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Smiling faces on parade

Thursday evening was Street Fair's Industrial Parade and no one left empty handed. Above is the Elevate Wells County float, and at right, this year's Grand Marshal Tara Cocanower waves to crowds. (Photos by Sydney Kent) Below, Vietnam veterans were honored by parade watchers standing and applauding as they rode by. (Photo by Barbara Barbieri) **Related photos on Page 5**



Festival worker charged with child solicitation

By SYDNEY KENT

A man working at the Bluffton Street Fair attempted to meet with a 12-year-old girl at Pak A Sak to engage in sexual acts earlier this week.

Instead, he was met by a decoy from Bikers Against Predators.

Teddy Hussung, 48, Aurora, was charged with child solicitation, a Level 4 Felony. Hussung pleaded not guilty to the crime during his initial hearing Wednesday morning in the Wells Circuit Court. Larry Mock was appointed as his public defender.



Teddy Hussung

According to a probable cause affidavit, Hussung told officers he met "Gabby" on Snapchat. Gabby is the name used by the decoy, Robert Bloom. Hussung reportedly told "Gabby" he wanted to impregnate her. He also referred to her as his wife in several text messages and called himself her husband when he sent a photo of his genitals. In a written statement, Hussung said, "I messed up. I should have

(Continued on Page 2)

Number of Hoosiers without health insurance declines

By WHITNEY DOWNARD
Indiana Capital Chronicle

The number of Hoosiers without health insurance decreased between 2021 and 2022, falling 0.6 percent to 7 percent uninsured, according to a release from the United States Census Bureau.

"For seven of the states with lower uninsured rates in 2022, the difference was driven by increased private coverage. For 10 states, the uninsured rate decrease was related to increased public coverage," said David Waddington, a division chief with the bureau.

The report credits increased insurance coverage in Indiana to an enrollment uptick in public health insurance options, such as Medicaid, rather than any significant change in private insurance plans. Six other states fell into the same category, including Alabama, California, Georgia,

(Continued on Page 2)

Tropical storm warning issued for East Coast ahead

MIAMI (AP) — A tropical storm warning was issued Thursday from coastal North Carolina to Delaware ahead of a potential tropical cyclone that's approaching the densely populated East Coast.

The National Hurricane Center announced the formation of "Potential Tropical Cyclone Sixteen" on Thursday morning. The storm was located about 340 miles southeast of Charleston, South Carolina, and moving north at 7 mph, according to a 8 p.m. advisory from the center. The storm had top sustained winds of 35 mph.

The hurricane center defines a potential tropical cyclone as a disturbance that poses a threat of tropical storm or hurricane conditions to land within 48 hours. The current system could reach the North Carolina coast around Friday night or early Saturday.

Meteorologist Maria Torres, a public affairs officer with the Miami-based center, said people along the Atlantic coast need to watch the storm's progress, gather supplies and make preparations over the next 24 to 48 hours for its arrival.

"This will bring some tropical storm force winds and storm surge along with the high winds to the East Coast through the weekend, mainly from the Southeast to the Mid-Atlantic states," she told The Associated Press.

The tropical storm warning is in effect from Cape Fear, North Carolina, to Fenwick Island, Delaware. It also includes the Chesapeake Bay south of North Beach, Tidal Potomac south of Cobb Island and Albemarle and Pamlico Sounds.

Virginia emergency management offi-

(Continued on Page 2)



Norwell's homecoming court

Pictured above is Norwell High School's 2023 senior homecoming court. In back is Timothy Bonjour, Trey Bodenheimer, Trace Moser, Quentauris Jones and Chase Hulvey, and in front, Lillian Norris, Annabelle Johnson, Grace Gerber, Gracie Rinkenberger and Emily Edmiston. The Norwell Knights will face the East Noble Knights at 7 p.m. Friday, Sept. 22, and the homecoming king and queen will be crowned during the game's half-time. (Photo by Holly Gaskill)

Zelenskyy delivers upbeat message to U.S. lawmakers

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Volodymyr Zelenskyy worked to shore up U.S. support for Ukraine on a whirlwind visit to Washington on Thursday, delivering an upbeat message on the war's progress while facing new questions about the flow of American dollars that for 19 months

have helped keep his troops in the fight against Russian forces.

The Ukrainian leader received a far quieter reception than the hero's welcome he was given last year from Congress, but also won generally favorable comments on the next round of U.S. aid he says he needs to stave off defeat.

