Lytle Creek Road.

Cari Torguson, a bartender at Melody's Place in Lytle Creek, said she felt "a hard boom and a shake."

"It wasn't very long, but it was scary," she told The Associated Press.

A decorative glass mushroom above the bar fell and broke, and a jar of instant coffee toppled off a shelf in the adjoining store, she said. Only a handful of people were inside the building.

The quake was centered within miles of the home of minor league baseball's Rancho Cucamonga Quakes. "What's in a name, you say," the team quipped on social media.

The tremor was felt as a slight rocking in downtown Los Angeles. Shaking was also reported in several surrounding counties and cities including Long Beach, more than 50 miles (80 kilometers) southwest of Lytle Creek.

The quake occurred in Cajon Pass, where the San Andreas and San Jacinto faults come together, veteran seismologist Lucy Jones said in a social media post. In 1970 there was a magnitude 5.2 quake with a 4.0 foreshock close to the same location, she said.

Flu and COVID infections got worse over the holidays, with more misery expected, CDC says

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The flu season in the U.S. is getting worse but it's too soon to tell how much holiday gatherings contributed to a likely spike in illnesses.

New government data posted Friday for last week — the holiday week between Christmas and New Year's — show 38 states with high or very high levels for respiratory illnesses with fever, cough and other symptoms. That's up from 31 states the week before.

The measure likely includes people with COVID-19, RSV and other winter viruses, and not just flu. But flu seems to be increasing most dramatically, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"We expect it to be elevated for several more weeks," said the CDC's Alicia Budd. So far, though, this is a moderate flu season, she said.

Interpreting flu reports during and after the holidays can be tricky, she noted. Schools are closed. More people are traveling. Some people may be less likely to go see a doctor, deciding to just suffer at home. Others may be more likely to go.

The flu season generally peaks between December and February; CDC Director Dr. Mandy Cohen said she expects it to peak by the end of this month. Officials say this season's flu shots are well-matched to the strain that is spreading the most.

According to CDC estimates, since the beginning of October, there have been at least 10 million illnesses,

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 69 of 85

110,000 hospitalizations, and 6,500 deaths from flu so far this season. The agency said 27 children have died of flu.

COVID-19 illnesses may not be as escalating as quickly as flu this winter. CDC data indicates coronavirus-caused hospitalizations haven't hit the same levels they did at the same point during the last three winters. Still, COVID-19 is putting more people in the hospital than flu, CDC data shows.

Lauren Ancel Meyers of the University of Texas, said the nation is seeing a second rise in COVID-19 after a smaller peak in September.

"There is a lot of uncertainty about when and how high this current surge will peak," said Meyers, who runs a team that forecasts COVID-19, flu and RSV trends

A new version of the coronavirus, called JN.1, is accounting for nearly two-thirds of U.S. cases, according to a CDC estimate. But health officials say there's no evidence that that it causes more severe disease than other recent variants,

Florida can import prescription drugs from Canada, US regulators say

By MATTHEW PERRONE AP Health Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Food and Drug Administration on Friday cleared the way for Florida's first-in-the-nation plan to import prescription drugs from Canada, a long-sought approach to accessing cheaper medications that follows decades of frustration with U.S. drug prices.

Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis signed the plan into law in 2019, but it required federal review and approval by the FDA, which controls prescription drug imports.

Democratic President Joe Biden has backed such programs as a way to lower prices, signing an executive order in 2021 that directed the FDA to work with states on imports.

The White House called Friday's action "a step in the right direction," and encouraged more states to apply for importation.

"For too long, Americans have been forced to pay the highest prescription drug prices of any developed nation," White House spokesperson Kelly Scully said in a statement.

But even as U.S. politicians applauded the plan, Canadian health providers said it was impractical given the supply challenges the country already faces.

"Historically, we've had some pretty devastating drug shortages in Canada," Joelle Walker, spokesperson for the Canadian Pharmacists Association, told the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation "So the idea that they could import them from us is not really feasible."

The policy represents a major shift in the U.S. after years of successful lobbying by the pharmaceutical industry, which said imports would expose U.S. patients to risks of counterfeit or adulterated drugs. The FDA also previously warned of the difficulties of assuring the safety of drugs originating from outside the U.S.

But the politics surrounding the issue have shifted in recent years, with both parties — including former President Donald Trump — doubling down on the import approach.

Jeff Johnson, director for AARP Florida, said he was excited about the federal decision, though he said it's only one step of many the group would like to see to help lower prescription drug costs. He noted savings won't be noticed by most people, but the state will save money overall.

"Unless our healthcare coverage comes through Medicaid or through some another state-run program, we probably won't save that money on prescription drugs," Johnson said. "If there are enough different things out there that help reduce drug prices, together they'll make a difference."

The FDA said Florida's program will be authorized for two years, though imports won't begin immediately. Under federal requirements, state officials must first test the drugs to make sure they're authentic and relabel them so that they comply with U.S. standards.

Florida's health department must also provide a quarterly report to the FDA on the types of drugs imported, cost savings and any potential safety and quality issues.

The FDA action was first reported by The New York Times.

DeSantis, who is battling Trump for the Republican presidential nomination, previously sued the Biden administration for allegedly delaying approval of the import program. Several other states are also await-

ing federal approval.

"After years of federal bureaucrats dragging their feet, Florida will now be able to import low-cost, life-saving prescription drugs," said DeSantis in a statement.

The FDA is likely to face legal challenges over the decision, which the pharmaceutical industry's trade organization called "a serious danger to public health."

"We are deeply concerned with the FDA's reckless decision to approve Florida's state importation plan," the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America said in a statement Friday.

Many people already buy at least some of their medicines from pharmacies in Canada or Mexico, although technically it's illegal to import them.

Work on allowing state imports began under Trump, a relentless critic of industry pricing.

Under the current regulations, states can import certain medicines through pharmacies and wholesalers. DeSantis has previously estimated taxpayers could save up to \$150 million annually under the program.

The state's proposal includes a number of drug classes, including medications for asthma; chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, or COPD; diabetes; HIV and AIDS; and mental illness.

The medications would be only for certain people, including foster children, inmates, certain elderly patients and — eventually — Medicaid recipients.

Like most developed nations, Canada sets limits on the prices drugmakers can charge if they wish to enter the market. Health officials there have suggested their country's prescription drug market is too small to have any real impact on U.S. prices.

Until recently, the U.S. government had almost no leverage over the prices set by drugmakers. Only in 2022 did Congress pass a law allowing the federal government to negotiate prices for a small number of medications used by seniors in the Medicare program. The first such negotiations are set to take place later this year.

New gun law has blocked over 500 firearms from being bought by young people, attorney general says

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — More than 500 gun purchases have been blocked since a new gun law requiring stricter background checks for young people went into effect in 2022, Attorney General Merrick Garland said Friday, the day after a school shooting in Iowa left a sixth-grader dead.

The bipartisan law passed in June 2022 was the most sweeping gun legislation in decades and requires extra checks for any gun purchases by people under age 21. Those denied a gun purchase include a person convicted of rape, a suspect in an attempted murder case and someone who had been involuntarily committed for mental-health treatment, according to the Justice Department.

