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Tuesday, March 19

School Breakfast: Scones.
School Lunch: Meatballs, roasted potatoes.
Indoor track meet at Northern State University
Thrift Store open 3 p.m. to 6 p.m.
Food Pantry open 4 p.m. to 8 p.m.
City Council Meeting, 7 p.m.
Senior Menu: Baked fish, au gratin potatoes, 3 bean salad, tropical fruit, whole wheat bread.
St. John's Lutheran: Quilting, 9 a.m.
Special School Board Meeting in Bristol, 6 p.m.
United Methodist: Spring Tea luncheon, 10:30 a.m.



Wednesday, March 20

School Breakfast: Cereal.
School Lunch: Pizza crunchers, green beans.
Senior Menu: Breaded pork cutlets, creamy noodles, broccoli/cauliflower blend, frosted brownie, fruit, whole wheat bread.
Emmanuel Lutheran: Luther League, 5:30 p.m.; Soup Supper, 6 p.m. (Luther League host); Lenten worship, 7 p.m.
St. John's Lutheran: Confirmation, 3:45 p.m.; Lent Service, 7 p.m.
United Methodist: Communion coffee hour, 9:30 a.m.; Confirmation, 6 p.m.; Lent Bible Study, 7 p.m.; Groton Ad Council, 7 p.m.
Groton CM&A: Kids' Club, Youth Group and Adult Bible Study begins at 7 pm

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

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton
The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.
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1440

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The Environmental Protection Agency yesterday banned the last form of asbestos still imported into the US. Exposure to the mineral—a fibrous silicate found naturally in rocks—is linked to lung and other forms of cancer, killing an estimated 40,000 Americans each year.

A majority of US Supreme Court justices appeared skeptical yesterday of arguments the Biden administration coerced social media companies to remove content from their platforms. Last fall, the high court put on hold a lower court ruling to bar federal officials from

communicating with tech platforms about the content they host. Supreme Court decisions are released in June.

Digital sports media company Minute Media has agreed to partner with Sports Illustrated, reportedly overseeing all editorial operations across its digital and print platforms. The deal spans up to 10 years with a possible extension of up to 20 more, although detailed financial terms remain unclear.

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

YouTube star MrBeast teams up with Prime Video for reality show competition series with prize of \$5M, believed to be largest-ever single cash prize in reality competition history.

NCAA men's basketball tournament kicks off tonight with "First Four" matchups from Dayton, Ohio.

Steve Harley, Cockney Rebel frontman known for chart-topping "Make Me Smile," dies at 73. Recently convicted "Rust" armorer seeks new trial based on recent New Mexico Supreme Court ruling from separate case.

Science & Technology

Apple and Google reportedly in talks to license Google's AI chatbot Gemini on Apple products, including iPhones.

New study suggests hair originally evolved in amphibians, with hair follicles sharing genetic similarities with the claws of clawed frogs.

Paleontologists identify the ancestor of the modern-day crocodile; 200-million-year-old fossil was found in northwest Texas.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close higher (S&P 500 +0.6%, Dow +0.2%, Nasdaq +0.8%) ahead of Federal Reserve kickoff meeting today.

Nvidia shares up 0.7% on first day of its GPU Technology Conference, referred to as the Woodstock of AI; conference to preview next generation of AI-powering semiconductor chips.

Encyclopædia Britannica reportedly seeking \$1B valuation in upcoming initial public offering. Joann fabrics retailer files for Chapter 11 bankruptcy amid reduced consumer spending.

Politics & World Affairs

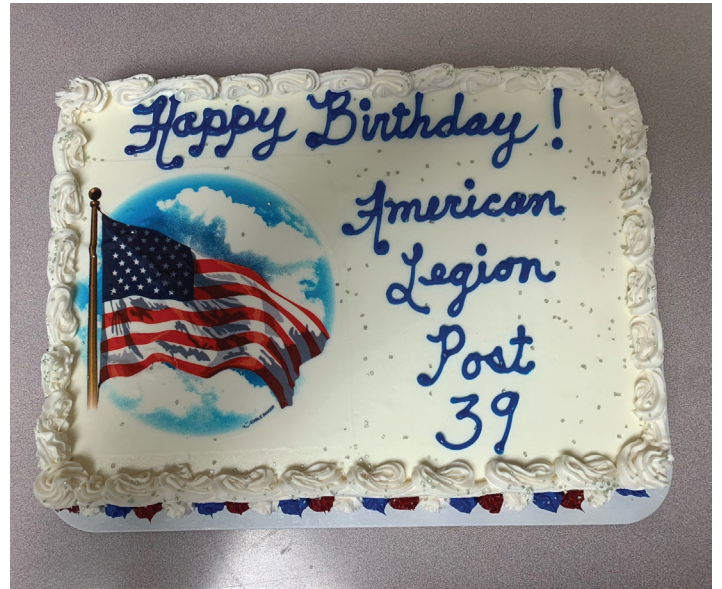
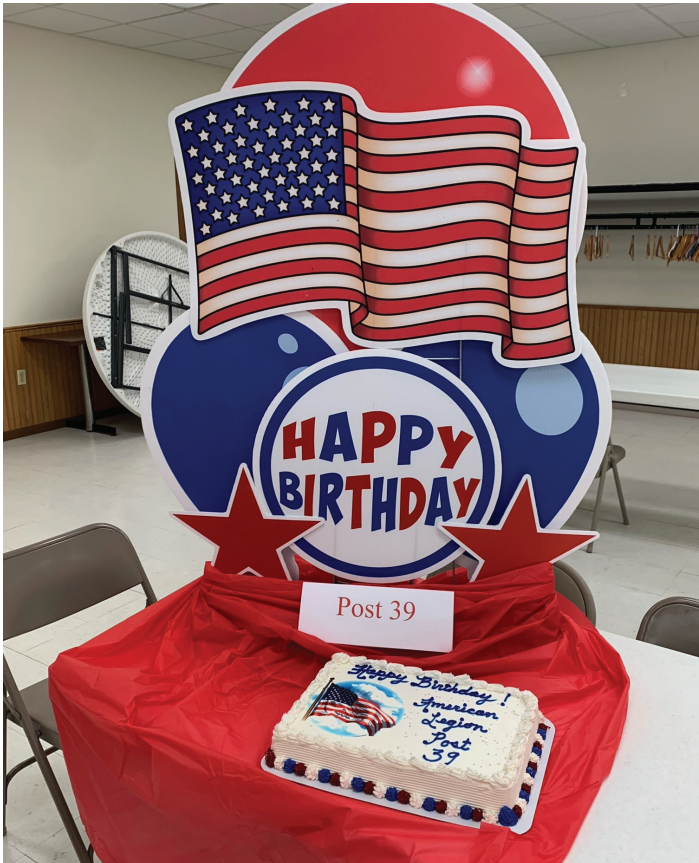
Israeli military raids northern Gaza's al-Shifa hospital, claims to have killed a senior Hamas commander. President Joe Biden, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu speak for first time in more than a month over Israel's imminent Rafah ground operation.

Former President Donald Trump's attorneys claim Trump has been unable to secure full bond for \$454M judgment in New York civil fraud case, citing rejections from 30 underwriters over bond's large size; Trump must cover full bond by March 25 to avoid enforcement while he appeals the case.

National Institutes of Health's five-year study finds no significant brain injuries or degeneration among US officials overseas suffering from mysterious illness known as "Havana Syndrome".

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The Groton Legion and Auxiliary celebrated the American Legion's 105th Birthday last week at the Groton Legion Hall. (Photo by Bruce Babcock)



In attendance for the Legion's 105th Birthday Party was front row L-R Wendy Cooper, Rose Locke, Jan Seibel, Samantha Oswald, Grace Oswald, and Anna Oswald. Back row L-R Ron Faulk, Roger Overacker, Ben Smith, Bruce Babcock, and Aaron Grant. (Photo courtesy Bruce Babcock)

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Groton Legion holds District Meeting

The Groton American Legion Post 39 hosted the well attended Legion District 4 Spring Meeting March 3rd. 30 Legion Posts comprise the District 4 boundaries in North Central South Dakota. Both the Legion and Auxiliary conducted separate business meetings and then combined for a joint luncheon in the Groton Legion Hall.



Bruce Babcock, Groton American Legion Post 39 Commander opens the District 4 Spring Meeting. Seated at the head tables L-R Bob Thomason, District 4 Commander (Selby), Courtney Steffen, SD Department Commander (Madison), and C.P. Van Delist, Department Adjutant (Watertown). (Photo courtesy Bruce Babcock)



SD Department Commander Courtney Steffen provided opening remarks. (Photo courtesy Bruce Babcock)



District 4 Commander Bob Thomason conducts the Legion business meeting. (Photo courtesy Bruce Babcock)

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Commander Steffen awards Groton Post 39 the department membership goal award (106%) Accepting the award for Post 39 is Bruce Babcock (center) with Bob Thomason to his left. (Photo courtesy Bruce Babcock)



30 posts comprise District 4. (Photo courtesy Bruce Babcock)

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Groton City Council Meeting Agenda

March 19, 2024 – 7:00pm

City Hall – 120 N Main Street

(IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO CALL IN TO THIS MEETING, PLEASE MAKE PRIOR ARRANGEMENTS TO DO SO BY
CALLING CITY HALL 605-397-8422)

1. Approval of Agenda
2. Public Comments - pursuant to SDCL 1-25-1
(Public Comments will offer the opportunity for anyone not listed on the agenda to speak to the council. Speaking time will be limited to 3 minutes. No action will be taken on questions or items not on the agenda.)
3. Approval of Special Event Alcoholic Beverage License – Private Graduation Event at Community Center for Susan Fjeldheim on May 4, 2024
4. Resolution for Electric Interconnection – Kelly Dybdahl w/ Heartland Energy
5. Authorization to Bid Soda Contract
6. February Finance Report
7. Minutes
8. Bills
9. 2024-2025 Malt Beverage License Renewals:
MJ's Sinclair
Ken's Food Fair
Dollar General
10. 2024 Spring City Wide Cleanup: 4/27/2024 – 5/3/2024
 - a. Pickups by Appointment: 4/29/2024 – 5/3/2024
11. SDML District 6 Annual Meeting – April 10, 2024 – 6pm at the Groton American Legion
12. Water Distribution Course – Highlands Conference Center in Mitchell, SD on April 16-18, 2024 – Branden Abeln
13. Executive session personnel & legal 1-25-2 (1) & (3)
14. Hire Summer Employees
15. Adjournment

Equalization Meeting to Follow at 7:45pm.

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Groton City Board of Equalization Agenda

March 19, 2024 – 7:45pm
City Hall – 120 N Main Street

(IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO CALL IN TO THIS MEETING, PLEASE MAKE PRIOR ARRANGEMENTS TO DO SO BY CALLING CITY HALL 605-397-8422)

1. Convene as Groton City Board of Equalization
2. Appeals Filed:
 - a. Parcel #31653 – 208 N 2nd Street
 - b. Parcel #19030 – 17 N 4th Street
3. Review Assessments
4. Adjournment

Registration Open for \$20,000 Lesson Learned Teen Safe Driving Campaign

Pierre, S.D.- South Dakota high school students may now enter this year's Lesson Learned teen safe driving campaign, where they can win \$10,000 for themselves and another \$10,000 for a school-sponsored activity or program of their choice.

Lesson Learned is in its eighth year and is appropriately timed with this spring's driver education classes. It is sponsored by the South Dakota Office of Highway Safety and the South Dakota Broadcasters Association, which provides the prize money.

The entry period begins on March 18 and runs through April 30. To participate, students must be between 14 and 19 years of age and complete a three-question safe driving quiz at: <https://drivesafesd.com/lesson-learned>. Once completed, their names will be entered into the drawing. The website also tracks participation rates of South Dakota schools.

Last year's \$10,000 winner was Robbie Sealey, a freshman at O'Gorman High School in Sioux Falls. His school also received a \$10,000 award.

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

For more information and complete contest rules, visit the Lesson Learned website at: LessonLearnedSD.com.

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Groton Prairie Mixed Bowling League Week #17 Results

Team Standings: Coyotes – 9, Shihtzus – 8, Chipmunks – 8, Jackelopes – 5, Cheetahs – 4, Foxes – 2

Men's High Games: Roger Spanier – 223, Vern Meyers – 201, Lance Frohling – 199

Women's High Games: Nancy Radke – 182, Karen Spanier – 173, Sue Stanley – 164

Men's High Series: Vern Meyers – 558, Roger Spanier – 531, John Sippel – 514

Women's High Series: Karen Spanier – 458, Nancy Radke – 452, Darci Spanier – 451

Fun Game - Lowest Series - Jackelopes!

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That's Life by Tony Bender

Scattered Thoughts

Mixed messages from my window

After the winter that never was (knock on wood), we got a dusting of snow on St. Patrick's Day. Then, Gus the Wonder Pug's furious barking alerted me to the giant tractor rolling past our rural abode. Here's a prayer for timely rains and good prices.

I've never understood farmers who vacation in Las Vegas. It seems redundant. Anyway, as a local business, I love seeing our farmers and ranchers buying new equipment and trucks. When they thrive, we all thrive. Especially the hardware stores in the fall when there's a run on mailboxes thanks to larger combine headers that are now measured in miles.

Liver and onions

The only thing more controversial in these parts other than what the heck are the Minnesota Vikings doing, is liver and onions. You're either all in or completely repulsed. For you snooty Nordic critics, I have one word for you. Lutfisk.

I get a craving a couple times a year or when I need an organic pesticide to take out the fruit flies. My mom and sister are excellent liver and onioners, but I'm not sure that's something you want on your resume. But, I don't think my effort on Saturday brought (any more) shame to the family name. The package was larger than I needed, so Gus enjoyed a couple of upscale meals.

After posting a photo online I received several cooking tips and a three-day suspension from Facebook. I was reminded to give the liver a milk bath and to cook it in bacon grease. Bacon, of course, along with Snickers, is the world's most perfect food.

The Vikings

OK, what are the Vikings doing? And why are the chronic complainers suddenly upset that whipping boy Kirk Cousins left for Atlanta? Well, the reality is that it's a business, there's a salary cap to consider, and Cousins' agent is an evil genius. Hey, I have no issues with these entertainers getting paid. Their careers are brutish and short. Like my seventh grade girlfriend. Besides, Cousins is a great passer.

Cousins' newfound popularity may have something to do with the Netflix series "Quarterback." Other quarterbacks profiled included Patrick Mahomes and Marcus Mariota, but Cousins came off best—eminently likable.

Bottom line, it appears the Vikes are positioning themselves to draft a QB, and there are some pretty good ones available.

Win Twins?

Then, there are the Minnesota Twins. All bullpen and questionable starters. Pitching by committee. Last year, was excruciating even though they won the division and probably will again. They just couldn't string hits together. Baseball is a funny game that way. They say streaks and momentum aren't a thing, but anyone who's played the game doesn't believe that. You may be the most logical, pragmatic person in the world but if you believe your hitting streak depends on eating at Chick-fil-A before game time, well, some chickens are gonna die.

Baseball is the most optimistic of all the sports. The season opens in the spring, the most optimistic of all the seasons, and even a bad team can stay in the mix through June. Not so much with a really, really, really bad team, though. I grew up loving the Baltimore Orioles—I used to clip the box scores to track the exploits of Brooks Robinson and Boog Powell. In 1988, five years removed from their last World Series win, the team started out 0-21. They were out of it in April.

Back home

If you've ever wondered how foreign healthcare compares to ours, my brother Scott can report that Portugal's medical system is outstanding. The hospital food? Meh. He and his wife Pam recently got back the US after vacation interruptus. Scott had an episode involving a heart murmur that torpedoed the next stage of their trip to Africa and led to open heart surgery in Lisbon.

The doctors didn't feel good about putting him on a plane home without addressing his condition. So, they had an extended stay. Scott came home with Portuguese pig parts and zipper on his chest. He typically receives care from the VA, but had nothing but good things to say about the Portuguese medical system (except for the food), and Pam was adopted by some of the locals in what otherwise would have been a very lonely "vacation."

© Tony Bender, 2024



Who leads South Dakota if Noem runs for vice president? 'I still get to be governor' she says

By Stu Whitney

South Dakota News Watch

MITCHELL, S.D. – Standing next to a row of bookcases in the Mitchell High School library, South Dakota's lieutenant governor was asked about taking the reins of state government.

It's a sensitive subject for Larry Rhoden, who has embraced his supporting role as Gov. Kristi Noem's second-in-command since entering office in 2019 following 16 years in the state Legislature.

"I try not to bring it up," said the Union Center rancher when asked by News Watch about how his duties might change if Noem is chosen as Donald Trump's vice presidential nominee on the Republican ticket. "I don't want to make it look like I'm thinking about it."

Despite that political prudence, the subject is hard to avoid.

Noem is considered among the top contenders to become Trump's running mate for 2024 along with South Carolina Sen. Tim Scott; New York Rep. Elise Stefanik; former congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard; and entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy.

Rhoden surmised that the selection process will accelerate now that Trump has wrapped up the nomination and is looking ahead to the July 15-18 Republican National Convention in Milwaukee.

Noem didn't dodge the topic at a March 13 town hall that she and Rhoden attended in Mitchell. The event saw her sign two education-related bills while mingling with state legislators, staffers and residents, some of whom grilled her on landowner rights while others queried her on the VP sweepstakes.

Noem: 'I still get to be governor'

The 52-year-old governor confirmed that she met with Trump at his Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida recently to discuss the possibility of her joining the ticket, adding that she is committed to helping Trump defeat Democratic President Joe Biden on Nov. 5.

"My answer used to be that President Trump and I have never talked about it, but now we have talked about it," Noem said during the town hall. "What I told him is that I will do whatever it takes for me to help him win. Of course, I'd rather stay with all of you if you'll keep me. This is my favorite job. I love this job."

If she is chosen to run for VP, News Watch asked Noem, will she formally delegate authority to Rhoden during the time she is campaigning nearly full-time away from South Dakota? She responded that no such transfer of power will occur.

"If I'm nominated, I still get to be governor," Noem said. "So you keep me until I'm not governor. People who know me will tell you that I don't sleep very well. The lieutenant governor is my partner and he helps me with a lot of stuff, but I will still be the governor and I will still be making the decisions."

South Dakota law addresses governor's absence

The answer may not be as clear as Noem suggests.

While speculation has swirled around her joining Trump's ticket, there has been less examination of what happens to state government if the chief executive is away from South Dakota for long stretches running for national office.

When South Dakota U.S. Sen. George McGovern was the Democratic nominee for president in 1972, he remained in office during his campaign, which resulted in a landslide defeat to Republican incumbent President Richard Nixon. McGovern was re-elected to the Senate in 1974 despite being labeled a "part-time senator" by his opponent in a closer-than-expected race.

Running for national office as a governor is different, not only because of differing job descriptions but

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also due to the boundaries of state law.

The South Dakota Constitution, in Article 4, Section 6, states that when the governor is "unable to serve by reason of continuous absence from the state, or other temporary disability, the executive power shall devolve upon the lieutenant governor for the residue of the term or until the disability is removed."

'Not new territory' for Noem

Like other constitutional interpretations, the assessment of Noem's "continuous absence" will likely hinge on how much political pressure is exerted upon her to hand over day-to-day operations during a rigorous presidential campaign.

Democratic state Sen. Reynold Nesiba of Sioux Falls, a member of the Government Operations and Audit Committee, told News Watch that the governor should resign her office if she is chosen to run for vice president.

"South Dakota taxpayers should not be footing the bill for her travel around the country, especially since she provides little to no transparency about her state airplane use and security-related costs while in office," Nesiba said.

Jon Schaff, a political science professor at Northern State University in Aberdeen, noted that Noem has already weathered her share of controversy about pursuing a national political profile away from South Dakota on the heels of her hands-off handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, which endeared her to some conservatives.

"It probably comes down to how much grief she wants to get, but this is not new territory for her," Schaff said. "(The presidential campaign) wouldn't be during the legislative session, and state government has a certain inertia that allows things to keep running."

State Rep. Tony Venhuizen, a Sioux Falls Republican and former chief of staff to Noem and former Gov. Dennis Daugaard, said the "continuous absence" clause in the state constitution was necessary before the advent of smartphones and Zoom meetings.

Of course, there are also only so many hours in the day.

"There are a lot of things you can do remotely, but there are time considerations," said Venhuizen, who attended the town hall in Mitchell. "I think most people understand that if you're running for vice president, you're going to be on the road a lot. There would have to be some practical considerations of who's covering some of the duties and when."

No 'resign to run' law in South Dakota

Five states have "resign to run" laws to prevent elected officials from neglecting state duties or using public resources while running for another office. South Dakota is not one of them.

Florida's Republican-dominated Legislature added an exemption for presidential and vice presidential campaigns in April 2023, before Gov. Ron DeSantis began his unsuccessful run for the White House.

The last sitting governor to run for vice president on a major ticket was Mike Pence of Indiana, who was running for re-election when he was selected as Trump's running mate in July 2016. Pence withdrew from the gubernatorial race and endorsed Lt. Gov. Eric Holcomb as the GOP nominee.

Trump/Pence and Holcomb both won, but Pence opted not to resign and stayed in office until Holcomb was sworn in Jan. 9, 2017, vowing to "serve Hoosiers until the very last hour."

First-term Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin was a surprise selection as 2008 running mate to GOP presidential nominee John McCain, who lost to Barack Obama. Palin remained in office during the tumultuous campaign and returned to Alaska after the defeat with a much-expanded national profile.

She resigned in July 2009 with 18 months left in her term, citing the pressure and financial burden of a flood of in-state ethics complaints against her.

Rhoden offers stability in Pierre

Rhoden has been a steady presence during Noem's often turbulent time in office, marked by five different chiefs of staff and no one currently in that role. The administration has seen higher-than-normal turnover among Cabinet positions and executive staff.

The 65-year-old Rhoden, a former South Dakota House majority leader whose legislative experience

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stretches back more than two decades, is viewed as a stabilizing force by lawmakers such as Republican state Sen. Lee Schoenbeck of Watertown. "If I have any questions, I contact Larry," he told News Watch in 2023.

At the Mitchell town hall, Noem credited Rhoden with helping her learn the ropes as a rookie legislator in Pierre in 2007, something she kept in mind when it came time to choose a running mate for her 2018 gubernatorial run.

"Because I was a farmer and rancher, I was advised to choose a businessman from Sioux Falls," Noem told attendees. "So instead I chose a rancher from West River. I trust his instincts and values. He loves the Lord and loves his family. I knew that if I got killed the next day, he'd run this state exactly as I would, and that was important to me."

Rhoden is viewed as a likely candidate for governor in 2026, which would mean a highly competitive GOP primary battle against U.S. Rep. Dusty Johnson and possibly Attorney General Marty Jackley, among other candidates.

Rhoden could be an incumbent at that point if a Trump/Noem ticket gains the White House. Noem would likely resign as governor after the Nov. 5 election – well before the presidential inauguration on Jan. 20, 2025 – to allow Rhoden to start preparing for his budget address and the legislative session.

"It would make sense to have that handover take place before the session started," said Venhuizen.

Thune seeks leadership in Senate

Even more tangible than Noem VP speculation is the possibility that South Dakota Republican U.S. Sen. John Thune will be voted by his peers as Senate Leader in December, taking the reins after nearly two decades from Kentucky's Mitch McConnell.

"It would be the most influence South Dakota has ever had in Washington," Venhuizen said of the possibility of having Noem as vice president and Thune as Senate Republican leader, in the majority or minority depending on the election.

Former South Dakota Democratic U.S. Sen. Tom Daschle served as both minority leader and majority leader in the Senate before being ousted by Thune in a landmark 2004 election.

Thune, the No. 2 Republican in the Senate as minority whip, has met with GOP colleagues privately and is viewed by Washington insiders as the favorite to win the job in a secret ballot over U.S. Sen. John Cornyn of Texas, though other contenders could emerge.

Thune criticized Trump after the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol and called for him to withdraw his 2016 candidacy following the release of a 2005 Access Hollywood tape of Trump having a lewd conversation about sexual mistreatment of women.

Yet Thune twice voted against impeachment and endorsed the former president last month, a nod to the reality of procuring power in a Make America Great Again-fueled Republican Party.

Noem softens stance on Trump

While the 63-year-old Thune has been building up to the role of Senate leader for more than a decade, Noem's rise to the level of White House hopeful is a more recent phenomenon.

She started off as a Trump critic while serving in Congress, saying in an interview with Yankton's WNAX radio in late 2015 that "he's not my candidate" and calling Trump's comments about banning Muslims "un-American." In a separate interview looking ahead to the 2016 Iowa Caucuses, Noem said of Trump's sizable lead in the polls: "I look at the candidates who are running and think, 'Who do I want in the room when we're negotiating with Iran?' It's not going to be Donald Trump. His principles and values don't align with mine, and his offensive nature wouldn't serve us very well in the presidency."

Noem softened that stance when Trump became the 2016 nominee and defeated Hillary Clinton to win the White House. When Noem became governor and publicly derided COVID restrictions after initially supporting them, she and Trump became more politically connected.

Noem's national profile and status within Trump's orbit surged in the summer of 2020, leading to his visit to Mount Rushmore for July 4 festivities and her speaking slot at the Republican National Convention in Washington.

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When he lost to Biden that year but decided to run again in 2024, Noem decided that her best path was not challenging him for the nomination but rather remaining a strong supporter and perhaps going along for the ride.

"She started to see her ticket to national prominence as a vice presidential nominee," said Schaff. "Because Trump already served a term, he can only constitutionally serve one more term as president. So if he wins, you would have to think that the person serving as vice president becomes his heir apparent."

Can Noem help win presidential election?

So will Trump actually pick Noem as his running mate?

It would be much less surprising than McCain's choice of Palin in 2008, since Trump and Noem are already aligned in many ways and Noem is more politically seasoned than Palin.

The question is whether she helps the ticket strategically, since featuring Noem – who is more conservative than Trump on issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage – doesn't appeal to the type of moderate suburban voter needed to win.

"The traditional view is that you choose a running mate to broaden your appeal or improve your chances in the general election," said Michael Card, an emeritus professor of political science at the University of South Dakota in Vermillion. "So it's either picking someone very different from yourself or someone very similar. Mike Pence was needed (in 2016) to shore up the evangelical vote. But Trump doesn't need that as much because Christian nationalists generally appreciated the policies put forward by his administration or confirmed by the Supreme Court."

Another factor is whether the VP nominee can withstand the heat of the campaign and not make mistakes that harm the ticket.

Noem sparked national headlines for posting an infomercial video for a Texas cosmetic dental office on her personal social media channels March 11, which drew a lawsuit from a nonpartisan consumer group and questions about her ethical judgment.

In tennis and politics, "unforced errors" can be the most damaging.

As of March 17, Noem is no longer listed as the betting favorite to get the vice presidential nod, falling behind South Carolina's Scott but still ahead of Stefanik, Gabbard and Ramaswamy.

In the end, though, there is just one person that South Dakota's governor needs to persuade, and Trump likes those who can handle the glare. Noem has done more mainstream TV interviews recently to answer critics who said she is more suited to "preaching to the choir" on conservative outlets such as Fox News.

"There are few politicians as good as Kristi Noem at sticking to the script," Card said. "If the script is well-presented and especially if she has a friendly audience, which doesn't necessarily mean a debate audience, she does very well."

As the audition continues, so will the chances to expand those expectations.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Oglala, Rosebud tribal presidents demand governor apologize for comments last week

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - MARCH 18, 2024 4:57 PM

Two tribal leaders in South Dakota are demanding Gov. Kristi Noem apologize for comments she made about tribal governments at town halls last week.