Zelenskyy, in long-sleeve olive drab, came to the Capitol with a firm message in private talks with Republican and Democratic leaders. The Ukrainians have a solid war plan, and "they are winning," lawmakers quoted him as assuring them, at a time that the world is watching Western support for

Kyiv. President Joe Biden gave Zelenskyy a red-carpet arrival on the White House South lawn and more ceremony than world leaders normally receive, and made clear his concern with Congress.

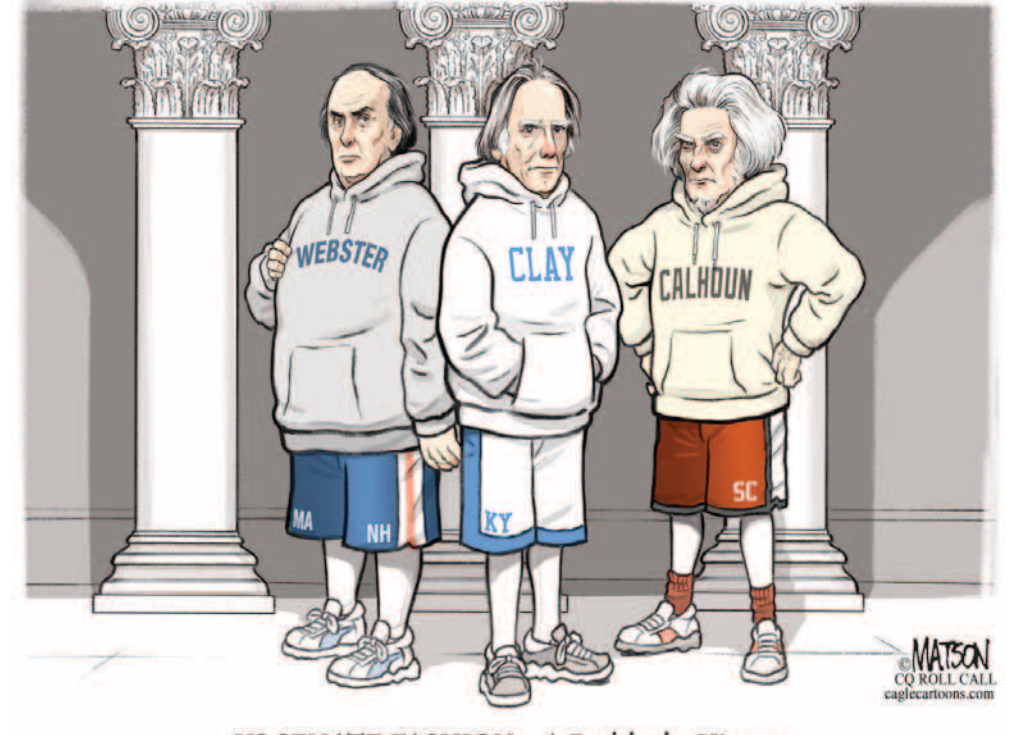
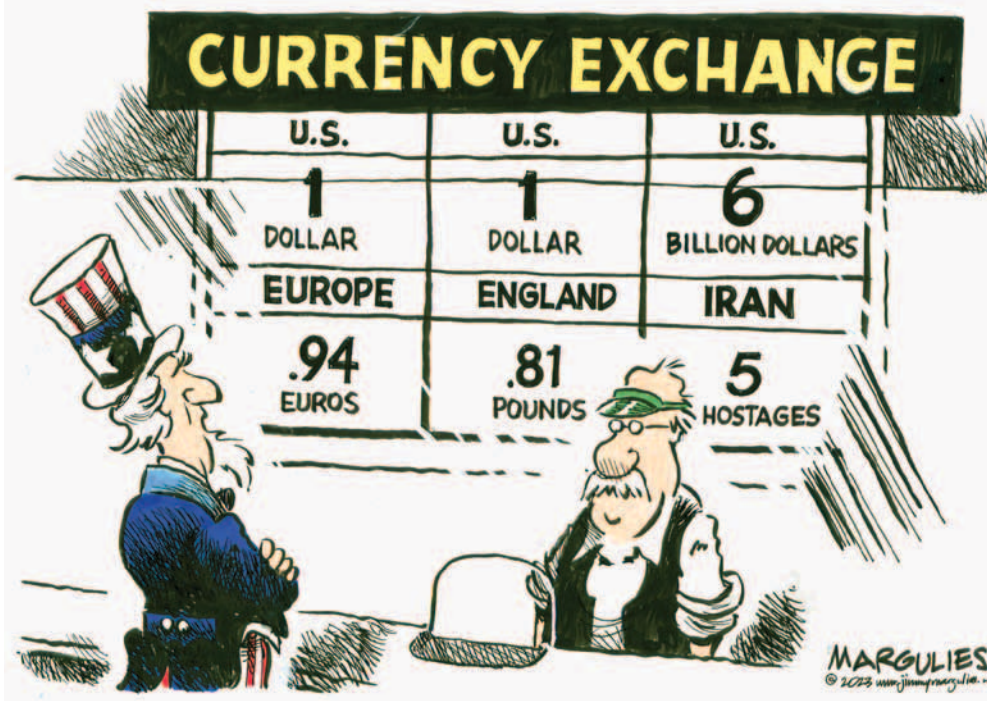
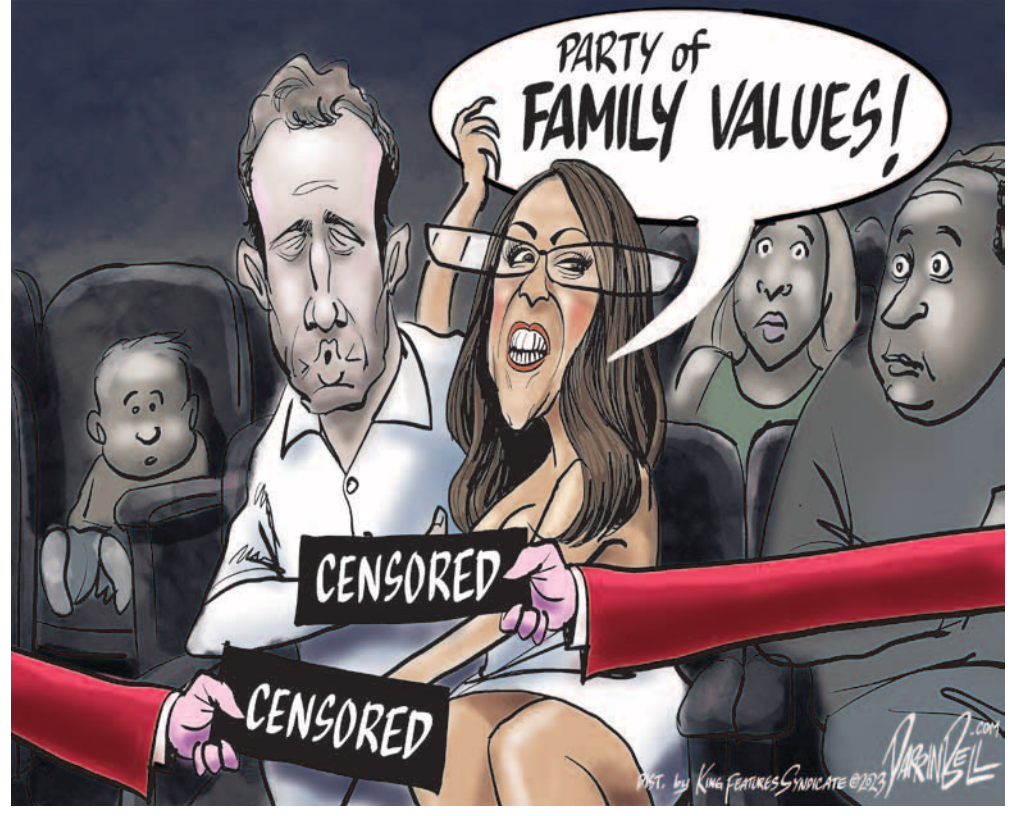
Intensifying opposition to continued Ukraine funding from a