President Joe Biden applauded the news, calling it an important milestone.

"Simply put: this legislation is saving lives," Biden said in a statement where he also called for additional measures such as universal background checks and a ban on firearms often referred to as assault weapons. The Democratic president said he was "proud to have taken more executive action than any president in history to combat gun violence in America, and I will never stop fighting to get even more done."

The news came the day after the country was rocked by another school shooting, this one carried out by a 17-year-old armed with a shotgun and a handgun who killed a sixth grader and wounded five others on the new year's first day of classes at an Iowa high school, authorities said. The suspect, a student at the school in Perry, Iowa, died of what investigators believe is a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

It wasn't clear Friday how the shooter got the weapons, but people under 18 can't buy legally buy guns in purchases regulated by federal law.

The 2022 law was passed after a series of mass shootings, including the massacre of 19 students and two teachers at a Texas elementary school. The measure was a compromise that also included steps to keep firearms from more domestic violence offenders and help states put in place red flag laws that make it easier for authorities to take weapons from people found to be dangerous.

It mandates extra checks with state and local officials for young buyers, along with the FBI databases typically searched before someone is approved to buy a gun. Those steps have so far blocked 527 guns from being sold, Garland said.

Still, "This is not a time to relax our efforts," he said in remarks that also touched on overall declines in homicides in many U.S. cities. "We have so much more to do."

Hundreds of convictions, but a major mystery is still unsolved 3 years after the Jan. 6 Capitol riot

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER and MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Members of far-right extremist groups. Former police officers. An Olympic gold medalist swimmer. And active duty U.S. Marines.

They are among the hundreds of people who have been convicted in the massive prosecution of the Jan 6, 2021, riot in the three years since the stunned nation watched the U.S. Capitol attack unfold on live TV.

Washington's federal courthouse remains flooded with trials, guilty plea hearings and sentencings stemming from what has become the largest criminal investigation in American history. And the hunt for suspects is far from over.

"We cannot replace votes and deliberation with violence and intimidation," Matthew Graves, the U.S. attorney for the District of Columbia, told reporters on Thursday.

Authorities are still working to identify more than 80 people wanted for acts of violence at the Capitol and to find out who placed pipe bombs outside the Republican and Democratic national committees' offices the day before the Capitol attack. And they continue to regularly make new arrests, even as some Jan. 6 defendants are being released from prison after completing their sentences.

The cases are playing out at the same courthouse where Donald Trump is scheduled to stand trial in March in the case accusing the former president of conspiring to overturn his 2020 election loss in the run-up to the Capitol attack.

"The Justice Department will hold all Jan. 6 perpetrators at any level accountable under the law, whether they were present that day or otherwise criminally responsible for the assault on our democracy," Attorney General Merrick Garland said Friday. He said the cases filed by Graves and the special counsel in Trump's federal case, Jack Smith, show the department is "abiding by the long-standing norms to ensure independence and integrity of our investigations."

A look at where the cases against the Jan. 6 defendants stand:

BY THE NUMBERS

More than 1,230 people have been charged with federal crimes in the riot, ranging from misdemeanor offenses like trespassing to felonies like assaulting police officers and seditious conspiracy. Roughly 730 people have pleaded guilty to charges, while another roughly 170 have been convicted of at least one charge at a trial decided by a judge or a jury, according to an Associated Press database.

Only two defendants have been acquitted of all charges, and those were trials decided by a judge rather than a jury.

About 750 people have been sentenced, with almost two-thirds receiving some time behind bars. Prison sentences have ranged from a few days of intermittent confinement to 22 years in prison. The longest sentence was handed down to Enrique Tarrío, the former Proud Boys national chairman who was convicted of seditious conspiracy for what prosecutors described as a plot to stop the transfer of power from Trump, a Republican, to Joe Biden, a Democrat.

Many rioters are already out of prison after completing their sentences, including some defendants who engaged in violence. Scott Fairlamb — a New Jersey man who punched a police officer during the riot and was the first Jan. 6 defendant to be sentenced for assaulting law enforcement — was released from Bureau of Prisons' custody in June.

ALL EYES ON THE SUPREME COURT

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 72 of 85

Defense attorneys and prosecutors are closely watching a case that will soon be heard by the U.S. Supreme Court that could impact hundreds of Jan. 6 defendants. The justices agreed last month to hear one rioter's challenge to prosecutors' use of the charge of obstruction of an official proceeding, which refers to the disruption of Congress' certification of Biden's 2020 presidential election victory over Trump.

More than 300 Jan. 6 defendants have been charged with the obstruction offense, and so has Trump in the federal case brought by special counsel Jack Smith. Lawyers representing rioters have argued the charge was inappropriately brought against Jan. 6 defendants.

The justices will hear arguments in March or April, with a decision expected by early summer. But their review of the obstruction charge is already having some impact on the Jan. 6 prosecutions. At least two defendants have convinced judges to delay their sentencings until after the Supreme Court rules on the matter.

RIOTERS ON THE LAM

Dozens of people believed to have assaulted law enforcement during the riot have yet to be identified by authorities, according to Graves. And the statute of limitations for the crimes is five years, which means they would have to be charged by Jan. 6, 2026, he said.

Several defendants have also fled after being charged, including a Proud Boys member from Florida who disappeared while he was on house arrest after he was convicted of using pepper spray gel on police officers. Christopher Worrell, who spent weeks on the lam, was sentenced on Thursday to 10 years in prison.

The FBI is still searching for some defendants who have been on the run for months, including a brother-sister pair from Florida. Olivia Pollock disappeared shortly before her trial was supposed to begin in March. Her brother, Jonathan Pollock, is also missing. The FBI has offered a reward of up to \$30,000 for information leading to the arrest of Jonathan Pollock, who is accused of thrusting a riot shield into an officer's face and throat, pulling an officer down steps and punching others.

Another defendant, Evan Neumann, fled the U.S. two months after his December 2021 indictment and is believed to be living in Belarus.

WHAT ABOUT THE PIPE BOMBER?

One of the biggest remaining mysteries surrounding the riot is the identity of the person who placed two pipe bombs outside the offices of the Republican and Democratic national committees the day before the Capitol attack. Last year, authorities increased the reward to up to \$500,000 for information leading to the person's arrest. It remains unclear whether there was a connection between the pipe bombs and the riot.

Investigators have spent thousands of hours over the last three years doing interviews and combing through evidence and tips from the public, said David Sundberg, assistant director in charge of the FBI Washington Field Office.

"We urge anyone who may have previously hesitated to come forward or who may not have realized they had important information to contact us and share anything relevant," he said in an emailed statement on Thursday.

The explosive devices were placed outside the two buildings between 7:30 p.m. and 8:30 p.m. on Jan. 5, 2021, but officers didn't find them until the next day. Authorities were called to the Republican National Committee's office around 12:45 p.m. on Jan. 6. Shortly after, a call came in for a similar explosive device found at the Democratic National Committee headquarters. The bombs were rendered safe, and no one was hurt.