The president of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe released a statement over the weekend calling the comments defamatory and racially prejudiced. The president of the Oglala Sioux Tribe released a statement Monday calling the comments malicious, incendiary and demeaning.

Noem told attendees at a Winner town hall that she believes tribal leaders are “personally benefiting” from drug cartels. At a town hall in Mitchell, she said tribal children “don’t have parents who show up and help them,” and tribal members “have a tribal council or a president who focuses on a political agenda more than they care about actually helping somebody’s life look better.” She did not offer evidence supporting the comments.

Oglala Sioux Tribe President Frank Star Comes Out said her comments ignore the work being done by his administration to expand broadband services and invest in dams and infrastructure, among other initiatives. Star Comes Out also serves as the chairman of the Great Plains Tribal Chairmen’s Association.

“How dare the governor allege that Sioux Tribal Councils do not care about their communities or their children and, worse, that they are involved in nefarious activities,” Star Comes Out said.

Earlier this year, tribal leaders and tribally enrolled legislators criticized comments Noem made about drugs on South Dakota reservations during a speech to lawmakers about the U.S.-Mexico border. In that speech, Noem made multiple references to the ravages of fentanyl and other drugs on reservation communities, and said the drugs are coming from Mexican cartels.

Noem was banned from the Pine Ridge Reservation for a second time after her border remarks in February.

“You can’t build relationships if you don’t spend time together,” Noem said in February in response to the ban. “I stand ready to work with any of our state’s Native American tribes to build such a relationship.”

Star Comes Out declared a state of emergency on the Pine Ridge Reservation last year due to increasing crime. A judge ruled last year that the federal government has a treaty duty to support law enforcement on the reservation, but declined to rule on the funding level the tribe sought.

The governor has offered to enter into a law enforcement agreement with tribal governments to have South Dakota Highway Patrol officers assist in enforcing tribal law on reservations, according to a letter she sent to tribal leaders in late February.

In the letter, she invited the leaders to meet with her in Pierre or invite her to their tribal nations to discuss the issue further.

Rosebud Sioux Tribe President Scott Herman said Noem’s most recent remarks were “made from ignorance” and intended to fuel a “racially based and discriminatory narrative towards the Native people of South Dakota.”

“If the governor is truthful about wanting to work with tribal nations on issues of education, economic development and law enforcement, she should take the time to contact tribal leaders before making racist, unsubstantiated and discriminatory attacks of tribal people,” Herman said.

Noem’s spokesman Ian Fury told South Dakota Searchlight she called President Herman on Monday and “left him yet another voicemail,” and that she’s also trying to schedule a meeting with Oglala Sioux Tribe

leadership. While Fury said she hasn't received a response, she has been engaging with tribal community members.

"We would challenge the tribes to prove the governor's comment false by banishing the drug cartels from their reservations," Fury said in a text message.

Noem also told town hall attendees she wants to improve Native American student success, while criticizing tribal leaders and parents for low success rates.

Chronic absenteeism among South Dakota's Native American students attending public school increased from 31% to 54% from 2018 to 2023 – the highest among all South Dakota student demographics. A third of Native American public school students don't complete high school, 84% are not considered college and career ready, and only 7% take the ACT, according to the latest data from the state Department of Education.

Star Comes Out called on Noem to "engage in meaningful dialogue and collaboration with tribal leaders" to address problems in South Dakota and reservation communities.

"It is only through genuine partnership and mutual respect that we can work towards a future of prosperity and justice for both Indian and non-Indians residing in South Dakota," Star Comes Out said.

Trump calls Noem to podium at Ohio rally, comments on her appearance

BY: SEARCHLIGHT STAFF - MARCH 18, 2024 2:47 PM

Former president and presumptive Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump appeared with South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem — a potential running mate — and called her up to the mic Saturday during a rally in Ohio.

"We have a very special woman who's hot as a politician. She's doing an incredible job in South Dakota. She's the governor, Kristi Noem," Trump said during the event in Vandalia, according to a video shared by C-SPAN.

Noem made brief comments while she and Trump both wore red "Make America Great Again" caps.

She said when Trump was president, she was "on offense."

"As soon as Joe Biden got in the White House, I went on defense," Noem said. "All I do now is fight to protect the freedom of my people."

After Noem left the podium, Trump added, "And you're not allowed to say it, so I will not. You know you're not allowed to say she's beautiful, so I'm not going to say that. I will not say it, because that's the end of your political career, if you make — if you make that statement, that's the end of your political — so I will not say that."

Noem and Trump also offered support for Ohio Republican U.S. Senate candidate Bernie Moreno. The rally was staged on a tarmac in front of Trump's plane for a crowd estimated in the thousands.

Trump's speech included a "bloodbath" prediction that has drawn widespread criticism from his opponents.

After saying he'd place a 100% tariff on cars produced in Chinese-owned, Mexican factories, Trump clarified "if I get elected."

"Now if I don't get elected," he continued, "it's gonna be a bloodbath for the whole — that's gonna be the least of it. It's gonna be a bloodbath for the country. That'd be the least of it. But they're not going to sell those cars."

The Biden campaign connected the phrasing to the violence carried out by Trump's supporters at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. In a press release after the fact, Trump's campaign insisted he meant a metaphorical, economic bloodbath rather than a literal one.

The Ohio Capital Journal's Nick Evans contributed to this report.

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COMMENTARY

Sunshine Week speaker reveals 'steady decline in transparency'

Nationwide trends are negative; South Dakota ranks near the bottom in multiple studies

David Bordewyk

Last week we observed Sunshine Week by discussing ominous clouds of secrecy forming on the horizon. Truthfully, the overcast conditions are already here.

Sunshine Week is a national observance focused on government transparency and the public's right to know. The South Dakota NewsMedia Association First Amendment Committee hosted a public webinar on March 14 with a nationally recognized open government expert who quickly put a damper on any thoughts of a celebratory-type Sunshine Week.

"My message today is clouds are forming. There is a steady decline in transparency in this country," said David Cuillier, director of the Joseph L. Brechner Freedom of Information Project at the University of Florida.

And that downward trend in government transparency is no more apparent than right here in South Dakota.

One national study ranks South Dakota 48th in the nation when it comes to state government's compliance with open records requests. In three other open government studies, South Dakota ranks dead last in the nation.

As Cuillier told the webinar audience of about 75 journalists, government officials and others: "that's not cool" regarding South Dakota's propensity to be at the bottom for government openness.

Across the country, we are witnessing the government being less cooperative when it comes to responding to requests by journalists and others for government records and information.

The success rate for those who requested records from state and local governments dropped from 53% in 2014 to 31% in 2022, according to data from MuckRock, a nonprofit organization that assists in filing requests for government information.

It's even worse at the federal level where successful freedom of information requests dropped from 52% to 13% over the same time period.

Why such alarming trends here and nationwide?

Cuillier pointed to a few key reasons: fewer journalists and FOI advocacy groups to carry the torch for the public's right to know; government agencies more likely to "ghost" or simply ignore journalists' phone calls and email queries; and fewer resources to mount legal challenges to FOI denials.

It comes as no great surprise South Dakota suffers from a lack of government openness and transparency.

Cuillier attributed South Dakota's problems to weaknesses in our open-records and open-meetings laws, and he is correct.

Broad, sweeping exemptions in our open-records laws allow government officials to deny most any request for government records. Most notable is a lack of public access to official government correspondence, including government emails, and to a whole host of law enforcement records. Things that are commonplace in other states.

Open government laws need to be fixed in South Dakota, but it cannot be done without political leadership and diligence in our state. In the meantime, we must do all we can to keep these issues at the forefront. Much is at stake.

As Cuillier said: "Accessing public records is all about democratic civic engagement, because we can't make decisions at the polls or elsewhere if we don't know what the government is doing."

Here is hoping for brighter, sunnier days ahead.

Lawmakers face a 'back to normal' budget future after allocating last of federal pandemic aid

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - MARCH 18, 2024 7:00 AM

The South Dakota Legislature allocated the last of its federal pandemic aid earlier this month, marking a shift in state spending and budgeting.

The federal government infused billions of dollars into the state through several rounds of congressional legislation intended to help the country through the COVID-19 crisis. The last of those efforts brought nearly \$975 million to the state through the 2021 American Rescue Plan Act, known by the acronym "ARPA," with most of the money used for water and wastewater projects. The state Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources has been rushing to fund projects across the state.

With the last of the money appropriated, South Dakota is nearly "back to normal," as Gov. Kristi Noem warned legislators late last year in her budget address, and will have to prepare future budgets without the cushion of federal pandemic money they've had for the last several years.

The 2024 legislative session ended March 7, except for a day on March 25 to consider vetoes. Lawmakers approved uses for the remaining \$130 million from ARPA, including:

- \$5 million in telemedicine grants to nursing homes and assisted living facilities.

- Over \$100 million to water and wastewater projects for state government and local projects statewide (with authority to spend more if other approved ARPA uses aren't spent by federal deadlines).

- Over \$12 million for water and sewer infrastructure at the sites of the future men's prison in rural Lincoln County and future women's prison in Rapid City.

The money had to be appropriated by the end of this year and must be spent by the end of 2026, or it reverts back to the federal government.

Overall, South Dakota received nearly \$14 billion of pandemic relief funds from March 2020 through January 2023, according to South Dakota News Watch. State government received about \$4.2 billion while the remaining \$9.6 billion went to local governments, health care providers, schools, businesses and individuals.

Most of the state's ARPA funds went toward one-time projects, said Yankton Republican Sen. Jean Hunhoff, who co-chairs the legislative Joint Appropriations Committee.

"I think South Dakota had the wisdom and the leadership of both the governor and the Legislature to realize we're not going to start anything new," Hunhoff said. "We're going to support what we have, meet some of those short-term needs, but we're not going to grow our programming simply because those dollars flowed in."

In addition to the water projects, the state supported \$50 million in broadband expansion with ARPA funds, \$50 million in workforce housing, \$35 million in tourism marketing, \$20 million in ambulance system improvements, and \$15 million to expand regional behavioral health facilities.

Not all states did that. Illinois, for example, allocated 32% of its ARPA funds as of July 2022 toward ongoing, operational expenses, according to a Pew Charitable Trusts analysis published in December.

Using one-time funds for ongoing projects could lead to "uncertainty," the report said. According to Illinois Public Media, the state's ARPA-funded programs will end once federal funding runs out or will require new funding from the state or other sources.

South Dakota won't have that problem, Hunhoff said.

"That's the concern when the federal dollars are gone," Hunhoff said. "It is not the state's intention and it's not its responsibility to start spending general funds to keep those new programs going."

The influx of federal funds will continue influencing the state's economy for the next few years, since the money won't have to be spent until the end of 2026. The state has seen an increase in contractor's excise tax in recent years due to increased construction spurred by federal funding.

Before the pandemic, less than 40% of the state budget came from federal funds. That percentage spiked to 56% in 2021 and has been above 40% in most years since.

With federal support receding to pre-pandemic levels, Hunhoff hopes legislators turn their attention to

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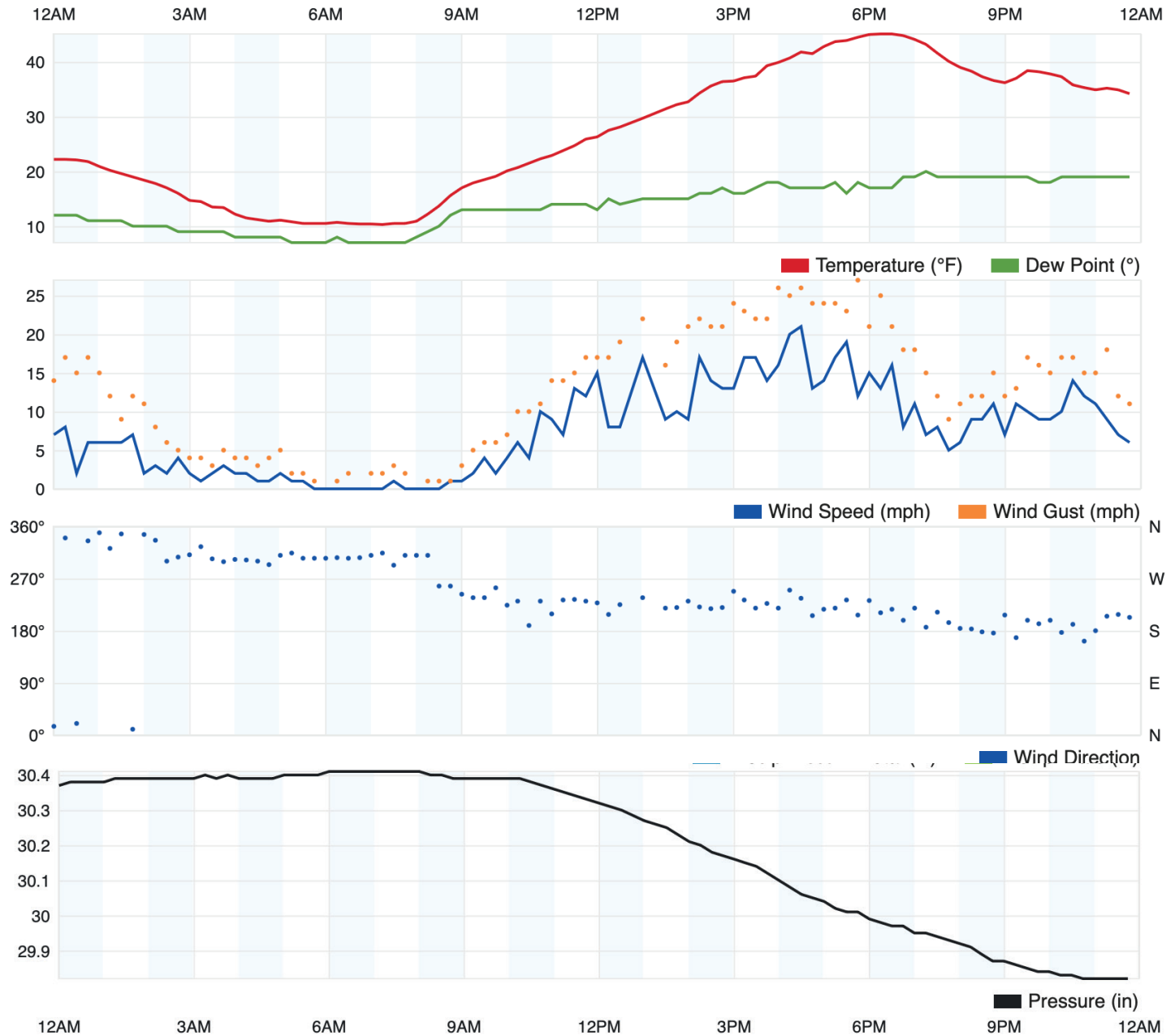
economic development next session.

"If we can continue to encourage people to come and relocate to South Dakota, get big businesses in here and expand that base for economic development, that's what you look at for your return on investment," Hunhoff said. "If you don't have the federal dollars, you need to keep growing in economic development and our major industries with tourism and agriculture."

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



Mostly Sunny

High: 50 °F

Tonight



Partly Cloudy

Low: 16 °F

Wednesday



Mostly Sunny

High: 31 °F

Wednesday
Night



Snow Likely

Low: 18 °F

Thursday



Snow

High: 32 °F



Accumulating Snow Wed Night into Thursday

March 18, 2024
3:20 PM

What

A swath of 2 plus inches of snow appears likely (55-90% chance) northeast of a line from Eureka to Aberdeen, and Watertown. There is a 50% chance of 4" or more of snow in far northeast SD into west-central MN.

When

Light snow will develop Wednesday afternoon, but the heaviest snow will fall Thursday afternoon into Thursday evening over northeast SD and west-central MN.

Impacts

Travel Plans Thursday? Monitor future forecasts and be prepared to modify travel plans.

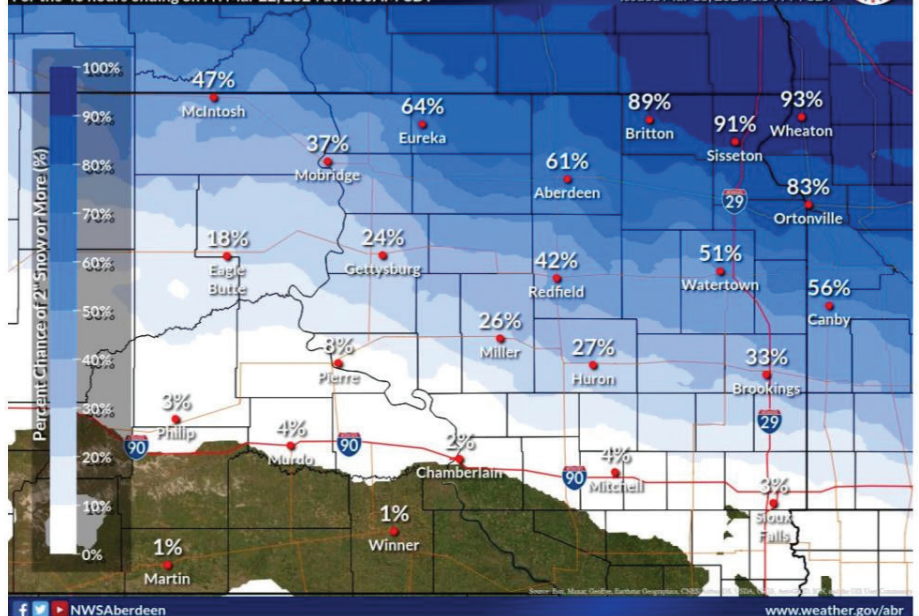
Uncertainty

A bit of a shift north or south remains possible for the area of heaviest snow.

Percent Chance of 2" of Snow or More

For the 48 hours ending on Fri Mar 22, 2024 at 7:00AM CDT

Weather Forecast Office
Aberdeen, SD
Issued Mar 18, 2024 1:54 PM CDT



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

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

A disturbance is forecast to move across the Dakotas on Wednesday night through Thursday night is expected to deliver a swath of light snow to portions of the forecast area. This looks to primarily affect portions of north central South Dakota eastward into northeast South Dakota and west central Minnesota. The far northeast corner of South Dakota into parts of west central Minnesota have the highest probabilities of seeing the most snowfall from this system at this point. If you have travel plans for Thursday into these areas, please keep in touch with the latest forecast details.

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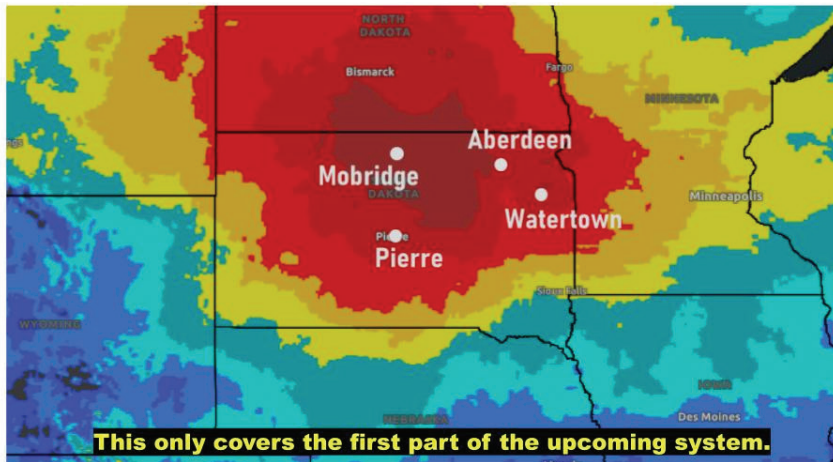
Winter Storm Sat Night into Early Next Week?

March 18, 2024

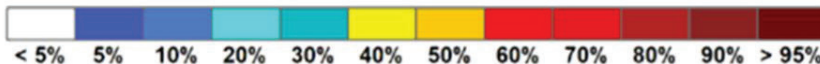
3:36 PM

Likelihood of at least Minor Impacts from 1pm Saturday (3/23) through 1pm Sunday (3/24)

Minor Impacts: Expect a few inconveniences to daily life. Winter driving conditions. Use caution while driving.



This only covers the first part of the upcoming system.



What We Know

A low pressure system is expected to move through the Central Plains Sunday into early next week. As this occurs, **snow will spread across the Northern Plains Saturday night through next Monday.**

What We Don't Know

The exact track of the system and thus **the location of heaviest snowfall, what the snowfall amounts will be, and specific details on the timing of the snow.**

What You Can Do



Continue to monitor the latest forecast from reliable/reputable sources... especially if you have travel plans!

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD



At this time, the potential exists for a more significant storm system to affect the Northern Plains and Upper Midwest this weekend into early next week. There remains quite a few details to iron out with this system between now and toward the end of the week, so the forecast will continue to experience quite a few changes over the coming few days. We do know that the region will begin to experience increasing chances for precipitation during the weekend, especially by Saturday night through Sunday night. Details on precipitation type and how much will fall remains a big question mark right now. Please continue to pay attention to the forecast through the week for the latest details on this potential late season winter storm.



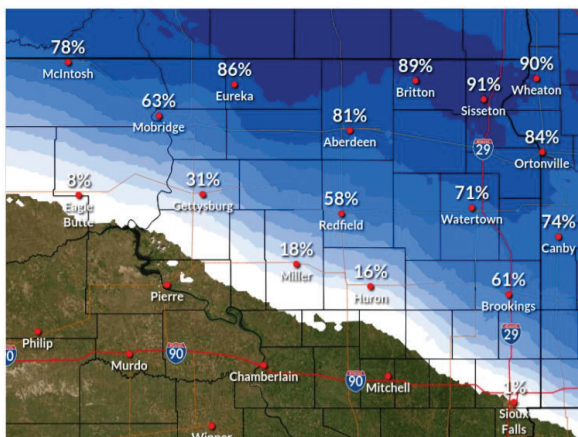
Accumulation Potential

March 19, 2024

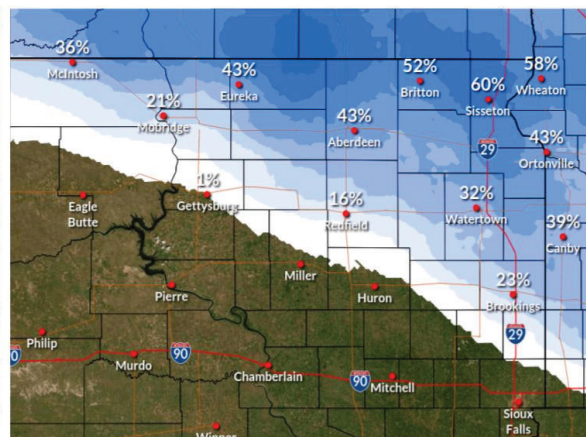
3:47 AM

Majority Of This Will Fall Thursday - Early Thursday Night

Probability of Exceeding 2"



Probability of Exceeding 4"



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 45 °F at 6:20 PM

Low Temp: 10 °F at 6:44 AM

Wind: 29 mph at 3:47 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 12 hours, 11 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 73 in 2012

Record Low: -11 in 1965

Average High: 43

Average Low: 21

Average Precip in March.: 0.49

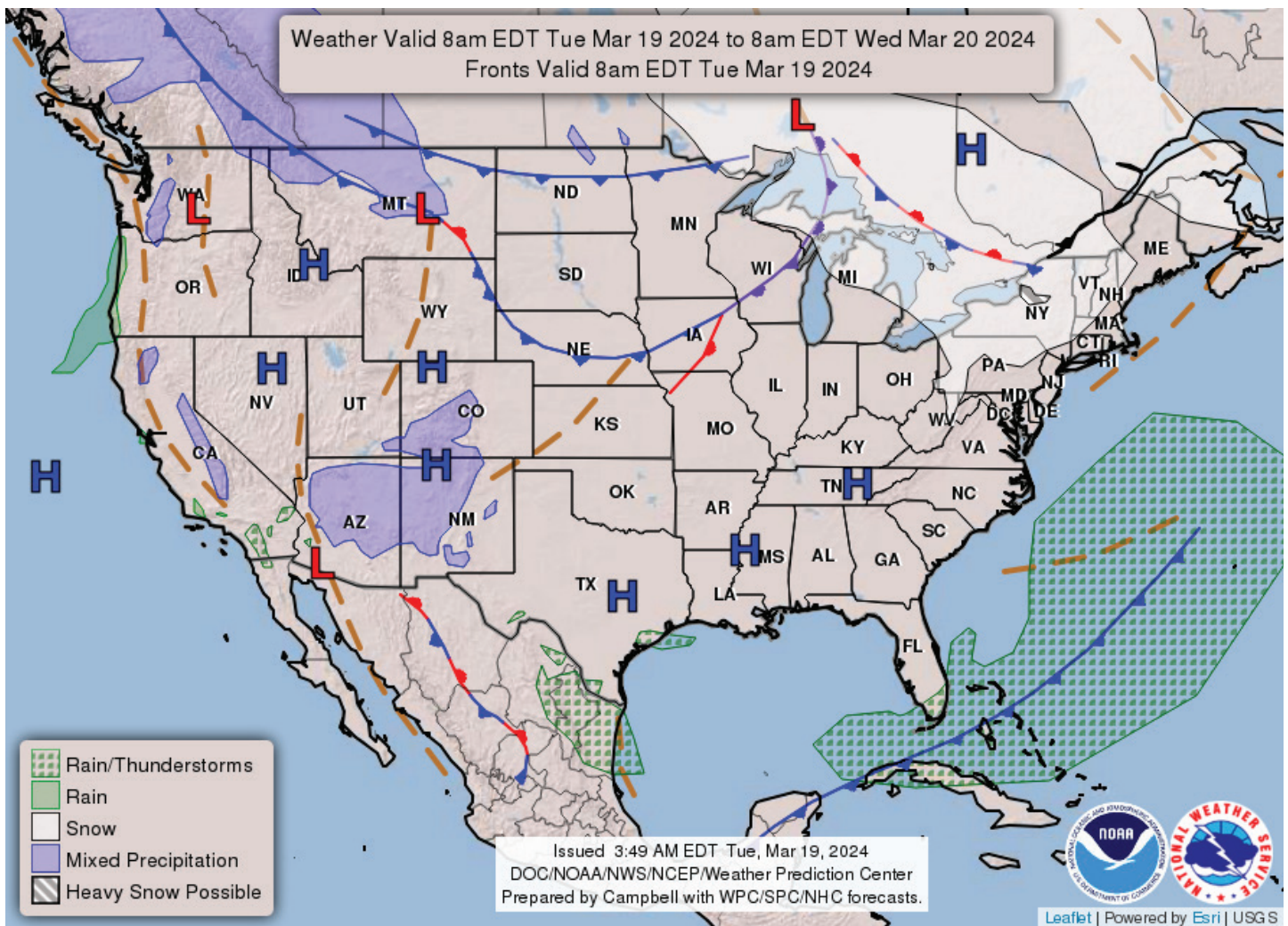
Precip to date in March: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 1.66

Precip Year to Date: 0.07

Sunset Tonight: 7:45:38 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:32:18 am



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Today in Weather History

March 19, 1968: During a severe weather event, hail up to 1.75 inches in diameter fell 2 miles south of Brookings. Also, hail 1.00 inch in diameter fell 3 miles northeast of Sioux Falls.