fraction of congressional Republicans largely aligned with the party's presidential frontrunner Donald Trump is threatening what had been easier congressional approval for four previous rounds of funding for Ukraine, delivering \$113 billion. Any momentum

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The Week That Was - a look back through cartoonists' eyes...



US SENATE FASHION - A Revisionist History

Other Opinions

Pandemic fraud reaches new heights

You know a robbery is bad when it takes years to figure out how much was stolen. States have long known that they paid billions in fraudulent unemployment claims during the pandemic. But this week the federal government more than doubled its estimate in stolen payments to as much as \$135 billion.

The new figure comes from a report released Tuesday by the Government Accountability Office (GAO). The finding is a rebuke to the Biden Administration, which had previously put the fraud total as low as \$45 billion based on surveys of state programs. Congressional Republicans suspected the estimates were low and asked GAO to conduct its own study.

The agency reached its estimate by assessing a sample of more than 2,500 unemployment insurance payments issued from 2020 to 2023. The Labor Department's previous tally relied largely on adding confirmed fraud cases reported by states, but GAO auditors say that produced a massive undercount. The oversight agency assumed a higher, more plausible fraud rate by comparing unemployment insurance to similar federal programs.

The \$135 billion finding places the pandemic unemployment program in a new tier of government disaster. Fraud claimed 11% to 15% of the nearly \$900 billion that Washington paid out over three years. The theft rate is another demerit for a program that caused incredible harm even when it worked as planned. Federal and state governments provided an incentive for millions of people not to work with a \$600 weekly jobless bonus in 2020 and up to 79 weeks of total unemployment benefits.

The GAO reports that states had recovered only \$1.2 billion of stolen payments by May, out of about \$56 billion of identified fraud cases. Recoveries have been sluggish despite \$1.4 billion in federal aid to help states track and penalize fraudsters.

House Republicans passed a bill in May that boosts the incentive to recoup stolen payments, letting states keep up to a quarter of the federal cash they get back. Yet few Democrats signed on, the Senate hasn't voted on it, and the White House blasted the bill as a threat to Washington's "well-functioning UI system."

Well-functioning? In a sane government, the fraud explosion would be a call to action. But in today's Washington all that matters to politicians is how much money they can spend, not whether it's wasted or stolen.

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Opinions expressed on this page do not necessarily represent the views of this newspaper.

The mystery of the missing F-35

It was one of the weirdest stories in years. The U.S. military lost a state-of-the-art F-35 fighter jet, last seen flying pilotless over North Charleston, South Carolina, and was asking the public for help in finding the \$80 million plane. As South Carolina Republican Rep. Nancy Mace said: "How in the hell do you lose an F-35?"

The military has not been particularly transparent about what happened. We know the plane was a Marine jet that took off Sunday from Marine Corps Air Station Beaufort, about 70 miles southwest of Charleston. We know that the pilot, who has not been publicly identified, bailed out over the Charleston suburbs and landed in a residential area, near South Kenwood Drive in North Charleston. Why did the pilot, who is now hospitalized, eject? All the Marine Corps will say is that a "mishap" occurred and that it is under investigation.

Obviously, bailing out of an airplane over a heavily populated area is something a pilot really, really does not want to do. It is, needless to say, of great concern to the public. It's a particularly relevant issue in this case because there was, nearby, a very large ocean into which the pilot could have ditched the F-35. But for so far unknown reasons, the pilot bailed out over North Charleston and the plane kept flying.

It is not publicly known how long the plane flew without a pilot. But we do know the Marines couldn't find it. The Associated Press reported that "based on the missing plane's location and trajectory, the search was initially focused on Lake Moultrie and Lake Marion," which are north of Charleston. Whether the plane actually flew over either lake is not known. Then the Marines actually asked the public to send in any tips they might have about the plane's location.

That set off lots of jokes that echoed Rep. Mace's question. The Babylon Bee posted an article headlined, "Military Personnel Seen Wandering Forest

Pressing Button On F-35 Key Fob," with an accompanying illustration of troops in full gear doing just that.

Yes, that's funny. But this is not a funny story. According to the Census Bureau, the population of Charleston is 419,279, and the population of North Charleston is 118,608. That means the pilot abandoned an aircraft that is 51 feet long, with a 35-foot wingspan, that weighs at least 35,000 pounds, with who knows what kind of armaments, over a metro area with more than a half-million people in it. It is hard to imagine anything more dangerous. Even the rural county in which the plane eventually crashed has a population of around 30,000.

On the day the wreckage was found, the Marines



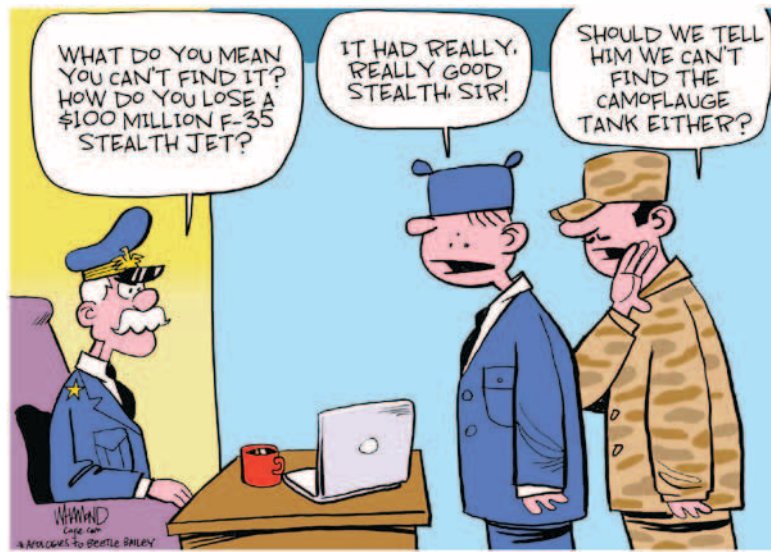
Byron York

announced that all its flight operations would be stopped for two days to "discuss aviation safety matters and best practices." The Pentagon continued: "This stand down is being taken to ensure the service is maintaining operational standardization of combat-ready aircraft

with well-prepared pilots and crews." That's a lot of bureaucratese to suggest that Marine aviation is not up to standards.