Video released by the FBI shows a person in a gray hooded sweatshirt, a face mask and gloves appearing to place one of the explosives under a bench outside the DNC and separately shows the person walking in an alley near the RNC before the bomb was placed there. The person wore black and light gray Nike Air Max Speed Turf sneakers with a yellow logo.

Olympic sprinter Oscar Pistorius freed after serving nearly 9 years in prison for killing girlfriend

By GERALD IMRAY, NQOBILE NTSHANGASE and MOGOMOTSI MAGOME Associated Press
PRETORIA, South Africa (AP) — Olympic sprinter Oscar Pistorius, a double-amputee who became a global star competing at his sport's highest level while running on carbon-fiber blades, was released from prison on Friday after serving nearly nine years for killing his girlfriend, the model Reeva Steenkamp.

Pistorius, 37, quietly left the Atteridgeville Correctional Center in Pretoria and was processed at a parole office before being released to his family, Department of Corrections spokesperson Singabakho Nxumalo told The Associated Press. Nxumalo, who referred to Pistorius' release as an "operation" designed to avoid a media scramble, declined to give further details.

"I can only tell you he was released this morning," Nxumalo said.

Pistorius served nearly nine years of his murder sentence of 13 years and five months for the fatal shooting of Steenkamp at his home on Valentine's Day 2013. He became eligible for early release having served at least half his sentence, and was approved for parole in November.

Pistorius will live under strict parole conditions, including a ban on speaking to the media, until his sentence expires in December 2029. He is expected to initially live at his uncle's mansion in the upscale Pretoria suburb of Waterkloof, which is where he stayed during his seven-month trial in 2014.

A police van was outside that house and a police officer was seen coming out later Friday. The officer declined to comment to reporters. Three black private security vehicles were also parked in front of the mansion.

Pistorius and his brother and sister grew up under the care of their uncle and aunt, Arnold and Lois Pistorius, after becoming estranged from their father. Pistorius' mother died when he was a teenager. Arnold Pistorius was seen driving out of the home, as was Pistorius' sister, Aimee.

Pistorius' trial drew a horde of media from around the world, and even though corrections officials warned ahead of time that he wouldn't be "paraded" for the cameras upon his release, a few dozen reporters, photographers and TV cameras were camped outside the prison in the hopes of seeing him.

Pistorius maintains that he shot the 29-year-old Steenkamp in error after mistaking her for a dangerous intruder hiding in a bathroom in his Pretoria villa in the middle of the night. He fired four times through a locked toilet cubicle door, hitting Steenkamp in the head, hip and hand. He claimed he fired in what he believed was self-defense and that he didn't know it was his girlfriend in the cubicle. Prosecutors alleged that he intentionally killed her in anger during an argument.

In addition to her modeling career, Steenkamp was a reality TV star with a law degree who had become an activist against the scourge of violence against women in South Africa — a tragic irony given how she died. She and Pistorius had only been dating for a few months.

Steenkamp's mother, June Steenkamp, said in a statement Friday that she had accepted Pistorius' parole, although the pain of her daughter's death was "still raw and real." Steenkamp's father, Barry Steenkamp, died last year.

"Has there been justice for Reeva? Has Oscar served enough time? There can never be justice if your loved one is never coming back, and no amount of time served will bring Reeva back," June Steenkamp said. "We who remain behind are the ones serving a life sentence."

"With the release of Oscar Pistorius on parole, my only desire is that I will be allowed to live my last years in peace with my focus remaining on the Reeva Rebecca Steenkamp Foundation, to continue Reeva's legacy."

The Department of Corrections has emphasized that the champion Paralympic sprinter's release — like every other offender on parole — doesn't mean he has completed his sentence.

Pistorius' parole conditions include restrictions on when he's allowed to leave home, a ban on consuming alcohol, and orders that he must attend programs on anger management and violence against women. He must also perform community service.

Pistorius also will have to regularly meet with parole officials and will be subjected to unannounced visits by authorities. He is not allowed to leave the Waterkloof district without permission and is not allowed

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 74 of 85

to speak to the media until the end of his sentence. He could be sent back to prison if he is in breach of any of his parole conditions.

South Africa doesn't use monitoring devices on parolees. But the Department of Corrections said a parole official will constantly monitor Pistorius, who will have to inform the official of any major changes in his life, such as if he wants to get a job or change addresses.

Once a wealthy athlete who drove sports cars and was endorsed by Nike, Pistorius was left broke after his lengthy murder trial, his chief defense lawyer said in 2014. He sold the house where he killed Steenkamp to pay some of his legal bills.

Steenkamp's family did not oppose his parole application in November, although June Steenkamp said then that she didn't believe Pistorius had been fully rehabilitated and that he was still lying about the shooting.

Before the killing, Pistorius was seen as an inspiring role model after having had both of his legs amputated below the knee as a baby because of a congenital condition. He became a champion sprinter on his carbon-fiber running blades and made history by competing against nondisabled athletes at the 2012 London Olympics.

His trial destroyed his image. He was accused of being prone to angry outbursts and acting recklessly with guns, while witnesses testified about altercations he had with others, including an argument in which he allegedly threatened to break a man's legs.

Pistorius was first convicted of culpable homicide — a charge comparable to manslaughter — and sentenced to five years in prison for killing Steenkamp. After appeals by prosecutors, he was ultimately found guilty of murder and had his sentence increased, although that judgment by the Supreme Court of Appeal still didn't definitively rule that he knew it was Steenkamp behind the bathroom door.

Pistorius was sent to prison in 2014, released on house arrest in 2015 during an appeal, and then sent back to prison in 2016. He was initially incarcerated at the maximum security Kgosi Mampuru II Prison in Pretoria but was moved to Atteridgeville early in his sentence because it's better suited to holding disabled prisoners.

Reaction to Pistorius' parole has been muted in South Africa, in stark contrast to the first days and months after Steenkamp's killing, which sparked angry protests outside of the courthouse calling for him to receive a long prison sentence. There is no death penalty in South Africa.

"He has ticked all the necessary boxes," said Themba Masango, secretary general of Not In My Name International, a group that campaigns against violence against women. "And we can only wish and hope Oscar Pistorius will come out a better human being."

"We tend to forget that there is a possibility where somebody can be rehabilitated."

Iran mourns those slain in Islamic State-claimed suicide blasts as death toll rises to 89

By AMIR VAHDAT, VAHID SALEMI and JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

KERMAN, Iran (AP) — Iranian officials tried Friday to link Israel and the U.S. to an Islamic State group-claimed suicide bombing while speaking to a mass funeral for some of the 89 people killed in the attack, seeking to intertwine the assault with wider Middle East tensions from the Israel-Hamas war.

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and the top commander of Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard sought to make the link without offering evidence for their claims. The gathered crowd in front of flag-draped caskets shouted in response: "Death to America!" and "Death to Israel!"

"The enemy always sees the power of the Islamic Republic. The whole world is recognizing this power and this ability," Raisi said, without directly naming any country. "Be sure, the initiative is in the hands of our powerful forces. The place and time will be determined by our forces."

Iranian state television also sought to link America to the attack. At one point, it re-broadcast comments from 2016 from then-presidential candidate Donald Trump, who wrongly accused then-President Barack Obama of being the "founder" of the extremist group.