March 19, 2006: Heavy snow of 7 to as much as 20 inches fell on the afternoon of the 18th until around noon on the 20th. The South Dakota Department of Public Safety issued a travel advisory for any travel but especially for the State Basketball Tournament travelers. Interstate-90 was closed on Sunday into Monday morning, with many people stranded. Many cars and trucks were stuck on the roads. Many schools and meetings were postponed or canceled. Snowfall amounts included 8 inches at Blunt, Onida, and Lake Sharpe, 9 inches at Mission Ridge, 10 inches at Pierre, 11 inches at Fort Pierre and near Stephan, 12 inches at Eagle Butte, 14 inches northwest of Presho, 16 inches at Murdo, and 20 inches near Iona.

1907: The highest March temperature in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, was set when the temperature soared to 97 degrees. Dodge City, Kansas, also set a March record with 98 degrees. Denver, Colorado, set a daily record high of 81 degrees.

1935 - Suffocating dust storms occurred frequently in southeastern Colorado between the 12th and the 25th of the month. Six people died, and many livestock starved or suffocated. Up to six feet of dust covered the ground. Schools were closed, and many rural homes were deserted by tenants. (The Weather Channel)

1948: An estimated F4 tornado moved through Fosterburg, Bunker Hill, and Gillespie, Illinois, killing 33 people and injuring 449 others. 2,000 buildings in Bunker Hill were damaged or destroyed. The total damage was \$3.6 million.

1950 - Timberline Lodge reported 246 inches of snow on the ground, a record for the state of Oregon. (The Weather Channel)

1956 - The second heavy snowstorm in just three days hit Boston. Nearby Blue Hill received 19.5 inches contributing to their snowiest March of record. (David Ludlum)

1987 - A storm in the western U.S. produced rain and snow from the northern and central Pacific coast to the northern and central Rockies. Heavier snowfall totals included 13 inches at Clear Creek UT, 12 inches at Snow Camp CA and Glacier Park MT, and 10 inches at Kayenta AZ. Wind gusts reached 54 mph at Winslow AZ. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Seven cities in California and Nevada reported record high temperatures for the date as readings soared into the 80s and lower 90s. Los Angeles CA reported a record high of 89 degrees. Five cities in south central Texas reported record lows, including El Paso, with a reading of 22 degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Six cities reported new record low temperatures for the date as cold arctic air settled into the Upper Midwest for Palm Sunday, including Marquette MI with a reading of 11 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - Rather wintry weather in the eastern U.S. replaced the 80 degree weather of the previous week. Freezing temperatures were reported in northern sections of the Gulf Coast States, and snow began to whiten the Northern and Central Appalachians. Up to eight inches of snow was reported in western Virginia. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

2003 - Denver digs out from the second-biggest snowstorm in the city's history. Almost two and a half feet of wet snow over 36 hours shuts down the city. The month ends as Denver's snowiest March on record.

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Daily Devotionals

Seeds of Hope

A BETTER WORLD

One day the Abbotts were watching the morning news. After observing one tragic event after another, Jon turned to his wife and said, "You know, I could make a better world than this one."

Turning to him, she politely said, "Why don't you?"

We read in Genesis that God "looked over all that He made, and He saw that it was excellent in every way." Every small detail that God brought into existence was the way He intended it to be - excellent. He placed light in the sky and fish in the sea; land for farmers to grow crops, and scenery for people to enjoy; the sun and moon and stars to govern days and nights and seasons; birds in the sky and animals for man's enjoyment, use and nourishment - even the man and woman He created were without flaw. Everything was all perfect.

But, then through man - the triumph of His creation - sin entered the world, and all that was the way He wanted it to be perfect - was ruined. Satan entered His creation and brought destruction and death.

Any goodness in us or in the world is of God. He is the source of light and life, grace and goodness, peace and purity. And, it is only as we let God through Christ, Who is Lord, rule and reign in our lives, that we can become good, and do good for God, and reclaim His work.

Christ in us, the hope of glory.

Prayer: Help us, Father, to do Your work in Your world as we surrender our lives to Your will. May we make the world better through Your Son, our Savior. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Then God looked over all he had made, and he saw that it was very good! And evening passed and morning came, marking the sixth day. Genesis 1:31



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

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.15.24

13 25 50 51 66 6

MegaPlier: 5x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$875,000,000

NEXT 17 Hrs 27 Mins 39
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.18.24

19 23 24 31 44 2

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$2,300,000

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 42
DRAW: Mins 39 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.18.24

8 20 35 36 38 16

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT 16 Hrs 57 Mins 39
DRAW: Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.16.24

2 15 17 21 24

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$24,000

NEXT 1 Days 16 Hrs 57
DRAW: Mins 40 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.18.24

11 44 55 63 68 17

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 17 Hrs 26
DRAW: Mins 39 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 03.18.24

10 17 20 39 44 16

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$687,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 17 Hrs 26
DRAW: Mins 39 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the Associated Press

Blinken underscores 'ironclad' support for the Philippines as it clashes with China in disputed sea

BY JIM GOMEZ Associated Press

MANILA, Philippines (AP) — Secretary of State Antony Blinken underscored Washington's "ironclad commitment" Tuesday to help defend the Philippines in case of an armed attack against its forces after clashes between Chinese and Filipino coast guards in the disputed South China Sea recently turned more hostile.

Blinken, the latest high-level official to visit the United States treaty ally, met his Philippine counterpart Enrique Manalo on Tuesday before planned meetings with President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and other top officials in Manila.

President Joe Biden will host Marcos and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida in a White House summit in April. The three are likely to discuss growing concerns over increasingly aggressive Chinese actions in the South China Sea and North Korea's nuclear program.

"We stand with the Philippines and stand by our ironclad defense commitments, including under the Mutual Defense Treaty," Blinken said in a news conference with Manalo.

"We have a shared concern about the PRC's actions that threaten our common vision for a free, open Indo-Pacific, including in the South China Sea and in the Philippines' exclusive economic zone," Blinken said, using the abbreviation for the People's Republic of China. He cited "repeated violations of international law and the rights of the Philippines: water cannons, blocking maneuvers, close shadowing other dangerous operations."

The Chinese coast guard blocked and used water cannons against Philippine vessels in a confrontation two weeks ago that slightly injured a Filipino admiral and four of his sailors near the disputed Second Thomas Shoal. The March 5 faceoff in the high seas also caused two minor collisions between Chinese and Philippine vessels and prompted Manila's Department of Foreign Affairs to summon China's deputy ambassador to convey a protest against the Chinese coast guard's actions, which the Philippines said were unacceptable.

The Chinese coast guard said then that "it took control measures in accordance with the law against Philippine ships that illegally intruded into the waters adjacent to Ren'ai Reef," the name Beijing uses for Second Thomas Shoal.

The Second Thomas Shoal, which is occupied by a small Philippine navy contingent but surrounded by Chinese coast guard ships and other allied vessels, was the site of several tense skirmishes between Chinese and Philippine coast guard ships in the past year. But Filipino officials said the confrontation earlier this month was particularly serious because of the injuries sustained by its navy personnel and damage to their vessel.

Blinken renewed a warning Tuesday that the U.S. is obligated under a 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty to defend the Philippines if Filipino forces, ships or aircraft come under an armed attack anywhere in the South China Sea.

Both Blinken and Manalo described their countries' treaty alliance as being on "hyper-drive," but acknowledged that more could be done. They said efforts to shore up defense ties were not aimed against any country.

Beijing has repeatedly said that Marcos' decision to allow the expansion of American military presence in the Philippines under a 2014 defense pact could undermine the security of China and the region.

U.S. and Philippine forces plan to hold their largest annual combat exercises in April in the Philippines. The area would include a northern region just a sea away from Taiwan, which China claims as its own territory.

"We reaffirmed our shared view that a strong and capable Philippines would make a formidable ally for the United States," Manalo said.

Blinken said that "the alliance has never been stronger, but we not only have to sustain that, we have

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to continue to accelerate the momentum.”

Outside the presidential palace in Manila, dozens of left-wing activists tore a mock U.S. flag in a noisy rally Tuesday to oppose Blinken’s visit and Washington’s involvement in the long-simmering territorial disputes.

Aside from China and the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Taiwan and Brunei also have overlapping claims in the resource-rich and busy waterway, a key global trade route.

Beijing claims almost the entire South China Sea. In the past decade, China has turned barren reefs into seven islands that now serve as missile-protected island bases — including three with runways — that have bolstered its capability to fortify its territorial claims and patrols.

In response, Washington has been strengthening an arc of military alliances and security ties in the Indo-Pacific, including with the Philippines, Vietnam and other countries at odds with China in the disputed sea.

After China effectively seized another disputed atoll — the Scarborough Shoal off the northwestern Philippines — in 2012, Manila brought its disputes with Beijing to international arbitration and largely won. China, however, rejected the 2016 ruling of the United Nations-backed tribunal that invalidated its expansive claims on historical grounds, and continues to defy the decision.

The average bonus on Wall Street last year was \$176,500. That’s down slightly from 2022

NEW YORK (AP) — The average Wall Street bonus fell slightly last year to \$176,500 as the industry added employees and took a “more cautious approach” to compensation, New York state’s comptroller reported Tuesday.

The average bonus for employees in New York City’s securities industry was down 2% from \$180,000 in 2022. The slight dip came even as Wall Street profits were up 1.8% last year, according to the annual estimate from Thomas DiNapoli, the state’s comptroller.

DiNapoli’s office said the slight decline could be attributed to the compensation approach as more employees joined the securities industry.

Last year, the industry employed 198,500 people in New York City, which was up from 191,600 in 2022.

For 2023, the bonus pool was \$33.8 billion, which is largely unchanged from the previous year.

The average Wall Street bonus hit a record high \$240,400 in 2021, compared to a relative low of \$111,400 in 2011.

Wall Street is a major source of state and city tax revenue, accounting for an estimated 27% of New York state’s tax collections and 7% of collections for the city, according to the comptroller.

“While these bonuses affect income tax revenues for the state and city, both budgeted for larger declines so the impact on projected revenues should be limited,” DiNapoli said in a prepared statement. “The securities industry’s continued strength should not overshadow the broader economic picture in New York, where we need all sectors to enjoy full recovery from the pandemic.”

Biden heads West to secure his standing in Nevada and Arizona

By SEUNG MIN KIM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden is embarking on a three-day campaign swing aimed at shoring up his standing in the Sun Belt as part of an aggressive play to re-energize vital parts of his 2020 electoral coalition.

Much of Biden’s time on this trip this week, which includes stops in Nevada, Arizona and Texas, will be geared toward courting the Latino voters who helped power his coalition in 2020 and to emphasizing his pro-union, pro-abortion rights message.

Biden’s first stop Tuesday is in Reno, Nevada, where he will meet with local officials and campaign volunteers in Washoe County before heading to Las Vegas to promote his administration’s housing policies.

Next he’ll travel to Phoenix for another campaign stop in a critical swing county paired with an event talking up what he has done to bolster the computer chip manufacturing sector.

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Biden's push with Latino voters this week is also part of the campaign's broader efforts to put in place the infrastructure to re-engage various constituencies that will be critical to the president's reelection. That effort is all the more crucial as key parts of Biden's base, such as Black and Hispanic adults, have become increasingly disenchanted with the president's performance in office.

In an AP-NORC poll conducted in February, 38% of U.S. adults approved of how Biden was handling his job. Nearly 6 in 10 Black adults (58%) approved, compared to 36% of Hispanic adults. Black adults are more likely than white and Hispanic adults to approve of Biden, but that approval has dropped in the three years since Biden took office.

Biden's reelection campaign, along with allied Democratic groups, has opened offices in Washoe County and in specific areas of Las Vegas that aides said will help the campaign to target Black, Latino and Asian American voters.

Bilingual campaign organizers are already in place in Arizona, and the campaign has opened an office in Maryvale, a major Latino community in Phoenix. The campaign has hired more than 40 staffers in Nevada and Arizona.

Campaign officials believe that tuned-out voters are starting to pay attention to the reality of a rematch between Biden and Trump now that the two candidates have clinched their respective nominations. They're trying to boost coalition-building efforts in battleground states now that the matchup is set, using the energy coming out of Biden's State of the Union earlier this month to jolt their campaign momentum.

That includes, for example, ensuring that chapters are in place across college campuses so that students have a place to organize and that campaign offices are open and stocked with yard signs, campaign literature and other materials. Democrats are hoping that Trump and the GOP will struggle to catch up in key states.

The campaign has already established "Women for Biden-Harris," an effort led by first lady Jill Biden to mobilize female voters who were a vital part of Biden's winning coalition in 2020, as well as "Students for Biden-Harris," which will focus on getting young voters organized and active.

"This isn't stuff that you can just stand up. This is stuff that requires work," Quentin Fulks, principal deputy campaign manager for the Biden campaign, said in an interview. "It does require training. It does require making sure that your volunteers and supporters have what they need on the ground."

Meanwhile, the Republican National Committee dismissed dozens of staffers after new leaders closely aligned with Trump took over last week. Those let go include people who worked at the party's community centers that helped build relationships with minority groups in some Democratic-leaning areas. The committee's new leadership has since insisted that those centers will remain open.

The RNC, already strapped for cash, is also trying to bat away assumptions that it'll pay for Trump's ever-escalating legal bills.

Still, the Biden campaign and the broader Democratic Party are confronting their own struggles, despite their cash and organizational advantages. On top of Biden's weaker job performance numbers, Democrats are seeing less support from key voting blocs come election time; while Biden won 63% of Hispanic voters in 2020, that percentage shrunk to 57% for Democratic candidates in the 2022 midterms, according to AP VoteCast, a survey of the national electorate.

Despite the waning approval numbers, campaign officials say they are confident that once the contrast between the president's agenda and Trump's plans for a second term are presented to disillusioned members of Biden's coalition, they will ultimately back the president.

"I can say this as a Latina, we always come late to the party. We like to make a grand entrance," said Democratic strategist Maria Cardona. "I think that's what you will see again because when it comes down to people making a real decision that is consequential to their future, the future of their children, the future of their communities, it's not some random phone call from an anonymous pollster — I think that the Democratic coalition will come home."

Alongside the campaign stops, the administration is pairing official White House events on matters that have particular significance in the two states. In Arizona, Biden will continue talking up a law he signed

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encouraging domestic manufacturing of computer chips, which has already spurred significant private investment in the state, especially in Phoenix.

And in Nevada, Biden will continue promoting a new housing proposal that would offer a mortgage relief credit for first-time homebuyers and a seller's tax credit to encourage homeowners to offload their starter homes. The issue of housing is sure to resonate in Nevada, where home prices have nearly doubled since early 2016, according to Zillow, the online real estate marketplace.

"As the president has said, the bottom line is, we have to build, build, build," said Lael Brainard, the director of the White House National Economic Council.

Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto, D-Nev., stressed that Democrats cannot take the state — which has not voted for a Republican presidential candidate since 2004 — for granted, even as she dismissed some polling that shows Trump with an edge in Nevada.

"You got to be there talking to voters, particularly in Nevada," Cortez Masto said. "It's still small enough, it's 3 million people, they expect you to show up, right? It's a swing state. It's very diverse. And people just expect that type of engagement, so they can decide for themselves."

Biden's three-day trip will wrap up in Texas, where he will host a trio of fundraisers in Dallas and Houston.

6 former Mississippi law officers to be sentenced for torture of 2 Black men

By MICHAEL GOLDBERG Associated Press/Report for America

JACKSON, Miss. (AP) — Six former Mississippi law enforcement officers who pleaded guilty to a long list of state and federal charges for torturing two Black men will be sentenced by a federal judge starting Tuesday.

U.S. District Judge Tom Lee will sentence two defendants each day on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday after twice delaying the proceedings. Each faces the potential of decades behind bars.

The former law officers admitted in August to subjecting Michael Corey Jenkins and Eddie Terrell Parker to numerous acts of racially motivated, violent torture. In a January 2023 episode, the group of six burst into a Rankin County home without a warrant and assaulted Michael Corey Jenkins and Eddie Parker with stun guns, a sex toy and other objects.

The terror began on Jan. 24, 2023, with a racist call for extrajudicial violence.

A white person phoned Rankin County Deputy Brett McAlpin and complained that two Black men were staying with a white woman at a house in Braxton, Mississippi. McAlpin told Deputy Christian Dedmon, who texted a group of white deputies so willing to use excessive force they called themselves "The Goon Squad."

Once inside, they handcuffed Jenkins and his friend Eddie Terrell Parker and poured milk, alcohol and chocolate syrup over their faces. They forced them to strip naked and shower together to conceal the mess. They mocked the victims with racial slurs and shocked them with stun guns.

After a mock execution went awry when Jenkins was shot in the mouth, they devised a coverup that included planting drugs and a gun. False charges stood against Jenkins and Parker for months.

Ahead of sentencing, Jenkins and Parker called for the "stiffest of sentences" at a news conference Monday.

"It's been very hard for me, for us," Jenkins said. "We are hoping for the best and preparing for the worst."

Jenkins suffered a lacerated tongue and broken jaw. He still has trouble speaking and eating.

Malik Shabazz, an attorney representing both men, said the result of the sentencing hearings could have national implications.

"Michael Jenkins and Eddie Parker continue to suffer emotionally and physically since this horrific and bloody attack by Rankin County deputies," Shabazz said. "A message must be sent to police in Mississippi and all over America, that level of criminal conduct will be met with the harshest of consequences."

Months before federal prosecutors announced charges in August 2023, an investigation by The Associated Press linked some of the deputies to at least four violent encounters with Black men since 2019 that left two dead and another with lasting injuries.

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The officers charged include McAlpin, Dedmon, Hunter Elward, Jeffrey Middleton and Daniel Opdyke of the Rankin County Sheriff's Department and Joshua Hartfield, a Richland police officer. They pleaded guilty to charges including conspiracy against rights, obstructions of justice, deprivation of rights under color of law, discharge of a firearm under a crime of violence, and conspiracy to obstruct justice.

Most of their lawyers did not immediately respond to emails requesting comment Monday. Jason Kirschberg, representing Opdyke, said: "Daniel has accepted responsibility for his actions, and his failures to act. ... He has admitted he was wrong and feels deep remorse for the pain he caused the victims."

On the federal charges, Dedmon and Elward each face a maximum sentence of 120 years plus life in prison and \$2.75 million in fines. Hartfield faces a possible sentence of 80 years and \$1.5 million, McAlpin faces 90 years and \$1.75 million, Middleton faces 80 years and \$1.5 million, and Opdyke could be sentenced to 100 years with a \$2 million fine.

The former officers agreed to prosecutor-recommended sentences ranging from five to 30 years in state court, but time served for separate convictions at the state level will run concurrently with the potentially longer federal sentences.

The majority-white Rankin County is just east of the state capital, Jackson, home to one of the highest percentages of Black residents of any major U.S. city.

The officers warned Jenkins and Parker to "stay out of Rankin County and go back to Jackson or 'their side' of the Pearl River," court documents say, referencing an area with higher concentrations of Black residents.

In the gruesome crimes committed by men tasked with enforcing the law, federal prosecutors saw echoes of Mississippi's dark history, including the 1964 killing of three civil rights workers after a deputy handed them off to the Ku Klux Klan.

For months, Rankin County Sheriff Bryan Bailey, whose deputies committed the crimes, said little about the episode. After the officers pleaded guilty in August, Bailey said the officers had gone rogue and promised to change the department. Jenkins and Parker have called for his resignation, and they have filed a \$400 million civil lawsuit against the department.

The Bank of Japan ends its negative interest rate policy, opting for its first hike in 17 years

By YURI KAGEYAMA AP Business Writer

TOKYO (AP) — Japan's central bank raised its benchmark interest rate Tuesday for the first time in 17 years, ending a longstanding policy of negative rates meant to boost the economy.

The Bank of Japan's lending rate for overnight borrowing by banks was raised to a range of 0 to 0.1% from minus 0.1% at a policy meeting that confirmed expectations of a shift away from ultra-lax monetary policy.

It was the first rate hike since February 2007. The negative interest rate policy, combined with other measures to inject money into the economy and keep borrowing costs low, "have fulfilled their roles," Bank of Japan Gov. Kazuo Ueda told reporters.

The bank has an inflation target of 2% that it used as a benchmark for whether Japan had finally escaped deflationary tendencies. But it had remained cautious about "normalizing" monetary policy, or ending negative borrowing rates, even after data showed inflation at about that rate in recent months.

Ueda said there was "a positive cycle" of a gradual rise of wages and prices, while stressing that monetary policy will remain easy for some time.

Although private sector banks and other financial organizations will make their own decisions about rates, he said did not foresee any drastic rises. The central bank will watch for any big moves in rates, which would cause confusion, he added.

"We made the decision because we foresaw stable and continuous 2% inflation," he added.

Another factor supporting the shift: Japanese companies have announced relatively robust wage hikes

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for this year's round of negotiations with trade unions.

Wages and profits at companies were improving, the Bank of Japan said, in releasing its latest decision, referring to "anecdotal" accounts as well as data it had gathered lately.

"Japan's economy has recovered moderately," it said.

Market reaction was muted as the decision had been anticipated after Japanese media reports earlier this week. Tokyo's benchmark Nikkei 225 index gained nearly 0.7% on Tuesday, while the dollar was steady at about 150 yen.

Analysts said the bank likely won't rush to change its overall easy lending framework and will closely monitor prices.

Harumi Taguchi, principal economist at S&P Global Market Intelligence, said she believes inflation could begin falling below 2% and wage increases may not necessarily lead to robust consumer spending if people choose to save, rather than spend.

"While the bank's decisions will contribute to improving the functioning of financial markets, the impact on the real economy is likely to be limited," according to analysis by S&P Global Market Intelligence.

Ueda had repeatedly said the central bank would review its negative rate and other easing measures if the 2 percent inflation target was met and was accompanied by wage increases.

The Japanese central bank's policy is quite different from those of the U.S. Federal Reserve and the European Central Bank. Both have been moving to lower interest rates after rapidly raising them to clamp down on inflation.

The Bank of Japan has kept borrowing costs extremely low for many years to encourage Japanese consumers and businesses to spend and invest to help sustain stronger economic growth.

Japan recently became the world's fourth biggest economy, slipping behind Germany in terms of its nominal gross domestic product, or GDP. The U.S. economy is the largest, followed by China, which overtook Japan over a decade ago.

BOJ officials say they want to make sure inflation is based on domestic factors that can sustain higher wages, not external ones. Analysts expect the Bank of Japan to continue to move slowly on further raising interest rates.

The ultra-lax monetary policy also included huge injections of money into the economy through purchases of Japanese government bonds and other assets. The bank said the BOJ would continue with those government bond purchases at a rate of about 6 trillion yen (\$40.2 billion), and adjust quickly depending on economic trends.

But it discontinued or gave timelines for ending purchases of real estate investment trusts and other assets.

The ultra-lax monetary policy that Ueda's predecessor, Haruhiko Kuroda, put in place more than a decade ago was designed to establish what he called a "virtuous cycle" of inflationary expectations that would lead people to spend more both because borrowing costs were low and because they feared prices would rise in the future.

That was meant to counter a spell of deflationary trends where people held back on purchases in hopes of lower prices, which led companies to invest less and to cut back on wages.

The Bank of Japan said in its assessment of the economy that the current recovery was based partly on a "materialization of pent-up demand" even as global demand has weakened.

But it noted that industrial production was stagnant, partly due to cutbacks by automakers. Housing investment was relatively weak and government spending was "more or less flat." Ueda characterized the situation as "less than perfect."

"Concerning risks to the outlook, there are extremely high uncertainties surrounding Japan's economic activity and prices," the Bank of Japan said.

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Trump says Jews who vote for Democrats 'hate Israel' and their religion

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Former President Donald Trump on Monday charged that Jews who vote for Democrats "hate Israel" and hate "their religion," igniting a firestorm of criticism from the White House and Jewish leaders.

Trump, in an interview, had been asked about Democrats' growing criticism of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu over his handling of the war in Gaza as the civilian death toll continues to mount.

"I actually think they hate Israel," Trump responded to his former aide, Sebastian Gorka. "I think they hate Israel. And the Democrat party hates Israel."

Trump, who last week became the Republican Party's presumptive nominee, went on to charge: "Any Jewish person that votes for Democrats hates their religion. They hate everything about Israel and they should be ashamed of themselves because Israel will be destroyed."

The comments sparked immediate backlash from the White House, President Joe Biden's campaign and Jewish leaders. The vast majority of Jewish Americans identify as Democrats, but Trump has often accused them of disloyalty, perpetuating what critics say is an antisemitic trope.

At the White House, spokesperson Andrew Bates cast the comments as "vile and unhinged Antisemitic rhetoric" without mentioning Trump by name.

"As Antisemitic crimes and acts of hate have increased across the world — among them the deadliest attack committed against the Jewish people since the Holocaust — leaders have an obligation to call hate what it is and bring Americans together against it," he said. "There is no justification for spreading toxic, false stereotypes that threaten fellow citizens. None."

Biden's campaign said, "The only person who should be ashamed here is Donald Trump."

"Trump is going to lose again this November because Americans are sick of his hateful resentment, personal attacks, and extreme agenda," said spokesman James Singer.

Jonathan Greenblatt, who heads the Anti-Defamation League, said, "Accusing Jews of hating their religion because they might vote for a particular party is defamatory & patently false."

"Serious leaders who care about the historic US-Israel alliance should focus on strengthening, rather than unraveling, bipartisan support for the State of Israel," he wrote on X, formerly known as Twitter.

Trump's comments come as Biden has been facing mounting pressure from the progressive wing of his party over his administration's support for Israel in its retaliatory offensive in Gaza. More than 30,000 Palestinians have been killed since Hamas attacked Israel on Oct. 7, according to the Health Ministry in the Hamas-ruled territory.

While Biden continues to back Israel's right to defend itself, he has increasingly criticized Netanyahu. After his State of the Union speech, he said he needed to have a "come to Jesus" conversation with the Israeli leader. He has also accused Netanyahu of "hurting Israel more than helping Israel," saying, "he must pay more attention to the innocent lives being lost as a consequence of the actions taken."

Trump took particular issue with recent comments from Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, the country's highest-ranking Jewish official. In a speech last week, Schumer sharply criticized Netanyahu's handling of the war in Gaza, warning that the civilian toll was damaging Israel's standing around the world. He also called for Israel to hold new elections.

While the White House formally distanced itself from Schumer's comments, the Democratic leader and key ally was voicing an opinion increasingly held across Biden's administration.

Schumer — whom Trump accused of being "very anti-Israel now" — responded by accusing Trump of "making highly partisan and hateful rants."

"To make Israel a partisan issue only hurts Israel and the US-Israeli relationship," he wrote on X.

The Pew Research Center reported in 2021 that Jews are "among the most consistently liberal and Democratic groups in the U.S.," with 7 in 10 Jewish adults identifying with or leaning toward the Democratic Party. In 2020, it found that nearly three-quarters of American Jews disapproved of Trump's performance as president, with just 27% rating him positively.

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Americans have also increasingly soured on Israel's military operation in Gaza, according to surveys from The Associated Press and the NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. In January, 50% of U.S. adults said the military response from Israel in the Gaza Strip had gone too far, up from 40% in November.

That number was higher among Democrats, 6 in 10 of whom said the same thing in both surveys.

Famine is said to be imminent in northern Gaza as Israel raids the main hospital again

By WAFAA SHURAF, SAMY MAGDY and TIA GOLDENBERG Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Famine is imminent in northern Gaza, where 70% of people are experiencing catastrophic hunger, according to a report Monday that warned escalation of the war could push half of Gaza's total population to the brink of starvation.

The report, by the international community's authority on determining the severity of hunger crises, came as Israel faces mounting pressure from even its closest allies to streamline the entry of aid into the Gaza Strip and to open more land crossings. Aid groups complain that deliveries by air and sea by the United States and other countries are too slow and too small.