Now, the Pentagon needs to inform Americans precisely how this incident happened. Was it pilot error? Was it equipment failure? Some other factor? Given the taxpayers' obvious interest in the functioning of the armed services, and given the extremely serious public safety issues involved, the report should be absolutely transparent about what happened. Most of all, it should answer the question: "How in the hell do you lose an F-35?"

Byron York is chief political correspondent for The Washington Examiner



Today in History

By The Associated Press

Today is Friday, Sept. 22, the 265th day of 2023. There are 100 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History: On Sept. 22, 1862, President Abraham Lincoln issued the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, declaring all slaves in rebel states should be free as of January 1, 1863 if the states did not end the fighting and rejoin the union.

On this date: In 1776, during the Revolutionary War, Capt. Nathan Hale, 21, was hanged as a spy by the British in New York.

In 1911, pitcher Cy Young, 44, gained his 511th and final career victory as he hurled a 1-0 shutout for the Boston Rustlers against the Pittsburgh Pirates at Forbes Field.

In 1949, the Soviet Union exploded its first atomic bomb.

In 1961, the Interstate Commerce Commission issued rules prohibiting racial discrimination on interstate buses.

In 1975, Sara Jane Moore attempted to shoot President Gerald R. Ford outside a San Francisco hotel, but missed.

In 1980, the Persian Gulf conflict between Iran and Iraq erupted into full-scale war.

In 1985, rock and country music artists participated in "Farm Aid," a concert staged in Champaign, Illinois, to help the nation's farmers.

In 1993, 47 people were killed when an Amtrak passenger train fell off a bridge and crashed into Big Bayou Canot near Mobile, Alabama.

In 1994, the situation comedy "Friends" debuted on NBC-TV.

In 1995, an AWACS plane carrying U.S. and Canadian military personnel crashed on takeoff from Elmendorf Air Force Base near Anchorage, Alaska, killing all 24 people aboard.

In 2020, U.S. deaths from the coronavirus topped 200,000, by far the highest confirmed death toll from the virus in the world at that point, according to a count by Johns Hopkins University.

In 2017, as the scale of the damage from Hurricane Maria started to become clearer, Puerto Rican officials said they could not contact more than half of the communities in the U.S. territory, where all power had been knocked out to the island's 3.4 million people.

Bluffton Street Fair Industrial Parade



Fort Wayne Mizpah Shriners joined Bluffton's Masonic Lodge No. 145 for the Industrial Parade. (Photos by Barbara Barbieri)



Many parade watchers came prepared with large bags to collect the candy and brochures being handed out by marchers. Barbara Oswald, middle, was handing out candy from the Wells County Public Library that explained how to become a Friend of the Library.



Friends of the Library joined the Wells County Public Library staff and assisted with candy distribution. Left to right are Barbara Oswald, Ginger Bolinger, Natilie Eschenbacher, and Barbara Barbieri. (Photo by Emily Marshall)

A grandmother seeks justice for Native Americans after thousands of unsolved deaths, disappearances

HARDIN, Mont. (AP) — Yolanda Fraser is back near a ragged chain-link fence, blinking through tears as she tangles up flowers and ribbons and a pinwheel twirls in the breeze at a makeshift roadside memorial in a small Montana town.

This is where the badly decomposed body of her granddaughter Kaysera Stops Pretty Places was found a few days after the 18-year-old went missing from a Native American reservation border town.

Four years later, there are still no answers about how the Native American teenager died. No named suspects. No arrests.

Fraser's grief is a common tale among Native Americans whose loved ones went missing, and she's turned her fight for justice into a leading role with other families working to highlight missing and slain Indigenous peoples' cases across the U.S. Despite some early success from a new U.S. government program aimed at the problem, most cases remain unsolved and federal officials have closed more than 300 potential cases due to jurisdictional conflicts and other issues.

As she told her granddaughter's story, Fraser pushed past tears and began listing other names among the thousands of disappearances and violent deaths of Native Americans and Alaska Natives.

"My nephew Victor, my nephew Dane Fisher, my close relative Christy Rose Woodenthigh — and it just goes on and on," Fraser said. "It just became obvious that there's a pattern to all of it. There's a line between these Native lives and other lives. ... But our voice is getting louder. People are listening."