Critics have blamed Obama's decision to pull troops from Iraq in 2011 for allowing the group, once an

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 75 of 85

affiliate of al-Qaida, to thrive and ultimately hold vast swaths of Iraq and Syria in its self-declared caliphate by 2014. U.S. troops under both Obama and Trump then battled alongside allied forces to retake that territory.

Gen. Hossein Salami, the commander of the Guard, similarly sought to make the connection.

"They can only act as agents and mercenaries of American politics and Zionism," Salami said. "But we give them this warning, ... wherever you are, we will find you. You cannot avoid divine punishment by disappearing. If you live for 1,000 years, we will find you."

In Wednesday's attack, one suicide bomber killed himself, then another attacked 20 minutes later as people and emergency workers tried to help the wounded in Kerman, about 820 kilometers (510 miles) southeast of the capital, Tehran.

On Friday, the intelligence ministry said in a statement published by its website, vaja.ir, that one of the two suicide bombers was a Tajik national. It said the other's nationality was not clear yet. The statement added that after the attack, in the early hours of Thursday, the base of the bombers was identified on the outskirts of Kerman and that a total of 11 people have been arrested.

The attack targeted a commemoration for Guard Gen. Qassem Soleimani, killed in 2020 by a U.S. drone strike as he led its expeditionary Quds Force.

Soleimani had been part of the Iranian response to the Islamic State group in Syria, while focusing on keeping embattled Syrian President Bashar Assad in power. He also had extensive ties to proxy groups around the wider Mideast, including Hamas. But the U.S., which killed Soleimani as part of wider tensions over its collapsed nuclear deal with world powers, saw Soleimani as the mastermind behind deadly road-side bombings targeting American soldiers in Iraq.

The two attacks on Wednesday killed at least 89 people and wounded about 280 others, authorities said Friday in an update of the death toll. The attacks have sparked condemnation from around the world, even amid Iran's wider tensions with the West over its nuclear program.

Pope Francis offered a condolence telegram to express his deep sadness over the "loss of life caused by the recent explosions in Kerman," the Vatican said on Friday.

Francis "invokes upon all the people of Iran the Almighty's blessings of wisdom and peace," the Vatican said.

The Islamic State group claimed the attack Thursday in a statement that named the two bombers and described it as part of a new campaign linked to Israel's war in the Gaza Strip. The statement bore some differences to previous claims made by the Islamic State group in other attacks it has claimed in Iran, though experts said it appeared to be legitimate and came from online channels associated with the extremists. Much of the group's leadership has been killed and replaced in the years since 2014.

It's unclear why the two Iranian leaders chose to focus on the U.S. and Israel, rather than on the Islamic State group, during their remarks Friday. Iran has retaliated in the past over IS-claimed attacks, including launching ballistic missiles into Syria.

However, the Islamic State group has grown stronger in recent years in neighboring Afghanistan, just some 360 kilometers (225 miles) east of Kerman, since the Western-backed government in Kabul fell to the Taliban in 2021.

Iran and the Taliban have maintained diplomatic ties since the takeover, though there have been border skirmishes and tensions over water supplies between the two nations. Iranian officials say at least 12 of the dead in Wednesday's bombings were Afghans.

House Republicans ready contempt of Congress charges against Hunter Biden for defying a subpoena

By FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Republicans plan to move forward next week with holding Hunter Biden in contempt of Congress after the president's son defied a congressional subpoena to appear for a private deposition last month.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 76 of 85

The Republicans who lead the House Oversight and Accountability Committee and the Judiciary Committee announced Friday that they will hold votes on contempt charges against Hunter Biden as the GOP moves into the final stages of its impeachment inquiry. If the committees approve the charges, the full House would get a final vote.

"Hunter Biden's willful refusal to comply with our subpoenas constitutes contempt of Congress and warrants referral to the appropriate United States Attorney's Office for prosecution," said Reps. James Comer, R-Ky., and Jim Jordan, R-Ohio, in a joint statement. "We will not provide him with special treatment because of his last name."

Hunter Biden and his lawyers have repeatedly slammed the GOP-issued subpoena for the closed-door testimony, arguing that information from those interviews can be selectively leaked and manipulated. Hunter Biden has insisted that he would only testify in public.

"It's clear the Republican chairmen aren't interested in getting the facts or they would allow Hunter to testify publicly," Hunter Biden's attorney, Abbe Lowell, said in a statement. "Instead, House Republicans continue to play politics by seeking an unprecedented contempt motion against someone who has from the first request offered to answer all their proper questions."

He added, "What are they afraid of?"

For months, Republicans have pursued an impeachment inquiry seeking to tie the Democratic president to his son's business dealings. So far, GOP lawmakers have failed to uncover evidence directly implicating Democratic President Joe Biden in any wrongdoing.

While Republicans say their inquiry is ultimately focused on the president, they have taken particular interest in Hunter Biden and his overseas business dealings, from which they accuse the president of personally benefiting. Republicans have also focused a large part of their investigation on whistleblower allegations of interference in the long-running Justice Department investigation into the younger Biden's taxes and his gun use.

The hearings planned for Wednesday on contempt of Congress will come a day before Hunter Biden is scheduled to make his first court appearance on tax charges filed by a special counsel in Los Angeles. He is facing three felony and six misdemeanor counts, including filing a false return, tax evasion, failure to file and failure to pay.

His lawyer has accused special counsel David Weiss of "bowing to Republican pressure" in the case.

US employers add a surprisingly strong 216,000 jobs in a sign of continued economic strength

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Business Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The nation's employers added a robust 216,000 jobs last month, the latest sign that the American labor market remains resilient even in the face of sharply higher interest rates.

Friday's government report showed that December's job gain exceeded the 173,000 that were added in November. The unemployment rate was unchanged at 3.7% — the 23rd straight month that joblessness has come in below 4%.

Some details of the report, though, may disappoint the inflation fighters at the Federal Reserve, who might now be inclined to delay any cuts in their benchmark interest rate. Average hourly wages rose 4.1% from a year earlier, up from a 4% gain in November, which could make it harder for the Fed to slow inflation back to its 2% target.

Still, taken as a whole, the December jobs report reflected a healthy economy, with steady job growth, rising wages and cooling inflation. It provided the latest evidence that the Fed may be able to achieve a notoriously difficult "soft landing," in which the central bank would conquer inflation without causing a steep recession.

Yet despite the low unemployment and easing inflation, polls show that many Americans are dissatisfied with the economy. That disconnect, which will likely be an issue in the 2024 elections, has puzzled economists and political analysts.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 77 of 85

A key factor is the public's exasperation with higher prices. Though inflation has been falling more or less steadily for a year and a half, the lingering financial and psychological effects of the worst bout of inflation in four decades have soured many Americans on the economy. Prices are still 17% higher than they were before the inflation surge began and are still rising.

Pollsters and economists say there has never been as wide a gap between the underlying health of the economy and public perception. A poll conducted in November by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, about three-quarters of respondents described the economy as poor. Two-thirds said their expenses had risen.