The European Union's top diplomat said the impending famine was "entirely manmade" as "starvation is used as a weapon of war."

Israeli forces, meanwhile, launched another raid on the Gaza Strip's largest hospital early Monday, saying Hamas militants had regrouped there and fired on them from inside the Shifa Hospital compound.

Clashes continued all day in and around the hospital, where Palestinian officials say tens of thousands of people have been sheltering.

The Israeli military said troops killed 20 people it identified as Hamas militants, and one of its own soldiers was killed, though the identification of the dead as militants could not be confirmed. Among those killed was a senior commander in Gaza's Hamas-led police forces who Israel said was hiding in the hospital. Gaza officials said the commander was coordinating protection of aid convoys.

The army last raided Shifa Hospital in November after claiming that Hamas maintained an elaborate command center within and beneath the facility. The military revealed a tunnel leading to some underground rooms, as well as weapons it said were found inside the hospital. But the evidence fell short of the earlier claims, and critics accused the army of recklessly endangering the lives of civilians.

RAFAH OFFENSIVE COULD PUSH HALF OF GAZA TO STARVATION

The latest findings on hunger in Gaza came from the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, or IPC, an initiative first set up in 2004 during the famine in Somalia that now includes more than a dozen U.N. agencies, aid groups, governments and other bodies to determine the severity of food insecurity.

It says virtually everyone in Gaza is struggling to get enough food, and that around 677,000 people — nearly a third of the population of 2.3 million — are experiencing the highest level of catastrophic hunger. That means they face extreme lack of food and critical levels of acute malnutrition. The figure includes around 210,000 people in the north.

Outright famine is projected to occur in the north anytime between now and May, it said. An area is considered to be in famine when 20% of households have an extreme lack of food, 30% of children suffer from acute malnutrition and at least two adults or four children per every 10,000 people die daily.

The report said the first condition has been fulfilled, and it is "highly likely" the second has as well. The death rate is expected to accelerate and reach famine levels soon, it said.

The report warned that if Israel broadens its offensive to the packed southern city of Rafah, as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed to do, the fighting could drive over 1 million people — half of Gaza's population — into catastrophic hunger and potentially cause famine in the south.

"This is the largest number of people facing imminent famine in the world today, and it has only taken five months to occur," said Matthew Hollingworth, the acting World Food Program country director for the Palestinian territories.

Jamie McGoldrick, the U.N. humanitarian coordinator for the Palestinian territories, called for "all roads"

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to be opened for aid, including into northern and central Gaza. The WFP report said aid from airdrops is "negligible" compared to what is brought on trucks.

Northern Gaza, including Gaza City, was the first target of the invasion, and entire neighborhoods have been obliterated. It is now the epicenter of Gaza's humanitarian catastrophe, with many residents reduced to eating animal feed. At least 27 people, mostly children, have died from malnutrition and dehydration in the north, according to the Health Ministry.

A spokesman for the Israeli military body that deals with Palestinian issues, Shimon Freeman, said Israel "places no limit on the amount of aid that can enter the Gaza Strip" and encourages countries to send aid. Israel has accused U.N. bodies of failing to distribute aid in a timely manner. Aid groups say distribution is impossible in much of Gaza because of hostilities, the difficulty of coordinating with the military and the breakdown of law and order.

Alex de Waal, the executive director of the World Peace Foundation at Tufts University and an expert on global famines, said Israel has had "ample warning" that if it continued to destroy key infrastructure, displace large numbers of people and obstruct aid operations, the results would be catastrophic.

"In failing to change course, it is culpable for these deaths," he said.

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said it was up to Israel to facilitate more aid.

"Israel has to do it. It is not a question of logistics. It is not because the United Nations has not provided enough support," he said. "Trucks are stopped. People are dying, while the land crossings are artificially closed."

'WE'RE TRAPPED INSIDE'

The raid on Shifa Hospital began before dawn, when Israeli forces backed by tanks and artillery surrounded the complex and troops stormed into a number of buildings.

"We're trapped inside," said Abdel-Hady Sayed, who has been sheltering in the facility for months. "They fire at anything moving."

In the evening, he said tanks were still in the hospital yard, and he could see three bodies outside the gates. "We can't retrieve the dead," he said.

Gaza's Health Ministry said around 30,000 people are sheltering at the hospital, including patients, medical staff and people who have fled their homes seeking safety. The war has displaced around 80% of Gaza's population.

Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari, the chief Israeli military spokesperson, said senior Hamas militants had regrouped in the hospital and were directing attacks from inside.

Among those killed in the raid was Faiq Mabhouh, a senior officer in the Gaza police, which is under Gaza's Hamas-led government but distinct from the militant group's armed fighting wing. The Israeli military said he was armed and hiding in Shifa, and that weapons were found in an adjacent room.

The Gaza government said Mabhouh was in charge of protecting aid distribution in the north and coordinating between aid groups and local tribes. Aid groups say Israeli strikes on police are one reason public order has collapsed, leading to desperate Palestinians overwhelming aid trucks on the road.

Hagari said the patients and medical staff could remain in the medical complex and that safe passage was available for civilians who wanted to leave.

Israel accuses Hamas of using hospitals and other civilian facilities to shield its fighters, and the Israeli military has raided several hospitals since the start of the war.

The Gaza Health Ministry said Monday that at least 31,726 Palestinians have been killed in Israel's offensive. The ministry doesn't differentiate between civilians and combatants in its count, but it says women and children make up two-thirds of the dead.

Palestinian militants killed some 1,200 people in Hamas' Oct. 7 attack into southern Israel that triggered the war, and took another 250 people hostage. Hamas is still believed to be holding about 100 captives, as well as the remains of 30 others, after most of the rest were freed during a cease-fire last year.

Detention of 3 teens over gruesome killing of 13-year-old classmate sparks debate in China

By DAKE KANG Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — In the last recorded moments before the 13-year-old boy's death, surveillance cameras showed him sitting on a scooter, surrounded by three classmates. An hour later, his phone went dead, kicking off a frantic search by relatives.

The following day, police in a village in northern China's Hebei province made a sickening discovery: the boy's body, buried underneath a tarp in an abandoned vegetable greenhouse.

His three teenage classmates have been detained on suspicion of murdering the boy in a case that has riveted China, setting off outrage and frenzied debate over the young age of the suspects and soul-searching about bullying and social responsibility in the Chinese countryside.

Police in Feixiang district of Handan city identified the boy only by his last name, Wang. In a statement Sunday they said the boy had been killed on March 10 and that the suspects were detained the following day. A police investigator told state broadcaster CCTV on Monday that the crime had been premeditated, with the suspects digging out the pit twice, once the day before and again the day of the killing.

Wang's relatives and their attorney said in interviews with Chinese media and in posts on social media that the boy had long been a victim of bullying, and was forced to give money to one of his classmates before he was killed. They said police identified the suspected killers after reviewing the surveillance footage and questioning the classmates.

"He was beaten alive and his body was disfigured beyond recognition," Wang's father wrote on Douyin, a Chinese social media platform. "I hope the government will be fair, open and just, punish them severely, and that the killers will pay with their lives!"

The case will be a test of a change in the law in 2021 that lowered the age at which children could be charged with a crime from 14 to 12 years old.

Wang's father, aunt, and grandmother did not respond to requests for comment. A person answering a phone number listed for their attorney's law firm told The Associated Press to wait for comment, saying they were swamped with interview requests. A number for the principal of the boy's school rang unanswered, as did numbers for relatives of two of the suspects.

The victim and the suspects are all under the age of 14. Media reports said they were "left-behind" children, a phrase used to describe kids in the countryside often cared for by grandparents because their parents work in faraway cities.

As details of the tragedy emerged last weekend, it renewed concern over the social and psychological welfare of such children, their exposure to violent content online and the ability of the country's social services to care for them. Posts and videos from Wang's relatives garnered millions of views and thousands of comments.

"The attention paid to the mental health of minors in the countryside is too little," said one commenter on Weibo, a Chinese social media platform. "I think this sort of thing could happen again."

Zhang Dongshuo, a defense attorney in Beijing unaffiliated with the case, said that Wang's death is the latest in a series of juvenile murder cases in China that have sparked debate on how old a child should be before being held responsible for a crime.

"Generally speaking, these kinds of cases involving minors are rare," Zhang said. "But recently more and more of these cases have been reported by the media, and it's been triggering discussion in Chinese society over revising the age of criminal responsibility."

In 2019, a 13-year-old boy who confessed to sexually assaulting and murdering a 10-year-old girl avoided criminal charges because Chinese law at the time stipulated that only those over the age of 14 could be held criminally liable. Two years later, the age of criminal responsibility was lowered to 12, but the government mandated that prosecution only take place if approved by the Supreme People's Procuratorate, China's highest prosecuting authority.

Zhang added that the lack of parental guidance for "left behind" children has been a longstanding social

issue, but that the question of how they should be raised has not been fully resolved.

"Many people think schools and the government should take responsibility for children's education, but that means if the relevant government departments and schools don't educate them effectively, then it's highly likely this minor is left in an educational vacuum," he said.

State media have given Wang's death widespread coverage, though there are signs that Chinese authorities are keeping a close eye on public sentiment. On Sunday, the family's attorney, Zang Fanqing, was abruptly cut off on a live broadcast after saying he and Wang's father were barred from seeing the boy's body. The next day, Zang said on social media that they were allowed to see the body.

A public statement from police Sunday asked the public not to spread rumors to protect the victim's privacy and avoid further harm to the boy's family.

His family has signaled they intend to pursue criminal charges. In a video Wang's father posted Monday, he said the sight of his son's body was "crueler than I imagined."

"Your father isn't scared, he is only upset and furious," Wang's father wrote, addressing his son. "Wait for your father to avenge you!"

Notre Dame Cathedral's restoration has been a 5-year journey of dedication and recovery

By THOMAS ADAMSON Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — The restoration of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris following a tragic blaze in April 2019 is a story of dedication and recovery.

The iconic medieval monument immortalized in history, film and literature has been gradually rebuilt over the past five years, through challenges that have included delays during the pandemic and the loss of the project's leader.

It's slated for completion by the end of 2024. Here is a timeline of events in the restoration:

April 2019 — A fire ravages Notre Dame, collapsing its roof and spire and destroying its interior, unleashing a global wave of solidarity. A monumental effort to restore the cathedral's grandeur is launched, and French President Emmanuel Macron pledges to complete it within five years.

June 2020 — The pandemic delays work at the cathedral, but removing charred scaffolding that had encased the spire amid previous restoration works marked a significant step.

August 2020 — Efforts begin to restore the organ that once thundered through the cathedral — France's largest musical instrument. The 8,000-pipe organ survived the fire, but was coated in toxic lead dust. Dismantling, cleaning and reassembling it is expected to finish this year.

March 2021 -- The first of an expected 1,000 historic French oak trees destined to rebuild the spire are selected from the Bercé forest in the French Loire region.

September 2021 — Work to secure the structure is finally completed, after carpenters, scaffolding experts, climbers and others help build temporary structures and a special enormous "umbrella" to protect the towers, vaults and walls of the roofless building. Bidding starts on the rest of the reconstruction.

Spring 2022 — Workshops of master glassmakers and locksmiths from across France begin the laborious process of cleaning and restoring the cathedral's famed stained glass windows. Help also comes from abroad: Germany's Cologne Cathedral restores four windows.

July 2023 — Massive oak trusses are hoisted onto Notre Dame, drawing Parisians to witness what is described as a magical moment, intertwined with preparations for the 2024 Paris Olympics.

August 2023 — France mourns the sudden death of General Jean-Louis Georgelin, the French army general who had been appointed to oversee the restoration. President Macron hails him as the "greatest soldier" dedicated to restoring Notre Dame "stone by stone."

December 2023 — A golden rooster, reimagined as a phoenix, is returned to the top of the cathedral's spire, symbolizing Notre Dame's rebirth. Religious relics, including pieces of what is said to be Jesus Christ's Crown of Thorns, are placed in a time capsule inside the golden bird.

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February 2024 — Scaffolding is removed to unveil the cathedral's new spire, adorned with the golden rooster and a cross. It offers a glimpse into the future as Notre Dame nears its grand reopening.

Trump is making the Jan. 6 attack a cornerstone of his bid for the White House

By LISA MASCARO, MARY CLARE JALONICK and JILL COLVIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Republican Donald Trump has launched his general election campaign not merely rewriting the history of the Jan. 6, 2021, Capitol attack, but positioning the violent siege and its failed attempt to overturn the 2020 election as a cornerstone of his bid to return to the White House.

At a weekend rally in Ohio, his first as the presumed Republican Party presidential nominee, Trump stood onstage, his hand raised in salute to the brim of his red MAGA hat, as a recorded chorus of prisoners in jail for their roles in the Jan. 6 attack sang the national anthem.

An announcer asked the crowd to please rise “for the horribly and unfairly treated January 6th hostages.” And people did, and sang along.

“They were unbelievable patriots,” Trump said as the recording ended.

Having previously vowed to pardon the rioters, he promised to help them “the first day we get into office.”

Initially relegated to a fringe theory on the edges of the Republican Party, the revisionist history of Jan. 6, which Trump amplified during the early days of the GOP primary campaign to rouse his most devoted voters, remains a rally centerpiece even as he must appeal more broadly to a general election audience.

In heaping praise on the rioters, Trump is shifting blame for his own role in the run-up to the bloody mob siege and asking voters to absolve hundreds of them — and himself — over the deadliest attack on a seat of American power in 200 years.

At the same time, Trump's allies are installing 2020 election-deniers to the Republican National Committee, further institutionalizing the lies that spurred the violence. That raises red flags about next year, when Congress will again be called upon to certify the vote.

And they're not alone. Republicans in Congress are embarking on a re-investigation of the Jan. 6, 2021, attack that seeks to shield Trump of wrongdoing while lawmakers are showcasing side theories about why thousands of his supporters descended on Capitol Hill in what became a brutal scene of hand-to-hand combat with police.

Five people died in the riot and its aftermath.

Taken together, it's what those who study authoritarian regimes warn is a classic case of what's called consolidation — where the state apparatus is being transformed around a singular figure, in this case Trump.

Jason Stanley, a philosophy professor at Yale, said in history the question comes up over and over again: How could people not have taken an authoritarian leader at his word about what was going to happen?

“Listen to Trump,” he said.

“When a coup against the democratic regime happens and it's not punished, that is a very strong indicator of the end of the rule of law and the victory of that authoritarian movement,” he said.

“Americans have a hard time understanding that what happens in most of the world can happen here, too.”

Trump is facing a four-count federal indictment over Jan. 6 — charges he conspired to defraud Americans over his 2020 election defeat and obstructed the official proceeding in Congress to certify the vote for Joe Biden. As the Supreme Court considers Trump's claim that he should be immune from prosecution, it's unclear when the case will go to trial, raising the possibility it might not be resolved until after the election.

The initial House Select Committee on Jan. 6 found that Trump criminally engaged in a “multi-part conspiracy” to overturn the lawful results of the 2020 presidential election and failed to act to stop his supporters from attacking the Capitol and beating police.

More than 1,200 people have been charged in the riot, including far-right Oath Keepers and Proud Boys extremists, with hundreds convicted. Trump lawyer Rudy Giuliani and attorney John Eastman face legal challenges over their work on the 2020 election.

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Trump's campaign, in response to an inquiry from The Associated Press, pointed to the work from the House investigators who are trying to show inconsistencies in the Select Committee's probe and its star witness Cassidy Hutchinson, a former aide who had a front-row seat to inner workings at the White House.

Trump's national press secretary Karoline Leavitt said the Justice Department has spent more time prosecuting the former president and "targeting Americans for peacefully protesting on January 6th" than other criminals.

"President Trump will restore justice for all Americans who have been unfairly treated," she said.

Even as Republicans worry privately that Trump risks turning off women and independent voters he would need in the general election rematch against Biden, top aides have said there is only so much they can do as Trump is going to be Trump.

Over the weekend, Trump focused his attention on Liz Cheney, the former Republican congresswoman, who was vice chair of the Select Committee and personally secured Hutchinson's blockbuster 2022 testimony.

"She should go to Jail along with the rest of the Unselect Committee!" Trump posted on social media.

Cheney posted in response — "Hi Donald: you know these are lies" — as she makes dispelling falsehoods about Jan. 6 her singular focus in 2024.

"If your response to Trump's assault on our democracy is to lie & cover up what he did, attack the brave men & women who came forward with the truth, and defend the criminals who violently assaulted the Capitol," she said in one post, "you need to rethink whose side you're on. Hint: It's not America's."

Many Republicans are willfully ignoring the issue, especially in Congress, despite lawmakers having run for their lives and taken shelter as the rioters stormed the Senate chamber and ransacked Capitol offices.

Senators who sharply criticized Trump after the Jan. 6 attack, like Republican Leader Mitch McConnell and South Dakota's John Thune, the No. 2 Senate Republican, have now reluctantly endorsed him.

Others are still declining to endorse Trump, including Louisiana Sen. Bill Cassidy, who voted to convict Trump in his second impeachment on the charge of inciting the insurrection for the Jan. 6 attack. But the holdouts are in the minority.

Appearing on NBC's "Meet The Press," Cassidy would only say, "I plan to vote for a Republican for the presidency of the United States."

One Republican willing to speak out is Mike Pence, the former vice president, whom rioters shouted they wanted to "hang" that day as a makeshift gallows stood on the Capitol's West Front.

"I was there on January 6th. I have no doubt in my mind ... that some people were caught up in the moment," Pence said on CBS's "Face the Nation."

"But the assaults on police officers, ultimately an environment that claimed lives, is something that I think was tragic that day," Pence said. "And I'll never diminish it."

Tuesday's primaries include a key Senate race in Ohio and clues for the Biden-Trump rematch

By MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Five states will hold presidential primaries on Tuesday as President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump continue to lock up support around the country after becoming their parties' presumptive nominees.

Trump is expected to easily win GOP primaries in Arizona, Florida, Illinois, Kansas and Ohio. Biden is expected to do the same in all those states except Florida, where Democrats canceled their primary and opted to award all 224 of their delegates to Biden. That's not an unusual move for a party with an incumbent in the White House seeking reelection.

Other races outside of the presidency could provide insight into the national political mood. Ohio's Republican Senate primary pits Trump-backed businessman Bernie Moreno against two challengers, Ohio Secretary of State Frank LaRose and Matt Dolan, whose family owns the Cleveland Guardians baseball team.

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Chicago voters will decide whether to assess a one-time real estate tax to pay for new homeless services. And voters in California will move toward deciding a replacement for former House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, who resigned his seat after being pushed out of Republican leadership.

Trump and Biden have for weeks been focused on the general election, aiming their campaigns lately on states that could be competitive in November rather than merely those holding primaries.

Trump on Saturday rallied in Ohio, which has for several years been reliably Republican. But there are signs the state could be competitive again in 2024. Last year, Ohio voted overwhelmingly to protect abortion rights in its constitution and voted to legalize marijuana.

Biden, meanwhile, is set to visit Nevada and Arizona on Tuesday.

Both men are running on their records in office and casting the other as a threat to America. Trump, 77, has portrayed 81-year-old Biden as mentally unfit. The president has described his Republican rival as a threat to democracy after his attempt to overturn the 2020 election results and his praise of foreign strongmen.

For the last year, Trump has synthesized his campaign with his legal challenges, including dozens of criminal counts and civil cases in which he faces more than \$500 million in fines.

His first criminal trial was scheduled to start Monday in New York on allegations he falsified business records to cover up hush money payments. But a judge delayed the trial for 30 days after the recent disclosure of new evidence that Trump's lawyers said they needed time to review.

Israelis evacuated from the Lebanese border wonder if they'll ever return

By MELANIE LIDMAN Associated Press

KIRYAT SHMONA, Israel (AP) — For four years, Sivan Shoshani Partush recruited families for Kibbutz Malkiya, a community of around 400 that she calls her "little slice of heaven." It wasn't a hard sell: spacious homes, beautiful nature, paths winding through manicured lawns, and a slower pace of life than in Israel's frantic cities.

The border with Lebanon is just 200 meters (650 feet) away. Partush would pass it on her daily runs, a feature of the landscape just like the view of the snow-topped Hermon Mountain in the winter.

"There was fear, but I got over it, because that's the choice I made, because someone was protecting me," said Partush. "But now there's a feeling that no one is protecting us."

Among approximately 60,000 Israelis evacuated from northern Israel after months of cross-border fighting, Partush and her children are staying temporarily in another kibbutz, and she isn't sure if she wants to return to Malkiya. Nearly 91,000 people from south Lebanon have also been displaced.

Lebanon's Hezbollah militant group began launching rockets towards Israel one day after Hamas-led militants stormed into southern Israel on Oct. 7, killing some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and taking around 250 hostage. More than 31,000 people have been killed in Israel's subsequent invasion of Gaza, according to Gaza's Health Ministry. There has been near-daily violence along the Lebanon-Israel border and international mediators are scrambling to prevent an all-out war between Hezbollah and Israel.

The fighting has killed eight civilians and 11 soldiers in Israel. More than 200 Hezbollah fighters and about 40 civilians have died in Lebanon.

Defense Minister Yoav Gallant has said the Israeli military is concentrating on Gaza, but that Israel has a simple aim in Lebanon: to push Hezbollah away from the border, either by diplomacy or force.

So far, that hasn't happened.

Israel said it has targeted 4,500 Hezbollah sites in the past five months. But Hezbollah's well-stocked and deeply entrenched militants continue to launch rockets, and Israel said the militants have attempted to or have actually crossed the border half a dozen times.

Partush is grimly resigned to the reality that it may be a year before she can return home, if she ever goes back, and she struggles to explain what would make her feel safe in the post-Oct. 7 world. The reality of living next to Lebanon has irrevocably changed, she said.

"They need to create a security belt, we need to have an Israeli army presence always, and they need

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to strengthen the emergency squads so not even a mouse can pass through the border," she said.

Some in her kibbutz are doubtful about returning, and it's hurting their tight-knit community, said Partush.

"We want to go home, but on the other hand, where will we go? It's very scary," she said.

Many Israelis who evacuated from the Gaza border after the Hamas attack have returned home in recent weeks. Those from the hardest-hit kibbutzim are moving to semi-permanent housing while their homes are rebuilt.

In Sderot, the largest city near Gaza with some 30,000 residents, life is starting to return to normal. Schools reopened this month. City streets, deserted in the early days of the war, are bustling again. Stores and cafes are doing brisk business, even as the conflict continues just a few kilometers away.

Some 30,000 displaced Israelis are living in hotel rooms across the country as the war enters its sixth month, according to the Prime Minister's Office. Others have moved to rented apartments or are staying with family.

From their cramped hotel rooms, evacuees from Israel's north have been watching news reports showing Sderot's residents return home with mixed feelings, aware their journey is far from over.

Israelis who have grown up under the shadow of rockets from Lebanon no longer find it tolerable.

"I don't want my daughters to grow up like I did," said Michal Nidam, a high school counselor from Kiryat Shmona, the largest city in Israel's north, which has suffered rocket fire from Lebanon for decades. "I have had anxiety since I was little. I used to sleep with my fingers in my ears, under the bed, and many times I slept with shoes and clothes on."

After the Hamas attack, Nidam and her children bounced between rented apartments for a few months and they now live in a hotel in Tiberias. Her two teenage daughters have one room, while her two youngest daughters stay with her in another crammed with clothes, snacks and their small dog.

Some families are struggling with the transitory living arrangements. Bored teenagers are tempted by drugs, alcohol and other acts of rebellion, while their parents are overwhelmed with the challenges of evacuation, Nidam said. The city of Kiryat Shmona has employed her to serve as a trusted adult presence in the lobby in the evenings, talking with the teens and making sure their parents are kept in the loop about their comings and goings.

Another challenge: "Families have been broken up," Nidam said.

Nidam's mother is in Jerusalem, while her 85-year-old father refuses to leave the city and — wearing army fatigues — volunteers for an emergency preparedness squad. Nidam's husband and some of her brothers also remained to serve as emergency personnel. Other displaced siblings are spread across the country.

Despite the violence, the city of Kiryat Shmona says an estimated 3,000 residents stayed — either through choice or because they perform essential roles. Drivers now steer empty buses down deserted streets in the former northern economic hub. A hardware store is among a handful of shops still open.

Haim Menus, 70, a baker who was wounded in 1998 while serving as a tank driver during Israel's occupation of southern Lebanon, said he will not leave and that he trusts God to protect him. His hours at the bakery have been slashed because they have so few customers, and he tries not to spend too much time outside in case a siren warns of incoming rockets.

Menus said his neighbors want to return but that fear keeps them away.

"Who doesn't want to return to his family, his home, the children, schools, kindergartens?" he asked, just moments after a siren wailed and he dashed inside the hardware store for shelter. "But it's dangerous."

Supreme Court extends block on Texas law that would allow police to arrest migrants

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court on Monday continued to block, for now, a Texas law that would give police broad powers to arrest migrants suspected of illegally entering the U.S. while the legal battle it sparked over immigration authority plays out.

A one-page order signed by Justice Samuel Alito indefinitely prevents Texas from enforcing a sweeping

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state immigration enforcement law that had been set to take effect this month. The language of the order strongly suggests the court will take additional action, but it is unclear when.

It marks the second time Alito has extended a pause on the law, known as Senate Bill 4, which the Justice Department has argued would step on the federal government's immigration powers. Monday's order extending the stay came a few minutes after a 5 p.m. deadline the court had set for itself, creating momentary confusion about the measure's status.

Opponents have called the law the most dramatic attempt by a state to police immigration since an Arizona law more than a decade ago, portions of which were struck down by the Supreme Court. The court battle is unfolding as immigration emerges as a key issue in the 2024 presidential race.

The office of Republican Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton has said the state's law mirrored federal law and "was adopted to address the ongoing crisis at the southern border, which hurts Texans more than anyone else."

Arrests for illegal crossings along the southern border hit record highs in December but fell by half in January, a shift attributed to seasonal declines and heightened enforcement by the U.S. and its allies. The federal government has not yet released numbers for February.

The Biden administration sued to strike down the Texas measure in January, arguing it's a clear violation of federal authority on immigration that would hurt international relations and create chaos in administering immigration law. Critics have also said the law could lead to civil rights violations and racial profiling.

A federal judge in Texas struck down the law in late February, but the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals quickly stayed that ruling, leading the federal government to appeal to the Supreme Court.

The Supreme Court in 2012 struck down key parts of an Arizona law that would have allowed police to arrest people for federal immigration violations, often referred to by opponents as the "show me your papers" bill. The divided high court found then that the impasse in Washington over immigration reform did not justify state intrusion.

The battle over the Texas immigration law is one of multiple legal disputes between Texas officials and the Biden administration over how far the state can go to patrol the Texas-Mexico border and prevent illegal border crossings.

Several Republican governors have backed Gov. Greg Abbott's efforts, saying the federal government is not doing enough to enforce existing immigration laws.

March Madness kicks off with First Four games and teams looking to do some bracket busting

By MITCH STACY AP Sports Writer

DAYTON, Ohio (AP) — A year ago, Fairleigh Dickinson landed in the First Four and by the following weekend became one of the most improbable bracket-busters in NCAA Tournament history.

After routing Texas Southern in Dayton, the 16th-seeded Knights — one of the shortest teams in the tournament facing the tallest — upset No. 1 seed Purdue 63-58, only the second time a No. 16 seed had beaten a top-seeded team.

"Anybody has a chance. Anything can happen, no matter what's going on," said Donald Copeland, the coach of an injury-depleted Wagner team that opens this year's First Four against Howard on Tuesday night. "Now our path is probably different, but it gives you motivation to want to hopefully achieve something like that."