U.S. officials share frustration over the unsolved cases, which critics say reflects racial injustice, particularly when compared to the media frenzy that erupts when a white woman goes missing.

"The patchwork of jurisdictions makes it so hard to get started on these investigations. And when you lose time, your chances of solving these cases goes down," said Assistant Secretary of Interior Bryan Newland. "It's frustrating for everybody."

Federal law enforcement has jurisdiction over most Native American reservations, which often don't have their own police force yet experience people going missing at several times the rate of the rest of the nation. That's set against a backdrop of historical injustices that include massacres of Native Americans by U.S. troops, forced assimilation of Native children in abusive boarding schools and the removal of many tribes from their traditional lands.

Members of several victims' families joined Fraser recently to dedicate a billboard honoring victims along Interstate 90 just outside the town of Hardin where Stops Pretty Places died. The billboard lists four dozen missing and slain people and other victims on the Northern Cheyenne and Crow reservations in southeastern Montana.

As the names were recited over a loudspeaker some relatives of victims cried as they leaned into one another. "When we're divided we're not strong at all, but when we're together we're powerful," said Blossom Old Bull, whose son was killed in a car crash at 17 while being pursued by

police whom the family blames for his death.

With backing from non-profit groups and her family, Fraser hopes to erect similar billboards near reservations across the U.S. She wants to highlight the names behind crime statistics and for local officials to be confronted with the victims within their community.

Stops Pretty Places died in Big Horn County, just outside the Crow Indian Reservation and about 55 miles from Muddy Creek, the Northern Cheyenne Reservation community where Fraser largely raised her. She'd been missing for several days when her body was found at the edge of a fenced-in yard next to a busy road, one door down from where she'd last been seen with some friends.

For years, the family's pleas for an outside investigation went unanswered. This spring they learned county authorities had finally agreed to federal assistance. Agents from the Bureau of Indian Affairs' Missing and Murdered Unit are now reexamining the case.

The unit was formed in 2021 by U.S. Interior Secretary Deb Haaland amid rising criticism over the mishandling of crimes involving Native Americans. Its agents have received 845 case referrals, primarily from victims' families, including 117 that were solved and 372 still under review or being investigated.

More than 350 were closed with no resolution, often because of jurisdictional issues that prevent federal agents from working off-reservation without an invitation from local authorities.

Chairman of Joint Chiefs confirmed as GOP senator blocks nominations

By MARY CLARE JALONICK and TARA COPP
Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate on Wednesday confirmed Gen. CQ Brown as the next chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, putting him in place to succeed Gen. Mark Milley when he retires at the end of the month.

Brown's confirmation on a 83-11 vote, months after President Joe Biden nominated him for the post, comes as Democrats try to maneuver around holds placed on hundreds of nominations by Alabama Sen. Tommy Tuberville over the Pentagon's abortion policy. The Senate is also expected to confirm Gen. Randy George to be Army Chief of Staff and Gen. Eric Smith as commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps this week.

Tuberville has been blocking the Senate from the routine process of approving military nominations in groups, frustrating Democrats who had said they would not go through the time-consuming process of bringing up individual nominations for a vote. More than 300 nominees are still stalled amid Tuberville's blockade, and confirming them one-by-one would take months.

But Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., reversed course on Wednesday and moved to force votes on Brown, George and Smith.

"Senator Tuberville is forcing us to face his obstruction head on," Schumer said. "I want to make clear to my Republican colleagues — this cannot continue."

Tuberville did not object to the confirmation votes, saying he will maintain his holds but is fine with bringing up nominations individually for roll call votes.

White House national security spokesman John Kirby said that Brown's confirmation, along with expected votes on Smith and George, is positive news. But "we should have never been in this position," he said.

"While good for these three officers, it doesn't fix the problem or provide a path forward for the 316 other general and flag officers that are held up by this ridiculous hold," Kirby told reporters.

Brown, a career fighter pilot, was the

Air Force's first Black commander of the Pacific Air Forces and most recently its first Black chief of staff, making him the first African American to lead any of the military branches. His confirmation will also mark the first time the Pentagon's top two posts were held by African Americans, with Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin as the top civilian leader.

In a statement late Wednesday, Austin said Brown would be a "tremendous leader" as the new chairman.

Brown, 60, replaces Joint Chiefs Chairman Army Gen. Mark Milley, who is retiring after four decades in military service. Milley's four-year term as chairman ends on Sept. 30.