Asked why many Americans remain dissatisfied by the economy, Acting Labor Secretary Julie Su said Friday that "part of the unfortunate reality is we live in polarized times."

Many of the Biden administration's domestic policies, including its investment in infrastructure, are "wildly popular," Su said in an interview with The Associated Press.

Despite their stated discontent with the economy, Americans have kept spending. Average hourly pay has outpaced inflation over the past year, leaving consumers with more money to spend. Indeed, as they did for much of 2023, consumers, a huge engine for U.S. economic growth, hit the stores in November, shopped online, went out to restaurants or traveled.

Friday's jobs report did contain some cautionary notes. Paul Ashworth, chief North America economist at Capital Economics, noted that the government revised down its previous estimate of job gains for October and November by a combined 71,000. And just as in November, December's job growth was concentrated in just a few industries: Leisure and hospitality companies added 40,000, healthcare 38,000 and governments 52,000.

Indeed, from October through December, private-sector employers have added just 115,000 jobs a month, the lowest three-month average since companies were laying off workers in mid-2020 during COVID-19 lockdowns.

In addition, the proportion of people who either have a job or are looking for one fell in December to 62.5%, the lowest level since February. The Fed prefers having more people in the labor force to help ease pressure on employers to sharply boost pay to attract or retain workers. Companies typically pass their higher labor costs on to consumers by raising prices. In December, the number of Americans in the labor force actually fell by 676,000, the sharpest such drop since January 2021.

Fed Chair Jerome Powell had warned of hard times ahead after the central bank began jacking up interest rates in the spring of 2022 to attack high inflation. Most economists predicted that the much higher borrowing costs that resulted would cause a recession, with layoffs and rising unemployment, in 2023.

Yet the recession never arrived, and none appears to be on the horizon. The nation's labor market is still producing enough jobs to keep the unemployment rate near historic lows. For all of 2023, employers added 2.7 million jobs, a healthy gain but down from 4.8 million jobs added in 2022.

"I anticipate 2024 is going to continue to be a bit of a (job) candidate-driven market, with more openings than we have candidates," said Amy Glaser, senior vice president at the staffing firm Adecco.

Still, Glaser suggested, as hiring slows, employers won't likely have to resort to the signing and retention bonuses that were needed in the past few years to attract or keep employees.

Since March 2022, the Fed has raised its benchmark interest rate 11 times, lifting it to a 22-year high of about 5.4%. Those higher rates have made borrowing costlier for companies and households, but they are on their way toward achieving their goal: Defeating inflation.

Consumer prices were up 3.1% in November from a year earlier, down drastically from a four-decade high 9.1% in June 2022. The Fed has been satisfied enough with the progress so far that it hasn't raised rates since July and has signaled that it expects to make three rate cuts this year.

Still, Friday's robust jobs and wage figures could lead the Fed to push back the start of any interest rate cuts if it decides that inflation will take longer to tame.

"Today's report speaks to the bumpy road ahead for the Fed's journey back to 2% inflation," said Andrew Patterson, senior international economist at Vanguard.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 78 of 85

Patterson suggested that the Fed might have to wait for the second half of the year to start cutting rates, longer than many investors had expected.

In the meantime, many employers are still finding it hard to fill jobs. They include Isidore Kharasch, who runs Hospitality Works, which provides consulting services to restaurants, bars and hotels.

Kharasch said his restaurant clients are finding it easier to find servers than they did a year ago. But hiring culinary workers, including chefs and front line cooks remains difficult. Many such workers didn't like their hours and have taken other types of jobs. That trend, Kharasch said, has forced some restaurants to simplify menus or reduce their selection.

"It's constantly adjusting the menu to fit where our staff is at any one time," he said.

Kharasch said he thinks the minimum wage increases that are taking effect this year in some states will result in more automation, increased prices and a reduction in hours of operation to save money. Beginning April 1, California will require fast food companies to pay their workers at least \$20 an hour.

Krystle Phillips, owner of Roll Ice Cream LLC in St. Petersburg, Florida, which sells rolled ice cream machines, ingredients and supplies to ice cream trucks and stores, is struggling to find workers willing to work full time. Job candidates are demanding higher pay.

Short of help, Phillips, who considers herself an expert in refrigeration and logistics, has had to get up to speed on writing recipes and accounting.

"It's been hard to hire these specialized positions," she said.

Ukraine unleashes more drones and missiles at Russian areas as part of its new year strategy

By The Associated Press undefined

Russian air defenses downed dozens of Ukrainian drones in occupied Crimea and southern Russia on Friday, officials said, as Kyiv pressed its strategy of targeting the Moscow-annexed peninsula and taking the 22-month war well beyond Ukraine's borders.

Air raid sirens wailed in Sevastopol, the largest city in Crimea, and traffic was suspended for a second straight day on a bridge connecting the peninsula, which Moscow seized illegally a decade ago, with Russia's southern Krasnodar region. The span is a crucial supply link for Russia's war effort.

The Russian Defense Ministry said its defenses intercepted 36 drones over Crimea and one over Krasnodar, part of an emerging pattern of intensified Ukrainian aerial attacks in recent days.

A Ukrainian Neptune anti-ship missile also was destroyed over the northwestern part of the Black Sea, the ministry said.

The developments came after three people were injured Thursday night by other Ukrainian rocket and drone attacks on the Russian border city of Belgorod and the surrounding region, said Belgorod Gov. Vyacheslav Gladkov.

He posted photographs on Telegram of an apartment building with some windows shattered and damaged cars. He said authorities could help those wanting to move farther from the border.

Ukrainian attacks on Dec. 30 in Belgorod killed 25 people, officials there said.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has pledged to hit more targets on the Crimean Peninsula and inside Russian border regions this year. The goal is to unsettle Russians as President Vladimir Putin seeks another six years in power in a March 17 election.

A Ukrainian attack on military facilities in Crimea on Thursday affected a command center and the peninsula's air defense system, according to a spokesperson for Ukraine's southern joint forces, Nataliia Humeniuk.

She said the Russian military recently relocated its Crimean launch sites for Shahed drones.

It was not possible to verify either side's claims.

Following a drone strike deep inside Russia last year, Zelenskyy said Ukraine had developed a weapon that can hit targets 700 kilometers (400 miles) away. He said last month Kyiv plans to produce 1 million

drones, which have become a key battlefield weapon.

Other Ukrainian officials said it aims to manufacture this year more than 10,000 attack drones with a range of hundreds of kilometers, as well as more than 1,000 longer-range drones that can hit targets well behind the front line and inside Russia.

Both sides are raising the stakes of their long-range warfare as soldiers remain bogged down on the wintry battlefield. The U.K. Defense Ministry said Friday that "ground combat has continued to be characterized by either a static front line or very gradual, local Russian advances in key sectors."

The Kremlin, meanwhile, has acquired ballistic missiles from North Korea and fired at least one of them into Ukraine on Dec. 30, the White House said Thursday, citing recently declassified U.S. intelligence. It also is seeking close-range ballistic missiles from Iran, National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said.