The winner of that game will advance as the No. 16 seed in the West Region to face top-seeded North Carolina on Thursday.

In an unusual twist, the First Four brings together both Colorado and Colorado State. Both finished 24-10. Colorado was the runner-up in the Pac-12 Tournament and will play Boise State (22-10) from the Mountain West Conference in the late game Wednesday, with the winner moving on as the 10th seed in the South Region to face seventh-seeded Florida.

Colorado State, also from the Mountain West, draws ACC regular Virginia (23-10) in the late game Tues-

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day for the right to move on as the 10th seed in the Midwest and play No. 7 seed Texas. Virginia has made 10 NCAA Tournament appearances in the last 12 seasons under coach Tony Bennett and won the national title in 2019.

"It's a great opportunity for us to kind of test ourselves and see where we're at as a program. At this point there are no cupcakes," said Isaiah Stevens, Colorado State's top scorer at 16.5 points per game.

"The way I look at this is, we're a 10 seed in the NCAA Tournament and we just get to play one more game than everybody else," Rams coach Niko Medved said. "That's a pretty cool deal."

MAKING A NAME

Wagner, a school with around 2,000 students on Staten Island in New York City, returns to the NCAA Tournament after a drought of 21 years.

Howard — the Seahawks' opponent on Tuesday — was in last year, but hopes to have a better showing this time around.

Wagner (16-15) finished sixth in the Northeast Conference during the regular season. After losing their final two games, the Seahawks won three straight in the league tournament, beating Merrimack in the final, despite Copeland's rotation being down to seven players because of injuries.

In fact, it got so bad that Damen Mazil, the quarterback of the Wagner football team, was added to the roster in February for some depth.

"A small island, and we're back here after 21 years," Wagner guard Javier Ezquerro said. "It's amazing."

Howard (18-16) was 9-14 in early February but roared back to win nine of its last 11 games, including the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference Tournament.

"You go in with certain expectations, and this year was just like really rocky for us in a lot of ways," said Howard forward Seth Towns, who averaged 14.2 points. "So to come together at the end of the year, like we did, in the last five or so games and then in the tournament, I think it's a testament to the leadership of the coaching staff and just to the incredible guys who were never willing to give up."

WELCOME TO THE SHOW

Grambling State is making its first appearance in the NCAA Tournament after winning nine of its last 10 games to take the Southwestern Athletic Conference regular-season and tournament titles.

Grambling (20-14) faces Montana State on Wednesday for the right to advance as the 16th seed in the Midwest and play top-seeded Purdue on Friday.

Montana State (17-17) is fortunate to be in the tournament for the third straight season. The Bobcats were 13-17 on March 2 before winning four straight. They beat Montana in the Big Sky Tournament championship game to earn the league's automatic NCAA bid.

Biden to host Japan PM Kishida, Philippines President Marcos for White House summit

By AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden will host Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. for a White House summit next month amid growing concerns about North Korea's nuclear program, provocative Chinese action in the South China Sea and differences over a Japanese company's plan to buy an iconic American steel company.

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre in a statement on Monday said the first-ever U.S.-Japan-Philippines leaders' summit is an opportunity to highlight the countries' "growing economic relations, a proud and resolute commitment to shared democratic values and a shared vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific."

The three leaders have no shortage of issues to discuss.

The announcement came as North Korea's state media reported that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un supervised a live-fire drill of nuclear-capable "super-large" multiple rocket launchers designed to target South Korea's capital. The North Korean claim followed the South Korean and Japanese militaries reporting on Monday that they had detected North Korea firing multiple short-range ballistic missiles toward waters

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off its eastern coast, adding to a streak of weapons displays that have raised regional tensions.

The U.S.-Japan relationship is facing a rare moment of friction after Biden announced last week that he opposes the planned sale of Pittsburgh-based U.S. Steel to Nippon Steel of Japan. Biden argued in announcing his opposition that the U.S. needs to "maintain strong American steel companies powered by American steelworkers."

Nippon Steel announced in December that it planned to buy U.S. Steel for \$14.1 billion in cash, raising concerns about what the transaction could mean for unionized workers, supply chains and U.S. national security.

Meanwhile, long-running Philippines-Chinese tensions have come back into focus this month after Chinese and Philippine coast guard vessels collided in the disputed South China Sea.

The Chinese coast guard ships and accompanying vessels blocked the Philippine coast guard and supply vessels off the disputed Second Thomas Shoal and executed dangerous maneuvers that caused two minor collisions between the Chinese ships and two of the Philippine vessels, Philippine officials said.

A small Philippine marine and navy contingent has kept watch onboard a rusting warship, the BRP Sierra Madre, which has been marooned since the late 1990s in the shallows of the Second Thomas Shoal.

China also claims the shoal lying off the western Philippines and has surrounded the atoll with coast guard, navy and other ships to press its claims and prevent Filipino forces from delivering construction materials to fortify the Sierra Madre in a decades-long standoff.

Close U.S.-Philippines relations were not a given when Marcos, the son and namesake of the former Philippines strongman, took office in 2022.

But both Biden and Marcos have thrown much effort into strengthening the historically-complicated relationship between the two countries, with the two leaders sharing concerns about aggressive Chinese action around the region.

A U.S. appeals court in 1996 upheld damages of about \$2 billion against the elder Marcos' estate for the torture and killings of thousands of Filipinos. The court upheld a 1994 verdict of a jury in Hawaii, where he fled after being forced from power in 1986. He died there in 1989.

The elder Marcos placed the Philippines under martial law in 1972, a year before his term was to expire. He padlocked the country's congressional and newspaper offices, ordered the arrest of many political opponents and activists and ruled by decree.

The younger Marcos made an official visit to Washington last year, the first by a Philippine president in more than 10 years. The U.S. made the announcement of Marcos' coming trip to Washington as Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Manila.

Jean-Pierre said that in addition to the leaders' summit Biden will hold one-on-one talks with Marcos. She said the leaders would discuss efforts to expand cooperation on economic security, clean energy, people-to-people ties, human rights and democracy.

Biden is set to honor Kishida a day before the leaders summit with a state visit. The White House announced the state visit in January.

Pro-Trump Michigan attorney arrested after hearing in DC over leaking Dominion documents

By JOEY CAPPELLETTI and NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

An attorney facing criminal charges for illegally accessing Michigan voting machines after the 2020 election was arrested Monday after a hearing in a separate case in federal court in Washington, D.C.

Stefanie Lambert was arrested by U.S. Marshals after a hearing over possible sanctions against her for disseminating confidential emails from Dominion Voting Systems, the target of conspiracy theories over former President Donald Trump's 2020 election loss. Lambert obtained the Dominion emails by representing Patrick Byrne, a prominent funder of election conspiracy theorists who is being sued by Dominion for defamation.

In a statement, the Marshals office said Lambert was arrested on "local charges." A Michigan judge ear-

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lier this month issued a bench warrant for Lambert after she missed a hearing in her case, in which she's charged with four felonies for accessing voting machines in a search for evidence of a conspiracy theory against Trump. Lambert had earlier, unsuccessfully, sued to overturn Trump's loss in Michigan.

Earlier Monday, Lambert had acknowledged passing on the records from Dominion Voting Systems to "law enforcement." She then attached an affidavit that included some of the leaked emails and was signed by Dar Leaf, a county sheriff in northern Michigan who has investigated false claims of widespread election fraud from the 2020 election, to a filing in her own case in Michigan. The rest of the documents were posted to an account under Leaf's name on X, the social platform formally known as Twitter.

Leaf did not respond to requests for comment. Lambert's attorney, Daniel Hartman, did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Byrne wrote in a text that he did not know if Lambert had been arrested, "but if she was, I respect her even more, and she can raise her rate to me."

Lambert contended the Dominion documents obtained under discovery were evidence of "crimes" and needed to be disclosed.

Byrne wrote on X that Lambert "signed an NDA, but she found evidence of ongoing crime, and reported it to law enforcement. If she found a severed head in discovery box she had a duty to report it to law-enforcement, too."

Dominion on Friday filed a motion demanding Lambert be removed from the Byrne case for violating a protective order that U.S. District Court Judge Moxila A. Upadhyaya had placed on documents in the case. It said Lambert's disclosure had triggered a new round of threats toward the company, which has been at the center of elaborate conspiracy theories about Trump's loss.

"These actions should shock the conscience," Dominion wrote in its motion seeking to disqualify Lambert. "They reflect a total disregard for this Court's orders, to say nothing of the safety of Dominion employees."

Upadhyaya during a hearing Monday said she had scheduled a subsequent one to determine whether sanctions against Lambert or removing her from the case were appropriate.

Dominion filed several defamation lawsuits against those who spread conspiracy theories blaming its election equipment for Trump's 2020 loss. Fox News settled the most prominent of these cases for \$787 million last year.

Dominion's suit against Byrne is one of several the company has filed against prominent election deniers, including MyPillow founder Mike Lindell and attorney Sidney Powell.

Netanyahu agrees to send Israeli officials to Washington to discuss prospective Rafah operation

By AAMER MADHANI, ZEKE MILLER and JULIA FRANKEL Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Monday agreed to send a team of Israeli officials to Washington to discuss with Biden administration officials a prospective Rafah operation as each side is looking to make "clear to the other its perspective," White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan said.

The agreement to hold talks about Rafah came as Biden and Netanyahu spoke Monday, their first interaction in more than a month, as the divide has grown between allies over the food crisis in Gaza and Israel's conduct during the war, according to the White House. Sullivan said the talks will happen in the coming days and are expected to involve military, intelligence and humanitarian experts.

The White House has been skeptical of Netanyahu's plan to carry out an operation in the southern city of Rafah, where about 1.5 million displaced Palestinians are sheltering, as Israel looks to eliminate Hamas following the militant group's deadly Oct. 7 attack.

Sullivan said Biden in the call once again urged Netanyahu not to carry out a Rafah operation. At the coming talks, he said U.S. officials will lay out "an alternative approach that would target key Hamas elements in Rafah and secure the Egypt-Gaza border without a major ground invasion."

"The president has rejected, and did again today, the straw man that raising questions about Rafah is

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the same as raising questions about defeating Hamas," Sullivan said. "That's just nonsense. Our position is that Hamas should not be allowed a safe haven in Rafah or anywhere else, but a major ground operation there would be a mistake. It would lead to more innocent civilian deaths, worsen the already dire humanitarian crisis, deepen the anarchy in Gaza and further isolate Israel internationally."

The call comes after Republicans in Washington and Israeli officials were quick to express outrage after Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer sharply criticized Netanyahu's handling of the war in Gaza and called for Israel to hold new elections. They accused the Democratic leader of breaking the unwritten rule against interfering in a close ally's electoral politics.

Biden hasn't endorsed Schumer's call for election but said he thought he gave a "good speech" that reflected the concerns of many Americans. Netanyahu raised concerns about the calls by Schumer for new elections, Sullivan said.

Biden administration officials have warned that they would not support an operation in Rafah without the Israelis presenting a credible plan to ensure the safety of innocent Palestinian civilians. Israel has yet to present such a plan, according to White House officials.

Netanyahu in a statement after the call made no direct mention of the tension.

"We discussed the latest developments in the war, including Israel's commitment to achieving all of the war's goals: Eliminating Hamas, freeing all of our hostages and ensuring that Gaza never (again) constitutes a threat to Israel — while providing the necessary humanitarian aid that will assist in achieving these goals," Netanyahu said.

The Biden-Netanyahu call also came as a new report warned that "famine is imminent" in northern Gaza, where 70% of the remaining population is experiencing catastrophic hunger, and that a further escalation of the war could push around half of Gaza's population to the brink of starvation. The report came from the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, a partnership of more than a dozen governments, U.N. aid and other agencies that determines the severity of food crises.

Netanyahu lashed out against the American criticism on Sunday, describing calls for a new election as "wholly inappropriate."

Netanyahu told Fox News Channel that Israel never would have called for a new U.S. election after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, and he denounced Schumer's comments as inappropriate.

"We're not a banana republic," he said. "The people of Israel will choose when they will have elections, and who they'll elect, and it's not something that will be foisted on us."

Even as they express frustration about aspects of the Israeli operations, the White House acknowledges that Israel has made significant progress in degrading Hamas. And Sullivan revealed on Monday that an Israeli operation last week killed Hamas' third in command, Marwan Issa.

"The president told the prime minister again today that we share the goal of defeating Hamas, but we just believe you need a coherent and sustainable strategy to make that happen," Sullivan said.

Biden after his State of the Union address earlier this month was caught on a hot mic telling a Democratic ally that he has told Netanyahu they would have a "come to Jesus" meeting over the growing humanitarian crisis in Gaza. His frustration with Netanyahu's prosecution of the war was also on display in a recent MSNBC interview, in which he asserted Netanyahu was "hurting Israel."

"He has a right to defend Israel, a right to continue to pursue Hamas," Biden said of Netanyahu in the MSNBC interview. "But he must, he must, he must pay more attention to the innocent lives being lost as a consequence of the actions taken. He's hurting ... in my view, he's hurting Israel more than helping Israel."

The president announced during his State of the Union address that the U.S. military would help establish a temporary pier aimed at boosting the amount of aid getting into the territory. The U.S. military has also been air-dropping aid into Gaza.

The Biden administration resorted to the unusual workarounds after months of appealing to Israel, a top recipient of military aid, to step up access and protection for trucks bearing humanitarian goods for Gaza.

The five-month war was triggered after Hamas-led militants stormed into southern Israel in a surprise attack, rampaging through communities, killing some 1,200 people — mostly civilians — and taking around

250 hostages.

Israel responded with one of the deadliest and most destructive military campaigns in recent history. The war has killed over 31,000 Palestinians, according to Gaza's Health Ministry. Around 80% of Gaza's population of 2.3 million have fled their homes, and a quarter of the population faces starvation.

Supreme Court seems favorable to Biden administration over efforts to combat social media posts

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court seemed likely Monday to side with the Biden administration in a dispute with Republican-led states over how far the federal government can go to combat controversial social media posts on topics including COVID-19 and election security in a case that could set standards for free speech in the digital age.

The justices seemed broadly skeptical during nearly two hours of arguments that a lawyer for Louisiana, Missouri and other parties presented accusing officials in the Democratic administration of leaning on the social media platforms to unconstitutionally squelch conservative points of view.

Lower courts have sided with the states, but the Supreme Court blocked those rulings while it considers the issue.

Several justices said they were concerned that common interactions between government officials and the platforms could be affected by a ruling for the states.

In one example, Justice Amy Coney Barrett expressed surprise when Louisiana Solicitor General J. Benjamin Aguiñaga questioned whether the FBI could call Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) to encourage them to take down posts that maliciously released someone's personal information without permission, the practice known as doxxing.

"Do you know how often the FBI makes those calls?" Barrett asked, suggesting they happen frequently.

Justice Brett Kavanaugh also signaled that a ruling for the states would mean that "traditional, everyday communications would suddenly be deemed problematic."

The case Monday was among several the court is considering that affect social media companies in the context of free speech. Last week, the court laid out standards for when public officials can block their social media followers. Less than a month ago, the court heard arguments over Republican-passed laws in Florida and Texas that prohibit large social media companies from taking down posts because of the views they express.

The cases over state laws and the one that was argued Monday are variations on the same theme, complaints that the platforms are censoring conservative viewpoints.

The states argue that White House communications staffers, the surgeon general, the FBI and the U.S. cybersecurity agency are among those who coerced changes in online content on social media platforms.

Aguiñaga put the situation in stark terms, telling the justices that "the record reveals unrelenting pressure by the government to coerce social media platforms to suppress the speech of millions of Americans."

He said that calls merely encouraging the platforms to act also could violate speech rights, responding to a hypothetical situation conjured by Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson, about an online challenge that "involved teens jumping out of windows at increasing elevations."

Jackson, joined by Chief Justice John Roberts, pressed the Louisiana lawyer about whether platforms could be encouraged to remove such posts.

"I was with you right until that last comment, Your Honor," Aguiñaga said. "I think they absolutely can call and say this is a problem, it's going rampant on your platforms, but the moment that the government tries to use its ability as the government and its stature as the government to pressure them to take it down, that is when you're interfering with the third party's speech rights."

Justice Samuel Alito appeared most open to the states' arguments, at one point referring to the government's "constant pestering of Facebook and some of the other platforms." Alito, along with Justices Neil Gorsuch and Clarence Thomas, would have allowed the restrictions on government contacts with the

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platforms to go into effect.

Justice Department lawyer Brian Fletcher argued that none of the actions the states complain about come close to problematic coercion and that the federal government would lose its ability to communicate with the social media companies about antisemitic and anti-Muslim posts, as well as on issues of national security, public health and election integrity.

The platforms are large sophisticated actors with no reluctance to stand up to the government, "saying no repeatedly when they disagree with what the government is asking them to do," Fletcher said.

Justice Elena Kagan and Kavanaugh, two justices who served in the White House earlier in their careers, seemed to agree, likening the exchanges between officials and the platforms to relationships between the government and more traditional media.

Kavanaugh described "experienced government press people throughout the federal government who regularly call up the media and -- and berate them."

Later, Kagan said, "I mean, this happens literally thousands of times a day in the federal government."

Alito, gesturing at the courtroom's press section, mused that whenever reporters "write something we don't like," the court's chief spokeswoman "can call them up and curse them out and say...why don't we be partners? We're on the same team. Why don't you show us what you're going to write beforehand? We'll edit it for you, make sure it's accurate."

Free speech advocates said the court should use the case to draw an appropriate line between the government's acceptable use of the bully pulpit and coercive threats to free speech.

"We're encouraged that the Court was sensitive both to the First Amendment rights of platforms and their users, and to the public interest in having a government empowered to participate in public discourse. To that end, we hope that the Court resolves these cases by making clear that the First Amendment prohibits coercion but permits the government to attempt to shape public opinion through the use of persuasion," Alex Abdo, litigation director of the Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University, said in a statement.

A panel of three judges on the New Orleans-based 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals had ruled earlier that the Biden administration had probably brought unconstitutional pressure on the media platforms. The appellate panel said officials cannot attempt to "coerce or significantly encourage" changes in online content. The panel had previously narrowed a more sweeping order from a federal judge, who wanted to include even more government officials and prohibit mere encouragement of content changes.

A divided Supreme Court put the 5th Circuit ruling on hold in October, when it agreed to take up the case. A decision in *Murthy v. Missouri*, 23-411, is expected by early summer.

Trump seeks to appeal decision not to disqualify district attorney from Georgia election case

KATE BRUMBACK and SUDHIN THANAWALA undefined

ATLANTA (AP) — Former President Donald Trump and other defendants in Georgia's election interference case filed court papers Monday seeking to appeal a judge's ruling not to disqualify Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis from their prosecution or dismiss the charges.

The resignation of the special prosecutor with whom Willis had a romantic relationship is not enough to correct the appearance of impropriety the judge found, according to a court filing by attorneys for Trump, former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, former White House chief of staff Mark Meadows and five other defendants.

"Whether District Attorney Willis and her Office are permitted to continue representing the State of Georgia in prosecuting the Defendants in this action is of the utmost importance to this case, and ensuring the appellate courts have the opportunity to weigh in on these matters pre-trial is paramount," they wrote.

The filing asks Fulton County Superior Court Judge Scott McAfee to grant a certificate that would allow his decision to be reviewed by the Georgia Court of Appeals. A spokesman for Willis said the district attorney's office couldn't comment.

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McAfee ruled Friday that special prosecutor Nathan Wade had to leave the case or Willis couldn't continue to pursue the charges. Wade later resigned, allowing Willis to remain on the most sprawling of four criminal cases against the presumptive Republican nominee in the 2024 presidential election.

McAfee did not find that Willis' relationship with Wade amounted to a conflict of interest but said the allegations created an "appearance of impropriety" that infected the prosecution team.

Attorneys for Trump and the other defendants who joined Monday's filing said a failure to remove Willis now could imperil any convictions and force a retrial if an appeals court later finds it was warranted.

"Neither the Court nor the Parties should run an unnecessary risk of having to go through that process more than once," they wrote.

Willis hired Wade in 2021 to lead the team to investigate and ultimately prosecute Trump and 18 others on charges that they illegally tried to overturn his narrow loss to Democrat Joe Biden in Georgia in 2020. The case uses a statute normally associated with mobsters to accuse the former president, lawyers and other aides of a "criminal enterprise" to keep him in power.

Willis and Wade testified at a hearing last month that they had engaged in a romantic relationship, but they rejected the idea that Willis improperly benefited from it, as lawyers for Trump and some of his co-defendants alleged. Willis and Wade insisted they didn't begin dating until after he became special prosecutor and the relationship ended in the summer of 2023. They both said that Willis either paid for things herself or used cash to reimburse Wade for travel expenses.

McAfee wrote that there was insufficient evidence that Willis had a personal stake in the prosecution. And he said he was unable to "conclusively establish by a preponderance of the evidence" whether Willis and Wade began dating before or after he was hired as special prosecutor.

"However, an odor of mendacity remains," the judge wrote.

The judge also called a speech Willis gave at a historic Black church in Atlanta less than a week after the allegations of her relationship with Wade surfaced "legally improper." Willis complained in those remarks that people had questioned her decision to hire Wade and questioned his qualifications, seeming to suggest the criticism arose from the fact that she and Wade are Black.

Monday's filing cited the speech and argued an appellate court would likely find it and the appearance of impropriety McAfee found sufficient to disqualify Willis.

Former British tech star depicted as scam artist, visionary in trial about HP's disastrous 2011 deal

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE AP Technology Writer

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Federal prosecutors on Monday painted one-time British tech star Mike Lynch as the ruthless mastermind of an \$11 billion deal that defrauded Silicon Valley pioneer Hewlett Packard.

But his lawyer depicted him as a visionary who was made a scapegoat for a desperate buyer's bad decision.

The contrasting portraits of Lynch, 58, emerged at the start of a criminal trial revolving around HP's 2011 acquisition of British software maker Autonomy — a deal that was initially celebrated as a coup, but instead unraveled into a costly debacle.

Lynch, once hailed as an example of British ingenuity, is facing 16 felony counts of fraud and conspiracy that could send him to prison for more than 20 years if a jury convicts him of all charges. The trial in San Francisco federal court is scheduled to last two to three months.

Although the trial is mostly about Lynch's 16-year reign that culminated in his 2012 firing by then-HP CEO Meg Whitman just nine months after the takeover, the proceedings will also cast a spotlight on the decay and chaos at a storied Silicon Valley company.

Whitman's predecessor, Leo Apotheker, snapped up Autonomy as part of a plan to lessen HP's dependence on selling personal computers and printers amid the upheaval unleashed by the rise of the smartphone. But after the deal devolved into a financial scandal, Whitman wound up laying off thousands of workers as HP's fortunes sagged, leading eventually to the company being split in two in 2015.

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Lynch's lawyer, Reid Weingarten, hammered on HP's deteriorating condition in 2011 as the primary reason the company sought to complete the Autonomy acquisition without even conducting a thorough review of the business. Things were so bad, Weingarten told the jury, that Apotheker had likened HP to a "burning platform" in the ocean. Meanwhile, Whitman, he said, had praised Autonomy's products as "magical software."

"HP was in desperate shape, so they needed to do something," Weingarten told the jury during his hourlong opening statement.

In his 80-minute opening statement, federal prosecutor Adam Reeves asserted Lynch started lying to HP executives as soon as deal discussions began with an early 2011 meeting held at HP's headquarters in Palo Alto, California — the same city where Bill Hewlett and Dave Packard started the company in 1939.

"It was the scene of an \$11 billion fraud," Reeves said of that initial meeting between Lynch and HP executives. Although Lynch made it seem like he was running a "money-making machine," Reeves said, "Autonomy's success was in fact an elaborate multilayered, multiyear fraud."

Reeves said the prosecution will present witnesses who will explain how Autonomy cooked its books and engineered a variety of deals to inflate its revenue in illegal ways during a 2 1/2-year period that duped HP into paying for an acquisition it would come to rue. And Lynch orchestrated the skulduggery, according to Reeves.

"He was a dominating, controlling boss," Reeves told the jury. "For many years, he ran Autonomy with an iron fist."

Although he acknowledged Lynch is a "hard charger" who demanded the best from his employees, Weingarten said Lynch delegated most accounting and marketing issues while he focused primarily on innovation.

"Mike was ahead of everybody for a long time," Weingarten said. "He is a startup guy who liked to be eating cold pizza at 2 in the morning while inventing something."

Weingarten also showed the jury an internal HP document drawn up in July 2011 — a month before the acquisition was announced — valuing Autonomy at \$46 billion, suggesting the assessment showed HP thought it was getting a bargain to acquire the rights to software that helped businesses find information buried in emails and Word documents.

Autonomy's "software was so powerful that no competitor was near them and it sold like hotcakes," Weingarten said.

Lynch, who has been free on \$100 million bail since being extradited to the U.S. last May, sat stoically through most of the opening statements while looking at presentations appearing on a display and occasionally peering at the lawyers and jury.

The jury eventually will get to hear from Lynch, who Weingarten promised will testify to tell his side of the story.

"We want you to know him, we think that helps us," Weingarten said.

The testimony will likely open the door for prosecutors to drill down into Lynch's motives for making a deal from which he pocketed more than \$800 million, according to court documents.

Apotheker, who was replaced Whitman a few weeks after the Autonomy deal was announced, also is expected to testify. Whitman, currently the U.S. ambassador to Kenya, isn't expected to come to court during the trial, although her management of HP and the Autonomy takeover is expected to be placed under a microscope.

Lynch's trial will simultaneously cover fraud allegations made against Stephen Chamberlain, Autonomy's former vice president of finance.

Sushovan Hussain, Autonomy's former chief financial officer and Lynch's former office mate, was sentenced to five years in prison in 2019 after being convicted on 16 criminal counts of fraud and conspiracy. Although Hussain's name was mentioned during Monday's opening statements, his conviction wasn't.

Indiana Gov. Eric Holcomb signs proclamation condemning antisemitism while vetoing bill defining it

By ISABELLA VOLMERT Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS (AP) — Indiana Gov. Eric Holcomb vetoed a bill Monday that would have defined antisemitism in state education code while simultaneously signing a proclamation condemning all forms of antisemitism.

The Republican governor cited changes made to the bill in the final days of the legislative session in a news release. Aimed at addressing antisemitism on college campuses, the bill's opponents argued that early versions of it would penalize people for criticizing Israel.

Disagreements between lawmakers in the Republican-controlled state House and Senate threatened to kill the bill before reaching a compromise in the final hours of the legislative session on March 8.

This is the second time the state House has tried to pass the legislation; an identical bill died last year after failing to reach a committee hearing in the state Senate.

Around the country, similar legislation rose to prominence this session amid the ongoing Israel-Hamas war.

The proposal would broadly define antisemitism as religious discrimination, claiming it would "provide educational opportunities free of religious discrimination."

Defined in 2016 by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, antisemitism is "a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities."

The original House bill used the organization's definition, which its author has since warned against using in law. It also included "contemporary examples of antisemitism" provided by the group, which make explicit references to Israel. These have been adopted by the U.S. Department of State and under former President Donald Trump, through executive order.

Over 30 states have adopted the definition in some way either through proclamation, executive order or legislation.

State senators, however, passed an amended version of the bill earlier this month that still included the IHRA's broad definition of antisemitism but deleted the group's name and examples that include explicit references to Israel. Opponents including the Indiana Muslim Advocacy Network and Jewish Voice for Peace Indiana had argued that such direct references would stifle criticism of Israel in academic settings and activism on campuses in support of Palestinians facing a worsening humanitarian crisis and widespread starvation.