Tuberville said on Wednesday that he will continue to hold up the other nominations unless the Pentagon ends its policy of paying for travel when a service member has to go out of state to get an abortion or other reproductive care. The Biden administration instituted the policy after the Supreme Court overturned the nationwide right to an abortion and some states have limited or banned the procedure.

"Let's do one at a time or change the policy back," Tuberville said after Schumer put the three nominations up for a vote. "Let's vote on it."

In an effort to force Tuberville's hand, Democrats had said they would not bring up the most senior nominees while the others were still stalled. "There's an old saying in the military, leave no one behind," Senate Armed Services Chairman Jack Reed said in July.

But in a frustrated speech on the Senate floor, Schumer said Wednesday he was left with no other choice.

"Senator Tuberville is using them as pawns," Schumer said of the nominees.

The votes come as a host of military officers have spoken out about the damage of the delays for service members. While Tuberville's holds are focused on all general and flag officers, they carry career impacts on the military's younger rising officers. Until each general or admiral is confirmed, it blocks an opportunity for a more junior officer to rise.

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Biden: Norfolk Southern must be held accountable for Ohio derailment

But won't declare disaster

By **JOSH FUNK**
Associated Press

President Joe Biden ordered federal agencies to continue holding Norfolk Southern accountable for its February derailment in eastern Ohio and appoint a FEMA official to oversee East Palestine's recovery, but he still stopped short of declaring a disaster.

Biden issued the executive order Wednesday evening. Part of the order essentially directed the environmental, health and transportation officials to continue doing what they are doing to make sure Norfolk Southern fulfills its responsibilities and report on the progress. The Federal Emergency Management Agency will name a recovery coordinator to monitor the situation.

The lack of a disaster declaration has been a key concern for many residents of the area where the derail-

ment happened near the Ohio-Pennsylvania border, but officials have said this situation doesn't easily fit the definition of a disaster because Norfolk Southern is paying to clean up the mess and help the town recover so unpaid bills aren't piling up. The railroad has committed \$95 million to the town already as part of a response the railroad expects to cost at least \$803 million.

Still, Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine requested a disaster declaration back in July to make sure any unmet needs would be covered if Norfolk Southern did renege in its often-stated promise to make things right in East Palestine.

DeWine's spokesman, Dan Tierney, said the governor is glad the Biden administration "affirmed their long-term commitment to supporting the residents of East Palestine, including

the consideration of federal disaster aid should Norfolk Southern not fulfill its obligation to fully compensate the residents of East Palestine and clean up the aftermath of the derailment."

East Palestine resident Jessica Conard said the order is a step in the right direction, but she still has concerns.

"It's a lofty title for an incremental change," she said.

In particular, she questioned how the FEMA coordinator will effectively assess unmet needs of residents without chemical testing to their bodies or homes.

"I'm hopeful that we as residents can direct this narrative and that the emergency management services that are in place will support the residents through this process."

The railroad has reimbursed residents for relocation costs since the derailment and compensated the fire department for equip-

ment that was damaged while fighting the fire and dealing with the chemicals that were released after the derailment. Norfolk Southern has also promised to pay for upgrading East Palestine's parks and water treatment center. On Thursday, the Atlanta-based railroad announced plans to build a \$20 million regional training center for first responders in East Palestine.

Norfolk Southern has also said it will establish funds to pay for lost home values, any long-term health concerns and water contamination issues that result from the derailment. The railroad announced a preliminary program to compensate homeowners earlier this week although the final details of those funds are still being negotiated with Ohio officials.

The railroad said it is committed to helping East Palestine now and in the future.

"From the beginning, Norfolk Southern has committed to making it right in East Palestine and covering all costs associated with the clean-up. In the months since, we have made significant progress, keeping our promises to safely and thoroughly clean the derailment site, support the needs of the community, and invest in its future," Norfolk Southern said in a statement.

Jami Wallace, who helps lead the East Palestine Unity Council group that's trying to get residents' concerns addressed, said it would be better if the federal government would step in and compensate residents directly and then seek reimbursement from the railroad instead of forcing residents to deal with Norfolk Southern.

Also, she thinks more should be done to make sure the railroad does what it should.

"Commitment to holding Norfolk Southern account-

able? People are still sick and living in homes that haven't been tested. They are begging NS for assistance to survive," Wallace said.

U.S. Sen. Sherrod Brown, who co-sponsored a package of railroad safety reforms after the derailment that's still awaiting a vote in the Senate, said it's important to make sure that Norfolk Southern delivers on all its promises.

"This is an overdue but welcomed step to support the people of East Palestine," said Brown. "There is still much more work to do to make this community whole and I will continue to push the administration to deliver for East Palestine and hold Norfolk Southern accountable."