British Defense Minister Grant Shapps said Pyongyang would pay a high price for supporting Russia, although he didn't say in what way, and he accused Moscow of violating a U.N. embargo on arms shipments to and from North Korea.

"The world has turned its back on Russia, forcing Putin into the humiliation of going cap in hand to North Korea to keep his illegal invasion going," Shapps said on X, formerly Twitter.

Asked about the development, Ukrainian air force spokesman Yuriy Ihnat said in televised comments Friday that he couldn't immediately confirm the use of the North Korean-supplied missiles, adding that experts need to study the fragments. Russian officials have refrained from commenting on previous U.S. claims that North Korea has supplied ammunition to Moscow.

Ukraine said it stopped 21 out of 29 Russian Shahed drones launched late Thursday and early Friday. The assault injured two people, including a 14-year-old, and was the latest of almost daily Russian drone attacks in the new year.

Zelenskyy thanked Germany late Thursday for a delivery of military aid, especially air defense materiel that he said "is timely and focused on our priorities."

Ukraine "should look to continue degrading Russia's ability to wage war by conducting an escalating campaign of airstrikes on targets far behind the front lines throughout occupied Ukraine and inside Russia itself," according to Mykola Bielieskov, a research fellow at Ukraine's National Institute for Strategic Studies.

"This could include attacks on troop concentrations, military bases, and munitions stores along with logistical hubs and armament production facilities," he wrote in an assessment published by the Atlantic Council, a U.S. think tank.

A new immigration policy that avoids a dangerous journey is working. But border crossings continue

By GISELA SALOMON and COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

LEHIGH ACRES, Fla. (AP) — Five years ago, Alexis Llanos and his family fled Venezuela for Colombia, escaping death threats and political persecution. The family then planned to make the dangerous and deadly journey north, through the Darien jungle leading through Panama, with hopes of eventually crossing illegally into the United States.

Their plans changed when a friend mentioned a new migration program from the U.S. government that would allow them to stay put while they pleaded for a chance to come legally. It worked. After a four-month process that included medical exams and interviews with the United Nations and the U.S., Llanos, his partner and their 7-year-old girl and 3-year-old boy arrived in Florida.

"It was a unique opportunity, a miracle that God prepared for me," said Llanos, 27, during an interview with The Associated Press from his new home. "I feel blessed, grateful. ... I did not want to take the risk. I would not have forgiven myself if something had happened to them because of me," crossing the jungle.

The Llanos family is among the first migrants allowed into the U.S. under the Biden administration's new "safe mobility offices," set up in Colombia, Guatemala, Costa Rica and Ecuador beginning in the fall. The program is designed to streamline the U.S. refugee process so migrants don't give up and pay smugglers

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 80 of 85

to make the journey north, further straining the U.S.-Mexico border, which has seen record-high numbers of crossings.

So far, 3,000 refugees have arrived in the U.S., and 9,000 have been approved. But it's a small number compared with what's happening at the U.S.-Mexico border, where there were more than 10,000 arrests for illegal crossing per day over several days in December alone. In cities including Chicago, New York and Denver, migrants who have no access to work permits sleep in police station foyers and in airports.

These are the scenes that dominate the early phase of the 2024 presidential campaign, with Republicans excoriating President Joe Biden and considering whether to impeach his Homeland Security secretary.

Republicans are also pushing the Democratic president to back more restrictive policies that would dramatically reduce asylum protections, among other things, and they believe they have leverage if he wants to see another infusion of tens of billions in aid to Ukraine.

The Biden administration has worked to crack down on illegal crossings but has also sought to broaden legal pathways through efforts like the safe mobility initiative, to provide alternatives for migrants in the hope they don't journey north.

Those who do arrive on foot to the U.S.-Mexico border and ask for asylum get a court date and must prove they are eligible to stay. The system is badly backlogged, so they often end up waiting years for a court date while they sit in limbo in the U.S. without authorization to work.

With the safe mobility initiative, they're arriving as refugees who have already met the requirements and will be legally allowed to live and work in the U.S. The process takes only months, while more traditional refugee screening is a yearslong effort. Immigrant advocates laud the new pathways but don't think they replace asylum.

"It is absolutely critical that these pathways now exist," said Hannah Flamm, policy counsel at the International Refugee Assistance Project. But, "no enhancement of access to refugee resettlement can ever come at the expense of the rights of asylum seekers at the border."

To implement its plan, the Biden administration is working with the U.N. High Commission for Refugees and with the U.N.'s International Organization for Migration. To apply, migrants answer questions online to screen for eligibility, and then the U.N. agencies refer cases to the U.S., which makes the final decision. If they're denied, the government could evaluate them for different, more temporary programs.

"This process facilitates and reduces time" for refugees, said Luiz Fernando Godinho Santos, a UNHCR spokesman for the Americas.

Jefferson Castro, who first told Llanos about the program, also applied to come to the U.S. from Colombia, after arriving from Venezuela in 2018, when he said he was threatened by police. In September, he traveled nine hours by bus with his wife and their two children, ages 8 and 4, from Medellín to Bogota, where U.S. officials interviewed them, examined them medically and provided U.S. cultural immersion courses.

He knew at least three other families had been approved and assumed he would be, too. So he took his children out of school and sold his refrigerator, beds and motorcycle, which he used to work as a delivery person. But they heard nothing for weeks.

"I was left without a job, without money, without answers," said Castro, 28, in a recent phone interview from Medellín.

In late December, he finally received good news. They have one hurdle left: His daughter, born in Colombia, needs a passport. But he lacks the \$100 to cover the costs.

"How can I have faith without work? How do I get a passport if I don't have money?" Castro said. "I don't know what to do."

Immigrant advocates say the safe mobility initiative needs work — it can be confusing, isn't advertised well so enough migrants aren't aware of it, and it isn't open to enough people. For example, in Colombia, only Cubans, Haitians and Venezuelans present in Colombia before or on June 11 are eligible right now.

Still, they say, it's a start. And when families do make it, they are usually handed off to a non-governmental organization that helps resettle them into the U.S.

"It is certainly a step in the right direction in terms of providing people mechanisms to seek asylum

safely rather than relying on coyotes and undertaking a dangerous trip," said Lee Williams, chief programs officer at Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service.

Adanny Hurtado, a Venezuelan, and his family arrived in October and live in Houston. An NGO pays their rent and has helped with food and paperwork for work authorization. He is already working as a welder. His wife is a customer assistant at Walmart, and their two children are in school.

"I still can't believe it. I think it's not real," said Hurtado. The initiative "was the hand that God offered to me."

Nevertheless, Santos and others say, it is not a catchall solution or an asylum replacement. The UNHCR projects there are about 18.4 million people displaced in the Western Hemisphere — it's a problem that's only growing.

Llanos, his partner, Diomaris Barboza, 26, and their kids spent anxious weeks in Colombia wondering whether they would be eligible to come to the U.S., waiting for 10 days in a hotel after their interviews.

"We didn't know the answer until the last day," he said. The family sold their belongings and, with the help of the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, settled in Lehigh Acres, near Fort Myers.

They live in a two-bedroom house on a quiet street where they are already making friends. The Lutheran services are helping them obtain medical exams and all the paperwork they need to resettle, including the school enrollment for the children. They are being helped with food, money and rent, and Llanos is already working in construction.