The disagreement between the chambers prompted the bill to go to conference committee, a body consisting of lawmakers from both chambers. The committee reached an agreement on the last day of the legislative session to add the IHRA attribution back to the bill but remove the clause with examples. The final version was approved in both chambers with bipartisan support.

"The language that emerged in the final days of the legislative session fails to incorporate the entire International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition and its important contemporary examples," Holcomb said about vetoing the bill. "Additionally, the confusing language included in the bill could be read to exclude those examples."

The Indianapolis Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC) said the group supported the final version of the bill after it passed, as did the Indiana Muslim Advocacy Network, which was opposed to the original version over concerns about academic freedom and advocacy.

Holcomb's support wasn't clear after its passage. Last week, he expressed concern that Indiana would be an "outlier" among other states thanks to the changes and said he wanted to ensure there is no "ambiguity" in Indiana law.

Republican Indiana Attorney General Todd Rokita called on Holcomb to veto the bill, saying it is "toothless" without the mention of the examples.

Holcomb's proclamation condemning antisemitism cites the IHRA definition and its examples. In a state-

ment, Holcomb said the proclamation "ensures we join numerous states and countries by supporting the entire IHRA definition with its inextricable examples."

The JCRC thanked Holcomb in a statement for his "thoughtful" consideration of "the concerns raised in recent days by national experts and the Attorney General."

The group said it will work closely with lawmakers and the state to "ensure that the guidance of Governor Holcomb's proclamation is correctly applied to identify and confront antisemitism and meet the needs of Jewish students in K-12 and higher educational settings."

Holcomb has not vetoed a bill since 2022. Lawmakers can easily overturn a veto in Indiana and only need a simple majority to do so. It's unclear though if or when lawmakers might reconvene.

The push to define antisemitism in numerous states predates the Oct. 7 attacks in which Hamas killed some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, sparking a war that has killed more than 31,000 Palestinians. But the war gave supporters of the push another motivation. This year, governors in Arkansas, Georgia and South Dakota signed measures and a proposal is still awaiting gubernatorial review in Florida.

Trump's lawyers say it is impossible for him to post bond covering \$454 million civil fraud judgment

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Donald Trump's lawyers told a New York appellate court Monday that it's impossible for him to post a bond covering the full amount of a \$454 million civil fraud judgment while he appeals, suggesting the former president's legal losses have put him in a serious cash crunch.

Trump's lawyers wrote in a court filing that "obtaining an appeal bond in the full amount" of the judgment "is not possible under the circumstances presented." Trump claimed last year that he has "fairly substantially over \$400 million in cash," but back-to-back courtroom defeats have pushed his legal debt north of a half-billion dollars.

Citing rejections from more than 30 bond underwriters, Trump's lawyers asked the state's intermediate appeals court to reverse a prior ruling requiring that he post a bond covering the full amount in order to halt enforcement while he appeals the judgment in New York Attorney General Letitia James' lawsuit.

Trump's financial constraints are being laid bare as he appeals Judge Arthur Engoron's Feb. 16 ruling that he and his co-defendants schemed for years to deceive banks and insurers by inflating his wealth on financial statements used to secure loans and make deals.

If the appeals court does not intervene, James can seek to enforce the judgment starting March 25. James, a Democrat, has said she will seek to seize some of Trump's assets if he is unable to pay.

With interest, Trump owes the state \$456.8 million. That amount is increasing nearly \$112,000 each day. In all, he and co-defendants, including his company, sons Eric and Donald Trump Jr. and other executives, owe \$467.3 million. To obtain a bond, they would be required to post collateral covering 120% of the judgment, or about \$557.5 million, Trump's lawyers said.

Trump maintains that he is worth several billion dollars, but much of his wealth is tied up in his skyscrapers, golf courses and other properties. Few underwriters were willing to issue such a large bond and none would accept Trump's real estate assets as collateral, instead requiring cash or cash equivalents, such as stocks or bonds, his lawyers said.

Trump's lawyers said freeing up cash by offloading some of Trump's properties in a "fire sale" would be impractical because such cut-rate deals would result in massive, irrecoverable losses.

Not mentioned in Trump's court filings Monday was the presumptive Republican presidential nominee's potential financial windfall from a looming deal to put his social media company, Trump Media & Technology Group, on the stock market under the ticker symbol DJT.

A shareholder meeting is scheduled for Friday. If the deal is approved, Trump would own at least 58% of shares in the company, which runs his Truth Social platform. Depending on share price, that could be worth several billion dollars.

Trump is asking a full panel of the intermediate appeals court, the Appellate Division of the state's trial

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court, to stay the Engoron judgment while he appeals. His lawyers previously proposed a \$100 million bond, but Appellate Division Judge Anil C. Singh rejected that after an emergency hearing on Feb. 28. A stay is a legal mechanism pausing collection of a judgment during an appeal.

In a court filing last week, Senior Assistant Solicitor General Dennis Fan urged the full appellate panel to reject what he dubbed the defense's "trust us" argument, contending that without a bond to secure the judgment Trump may attempt to evade enforcement at a later date and force the state to "expend substantial public resources" to collect the money owed.

A full bond is necessary, Fan wrote, in part because Trump's lawyers "have never demonstrated that Mr. Trump's liquid assets — which may fluctuate over time — will be enough to satisfy the full amount of this judgment following appeal."

Trump's lawyers asked the Appellate Division panel to consider oral arguments on its request, and preemptively sought permission to appeal a losing result to the state's highest court, the Court of Appeals.

Singh did grant some of Trump's requests, including pausing a three-year ban on him seeking loans from New York banks. In their court filing Monday, Trump's lawyers did not address whether they have sought a bank loan to cover the cost of the judgment or obtain cash for use as bond collateral.

Trump appealed on Feb. 26, a few days after Engoron's judgment was made official. His lawyers have asked the Appellate Division to decide whether Engoron "committed errors of law and/or fact" and whether he abused his discretion or "acted in excess" of his jurisdiction.

Trump wasn't required to pay his penalty or post a bond in order to appeal, and filing the appeal did not automatically halt enforcement of the judgment. Trump would receive an automatic stay if he were to put up money, assets or an appeal bond covering what he owes.

Gary Giulietti, an insurance broker friend enlisted by Trump to help obtain an appeal bond, wrote in an affidavit Monday: "A bond of this size is rarely, if ever, seen. In the unusual circumstance that a bond of this size is issued, it is provided to the largest public companies in the world, not to individuals or privately held businesses."

Giulietti, who acts as an insurance broker for Trump's company, testified at the civil fraud trial as an expert witness called by Trump's lawyers. In his ruling, Engoron observed that some of Giulietti's testimony was contradicted by other witnesses, including a different defense expert. He noted that Giulietti's company collected \$1.2 million in commissions on its Trump accounts in 2022.

In all, Trump has more than \$543 million in personal legal liabilities from three civil court judgments in the past year. Bonding requirements could add at least \$100 million to that total.

In January, a jury ordered Trump to pay \$83.3 million to writer E. Jean Carroll for defaming her after she accused him in 2019 of sexually assaulting her in a Manhattan department store in the 1990s. Earlier this month, after his lawyers made similar arguments that he be excused from posting a bond, Trump did secure a \$91.6 million bond to cover 110% of the Carroll judgment while he appeals.

Last year, a jury ordered Trump to pay Carroll \$5 million in a related trial. In that case, rather than post a bond, Trump put more than \$5.5 million in cash in an escrow account while he appeals.

Who is Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and why is he running for president?

By JONATHAN J. COOPER Associated Press

The lack of excitement many Americans feel about a presidential rematch has heightened interest in alternatives to the major-party candidates, none more so than Robert F. Kennedy Jr., whose famous name has helped him build buzz for his independent bid.

Kennedy is a huge longshot to win Electoral College votes, much less the presidency. But his campaign events have drawn large crowds of supporters and people interested in his message.

He plans to announce his vice presidential nominee later this month in Oakland, California, and is stoking expectations that he might pick New York Jets quarterback Aaron Rodgers or former Minnesota Gov. Jesse Ventura. His campaign manager said Saturday that Kennedy has made his choice but didn't say whom he's picked. She said he had also interviewed Nicole Shanahan, a California philanthropist who bankrolled

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a Super Bowl ad for Kennedy, and Mike Rowe, star of the television show "Dirty Jobs."

Here is a look at his campaign and what he's stood for:

Who is RFK Jr?

Kennedy, 70, is a member of perhaps the nation's most famous political dynasty. His uncle was President John F. Kennedy. His father served as attorney general and a U.S. senator before seeking the Democratic nomination for president. Both were assassinated.

RFK Jr. built a reputation of his own as an activist, author and lawyer who fought for environmental causes such as clean water.

Along the way, his activism has veered into conspiracies and contradicted scientific consensus, most infamously on vaccines. Some members of his family have publicly criticized his views. Dozens of his family members posed with President Joe Biden at a St. Patrick's Day reception at the White House in a photo his sister Kerry Kennedy posted to social media.

Kennedy founded Waterkeeper Alliance, which works to secure clean water, and built a small anti-vaccine organization into Children's Health Defense, a juggernaut in the movement that saw its reach grow rapidly during the pandemic.

Children's Health Defense has a lawsuit pending against a number of news organizations, among them The Associated Press, accusing them of violating antitrust laws by taking action to identify misinformation, including about COVID-19 and COVID-19 vaccines. Kennedy took leave from the group when he announced his run for president but is listed as one of its attorneys in the lawsuit.

He's married to actress Cheryl Hines.

What does Kennedy's campaign look like?

Kennedy's need to collect thousands of signatures to get on the ballot has taken him to places that rarely see presidential candidates, including Hawaii, Wyoming and West Virginia.

At events in Phoenix and Las Vegas, hundreds of supporters queued up outside hours before he was scheduled to arrive. He attracts a legion of fans, many of whom have listened extensively to Kennedy's interviews on podcasts or YouTube videos.

In Nevada, massive graphics and photos were projected on three walls as upbeat music played. Drinks and merchandise were for sale.

Kennedy speaks in a quiet, strained voice, sometimes haltingly, the result of a neurological condition called spasmodic dysphonia.

What does he talk about?

Kennedy frames himself as a truth teller with a track record of fighting for the middle class against powerful interests. He points to lawsuits he's won against corporate behemoths such as Monsanto and DuPont.

"I can fix this country," he said in Las Vegas in February. "All these agencies that intimidate normal politicians, I've sued every one of them. ... When you sue these agencies, you get a Ph.D. in corporate capture and how to unravel it." Corporate capture refers to private interests using their influence to control government decision-making, as when they help draft legislation.

Kennedy has been critical of U.S. support for Ukraine and supportive of Israel's war against Hamas. He wants to reduce military and health care spending because of the impact on budget deficits, and combat rising housing costs so young people can afford to buy homes.

Kennedy has found a loyal following among people distrustful of institutions and those who believe the government has been captured by corporations, especially pharmaceutical companies.

He hasn't shied away from his controversial views on health care and vaccines. He wants to dismantle the public health bureaucracy, saying he'd immediately tell the National Institutes of Health to refocus research away from infectious diseases and vaccines and toward chronic diseases.

Kennedy insists he is not anti-vaccine and claims he has never told the public to avoid vaccination. But he has repeatedly made his opposition to vaccines clear. He said on a podcast "there's no vaccine that is safe and effective" and has urged people to resist CDC guidelines on when kids should get vaccinated.

While there are rare instances when people have severe reactions to vaccines, the billions of doses administered globally provide real-world evidence that they are safe. The World Health Organization says

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vaccines prevent as many as 5 million deaths each year.

Can he win?

The United States has a long history of rejecting independent or third-party presidential candidates. In fact, the last president to win without a party's backing was George Washington, and he did it before there were political parties.

The last third-party candidate to make it to the White House was Abraham Lincoln with the newly formed Republican Party.

The last third-party candidate to pull more than single digits in the popular vote was Ross Perot, a businessman who won 19% in 1992 and 8% in 1996. But he won zero electoral votes.

And while the independent share of the electorate is growing, it is still dwarfed by voters who consistently support Republican or Democratic candidates, even if they identify as independent.

In other words, the odds are long.

Kennedy's case for optimism hinges on his relatively strong showing in a few national polls. Polls during the 2016 presidential campaign regularly put libertarian Gary Johnson's support in the high single or low double digits, but he ultimately received only about 3% of the vote nationwide.

Horse-race polls are also notoriously unreliable this far out from an election, and many Americans don't know who Kennedy is. A February AP-NORC poll found, for instance, that 29% of Americans don't know enough about Kennedy to have a view about him.

Some of the people who say they'd support him may also be reacting to his famous last name rather than his actual pitch as a candidate. A CNN/SSRS poll conducted last spring found that 20% of people who said they would consider supporting Kennedy for the Democratic nomination — for which he was running at the time — said that their support was related to his last name and Kennedy family connections. Only 12% said it was because of support for his views and policies.

But for any of that to matter, he has to get on the ballot.

How does he get on the ballot?

Forget getting elected; merely running for president is an arduous process, especially for candidates like Kennedy who don't belong to a party.

Every state has different rules, requiring an army of lawyers to make sure everything is done right. Most states require thousands of signatures.

A pro-Kennedy super PAC is helping pay for Kennedy's ballot access work in several states. His allies have created a political party to ease the process in some states by getting recognized as a party and making Kennedy its nominee.

He has been approved for the ballot in Utah. His campaign and super PAC say he's collected enough signatures to qualify in several other states, including the battlegrounds of Arizona, Georgia and Nevada, though election officials in those states have not yet affirmed his candidacy.

Kennedy has also said he's talked with officials from the Libertarian Party, though it's not clear what a tie-up between the two might look like.

Who is working for him?

Kennedy is looking to his family and his allies in the anti-vaccine world to staff his campaign, building a leadership team that is light on experience working in politics.

His campaign manager is Amaryllis Fox Kennedy, his daughter-in-law who served as a CIA officer and has not worked in politics before.

His communications director, Del Bigtree, is founder of the Informed Consent Action Network, an anti-vaccine group. He also produced "Vaxxed," an anti-vaccine film that promoted the discredited idea that the vaccines cause autism.

Press secretary Stefanie Spear was an editor for the Children's Health Defense news website. Charles Eisenstein, a New Age author, is an adviser.

Kennedy also has staff and volunteers spread throughout states and focused on gathering signatures to get him on the ballot.

Supreme Court rejects appeal by former New Mexico county commissioner banned for Jan. 6 insurrection

By MORGAN LEE, NICHOLAS RICCARDI and MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court on Monday rejected an appeal from a former New Mexico county commissioner who was kicked out of office over his participation in the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol.

Former Otero County commissioner Couy Griffin, a cowboy pastor who rode to national political fame by embracing then-President Donald Trump with a series of horseback caravans, is the only elected official thus far to be banned from office in connection with the Capitol attack, which disrupted Congress as it was trying to certify Joe Biden's 2020 electoral victory over Trump.

At a 2022 trial in state district court, Griffin received the first disqualification from office in over a century under a provision of the 14th Amendment written to prevent former Confederates from serving in government after the Civil War.

Though the Supreme Court ruled this month that states don't have the ability to bar Trump or other candidates for federal offices from the ballot, the justices said different rules apply to state and local candidates.

"We conclude that States may disqualify persons holding or attempting to hold state office," the justices wrote in an unsigned opinion.

The outcome of Griffin's case could bolster efforts to hold other state and local elected officials accountable for their involvement in the Jan. 6 attack.

Griffin, a Republican, was convicted separately in federal court of entering a restricted area on the Capitol grounds on Jan. 6 and received a 14-day prison sentence. The sentence was offset by time served after his arrest in Washington, where he had returned to protest Biden's 2021 inauguration. That conviction is under appeal.

Griffin contends that he entered the Capitol grounds on Jan. 6 without recognizing that it had been designated as a restricted area and that he attempted to lead a crowd in prayer using a bullhorn, without engaging in violence.

The recent ruling in the Trump case shut down a push in dozens of states to end Trump's Republican candidacy for president over claims he helped instigate the insurrection to try to prevent Biden, a Democrat, from replacing him in the White House in 2020.

The accusations of insurrection against Griffin were filed on behalf of three New Mexico residents by Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, a left-leaning group that also brought the lawsuit in Colorado to disqualify Trump.

CREW has outlined the case for investigating several current state legislators who went to Washington on Jan. 6.

In Griffin's 2022 trial in state district court, New Mexico Judge Francis Mathew recognized the Jan. 6 attack as an insurrection and ruled that Griffin aided that insurrection, without engaging in violence, contributing to a delay in Congress' election certification proceedings.

Griffin's appeal of the disqualification asserted that only Congress, and not a state court, has the power to enforce the anti-insurrection clause of the 14th Amendment by legislation, and it urged the Supreme Court to rule on whether the events on Jan. 6 constituted an "insurrection" as defined in the Constitution.

It also invoked Griffin's rights to free speech protections.

"If the decision ... is to stand, at least in New Mexico, it is now the crime of insurrection to gather people to pray together for the United States of America on the unmarked restricted grounds of the Capitol building," Florida-based defense attorney Peter Ticktin argued on behalf of Griffin in court filings.

At trial, Mathew, the judge, called Griffin's free-speech arguments self-serving and not credible, noting that the then-commissioner spread lies about the 2020 election being stolen from Trump in a series of speeches at rallies during a cross-country journey starting in New Mexico, calling on crowds to go with him to Washington on Jan. 6 and join the "war" over the presidential election results.

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Mathew said recordings by a videographer accompanying Griffin outside the U.S. Capitol showed that the county commissioner "incited the mob, even after seeing members of the mob a short distance away attack police officers and violently try to break into the Capitol building."

The New Mexico Supreme Court later refused to hear the case after Griffin missed procedural deadlines. Griffin on Monday said the Supreme Court took "the coward's way out" in dismissing his appeal without comment, calling it "the greatest attack on our democracy to date."

"When civil courtrooms can remove elected officials, it sets a very dangerous precedent," Griffin said. "Personally, I'm very disappointed and equally concerned about the future of our political system."

On the third anniversary of the Jan. 6 attack this year, Griffin cast himself as the victim of political persecution as he spoke to a gathering in the rural community of Gillette, Wyoming, at the invitation of a county Republican Party.

"God is really allowing me to experience some amazing days," Griffin said. "Jan. 6 was a day like no other. It was a day where a type of patriotism was expressed that I'd never seen before, and I was honored to be there."

In 2019, Griffin forged a group of rodeo acquaintances into the promotional group called Cowboys for Trump, which staged horseback parades to support Trump's conservative message about gun rights, immigration controls and abortion restrictions.

While still a county commissioner, Griffin joined with Republican colleagues in refusing to certify results of the June 2022 primary election based on distrust of the voting systems used to tally the vote, even though the county's election official said there were no problems. The board ultimately certified the election on a 2-1 vote with Griffin still voting no based on a "gut feeling."

Griffin withstood a recall petition drive in 2021. After his disqualification from office, Griffin was tried and acquitted by a jury in his home county in March 2023 of allegations that he declined to register and disclose donors to Cowboys for Trump.

In Vermont, 'Town Meeting' is democracy embodied. What can the rest of the country learn from it?

By NICK PERRY and LISA RATHKE Associated Press

ELMORE, Vt. (AP) — Julie wants more donations to the food pantry. Kipp is busy knitting a sweater. Shorty is ready to ask: Why is so much being spent on a truck? The coffee, fresh-baked bread and donuts have been laid out. Eighty-seven voters have squeezed into the Elmore Town Hall.

Town Meeting is about to begin.

Across the United States, people are disgusted with politics. Many feel powerless and alienated from their representatives at every level — and especially from those in Washington. The tone long ago became nasty, and many feel forced to pick a side and view those on the other side as adversaries.

But in pockets of New England, democracy is done a bit differently. People can still participate directly and in person. One day each year, townsfolk gather to hash out local issues. They talk, listen, debate, vote. And in places like Elmore, once it's all over, they sit down together for a potluck lunch.

Town Meeting is a tradition that, in Vermont, dates back more than 250 years, to before the founding of the republic. But it is under threat. Many people feel they no longer have the time or ability to attend such meetings. Last year, residents of neighboring Morristown voted to switch to a secret ballot system, ending their town meeting tradition.

Not so in Elmore, population 886. Its residents are used to holding tight to traditions. They've fought to keep open their post office, their store and their school, the last one-room schoolhouse in the state. Last fall, Elmore residents voted 2-1 in favor of keeping their town meetings.

And so it is at 9 a.m. on the first Tuesday in March, when, atop an elevated stage, moderator Jon Gailmor stands up.

"Good morning, everyone, and welcome to democracy," he says. "This is the real thing, and we should all be proud that we're doing this."

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COMMUNITY AND GOVERNMENT, HAND IN HAND

Elmore calls itself the beauty spot of Vermont. The town borders a lake, which in early March is dotted with people ice fishing. Beyond, a mountain rises. At night, steam floats up from sugarhouses, where maple sap is being boiled down into syrup.

The heartbeat of the town is the store. "I've always said it's a live, living, breathing creature. I don't own it; she owns me," says Kathy Miller, 63, who bought the store with her husband, Warren, in 1983. People would come in not only to buy milk and pick up the mail but to use the fax machine, find a plumber or just to swap gossip.

In 2020, Warren died. He loved collecting things — advertising signs, beer-tap handles, snowboards. At home, Miller looks through some of his collections and talks about selling stuff. Her sense of loss is profound. Her best friend, the man she worked alongside every day, is gone.

The year he died, COVID-19 restrictions also took a toll on the business, and Miller found she was struggling. Then townsfolk began giving her money in advance. "I had one gentleman give me \$5,000 just to keep the store going," Miller says, choking up.

Miller kept running the store for another 18 months before she was bought out by a community trust, set up to ensure the store remains open. These days, the store is run by Jason Clark. Miller helps out when she's not serving meals at a food kitchen. And she still collects her bills from P.O. Box 1.

Miller recalls that after joining the state grocers' association in the 1980s, she testified before Congress about the impact of credit card fees. Back then, she believed that little people could have a voice in national politics. But these days, she says, Washington has gotten away from the basics. Too big, she says. Too messed up. Tilted off its axis.

Her husband served as a Republican representative in the Vermont state legislature, and Miller describes herself as a Republican who hasn't drunk the Kool-Aid. She notes both Vermont and Elmore have shifted more Democratic over the years. But at Town Meeting, she says, political differences don't mean a thing.

"There's no animosity," she says. "People can talk about things. You shake hands with your neighbor when you leave."

At Town Meeting, Miller makes a pitch to increase the town's library funding from \$1,000 per year to \$3,000, to reflect the increasing patronage and expenses. The townsfolk agree.

A MODERATOR WHO KEEPS THINGS MODERATE

Gailmor, 75, is a singer-songwriter who brings an element of performance to his role as moderator.

"Reappraisals of your homes are going to start in the spring," he says as he reads through a dry list of announcements. But then, to laughter, he adds: "So spruce 'em up."

He describes himself as an independent voter who has supported both Republicans and Democrats over the years.

The day before the meeting, Gailmor plays his guitar at the library in Morristown. He's helping a group of senior citizens practice the songs they have written for an upcoming performance. They are supposed to ax two of the eight songs but can't bring themselves to choose. Instead, they decide, they will perform them all.

The seniors love Gailmor, who says he has somehow aged to become one of them. They joke about "flatlanders" — people not born in Vermont — and have come up with a song that celebrates the spring thaw: "So break out the booze, we've got nothin' to lose, embracing the ooze, it's the mud season blues."

Gailmor first moved to Elmore in 1980 and says he found the town meeting tradition nothing short of miraculous. It wasn't some politician spouting off but real people taking part. He was so inspired that he even wrote a song about it. He plays it for the seniors.

"Greet the old town folks, hear the gossip and the jokes, dip a donut in a good strong cup of Joe," Gailmor sings. "Find your favorite chair, plant your buttocks there — we're getting down to business, don't you know."

At town meetings, people sometimes go beyond voting on local issues and decide to take a stand on national issues of the day. At home, Gailmor holds a photograph of his wife, Cathy Murphy, who died two

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years ago. Captured by an Associated Press photographer, the image shows Murphy at an Elmore Town Meeting in the 1980s, when she was speaking out against nuclear weapons as part of the Nuclear Freeze movement.

"You feel important," Gailmor says. "You feel like you are being listened to."

This year, Elmore decides to take a stance on another broader issue by adopting a declaration of inclusion. It states the town will welcome all people regardless of race, religion, sexual orientation or gender identity.

A 'FORCED CIVILITY' THAT WORKS

"Forced civility." Frank Bryan, a retired University of Vermont professor who wrote a book about town meetings, coined that term to describe the way people dealing with disagreements in person are compelled to recognize each other's common humanity in a way that larger-scale political interactions do not allow.

That doesn't mean it always goes smoothly. In Gailmor's decade of moderating, he says one incident stands out. He invoked the rules to stop one man from repeatedly talking on a particular issue. The man seethed, then came up to Gailmor after the meeting to say he felt like chopping his head off. He stormed off and later moved away. The animosity with Gailmor was never resolved.

Miller says she learned her own lesson about small-town politics after once putting up a political sign about school choice in her store. She had one customer who wouldn't come back and stopped speaking to her, she says. Even with that, though, she is confident about the gentility of the system in which she participates.

Just having voters show up for hours on a weekday morning is challenging. Morristown is one of many Vermont towns to end the tradition of town meetings. Richard Watts, the director of the Center for Research on Vermont at UVM, says people in larger towns tend to feel less sense of connection.

There's a key downside when a town moves to secret ballot, also known as an Australian ballot because states there were the first to adopt such a system in the mid-19th century: It's usually a straight up-or-down vote. That means people can't make tweaks or debate issues. And for some, the open, collegial debate is the genius of the entire system.

"You'll always have disagreements, and sometimes, sides," Miller says. "But it's not hate. There's not the rage that I'm seeing on TV."

WHY PEOPLE GET INVOLVED (AND STAY INVOLVED)

At the meeting, people leaf through the town report, which features a photo of Brent Hosking and a note thanking him for his 25 years of service as Elmore's volunteer fire chief.

A retired industrial arts teacher, Hosking, 74, first bought an old farmhouse in Elmore in 1979. What's sprouted on his property since then is testament to his never-ending tinkering. He has built a huge barn, an addition to his home and a sugarhouse to make maple syrup. Antique vehicles are scattered around his farm like animal carcasses, projects for another day.

He's tapped 400 maple trees — a small operation compared to some of his neighbors — and still uses buckets to carry the sap from some of them to the boiler. He and his wife, Sharon Fortune, sell some of the syrup they make from home and use the rest. Not only on their French toast and pancakes, but also in spaghetti sauce, stews, baking, on top of popcorn and in their morning coffee.

"The people in town, if they come over to eat, they say 'Well, is there maple syrup in this?'" Hosking says, chuckling.

He helped start the fire department in 1983 after locals tired of paying neighboring towns to extinguish fires. They get callouts for car accidents, structure fires, and unprepared hikers who get stranded on Mount Elmore.

Being involved has helped foster a sense of community, Hosking says. He knows others will have his back, like when he was once on vacation and other department volunteers corralled his escaped cattle back onto his farm. Town Meeting helps foster that sense of community, he says. It's a time to get to know your neighbor, he says, which is important in a small town.

Hosking says he's a Democrat but supports Vermont's moderate Republican Governor Phil Scott. Like many of his fellow citizens in town, he doesn't like the turn that national politics has taken.

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"You feel helpless, because all you do is one vote," Hosking says. "It seems like it gets lost. And I think a lot of people in the nation feel the same way."