The White House said that if FEMA identifies needs that aren't being met or if Norfolk Southern changes the aid it is offering, it will reassess the disaster declaration.

Ohio police suggested charging an 11 year old for her explicit photos

By **CLAUDIA LAUER**
and **SAMANTHA HENDRICKSON**
Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — When an Ohio father learned that his 11-year-old daughter had been manipulated into sending explicit photos to an adult, he turned to the police for help.

But instead of treating the girl as a crime victim, an officer seemingly threatened to charge her under a law most people view as designed to protect child victims.

The shocking interaction was recorded last week on body camera audio and by the father's doorbell camera in Columbus, Ohio. The footage drew criticism from the public and from experts who said law enforcement officials have long misused laws meant to protect children by threatening to charge them with being part of the same crime.

Experts said the incident also showed that training for officers on how to respond to child exploitation cases is spotty and not standardized between police departments.

"It was a complete fail on a legal level and on a human level," said Scott Berkowitz, founder and president of the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network — the nation's largest anti-sexual violence organization. "I don't know who immediately goes to blaming a child in a situation like that. It's inconceivable."

In the redacted body camera recording obtained by The Associated Press, the father asks if there's anything the police can do.

A female officer is heard replying that his 11-year-old could be charged with creating "child porn."

The parent protests that she is a child, a victim who was manipulated by an adult.

"It doesn't matter," the officer said. "She's still creating it."

The angry father ends the conversation and slams the door behind him. The video he posted to TikTok had been watched more than 750,000 times as of Thursday.

Police have not released the father's name. The AP, which does not identify victims of alleged sexual abuse, reached out to him on social media and by phone this week but did not receive a response.

Columbus Police Chief Elaine Bryant responded quickly in a statement that the officers' conduct was being investigated and that it did not meet the division's standards for how victims should be treated.

Columbus police spokesperson Andrés Antequera said the agency has a nuanced policy that considers each case individually, but that "the focus is to protect the minor through education, counseling and social services, not criminal charges."

He said the department sometimes provides information on those resources to parents, as well as referrals for services.

But Antequera said Ohio statutes are clear that minors who create, possess or distribute images of child sexual abuse, even of themselves, are violating the law. He said prosecutors

ultimately decide when to file charges, but he did not answer when asked whether Columbus police had arrested minors under similar circumstances in the past.

The AP filed a written request with the Franklin County prosecuting attorney's office seeking information on whether minors have been charged under the statute, but had not received a response as of Thursday afternoon.

Rebecca Epstein, the executive director of the Center on Gender Justice and Opportunity at Georgetown Law, said charges against victims are common. Epstein co-authored a report in April looking at how survivors of sexual assault and abuse are often criminalized.

"Girls who experience sexual abuse are often the ones who are punished for the sexual abuse that they experience. Rather than being treated as survivors who need support, they are funneled into the criminal justice system," she said. "Our culture assigns complicity to girls who are too young to legally even consent to sex."

Epstein said minors who are trafficked or coerced into sexual acts or into creating or soliciting sexual materials can often be charged with crimes.

In the early 2000s, as cellphone cameras became common and "sexting" entered the national vernacular, juvenile justice advocates began fighting against prosecutors who wanted to charge minors for consensually sharing explicit images with other minors.

Riya Saha Shah, the

senior managing director of the Juvenile Law Center, said the center was part of that advocacy and has continued to raise concerns about sexual exploitation laws being used against child victims.

"These laws were really intended to prevent sexual abuse of children, to protect against the exploitation of children," Shah said. "So weaponizing these laws against children to bring charges against them really misunderstands the law, and even worse, is flouting the law's purpose."

It's hard to know how many children are charged, partly because prosecutors can use the charges to elicit guilty pleas to lesser offenses, she said.

Shah, who said she also has an 11-year-old daughter, called the police response to a parent seeking help disappointing but not surprising.

"There was no investigation into who the individual was who has these images in their possession," Shah said. "It went right to punishing her, which unfortunately is all too common in a system that really isn't designed to help first, but rather to punish first."

Berkowitz said the inter-

action reflected the importance of training and the scarcity of standardized training for interviewing and interacting with child victims of sexual crimes.

The AP requested information on any training the responding officers had received, and asked why the father's call was not directed to specialized departments within the Colum-

bus Division of Police, but police had not responded as of Thursday afternoon.

Berkowitz said a possible lack of training resources doesn't excuse the officers' behavior.

"This should be pretty basic stuff that when an adult abuses a child, you do everything you can to stop it, not to blame the child," he said.

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