They must repay their \$3,000 plane tickets. But they have three years to do it.

Jo Koy ready to fulfill childhood dream of hosting Golden Globes with hopes of leaving positive mark

By JONATHAN LANDRUM Jr. AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Jo Koy remembers watching major award ceremonies like the Golden Globes with his mother on their living room sofa trying to guess the winners.

It was a ritual that Koy cherished as a child. Since then, he's grown as a comedian with various stand-up specials and several acting credits including last year's film "Easter Sunday."

On Sunday, Koy will live out his childhood dream of hosting the Globes — which is looking to return to form after being tarnished following years of scandal. He calls his upcoming duties a "very big moment."

"This is a throwback to my childhood, and now I'm the guy who's onstage," said Koy, the second Asian host in Globes history. (Sandra Oh emceed the show in 2019.) He wants to inspire those from the Asian community in his first major hosting gig.

"As a kid and watching TV and not having that many role models to kind of indirectly inspire me, that's what this means to me," said the Filipino American actor, whose "Easter Sunday" film became the first big studio movie with an all-Filipino ensemble. He's released five stand-up specials on Comedy Central and Netflix, including his most recent Netflix special, "Live From The Los Angeles Forum."

"I know there's kids out there that will be watching the Globes," he said. "And now when they see this, it's like 'Oh, it's possible. I can do this.' Things aren't so gray anymore. It's not just two colors on the palette. Sometime three. Every color is on the palette. This is a beautiful moment. I really want to make sure I knock this out of the park."

Koy hopes to leave a positive mark on the Globes, which are the first major broadcast of awards season. It airs live beginning at 5 p.m. Pacific on CBS and Paramount+ for users with a Showtime subscription.

The show is known for being a boozy celebration of television and film with a more party-like atmosphere compared to their Academy Award counterparts.

But the Globes faced tremendous backlash after a 2021 report in the Los Angeles Times found there were zero Black members in the group that only had 87 foreign journalists. The membership has since been revamped with a voting body of 300.

All indications point to a starry show, which will include presenters such as Michelle Yeoh, Will Ferrell,

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 82 of 85

Angela Bassett, America Ferrera and Amanda Seyfried.

Greta Gerwig's "Barbie" leads the Globes nominations with nine including for best picture musical or comedy as well as acting nominations for Margot Robbie and Ryan Gosling and three of its original songs. It is closely followed by its release date and meme companion "Oppenheimer," which scored eight nominations, including for best picture drama, best director for Christopher Nolan and nods for actors Cillian Murphy, Robert Downey Jr. and Emily Blunt.

Koy gave praise to Dick Clark Productions, the awards' producer, and an owner of the Globes' longtime home, the Beverly Hilton.

"This production company has been nothing but top notch," he said. "The relationship with CBS is beautiful. It's fun to see this because this is how things should be ran. We need to start moving forward. That's what this is. We're moving forward now. You learn from the past and you make sure it doesn't happen again."

Koy said he's anxious to hit the Globes stage to deliver his brand of relatable humor.

"They're giving me the blessing to be me," he said. "I want to bring my style to the Globes. Of course, I'm going to have fun. But most importantly, I want to make sure everyone's happy. I'm going to make fun of myself. If I can do that, I can make fun of other people."

A desperate family in Gaza clings to a routine for survival

By MOHAMMED JAHJOUH and JACK JEFFERY Associated Press

MUWASI, Gaza Strip (AP) — Stranded in a corner of southern Gaza, members of the Abu Jarad family are clinging to a strict survival routine.

They fled their comfortable three-bedroom home in northern Gaza after the Israel-Hamas war broke out nearly three months ago. The 10-person family now squeezes into a 16-square meter (172-square foot) tent on a garbage-strewn sandy plot, part of a sprawling encampment of displaced Palestinians.

Every family member is assigned daily tasks, from collecting twigs to build a fire for cooking, to scouring the city's markets for vegetables. But their best efforts can't mask their desperation.

At night "dogs are hovering over the tents," said Awatif Abu Jarad, an older member of the family. "We are living like dogs!"

Palestinians seeking refuge in southern Gaza say every day has become a struggle to find food, water, medicine and working bathrooms. All the while, they live in fear of Israeli airstrikes and the growing threat of illnesses.

Israel's bombardment and ground invasion of Gaza, now in its 13th week, have pushed almost all Palestinians toward the southern city of Rafah along the Egyptian border. The area had a prewar population of around 280,000, a figure that has bulged to over 1 million in recent days, according to the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees.

Rafah's apartment blocks are crammed with people, often extended families who have opened their doors to displaced relatives. West of the city, thousands of nylon tents have sprung up. Thousands more people are sleeping in the open, despite the cool and often rainy winter weather.

Most of northern Gaza is now under the control of the Israeli army, which early in the war urged Palestinians to evacuate to the south. As the war progressed, more evacuation orders were issued for areas in the south, forcing Palestinian civilians to crowd into ever smaller spaces, including Rafah and a nearby sliver of land called Muwasi. Even these purportedly safe spaces are often hit by airstrikes and shelling.

The war broke out on Oct. 7 after Hamas militants stormed into southern Israel, killing about 1,200 people and abducting 240 others. The fighting has killed over 22,400 Palestinians, according to the Health Ministry in the Hamas-run territory, which does not differentiate between civilians and combatants.

According to Nouman, Awatif's brother, the conflict drove the family the entire length of Gaza. They fled their home in the northern border town of Beit Hanoun on the first day of the war and stayed with a relative in the nearby town of Beit Lahia.

Six days later, the intensity of Israeli strikes in the border area sent them south to Al-Quds Hospital in Gaza City. As people started to evacuate the hospital two days later, they traveled to the Nuseirat urban

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 83 of 85

refugee camp in central Gaza, making the 10-kilometer (6-mile) journey on foot.

They stayed in a cramped U.N. school building in Nuseirat for over two months, but left on Dec. 23 as the Israeli army turned its focus toward Hamas targets in central Gaza refugee camps.

They escaped to Muwasi on Dec. 23, believing it was the safest option. On the first night, they slept out in the open. Then they bought nylon and wood in a Rafah market to build a tent.

Nouman, an accountant, sleeps on the nylon-covered floor with his wife, sister, six daughters and one grandchild. They sleep on their sides to conserve space.

He said the tent cost 1,000 shekels, about \$276. "It is completely crazy," he said. In Rafah's demand-driven war economy, larger pre-built family tents now range from \$800 to \$1,400.

The family's hardship begins at 5 a.m. Nouman said his first job is to start a small fire to cook breakfast, while his wife and daughters knead dough for flatbread and then wash their utensils and metal cooking griddle.

After eating, their attention turns to fetching water and food, tasks that take up most of the daylight hours.

Nouman said he and several of his younger relatives collect jugs of water from one of the public pipes nearby, water that is exclusively used for washing and not suitable for drinking. Next, they head to one of the dozens of drinking water tankers dotted across the city, where they wait in line for hours.