DEMOCRACY ACCOMPLISHED. LET'S EAT.

Elmore's Town Meeting has been going for nearly four hours. What has unfolded represents a cross-section of democracy, of people choosing for themselves how to live and work and govern.

— First, a big surprise: Nancy Davis throws her hat in the ring for a position on the cemetery commission, going up against incumbent John Fish. Nobody can remember a contested cemetery election. Davis, a relative newcomer to Elmore, wants to get more involved.

From there, democracy plays out. People write their choices on Post-it size pieces of green paper and slot them in an old mailbox. Three vote-counters tally the results: Fish 37, Davis 36 — and one spoiled ballot by somebody who has voted for both candidates.

— An impassioned speech by Julie Bomengen secures an extra \$500 for the Lamoille Community Food Share, raising Elmore's annual contribution to \$750.

— Several people have been criticizing the town's spending habits. Others argue that replacing equipment like the road maintenance truck will only end up costing more if the can is kicked down the road. "We have just spent two-and-a-half million on this new garage, and then we go out and put \$300,000 into a new truck. I think that's a little overkill," Shorty Towne tells the crowd.

— After exhaustive discussions, Elmore's annual town budget of \$1.1 million is passed in a voice vote. There is no dissent.

— A move to change next year's Town Meeting to a Saturday to encourage better attendance is rejected after a survey on people's preferences proved inconclusive. Elmore, after all, likes its traditions.

Gailmor, who has been voted in for another year as moderator, commends townsfolk for holding a particularly lively and well-attended meeting. Kipp Bovey, who has been active in the meeting, has made good progress on knitting her sweater. Towne has had his say about the truck. Democracy has unfolded on a small canvas. And the much-discussed American political polarization? It's nowhere in sight.

It's time to adjourn.

"Lunch is cold," Gailmor says. "But it will be in the church."

Takeaways from the predictable Russian election that gave Putin another 6 years in power

By DASHA LITVINOVA Associated Press

TALLINN, Estonia (AP) — To no one's surprise, President Vladimir Putin secured another six years in power in a preordained election landslide that comes amid the harshest crackdown on the opposition and free speech since Soviet times.

The three days of balloting, in which Putin faced three token contenders but none offering voters any real choice, went ahead with barely any independent monitoring and were marked by a level of pressure unseen in previous Russian elections. That left little room for protests, but some Russians still tried to defy authorities.

Some key takeaways from the election:

PUTIN WAS IN FULL CONTROL OF THE ELECTION

The Central Election Commission said Putin received 87.28% of the vote, the highest number for any president in post-Soviet Russia. It said turnout was 77.44% of the electorate, also the biggest. Others on the ballot all finished in single digits, and anti-war candidates were not allowed to run.

The state news agency RIA Novosti said the vote "as expected ... took place in an atmosphere of unprecedented national unity."

There was no video from CCTV cameras at polling stations depicting voter fraud or ballot-box stuffing — access to the footage was more heavily restricted than in previous elections — and hardly any independent monitors were on hand to document irregularities.

There still was voter intimidation, however, according to Golos, Russia's prominent independent election

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watchdog, noting it received reports of citizens being pressured to vote in over 60 Russian regions. On Sunday, voters were searched at polling stations, and some reported police checking their ballots before they were cast or peering over their shoulder while they filled them out, Golos said.

"Nothing like that has happened on such a scale at elections in Russia before," Golos said in a statement Monday. A total of 89 people were detained Sunday in 22 cities, said OVD-Info, a rights group that monitors political arrests.

The 71-year-old Russia leader "chose to show his adversaries his power," said political analyst Abbas Gallyamov, a former Putin's speechwriter.

Vandalism also was reported at polling stations, with arson attempts or some pouring ink into ballot boxes. On Sunday, a woman who set off a firecracker in a polling station bathroom was injured. At least 34 people were detained on vandalism charges over the weekend, according to Russian independent news outlet Verstka.

A STYMIED OPPOSITION STILL MUSTERED SOME PROTESTS

The Kremlin has severely crippled the Russian opposition in recent years. Top figures are either in jail or in exile abroad, and the death last month of Alexei Navalny, who was Putin's most vocal opponent, raised even more questions about what lies ahead for them.

On Sunday, some Russians turned up at polling stations at home and abroad at noon local time and formed long lines in a strategy endorsed by the late opposition leader Alexei Navalny and other Putin adversaries.

Analysts had said the "Noon Against Putin" tactic would test how well exiled opposition figures could rally supporters amid the crackdown that has largely scared people off from staging mass demonstrations.

Its success was hard to gauge. Navalny's team shared photos of lines at polling stations in Russia and embassies abroad as proof that many heeded their call. Journalists from The Associated Press and other independent media spoke to voters in multiple locations who confirmed they showed up to take part in the protest.

But Russian officials and state media interpreted the lines in their favor, saying they indicated an increased interest in the election.

This protest couldn't have had any direct implications for the Kremlin and the election's outcome, but it did show that such "silent resistance" — both inside the country and abroad — will continue, said Andrei Kolesnikov, senior fellow at the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center.

"The message to political manipulators has been sent: 'We are here, this is what we are like, we're not giving up, we're prepared to be creative in using unexpected windows (of opportunity to protest),' " Kolesnikov said.

UNPOPULAR MOVES PROBABLY ARE AHEAD

In a post-election news conference, Putin looked relaxed, Gallyamov noted, probably realizing that "he has secured his future for at least six years ahead."

Demonstrating his confidence, Putin even referenced Navalny by name — something he had made a point of not doing in public in years — and revealed that days before his foe's death, he supported the idea of releasing him from prison in a prisoner exchange.

There likely will be a period where officials will take some time off to celebrate the victory, Gallyamov said, but after that, unpopular moves could be in store.

After his reelection in 2018, Putin famously raised the age for which workers could receive their pensions, a decision that proved truly unpopular and prompted protests.

Decisions were made before this year's election "to keep the lid on public discontent," such as preventing price increases and not announcing another mobilization of troops for Ukraine, but all that could change now, he said.

The crackdown on dissent also is expected to persist.

Some analysts suggest Putin might further test NATO's resolve during his fifth term.

Reactions as Vladimir Putin secures a fifth term as Russia's president after tightly controlled vote

The Associated Press undefined

Vladimir Putin secured an unprecedented fifth term as president of Russia Monday, as the election commission announced the results of a vote in which he faced no serious challenges and which happened amid the strictest crackdown on opposition and free speech since Soviet times.

Putin claimed his overwhelming margin was proof that Russians had placed their "trust" and "hopes" in him, while politicians across Europe rejected the vote as a sham and condemned Russia's efforts to stage elections in occupied parts of Ukraine that it claims as its own territory.

Here's what Putin, European leaders and others are saying:

"Of course, we have lots of tasks ahead. But I want to make it clear for everyone: when we were consolidated, no one has ever managed to frighten us, to suppress our will and our self-conscience. They failed in the past and they will fail in the future." — Vladimir Putin, President of Russia

"It certainly was an undemocratic process and I think it is safe to say that there certainly won't be congratulatory calls coming from the United States of America." — State Department deputy spokesperson Vedant Patel

"The elections took place in an ever-shrinking political space, which has resulted in an alarming increase of violations of civil and political rights, and precluded many candidates from running, including all those opposed to Russia's illegal war of aggression." — Statement from the European Union

"There is no legitimacy in the imitation of elections." — Volodymyr Zelenskyy, president of Ukraine, in a nightly radio address on Sunday

"The results are, of course, stunning. It's a serious signal to the West, which has sought to destabilize the domestic situation in Russia." — President Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus, during a meeting with officials after congratulating Putin in a call

"We consider this so-called election in Russia last weekend to be neither free nor fair ... Russia, as the chancellor has already said, is now a dictatorship and is ruled by Vladimir Putin in an authoritarian manner." — Christina Hoffmann, spokeswoman for German Chancellor Olaf Scholz

"Russia's organization of elections in occupied parts of Georgia and Ukraine is completely illegal. And Russia's presidential election was clearly neither free nor fair." — NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg while visiting Tbilisi, Georgia on Monday

"These Russian elections starkly underline the depth of repression under President Putin's regime, which seeks to silence any opposition to his illegal war. Putin removes his political opponents, controls the media, and then crowns himself the winner. This is not democracy." — David Cameron, U.K. foreign secretary.

"Searches at entrances to polling stations, attempts to check ballots before voters put them into ballot boxes, detentions of voters who came to vote noon. Now there is a report that at one polling station in Moscow, police have demanded that a chairman of a commission (of poll workers) open a ballot box and give them a ballot with something written on it. It is the first time in my life that I see such absurdity." — Stanislav Andreychuk, co-chair of Golos independent election watchdog, on Telegram

"I'm glad that people outside the confines of the political prison that is called Russia currently are able to express their opinions ... For example, Russians that voted in Lithuania, just 3% of those who came to

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the Russian embassy in Vilnius voted for Vladimir Putin. Others decided either to spoil the ballot paper or to vote for any other candidate that was there on the ballot." — Gabrielius Landsbergis, Lithuanian foreign minister

"The election in Russia was an election without a choice. Holding so-called elections in parts of Ukraine, parts of Moldova and parts of Georgia is contrary to international law. It is therefore all the more remarkable how many Russians made it clear this weekend that they do not see eye to eye with this Russian president. That you go to a polling station even if you are accompanied by soldiers — that fills me with the utmost respect." — German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock

The status quo has become a moving target as college basketball ramps up to March Madness

By JOHN MARSHALL AP Basketball Writer

Oregon pulled off a run of three wins in three days, capped by a championship that propelled the Ducks into the NCAA Tournament.

Standing on a makeshift stage next to the Pac-12 tournament trophy, the players danced and shouted as confetti fell in one big Las Vegas party.

With the revelry came the realization the moment was also a wake, a goodbye to a once-great conference that splintered amid a rapidly transforming college sports landscape.

"Part of me is really sad that this is not going to be here because like all the coaches in the league, I like to travel in the league and those things are all going to change," Oregon coach Dana Altman said. "But change is exciting also, even at my age. I am kind of looking forward to it. It's going to be a different challenge."

Change is naturally ingrained in college athletics, from the sheer number of schools, student-athletes and sports to the needs in a range of conferences big and small.

The process has been accelerating, chaos becoming the status quo as the college basketball season winds into March Madness.

Name, Image and Likeness has opened new revenue-earning opportunities for student-athletes once considered purely amateurs. With it, schools and coaches have had to adapt or get left behind. The NCAA has been forced to create new rules to keep up with the money flow.

The transfer portal has created a maelstrom of madness not limited to March, with programs practically starting over every season as players move through a revolving door that opens just as teams are preparing for the postseason.

The massive shifts have shaken the foundation of the NCAA, changing the governing organization's structure as it tries to keep up with the world of college athletics.

"There's constant change and so you have to embrace that," ACC Commissioner Jim Phillips said. "For some, I think there's a tug to go back and can't we undo some of these things. And I think that's counterproductive."

The latest round of conference realignment could reshape college sports.

Realignment had slowed since the previous mass of conference swapping in the early 2010s, with a handful of schools moving to new leagues each year.

Texas and Oklahoma ignited the latest round by announcing last year they would be leaving the Big 12 for SEC riches in 2024. Southern California and UCLA followed by bolting from the Pac-12 to the Big Ten.

Losing two marquee schools, along with the lack of a new media rights deal for the Pac-12, forced the remaining schools in the conference to rethink their futures. A mass exodus followed, leaving only Oregon State and Washington State stuck in a league once dubbed the "Conference of Champions."

"We all grew up with the Pac-8, Pac-10, Pac-12, and to see it go away is something sad," Arizona coach Tommy Lloyd said. "But I'm also excited for new horizons, so we're not going to get sentimental about it. You and I can get sentimental at the end of the year and shed a tear, but now it's business."

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The demise of the Pac-12 led to what may be the beginning stages of college athletics shifting to a handful of super conferences.

The Big Ten will be up to 18 schools next year after the additions of USC, UCLA, Oregon and Washington. The ACC also will be an 18-team league by adding California, Stanford and SMU.

The Big 12 will have 16 teams now that Arizona, Arizona State, Colorado and Utah are headed east. The Southeastern Conference also will be 16 teams with the additions of Texas and Oklahoma.

The consolidation of power and resources will make it even tougher for the smaller conferences to keep up. It's also led the NCAA to look at possibly expanding the NCAA Tournament beyond 68 teams, which has stirred mixed emotions across the country.

"People were mad about the play-in game, now that's exciting, it's the build-up to the tournament," Minnesota coach Ben Johnson said. "We have to be openminded to changing and having new ideas and what can we do to push the envelope."

The changes are here and more are likely coming. The status quo has become a moving target and everyone has to adapt.

Astronaut Thomas Stafford, commander of Apollo 10, has died at age 93

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Astronaut Thomas P. Stafford, who commanded a dress rehearsal flight for the 1969 moon landing and the first U.S.-Soviet space linkup, died Monday. He was 93.

Stafford, a retired Air Force three-star general, took part in four space missions. Before Apollo 10, he flew on two Gemini flights, including the first rendezvous of two U.S. capsules in orbit. He died in a hospital near his Space Coast Florida home, said Max Ary, director of the Stafford Air & Space Museum in Weatherford, Oklahoma.

Stafford was one of 24 NASA astronauts who flew to the moon, but he did not land on it. Only seven of them are still alive.

"Today General Tom Stafford went to the eternal heavens which he so courageously explored as a Gemini and Apollo astronaut as well as a peacemaker in Apollo Soyuz," NASA Administrator Bill Nelson said via X, formerly known as Twitter. "Those of us privileged to know him are very sad but grateful we knew a giant."

After he put away his flight suit, Stafford was the go-to guy for NASA when it sought independent advice on everything from human Mars missions to safety issues to returning to flight after the 2003 space shuttle Columbia accident. He chaired an oversight group that looked into how to fix the then-flawed Hubble Space Telescope, earning a NASA public service award.

"Tom was involved in so many things that most people were not aware of, such as being known as the 'Father of Stealth,'" Ary said in an email. Stafford was in charge of the famous "Area 51" desert base that was the site of many UFO theories, but the home of testing of Air Force stealth technologies.

The Apollo 10 mission in May 1969 set the stage for Apollo 11's historic mission two months later. Stafford and Gene Cernan took the lunar lander nicknamed Snoopy within 9 miles (14 kilometers) of the moon's surface. Astronaut John Young stayed behind in the main spaceship dubbed Charlie Brown.

"The most impressive sight, I think, that really changed your view of things is when you first see Earth," Stafford recalled in a 1997 oral history, talking about the view from lunar orbit.

Then came the moon's far side: "The Earth disappears. There's this big black void."

Apollo 10's return to Earth set the world's record for fastest speed by a crewed vehicle at 24,791 mph (39,897 kph).

After the moon landings ended, NASA and the Soviet Union decided on a joint docking mission and Stafford, a one-star general at the time, was chosen to command the American side. It meant intensive language training, being followed by the KGB while in the Soviet Union, and lifelong friendships with cosmonauts. The two teams of space travelers even went to Disney World and rode Space Mountain together before going into orbit and joining ships.

"We have capture," Stafford radioed in Russian as the Apollo and Soyuz spacecraft hooked up. His Russian

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counterpart, Alexei Leonov, responded in English: "Well done, Tom, it was a good show. I vote for you."

The 1975 mission included two days during which the five men worked together on experiments. After, the two teams toured the world together, meeting President Gerald Ford and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev.

"It helped prove to the rest of the world that two completely opposite political systems could work together," Stafford recalled at a 30th anniversary gathering in 2005.

The two crews became so close that years later Leonov arranged for Stafford to be able to adopt two Russian boys when Stafford was in his 70s.

"We are too old to adopt, but they were too old to be adopted," Stafford told The Oklahoman in 2004. "They just added so much meaning to our life, and just because you're retiring doesn't mean you don't have anything left to give."

Later, Stafford was a central part of discussions in the 1990s that brought Russia into the partnership building and operating the International Space Station.

Growing up in Weatherford, Oklahoma, Stafford said he would look up and see giant DC-3 airplanes fly overhead on early transcontinental routes.

"I wanted to fly since I was 5 or 6 years old seeing those airplanes," he told NASA historians.

Stafford went to the U.S. Naval Academy where he graduated in the top 1% of his class and flew in the backseat of some airplanes and loved it. He volunteered for the Air Force and had hoped to fly combat in the Korean War. But by the time he got his wings, the war ended. He went to the Air Force's experimental test pilot school, graduated first in his class there and stayed on as an instructor.

In 1962, NASA selected Stafford for its second set of astronauts, which included Neil Armstrong, Frank Borman and Pete Conrad.

Stafford was assigned along with Wally Schirra to Gemini 6. Their original mission was to rendezvous with an empty spaceship. But their 1965 launch was scrubbed when the spaceship exploded soon after liftoff. NASA improvised and in December, Gemini 6 rendezvoused with but didn't dock with two astronauts aboard Gemini 7.

Stafford's next flight in 1966 was with Cernan on Gemini 9. Cernan's spacewalk, connected to a jet-pack like device, didn't go well. Cernan complained that the sun and machine made him extra hot and hurt his back. Then his visor fogged up and he couldn't see.

"Call it quits, Gene. Get out of there," Stafford, the commander, told Cernan. Stafford talked him back in, saying "move your hand over, start to float up ... stick your hand up ... just walk hand over hand."

In all, Stafford logged 507 hours in space and flew four different types of spacecraft and 127 types of aircraft and helicopters.

After the Apollo-Soyuz mission, Stafford returned to the Air Force and worked in research and commanded the Air Force Flight Test Center before retiring in 1979 as a three-star general.

Stafford's Air Force duties not only had him run the military's top flight school and experimental plane testing base, but he was commanding general of Area 51. A biography from his museum said, that while Stafford was in charge of Area 51 and later as the development and acquisition chief at the Pentagon he "wrote the specs and established the program that led to the development of the F-117 Stealth Fighter, and later, the B-2 Stealth Bomber."

Stafford became an executive for an Oklahoma-based transportation company and later moved to Florida, near Cape Canaveral.

He is survived by his wife, Linda, two sons, two daughters and two stepchildren, according to the museum.

March Madness brackets are here. Here's how to pick your teams

By NOAH TRISTER AP Sports Writer

March Madness this year comes at a time of great uncertainty in college sports.

In addition to eyeing potential 5-12 upsets and trying to figure out which sleeper to put in the Elite Eight, fans also have to consider more existential questions about college basketball's future. How will realignment affect the makeup of Division I? How much will football-related decisions affect basketball? How long will the NCAA Tournament stay at 68 teams, and if it changes, what will that mean for the Cinderellas of March?

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For now, this event looks pretty much the way it has for a generation. Don't take it for granted as you fill out your brackets — and if you need some tips, here you go. A Final Four with UConn, Houston, Gonzaga and Michigan State? Let us explain:

EAST REGION

First round winners: UConn, Northwestern, San Diego State, Auburn, BYU, Illinois, Drake, Iowa State.

Yale brings 7-footer Danny Wolf and an experienced supporting cast, but drew a tough first-round matchup against fourth-seeded Auburn. The Tigers are ranked No. 4 in the country by Ken Pomeroy.

Second round winners: UConn, Auburn, Illinois, Iowa State.

The Sweet 16 in this region could include the conference tournament champions of the Big East, SEC, Big Ten and Big 12.

Regional semifinal winners: UConn, Iowa State.

UConn is the betting favorite to win a second straight national title. The Huskies are also ranked No. 1 by Pomeroy, and although we're used to surprises it's hard to pick them to exit before the Elite Eight.

Regional champion: UConn. Iowa State had a case for a No. 1 seed, but there's a gap between the Cyclones and the Huskies.

SOUTH REGION

First Four: Colorado over Boise State.

First round winners: Houston, Nebraska, Wisconsin, Duke, Texas Tech, Kentucky, Florida, Marquette.

James Madison over Wisconsin figures to be a popular first-round upset pick — maybe a little too popular. Same with Vermont over Duke. The chalk holds in this region, for this round anyway.

Second round winners: Houston, Duke, Kentucky, Florida.

Kentucky's defense should be its undoing eventually, but the Wildcats beat Texas Tech in a clash of styles.

Regional semifinal winners: Houston, Kentucky.

The Sweet 16 and Elite Eight in the South are being held in Dallas, so expect the Cougars to have plenty of support.

Regional champion: Houston. The Cougars should be well prepared after joining the Big 12 and facing a power-conference schedule. It's on to the Final Four for Kelvin Sampson's team.

MIDWEST REGION

First Four: Montana State over Grambling State, Colorado State over Virginia.

First round winners: Purdue, TCU, Gonzaga, Samford, Oregon, Creighton, Texas, Saint Peter's.

"Dickinson" is the key word in this region. Kansas big man Hunter Dickinson didn't play in the Big 12 Tournament, and his health has been a concern for the Jayhawks. Top-seeded Purdue, meanwhile, needs to avoid being haunted by last year's loss to 16th-seeded Fairleigh Dickinson.

The Boilermakers advance. The fourth-seeded Jayhawks go down against Samford.

Second round winners: Purdue, Gonzaga, Creighton, Saint Peter's.

Three times in the past five tournaments, a No. 15 seed has made the Sweet 16, so don't be afraid to pick one. And hey, Saint Peter's has done it before from this same seed line.

Regional semifinal winners: Gonzaga, Creighton.

Purdue will be under plenty of pressure to avoid underachieving in the NCAA Tournament again. The Boilermakers get through the first weekend but fall short of an extended run.

Regional champion: Gonzaga. The Zags get a chance to fly under the radar this year, and with a shaky Kansas team near them in the bracket, there's a favorable path to the Sweet 16. If Gonzaga can get past Purdue, the Final Four is very much in play.

WEST REGION

First Four: Howard over Wagner.

First round winners: North Carolina, Michigan State, Saint Mary's, Alabama, New Mexico, Baylor, Nevada, Arizona.

Arizona is another team trying to rebound from a first-round loss in 2023, and top-seeded North Carolina returns after missing the tournament entirely last year.

Second round winners: Michigan State, Saint Mary's, New Mexico, Arizona.

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It's almost a cliché to pick Tom Izzo's team to overachieve in March, but Michigan State's Pomeroy rank (18th) suggests the Spartans are dangerous as a No. 9 seed.

Regional semifinal winners: Michigan State, Arizona.

Here's a question you don't hear often: Can Michigan State hold its own against Saint Mary's on the boards? The numbers suggest it would be tough, but the Spartans pull it out with defense.

Regional champion: Michigan State. The Big Ten and SEC aren't making a lot of friends these days. The Spartans prevent them from getting shut out of the Final Four.

FINAL FOUR

Of the two underdogs in this Final Four, Gonzaga is more likely to advance because it can hurt Houston on the boards, but ultimately UConn and Houston survive to set up a matchup between two former American Athletic Conference teams.

The Huskies are probably the better all-around team, but it's just too hard to repeat. Houston wins it all.

Germans thought they were immune to nationalism after confronting their Nazi past. They were wrong

By KIRSTEN GRIESHABER Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — When Sabine Thonke joined a recent demonstration in Berlin against Germany's far-right party, it was the first time in years she felt hopeful that the growing power of the extremists in her country could be stopped.

Thonke, 59, had been following the rise of the Alternative for Germany, or AfD, with unease. But when she heard about a plan to deport millions of people, she felt called to action.

"I never thought such inhuman ideas would be gaining popularity in Germany again. I thought we had learned the lessons from our past," Thonke said.

Many Germans believed their country had developed an immunity to nationalism and assertions of racial superiority after confronting the horrors of its Nazi past through education and laws to outlaw persecution.

They were wrong.

If an election were held today, the AfD would be the second largest party, according to polls.

But national polls camouflage an important division: the AfD has disproportionate support in the formerly communist and less prosperous eastern states of Germany.

After the fall of communism in 1989 and the unification of East and West Germany a year later, many people in the five eastern states lost not only their jobs but their collective past, leaving them disoriented and helpless in the capitalist system.

The AfD's rise has been propelled by anger over inflation and, above all, rising immigration. The EU received 1.1 million asylum requests in 2023, the highest number since 2015. Germany got by far the largest number of claims — more than 300,000 — mostly from Syria, Afghanistan and Turkey. The country has also taken in more than a million Ukrainian refugees displaced by Russia's invasion.

Voters in Germany and across Europe are increasingly empowering far-right nationalist parties who promise to restrict immigration and, in some cases, constrain democratic freedoms of religion, of expression, of the right to protest. These forces have bubbled up in France, Italy, the Netherlands and Austria.

This story, supported by the Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting, is part of an ongoing Associated Press series covering threats to democracy in Europe.

THE LESSONS OF WORLD WAR II

After 1945, West Germans grew up with the guiding principle that there should "never again" be a dictatorship on German soil. West German leaders made visits to Israel and apologized to the countries occupied by the Nazis, while schoolchildren were taken to see concentration camps or Holocaust memorials.

In the East, a self-declared anti-fascist society, young people were also taken to concentration camps, but the lessons did not focus on culpability. Instead, the lessons emphasized that they were the descen-

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dants of the Nazis' victims.

Thonke, who works at Berlin's water utility, grew up in Bavaria, which was part of West Germany before reunification in 1990. She said she did not speak much with her grandparents — the Nazi generation — about what happened during the Third Reich, but learned about Adolf Hitler's rise to power and the Holocaust in school.

Today's far right is using similar tactics, she said, exploiting people's fears to win their trust and their votes.

"I understand that many people are worn out from all these crises — the coronavirus pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the many migrants, inflation — and that they are afraid that things are going to get worse," Thonke said. "But the solutions the AfD offers won't solve any of these problems."

Polls show the AfD as the top party in the eastern states of Saxony and Thuringia, with roughly 35% support in each. Both states have elections this fall, along with the eastern state of Brandenburg, where the AfD is also expected to make strong gains.

The AfD's appeal is particularly strong among men — about two-thirds of its voters are male — and, increasingly, younger voters. In the last state elections in Hesse and Bavaria in October, AfD made significant gains among voters 24 and younger.

The party is far more internet-savvy than its rivals, making use of social media to get its message out to young people. At the same time, AfD officials often avoid talking to mainstream media reporters and sometimes don't accredit journalists they perceive as too critical to their party conventions.

The party has benefited from voters' deep frustration with Chancellor Olaf Scholz. His government came to power over two years ago with a progressive, modernizing agenda, but now is viewed by many as dysfunctional and incapable.

The AfD's Thuringia branch is particularly radical and was put under official surveillance by the domestic intelligence service four years ago as a "proven right-wing extremist" group.

AfD's Thuringia leader, Bjoern Hoecke, has at various times espoused revisionist views of Germany's Nazi past. In 2018, he called the Holocaust memorial in Berlin a "monument of shame" and called for Germany to make a "180-degree turn" in the way it remembers its past.

"The AfD is a nationalist party, and nationalists want to be proud of their history, and anyone who wants to be very proud of German history must of course minimize, play down, or even deny the shame of the Nazi crimes in order to be able to tell the story of national greatness," said Jens-Christian Wagner, a historian and the head of the Buchenwald Memorial, a former concentration camp in Thuringia, where the Nazis killed more than 56,000 people.

Attacks on the former concentration camp have stepped up massively in recent months: Wagner says this is because of the "revisionist, antisemitic and racist slogans" promoted by the AfD.

A WAKE-UP CALL

Since January, a wave of protests against the far right has swept across Germany, triggered by a report that right-wing extremists met to discuss the deportation of millions of immigrants, including some with German citizenship.

AfD members were present at the meeting, along with Martin Sellner, a persuasive young Austrian with neo-Nazi links and convictions for violent extremism.