A gallon of drinking water costs one shekel, or 28 cents. Some, so desperate for cash, wait in line just to sell their space.

After the water is fetched, family members move between several open markets to hunt for vegetables, flour and canned food for that evening's meal. Meanwhile, Nouman busies himself with scouring the ground for twigs and bits of wood to make a fire.

Food prices have soared. Gaza is facing acute food and medicine shortages and is dependent largely on aid and supplies that trickle in through two crossings, one Egyptian and one Israeli, and what has been grown in the recent harvest. More than half a million people in Gaza — roughly a quarter of the population — are starving, the United Nations said in late December.

Dalia Abu Samhadana, a young mother sheltering with her uncle's family in a crowded house of 20 in Rafah, says the only food staples at her local market are tomatoes, onions, eggplants, oranges and flour. All are virtually unaffordable.

A 25-kilogram (55-pound) bag of flour before Oct. 7 cost around \$10. Since then it has fluctuated between \$40 and \$100.

"My money has almost run out," said Abu Samhadana, unsure of how she will be able to feed her daughter.

Displaced Palestinians in Rafah are entitled to free aid if they register with the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees, which hands out flour, blankets, and medical supplies at 14 spots across southern Gaza. They often spend hours in line waiting for the aid to be distributed.

Abu Samhadana, who is originally from the nearby southern town of Khan Younis, said she has tried to register for free aid several times but has been turned away due to the lack of available supplies.

The U.N. agency is simply overwhelmed and is already providing support to 1.8 million people in Gaza, according to Juliette Touma, its communications director. She said she did not know if the agency had stopped registering new aid seekers.

With few options left, some hungry Palestinians in Rafah have resorted to grabbing packages from aid trucks as they pass by. The U.N. refugee agency confirmed that some supplies of aid had been snatched from moving trucks but did not provide any details.

Hamas police escorting aid trucks from border crossings to U.N. warehouses have been seen beating people, mostly teenagers, as they try to grab what they can. In some cases, they have fired shots into the air. In one incident, a 13-year-old boy was killed when Hamas police opened fire.

Meanwhile, health officials warn of the growing spread of diseases, especially among children.

The World Health Organization has reported tens of thousands of cases of upper respiratory infections, diarrhea, lice, scabies, chickenpox, skin rashes and meningitis in U.N. shelters.

The rapid spread of disease is mainly due to overcrowding and poor hygiene caused by a lack of toilets

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 84 of 85

and water for washing.

The Abu Jarad family dug its own makeshift toilet attached to the tent to avoid communal bathrooms. Still, the family is vulnerable to disease.

"My granddaughter is 10 months old, and since the day we came to this place, she has been suffering from weight loss and diarrhea," said Majeda, Nouman's wife.

Going to the pharmacy offers little help. "We can't find any (suitable) medicines available," she said.

Today in History: January 6

Trump supporters storm Capitol to stop certification of Biden victory

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Saturday, Jan. 6, the sixth day of 2024. There are 360 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Jan. 6, 2021, supporters of President Donald Trump, fueled by his false claims of a stolen election, assaulted police and smashed their way into the Capitol to interrupt the certification of Democrat Joe Biden's victory, forcing lawmakers into hiding; most of the rioters had come from a nearby rally where Trump urged them to "fight like hell." A Trump supporter, Ashli Babbitt, was shot and killed by a police officer as she tried to breach a barricaded doorway inside the Capitol. Capitol Police Officer Brian Sicknick, injured while confronting the rioters, suffered a stroke the next day and died from natural causes, the Washington, D.C., medical examiner's office said. Congress reconvened hours later to finish certifying the election result.

On this date:

In 1412, tradition holds that Joan of Arc was born in Domremy.

In 1838, Samuel Morse and Alfred Vail gave the first successful public demonstration of their telegraph in Morristown, New Jersey.

In 1912, New Mexico became the 47th state.

In 1919, former President Theodore Roosevelt died in Oyster Bay, New York at age 60.

In 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, in his State of the Union address, outlined a goal of "Four Freedoms": Freedom of speech and expression; the freedom of people to worship God in their own way; freedom from want; freedom from fear.

In 1974, year-round daylight saving time began in the United States on a trial basis as a fuel-saving measure in response to the OPEC oil embargo.

In 1982, truck driver William G. Bonin was convicted in Los Angeles of 10 of the "Freeway Killer" slayings of young men and boys. (Bonin was later convicted of four other killings; he was executed in 1996.)

In 1994, figure skater Nancy Kerrigan was clubbed on the leg by an assailant at Detroit's Cobo Arena; four men, including the ex-husband of Kerrigan's rival, Tonya Harding, went to prison for their roles in the attack. (Harding pleaded guilty to conspiracy to hinder prosecution, but denied any advance knowledge about the assault.)

In 2001, with his opponent, Vice President Al Gore, presiding in his capacity as president of the Senate, Congress formally certified George W. Bush the winner of the bitterly contested 2000 presidential election.

In 2005, former Ku Klux Klan leader Edgar Ray Killen was arrested on murder charges 41 years after three civil rights workers were slain in Mississippi. (Killen was later convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to 60 years in prison; he died in prison in 2018.)

In 2006, velvet-voiced singer Lou Rawls died in Los Angeles at age 72.

In 2013, the NHL and the players' association agreed on a tentative pact to end a 113-day lockout.

In 2018, pushing back against a new book that said his own aides questioned his competence, President Donald Trump defended his mental fitness in a series of tweets, saying that he is "like, really smart" and "a very stable genius."

In 2020, throngs of Iranians attended the funeral of Gen. Qassem Soleimani, who'd been killed in a U.S. airstrike in Iraq; Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei wept while praying over the casket.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, Jan. 06, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 196 ~ 85 of 85

In 2022, actor Sidney Poitier (PWAH'-tee-ay) the first Black actor to win an Oscar for best lead performance and the first to be a top box-office draw, died at age 94, while Peter Bogdanovich, director of 1970s black-and-white classics "The Last Picture Show" and "Paper Moon," died at 82.

Today's Birthdays: Country musician Joey Miskulin (Riders in the Sky) is 75. Former FBI director Louis (LOO'-wee) Freeh is 74. Rock singer-musician Kim Wilson (The Fabulous Thunderbirds) is 73. Singer Jett Williams is 71. Actor-comedian Rowan Atkinson is 69. World Golf Hall of Famer Nancy Lopez is 67. Actor Scott Bryce is 66. R&B singer Kathy Sledge is 65. TV chef Nigella Lawson is 64. R&B singer Eric Williams (BLACKstreet) is 64. Actor Norman Reedus is 55. Food writer and blogger Ree Drummond is 55. TV personality Julie Chen Moonves is 54. Actor Danny Pintauro (TV: "Who's the Boss?") is 48. Actor Cristela Alonzo is 45. Actor Rinko Kikuchi (RINK'-oh kih-KOO'-chee) is 43. Actor Eddie Redmayne is 42. Retired NBA All-Star Gilbert Arenas is 42. Actor-comedian Kate McKinnon is 40. Actor Diona Reasonover is 40. Rock singer Alex Turner (Arctic Monkeys) is 38.