The meeting, in November, bore an eerie resemblance to the Wannsee Conference, when the Nazis agreed to the so-called "final solution" — the systematic round-ups that led to the murder of 6 million Jews.

Just like in the winter of 1942, when senior Nazi officials met covertly in a villa by a lake outside Berlin, the recent meeting also took place in secrecy at a villa not far from the German capital.

AfD party leaders have sought to distance themselves from the meeting, saying the party had no organizational or financial links to the event, that it wasn't responsible for what was discussed there and members who attended did so in a purely personal capacity.

AfD chief whip in parliament, Bernd Baumann, complained that his party faces a "devious campaign by politicians and journalists from the ruined left-green class."

"Little private debating clubs are being blown up into secret meetings that are a danger to the public," he said.

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Still, week after week, millions of Germans have turned out to protest, attending events with slogans such as "Never Again is Now," "Against Hate" and "Defend Democracy."

Demonstrations in cities such as Berlin, Munich, Hamburg or Duesseldorf, have drawn hundreds of thousands of participants at a time — so many that authorities have had to end some marches early due to safety concerns with overcrowded streets.

People also turned out for protests in smaller towns and even held weekly vigils in their neighborhoods to express their frustration with growing support for far-right populism at the ballot box.

More than 2.4 million people have so far joined the anti-AfD protests which began in mid-January, according to the German interior ministry. The organizers of the demonstrations estimate more than 3.6 million people have participated.

Among them was Thonke, who went to two pro-democracy rallies in Berlin, relieved that the country was, as she put it, "waking up."

"I no longer have this feeling of powerlessness that I had during the last years while watching the rise and success of the AfD," she said, adding that the government must do more.

"The government needs to find solutions for the migration crisis, otherwise the AfD will continue to exploit this topic for their own purposes and become even more powerful," she said.

Earlier waves of protests against the anti-Islam and anti-immigration movement PEGIDA eventually ran out of steam, although they weren't as large as the anti-AfD movement that is building.

Still, the AfD is riding high. In December, it marked another milestone, when for the first time its candidate won a mayoral election in a midsized town: Pirna, in Saxony.

Now the party is setting its sights on elections for the European Parliament in June. If Thonke and her fellow protesters want to push back the far right, they will have to persuade their compatriots not just to protest, but to turn out in large numbers at the ballot box.

Descendant of judge who wrote infamous Dred Scott decision pens a play about where we are now

By MARK KENNEDY AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Writer and actor Kate Taney Billingsley has been thinking a lot about America's racial history and her family's part in it. One of her ancestors had an outsized role.

Billingsley's great-great-great-great uncle was Chief Justice Roger Brooke Taney, who made arguably the worst decision in U.S. Supreme Court history in 1857.

It was Taney who ruled that African Americans could not be citizens as part of the infamous Dred Scott decision, named after an enslaved man who unsuccessfully sought his freedom. The ruling helped set the nation on a path toward war.

"I inherited this generational trauma in the family," Billingsley says. The decision was overturned by the 14th amendment to the Constitution after the Civil War, granting citizenship to all those born in the United States, regardless of race.

Right about the time of Black Lives Matter protests, Billingsley decided to confront that trauma the only way she knew how — turning it into theater.

"I sat down to write this dramatic question that had been in my family for many, many years, which was, 'Should we apologize to the Scott family for what our ancestor did?'"

What emerged is the thrilling play "American Rot," about the modern-day fictional meeting of descendants on both sides of the Dred Scott decision in a diner off the New Jersey Turnpike. It makes its world premiere this month off-off-Broadway at La MaMa's Ellen Stewart Theatre.

It is raw, riotous and bursting, a kaleidoscopic work, with dueling white and Black choruses and surreal touches. The diner waitress is a white supremacist and Dred Scott himself appears at one point. "This play should move like a freight train," the playwright advises in her preface.

"I did not set out to solve anything when I wrote this play," says Billingsley. "My goal was not to say, 'OK, let's solve America's racist history and present moment.' It was more to let us just take a really hon-

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est look at it."

The play begins with the tentative meeting of Jim Taney and Walter Scott, both 70, one the descendant of Roger Brooke Taney and the other of Dred Scott. As the two men talk, the conversation grows more tense as each articulates their grievances and the legacy of hatred.

"We've got to believe in the arc of the moral universe, right?" asks Jim, apologizing for his family. "You know they killed King, right? Walter shoots back.

There are references to Clarence Thomas' wife, Ginni, climate change, the killing of 12-year-old Tamir Rice by police and the college admission scandal, with the white chorus singing: "White! White! And full of spite!/Breaking every rule to get our kids in good schools!"

"American Rot" is an expansion of Billingsley's one-act "A Man of His Time," and has gone through various iterations, all directed by "Roseanne" and Broadway star Estelle Parsons. The latest version has 14 characters, music and choreography. Billingsley was urged to expand her initial short work by John Douglas Thompson, who appeared in a podcast version by The Actors Studio.

The expanded version is the result of years traveling around the country and seeking out an array of voices, including descendants of the enslaved people held by her family and others. "I felt I needed to kind of shut up and listen," she says.

Billingsley populated her play with wives and children of both men, the original rivals Roger Brooke Taney and Dred Scott, and the character Chief Standing Bear. She also includes an aria by a struggling relative of Taney with economic grievances who thinks Jim's idea to apologize is ridiculous. Jim is partly based on the playwright's father.

Parsons helped suggest the concept of dueling choirs and realized that she didn't want to give it up to another director who would cut parts she adored. "I thought this is a musical without the music," she says.

Billingsley hopes the play can have a life everywhere, and despite a professional soundscape and lighting this time, it can be produced in schools and small theaters, too. "I would love this play to be done with it just in an empty black box with not a lot of money," she says.

It's structured without an intermission purposely: Billingsley doesn't want to give the audience the chance to leave early. "They're really being confronted with stuff that maybe they don't want to look at," she says.

While the playwright insists that she's not out to solve America's racial divide, there are some steps suggested — letting go of simmering hate, beginning the process of forgiveness and really doing the work to amputate white supremacy.

"A lot of feelings are going to come up," says Billingsley. "It's been very hard to confront this stuff that's in my genetic makeup and in my unconscious that presents itself every single day."

Israel urges UN court to reject South Africa's request for more emergency orders in genocide case

By MIKE CORDER Associated Press

THE HAGUE, Netherlands (AP) — Israel has urged the top U.N. court to reject the latest request by South Africa for interim orders to prevent starvation in Gaza as part of a case accusing Israel of breaching the Genocide Convention with its military offensive against Hamas.

In a written response published Monday by the International Court of Justice, Israel said that claims by South Africa in its request filed earlier this month are "wholly unfounded in fact and law, morally repugnant, and represent an abuse both of the Genocide Convention and of the Court itself."

Israel's response was published on the day that the U.N. food agency said that "famine is imminent" in northern Gaza, where 70% of the remaining population is experiencing catastrophic hunger, and that a further escalation of the war could push around half of Gaza's total population to the brink of starvation.

The food agency's statement came less than two weeks after South Africa urged the world court "to do what is within its power to save Palestinians in Gaza from genocidal starvation."

Israel fervently denies that its military campaign in Gaza amounts to a breach of the Genocide Convention. It acknowledged in its written response to South Africa's request that there are "also tragic and

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agonizing civilian casualties in this war. These realities are the painful result of intensive armed hostilities that Israel did not start and did not want."

Israel also said in its response that it is "doing a great deal to alleviate such suffering in these very challenging circumstances."

No date has been set for judges to rule on the South African request.

At hearings in January, lawyers for Israel argued that the war in Gaza was a legitimate defense of its people and that it was Hamas militants who were guilty of genocide.

After the hearings, the court ordered Israel in late January to do all it could to prevent death, destruction and any acts of genocide in Gaza, but stopped short of ordering an end to the military offensive triggered by the deadly Oct. 7 incursion into southern Israel by Hamas.

Israel said that South Africa has presented no reason to change that so-called provisional measures order.

"South Africa's request of 6 March 2024 shows nothing more than a continuation of elements already considered by the Court when issuing the Order of 26 January 2024," the Israeli response said.

The court last month rejected an earlier request by South Africa for more provisional measures to safeguard Rafah, but also stressed that Israel must respect the earlier measures that imposed at a preliminary stage in the landmark genocide case.

The European Union's top diplomat, Josep Borrell, said Monday that impending famine in Gaza was "entirely man-made" as "starvation is used as a weapon of war."

"Trucks are stopped. People are dying, while the land crossings are artificially closed," he said. ____

Find more of AP's coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/israel-hamas-war>

New study finds no brain injuries among 'Havana syndrome' patients

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — An array of advanced tests found no brain injuries or degeneration among U.S. diplomats and other government employees who suffer mysterious health problems once dubbed "Havana syndrome," researchers reported Monday.

The National Institutes of Health's nearly five-year study offers no explanation for symptoms including headaches, balance problems and difficulties with thinking and sleep that were first reported in Cuba in 2016 and later by hundreds of American personnel in multiple countries.

But it did contradict some earlier findings that raised the specter of brain injuries in people experiencing what the State Department now calls "anomalous health incidents."

"These individuals have real symptoms and are going through a very tough time," said Dr. Leighton Chan, NIH's chief of rehabilitation medicine, who helped lead the research. "They can be quite profound, disabling and difficult to treat."

Yet sophisticated MRI scans detected no significant differences in brain volume, structure or white matter — signs of injury or degeneration — when Havana syndrome patients were compared to healthy government workers with similar jobs, including some in the same embassy. Nor were there significant differences in cognitive and other tests, according to findings published in the Journal of the American Medical Association.

While that couldn't rule out some transient injury when symptoms began, researchers said it's good news that they couldn't spot long-term markers on brain scans that are typical after trauma or stroke.

That "should be some reassurance for patients," said study co-author Louis French, a neuropsychologist at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center who treats Havana syndrome. "It allows us to focus on the here and now, to getting people back to where they should be."

A subset, about 28%, of Havana syndrome cases were diagnosed with a balance problem called persistent postural-perceptual dizziness, or PPPD. Linked to inner-ear problems as well as severe stress, it results when certain brain networks show no injury but don't communicate properly. French called it a "maladaptive response," much like how people who've slouched to alleviate back pain can have posture trouble even after the pain is gone.

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The Havana syndrome participants reported more fatigue, posttraumatic stress symptoms and depression. The findings are the latest in an effort to unravel a mystery that began when personnel at the U.S. embassy in Cuba began seeking medical care for hearing loss and ear-ringing after reporting sudden weird noises.

Early on, there was concern that Russia or another country may have used some form of directed energy to attack Americans. But last year, U.S. intelligence agencies said there was no sign a foreign adversary was involved and that most cases appeared to have different causes, from undiagnosed illnesses to environmental factors.

Some patients have accused the government of dismissing their ailments. And in an editorial in JAMA on Monday, one scientist called for more research to prepare for the next such health mystery, cautioning that NIH's study design plus the limits of existing medical technology could have missed some clues.

"One might suspect that nothing or nothing serious happened with these cases. This would be ill-advised," wrote Dr. David Relman of Stanford University. In 2022, he was part of a government-appointed panel that couldn't rule out that a pulsed form of energy could explain a subset of cases.

The NIH study, which began in 2018 and included more than 80 Havana syndrome patients, wasn't designed to examine the likelihood of some weapon or other trigger for Havana syndrome symptoms. Chan said the findings don't contradict the intelligence agencies' conclusions.

If some "external phenomenon" was behind the symptoms, "it did not result in persistent or detectable pathophysiologic change," he said.

The State Department said it was reviewing NIH's findings but that its priority was ensuring affected employees and family members "are treated with respect and compassion and receive timely access to medical care and all benefits to which they are entitled."

Sculpture park aims to look honestly at slavery, honoring those who endured it

By KIM CHANDLER Associated Press

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — Visitors to the Freedom Monument Sculpture Park wind a serpentine path past art pieces depicting the lives of enslaved people in America and historic exhibits, including two cabins where the enslaved lived, before arriving at a towering monument.

Stretching nearly four stories into the sky, the National Monument to Freedom honors the millions of people who endured the brutality of slavery. The monument is inscribed with 122,000 surnames that formerly enslaved people chose for themselves, as documented in the 1870 Census, after being emancipated at the Civil War's end.

The sculpture park is the third site created by the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Ala., which is dedicated to taking an unflinching look at the country's history of slavery, racism and discriminatory policing. The first two sites — the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, a memorial to people slain in racial terror killings; and The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration — opened in 2018.

The sculpture park, which opens March 27, weaves art installations, historic artifacts and personal narratives to explore the history of slavery in America and honor the millions of people who endured its brutality.

Bryan Stevenson, the founder of Equal Justice Initiative, said after opening the first two sites that he felt there was more to do. Most plantation tourist attractions, he said, are centered around the lives of the family that did the enslaving. His goal was a place for visitors to have a "really honest experience with the history of slavery."

"I do see it as a truth-telling space, a place where we can confront parts of our history and paths that are not usually taught," he said. But he also believes it is ultimately a "hopeful place."

"If people found a way to create family and future, despite the horrors of that institution, then we can do something comparable in our day to create a future that is less burdened by these histories than I think we've been," Stevenson said.

The 17-acre site is nestled between the twisting banks of the muddy waters of the Alabama River and

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railroad tracks — the two transportation mechanisms used to bring people to the city's slave markets in the 1800s. Visitors will be able to arrive by boat, essentially tracing the same path taken to deliver the stolen and trafficked people.

The park is opening as some politicians, including in the Deep South, try to put parameters on how race and history are taught in classrooms and in workforce training sessions. Stevenson says such push-back has always accompanied progress.

"I see this as a kind of a desperate act to hold on to the silence and the status quo and the burden of bigotry which we've coped with for so long. And I just don't believe it will succeed because the truth is powerful," Stevenson said.

The sculpture park includes major pieces from artists including Simone Leigh. Leigh's Brick House, a 16-foot-tall bronze bust of a Black woman, sits as a formidable presence of strength at the entrance to the garden.

In a piece titled Mama, I hurt my hand, by Kwame Akoto-Bamfo, a child dragging a bag of cotton reaches out to show his injured hand to his mother, who balances a basket of cotton and an infant strapped to her back. Near them, a weary man with scarred skin and a splinted leg, sits in exhaustion.

The exhibits include two 170-year-old cabins that housed enslaved families on a cotton plantation, a whipping post, chains used to hold trafficked people and replicas of a transport box car and slave-holding pen. Interwoven between the exhibits are first-person accounts by enslaved people and formerly enslaved people about their lives.

Alison Saar, a Los Angeles-based sculptor, has a piece featured in the garden that "addresses escaped slaves and their ability to survive and thrive on their own," she said.

"I find the whole thing incredible and more necessary than ever," Saar said. Park visitors will come upon sculptures that convey "not only the horrors of being enslaved but the really beautiful stories and glory of people that somehow escaped that and created a life of their own."

The park's centerpiece is the National Monument to Freedom, which bears names taken from the 1870 Census in which formerly enslaved people claimed surnames.

Visitors can walk up, find their family name and touch it while seeing their own faces reflected in the polished granite — an experience Stevenson himself went through recently as more of the names were inscribed in the stone.

"I came and I saw my name, and I was surprised by how impacted I was by that, even though I've been planning for two years," he said.

EJI is a legal advocacy organization perhaps best known for its work freeing wrongly convicted death row inmates — the subject of the 2019 movie starring Michael B. Jordan and Jamie Foxx, based on Stevenson bestselling book "Just Mercy."

The organization years ago erected the first historical markers in downtown Montgomery to mark the sites of slave markets, as well as lynching sites across the South.

Stevenson said truth and confronting history is the key for America to move forward, likening it to an alcoholic who must acknowledge the harm created by his abuse in order to move forward.

"I think there's something better waiting for us. I think there's something that feels more like freedom, more like equality, more like justice. But I don't think we'll get there if we don't tear down the barriers and the burdens that have been created by our silence about history," Stevenson said.

'Art and science:' How bracketologists are using artificial intelligence this March Madness

By JAMES POLLARD Associated Press/Report for America

College hoops fans might want to think again before pinning their hopes of a perfect March Madness bracket on artificial intelligence.

While the advancement of artificial intelligence into everyday life has made "AI" one of the buzziest

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phrases of the past year, its application in bracketology circles is not so new. Even so, the annual bracket contests still provide plenty of surprises for computer science aficionados who've spent years honing their models with past NCAA Tournament results.

They have found that machine learning alone cannot quite solve the limited data and incalculable human elements of "The Big Dance."

"All these things are art and science. And they're just as much human psychology as they are statistics," said Chris Ford, a data analyst who lives in Germany. "You have to actually understand people. And that's what's so tricky about it."

Casual fans may spend a few days this week strategically deciding whether to maybe lean on the team with the best mojo — like Sister Jean's 2018 Loyola-Chicago squad that made the Final Four — or to perhaps ride the hottest-shooting player — like Steph Curry and his breakout 2008 performance that led Davidson to the Sweet Sixteen.

The technologically inclined are chasing goals even more complicated than selecting the winners of all 67 matchups in both the men's and women's NCAA tournaments. They are fine-tuning mathematical functions in pursuit of the most objective model for predicting success in the upset-riddled tournament. Some are enlisting AI to perfect their codes or to decide which aspects of team resumes they should weigh most heavily.

The odds of crafting a perfect bracket are stacked against any competitor, however advanced their tools may be. An "informed fan" making certain assumptions based on previous results — such as a 1-seed beating a 16-seed — has a 1 in 2 billion chance at perfection, according to Ezra Miller, a mathematics and statistical science professor at Duke.

"Roughly speaking, it would be like choosing a random person in the Western Hemisphere," he said.

Artificial intelligence is likely very good at determining the probability that a team wins, Miller said. But even with the models, he added that the "random choice of who's going to win a game that's evenly matched" is still a random choice.

For the 10th straight year, the data science community Kaggle is hosting "Machine Learning Madness." Traditional bracket competitions are all-or-nothing; participants write one team's name into each open slot. But "Machine Learning Madness" requires users to submit a percentage reflecting their confidence that a team will advance.

Kaggle provides a large data set from past results for people to develop their algorithms. That includes box scores with information on a team's free-throw percentage, turnovers and assists. Users can then turn that information over to an algorithm to figure out which statistics are most predictive of tournament success.

"It's a fair fight. There's people who know a lot about basketball and can use what they know," said Jeff Sonas, a statistical chess analyst who helped found the competition. "It is also possible for someone who doesn't know a lot about basketball but is good at learning how to use data to make predictions."

Ford, the Purdue fan who watched last year as the shortest Division I men's team stunned his Boiler-makers in the first round, takes it a different direction. Since 2020, Ford has tried to predict which schools will make the 68-team field.

In 2021, his most successful year, Ford said the model correctly named 66 of the teams in the men's bracket. He uses a "fake committee" of eight different machine learning models that makes slightly different considerations based on the same inputs: the strength of schedule for a team and the number of quality wins against tougher opponents, to name a few.

Eugene Tulyagijja, a sports analytics major at Syracuse University, said he spent a year's worth of free time crafting his own model. He said he used a deep neural network to find patterns of success based on statistics like a team's 3-point efficiency.

His model wrongly predicted that the 2023 men's Final Four would include Arizona, Duke and Texas. But it did correctly include UConn. As he adjusts the model with another year's worth of information, he acknowledged certain human elements that no computer could ever consider.

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"Did the players get enough sleep last night? Is that going to affect the player's performance?" he said. "Personal things going on — we can never adjust to it using data alone."

No method will integrate every relevant factor at play on the court. The necessary balance between modeling and intuition is "the art of sports analytics," said Tim Chartier, a Davidson bracketology expert.

Chartier has studied brackets since 2009, developing a method that largely relies on home/away records, performance in the second half of the season and the strength of schedule. But he said the NCAA Tournament's historical results provide an unpredictable and small sample size — a challenge for machine learning models, which rely on large sample sizes.

Chartier's goal is never for his students to reach perfection in their brackets; his own model still cannot account for Davidson's 2008 Cinderella story.

In that mystery, Chartier finds a useful reminder from March Madness: "The beauty of sports, and the beauty of life itself, is the randomness that we can't predict."

"We can't even predict 63 games of a basketball tournament where we had 5,000 games that led up to it," he tells his classes. "So be forgiving to yourself when you don't make correct predictions on stages of life that are much more complicated than a 40-minute basketball game."

Federal Reserve is likely to preach patience as consumers and markets look ahead to rate cuts

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Across the United States, many people are eagerly anticipating the Federal Reserve's first cut to its benchmark interest rate this year: Prospective home buyers hope for lower mortgage rates. Wall Street traders envision higher stock prices. Consumers are looking for a break on credit card debt at record-high interest rates.

Not to mention President Joe Biden, whose re-election campaign would likely benefit from an economic jolt stemming from lower borrowing rates.

Yet Chair Jerome Powell and his fellow Fed officials are expected to play it safe when they meet this week, keeping their rate unchanged for a fifth straight time and signaling that they still need further evidence that inflation is returning sustainably to their 2% target.

The Fed's cautious approach illustrates what's unusual about this round of potential rate cuts. Vincent Reinhart, chief economist at Dreyfus-Mellon and a former Fed economist, notes that the Fed typically cuts rates quickly as the economy deteriorates in an often-futile effort to prevent a recession.

But this time, the economy is still healthy. The Fed is considering rate cuts only because inflation has steadily fallen from a peak of 9.1% in June 2022. As a result, it is approaching rate cuts the way it usually does rate hikes: Slowly and methodically, while trying to divine the economy's direction from often-conflicting data.

"The Fed is driving events, not events driving the Fed," Reinhart said. "That's why this task is different than others."

The central bank's policymakers had said after their last meeting in January that they needed "greater confidence" that inflation was cooling decisively toward their 2% target. Since then, the government has issued two inflation reports that showed the pace of price increases remaining sticky-high.

In most respects, the U.S. economy remains remarkably healthy. Employers keep hiring, unemployment remains low, the stock market is hovering near record highs and inflation has plummeted from its highs. Yet average prices remain much higher than they were before the pandemic — a source of unhappiness for many Americans for which Republicans have sought to pin blame on Biden.

Excluding volatile food and energy costs, so-called "core" prices rose at a monthly pace of 0.4% in both January and February, a pace far higher than is consistent with the Fed's inflation target. Compared with a year earlier, core prices rose 3.8% in February. Core prices are considered a good signal of where inflation is likely headed.

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But in February, a measure of housing costs slowed, a notable trend because housing is among the “stickiest” price categories that the government tracks. At the same time, more volatile categories, like clothing, used cars and airline tickets, drove up prices in February, and they may well reverse course in coming months.

“Nothing about those two data prints made you feel substantially better about” inflation reaching the Fed’s target soon, said Seth Carpenter, chief global economist at Morgan Stanley and also a former Fed economist. “But it’s not at all enough to make you change your view on the fundamental direction of travel” for inflation.

Indeed, several Fed officials have said in recent speeches that they expect inflation to keep declining this year, though likely more slowly than in 2023.

The Fed has also built in some expectation that price increases would ease only gradually this year. In December, it projected that core inflation would reach 2.4% by the end of 2024. That’s not far from its current 2.8%, according to the Fed’s preferred measure.

On Wednesday, the Fed’s policymakers will update their quarterly economic projections, which are expected to repeat their December forecast for three rate cuts by the end of 2024. Still, it would take only two of the 19 Fed officials to change their forecast to one fewer rate cut for the central bank’s overall projection to downshift to just two rate cuts for 2024. Some economists expect that to happen, given that inflation has remained persistent at the start of this year.

The Fed’s benchmark rate stands at about 5.4%, the highest level in 23 years, after a series of 11 rate hikes that were intended to curb the worst inflation in four decades but have also made borrowing much more expensive for consumers and businesses.

Like the Fed, other major central banks are keeping rates high to ensure that they have a firm handle on consumer price spikes. In Europe, pressure is building to lower borrowing costs as inflation drops and economic growth has stalled, unlike in the United States. The European Central Bank’s leader hinted this month that a possible rate cut wouldn’t come until June, while the Bank of England isn’t expected to open the door to any imminent cut at its meeting Thursday.

Most economists expect the Fed to implement its first rate cut at its June meeting, which would mean that in May, the Fed would signal such a coming move. By June, the policymakers will have in hand three more inflation readings and three more jobs reports.

Sarah House, senior economist at Wells Fargo, said that timetable leaves plenty of time for inflation to resume its downward path. A rate reduction would likely lead, over time, to lower rates for mortgages, auto loans, credit cards and many business loans.

“They certainly need to see something better than the past couple of months, but they can get it,” she said.

Today in History: March 19, Michael Jordan returns to basketball

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Tuesday, March 19, the 79th day of 2024. There are 287 days left in the year.

Today’s Highlight in History:

On March 19, 1995, after a 21-month hiatus, Michael Jordan returned to professional basketball with his former team, the Chicago Bulls. (He would go on to win three more NBA championships to go with the three he and the Bulls had already won.)

On this date:

In 1859, the opera “Faust” by Charles Gounod premiered in Paris.

In 1931, Nevada Gov. Fred B. Balzar signed a measure legalizing casino gambling in the state.

In 1942, during World War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered men between the ages of 45 and 64, inclusive, to register for non-military duty.

In 1945, during World War II, 724 people were killed when a Japanese dive bomber attacked the carrier

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USS Franklin off Japan (the ship was saved).

In 1977, the series finale of "Mary Tyler Moore" aired on CBS-TV, ending the situation comedy's seven-season run.

In 1987, televangelist Jim Bakker resigned as chairman of his PTL ministry organization amid a sex and money scandal involving Jessica Hahn, a former church secretary.

In 1991, Polish President Lech Walesa arrived in Washington for his first state visit to the United States.

In 1997, artist Willem de Kooning, considered one of the 20th century's greatest painters, died in East Hampton, New York, at age 92.

In 2003, President George W. Bush ordered the start of war against Iraq. (Because of the time difference, it was early March 20 in Iraq.)

In 2007, a methane gas explosion in a Siberian coal mine killed 110 workers.

In 2012, the Justice Department announced it had begun an investigation into the fatal shooting of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in Florida by a neighborhood watch captain, George Zimmerman. (No federal civil rights charges were filed; Zimmerman was acquitted of a state charge of second-degree murder after claiming self-defense.)

In 2013, Pope Francis officially began his ministry as the 266th pope, receiving the ring symbolizing the papacy and a wool stole exemplifying his role as shepherd of his 1.2-billion strong flock during a Mass at the Vatican.

In 2020, President Donald Trump focused attention on a malaria drug, chloroquine, as a possible coronavirus treatment; the FDA issued a statement saying that there were "no FDA-approved therapeutics" to treat COVID-19.

In 2022, Russian forces pushed deeper into Ukraine's besieged and battered port city of Mariupol, where heavy fighting shut down a major steel plant and local authorities pleaded for more Western help.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Renee Taylor is 91. Actor Ursula Andress is 88. Singer Clarence "Frogman" Henry is 87. Singer Ruth Pointer (The Pointer Sisters) is 78. Actor Glenn Close is 77. Actor Bruce Willis is 69. Actor-comedian Mary Scheer is 61. Playwright Neil LaBute is 61. Actor Connor Trinneer is 55. Rock musician Gert Bettens (K's Choice) is 54. Rapper Bun B is 51. Rock musician Zach Lind (Jimmy Eat World) is 48. Actor Virginia Williams is 46. Actor Abby Brammell is 45. MLB pitcher Clayton Kershaw is 36. Actor Craig Lamar Taylor is 35. Actor Philip Bolden is 29.