3/31/22 Thursday

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Who Are the Americans Coordinating Bioweapons Research in Ukraine Labs?

Amid its ongoing special operation in Ukraine, Russian forces discovered US-operated biolabs in the country carrying out dangerous pathogen research. While Washington initially tried to deny their existence, they later confirmed it, but claimed the labs' activities were unremarkable.
The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) revealed new documents on Thursday that had been seized by Russian forces in eastern Ukraine, including correspondences between American financier Hunter Biden - the son of US President Joe Biden - and figures involved in biological research in Ukraine, which an investment firm of his helped to bankroll.
The documents revealed an intent to create a "Central Depository of Especially Dangerous Microorganisms in Kiev," according to Russian MoD spokesperson Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov, as well as ways to distribute biological agents via drone.
The emails revealed the names of several American figures central to the biological research projects from the firms Metabiota and Black & Veatch, as well as officials from the US Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA). Those named include:
Pope was deputy director of operations, readiness and exercises at the DTRA from 2017 until 2020. He previously held various positions at US Air Force European Command (USAFE), US Central Command (USCC), and the Pentagon. Pope participated in the development of radiochemical procedures for monitoring international treaties in the field of nuclear weapons (Air Force Technical Application Center).
The published emails revealed a correspondence between Pope and Ukraine's acting health minister between 2016 and 2019, American-born Ulana Suprun, who went to Ukraine to participate in the US-backed coupin 2014.
Rhys M. Williams
Williams took over for Pope as acting DTRA director in 2020, having previously been the agency's director of development, test and evaluation. He led the Department of Defense's program to develop capabilities to detect, locate and neutralize foreign WMD and improvised explosive devices. Williams also served as Assistant Deputy Administrator for Nonproliferation at the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) of the US Department of Energy, the organization responsible for the country's nuclear weapons arsenal.
Joanna Wintrol
Wintrol headed DTRA projects in Ukraine until 2021 at the US Embassy in Kiev's Defense Threat Reduction Office.
Emails published by the MoD revealed she directly supervised experiments with deadly pathogens, including the UP-2 Project for "mapping highly infectious diseases in Ukraine," including anthrax; the UP-4 Project, described as a "risk assessment of particularly dangerous pathogens transmitted by birds in Ukraine during migration"; the UP-8 Project studying "spread of Crimean-Congo hemorrhagic fever virus and hantaviruses in Ukraine and the potential need

for differential diagnosis of patients with suspected leptospirosis. Previously released documentsshowed she also oversaw Project P-782, conducting research into the transmission of diseases through bats.

Wintrol moved to Chemical Security and Elimination (CSE) in early 2021. According to a DTRA publication, CSE was formerly known as the Chemical Weapons Elimination (CWE) program and the Chemical Weapons Destruction (CWD) program. The effort "started in 1992 to build the capacity of the states of the Former Soviet Union (FSU) to reduce the threat from chemical weapons (CW) by securing and eliminating CW stockpiles, chemical research capabilities, and production facilities, while also redirecting scientists to peaceful purposes," the agency said.

Since 2013, Edwards has been the CEO of American engineering firm Black & Veatch, a longtime contractor for the Pentagon used for a variety of construction tasks. He has been with the company since 1978 and was formerly its Chief Operating Officer.

Black & Veatch was long known to be working on Pentagon projects in Ukraine, but the documents seized by Russian forces earlier this month revealed the firm's job in overseeing biological programs there, including the UP-8 project previously mentioned, studying Crimean-Congo hemorrhagic fever, leptospirosis and hantaviruses.

Lance Lippencott

He has been the project manager in Ukraine for Black & Veatch since 2011 and its biological project coordinator. In August 2021, he told the Kansas City Business Journal that his work on airborne biological agents in Ukraine had helped Black & Veatch to develop a device for purifying air of SARS-CoV-2 virus particles, the virus that causes COVID-19. Lippencott is a graduate of the US Army Military Academy at West Point.

In one of the documents published by the MoD, a report from the Security Service of Ukraine's Kherson region referred to "a potential threat to the epidemiological and epizootic situation in our country that has recently come to light as a result of DTRA's intentions through Black & Veatch to establish control over the functioning of Ukrainian microbiological laboratories that conduct research into particularly dangerous pathogens that can be used to create or upgrade new types of biological weapons."

Another document from Lippencott to the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense concerns the extension of the UP-8 project mentioned above.

David Mustra

"Issues of biomonitoring and transfer of information were supervised by David Mustra, who is closely associated with another Pentagon contractor, Metabiota," Konashenkov said. "Previously, he led military bio-projects in Ukraine and Eastern Europe as part of the Cooperative Threat Reduction Program."

Mustra was the company's biosafety recruitment manager in Ukraine, its biosurveillance and control managers, and the head of Metabiota's research and development.

With a doctorate in microbiology from UMass Amherst, Guttieri was the Executive Vice President at Metabiota from 2014 until 2019, and was previously the vice president of its Science & Technology Administration. She is now the lead scientist at Labyrinth Global Health. In Ukraine, Guttieri was the integrator of research projects for the US biology program and supervised the execution of biological projects related to the research of animals as vectors of disease.

Nita Madhav

Madhav has been the CEO of Metabiota since 2019. She specializes in epidemiology and pandemics and has a PhD in Public Health. However, according to the Russian MoD, there was no information in the documents about her supervising any specific biological programs in Ukraine.

Scott Thornton

Thorton was Metabiota's senior microbiologist and laboratory start-up coordinator between 2006 and 2016. He previously spent 20 years in the US Navy, where he worked as a research microbiologist and head of the Navy's Threat Assessment Department. According to his CV, Thornton did his work at secret facilities, including one in Cairo, Egypt, and "conducted research on disease agents of military relevance, especially enteric pathogens."

In Ukraine, Thornton advised local staff on highly dangerous pathogens as well as other epidemic disease related issues in DTRA projects, and coordinated the upgrade of reference laboratories in Ukraine to biosafety level 3 (BSL-3), which are used to study infectious agents or toxins that may be transmitted through the air and cause potentially lethal infections.

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Pentagon Commission Releases List of 750 Places Named After Confederate Leaders to be Renamed

About 50 years after the defeat of the Confederate rebellion, the US military began naming installations after rebel leaders amid a resurgence of white supremacist extremism that included revival of the Ku Klux Klan hate group and "lost cause" nostalgia for the era of Black enslavement.

On Wednesday, the Pentagon's Naming Commission released a list of some 750 places named after Confederate generals, military officers and politicians that could be renamed amid a broader effort to end commemoration of the rebel movement that was defeated in 1865.

The list includes everything from military bases and forts to naval vessels, individual buildings and streets, and even the crests of certain warships and units that pay homage to the Confederacy, such as that of the USS Shiloh, a cruiser named after the bloody 1862 battle in Tennessee.

"This list is subject to change as we continue our work with the Department of Defense to identify all such assets across the service branches and the department," the commission said in a statement.

"Inclusion on this list means only that the asset is subject to review by the Commission; renaming and removal recommendations will be included in our final report to Congress no later than Oct. 1, 2022," the statement added.

The release follows the commission's delivering of a list of 87 potential replacement names for the 10 US Army installations named after Confederate figures: Fort Bragg, North Carolina; Fort Hood, Texas; Fort Rucker, Alabama; Fort Polk, Louisiana; Fort Benning and Fort Gordon in Georgia; and Virginia's Fort AP Hill, Fort Lee and Fort Pickett.

On the list of potential replacements are Dwight D. Eisenhower, a former US president and Supreme Allied Commander during World War II; Colin Powell, who was the first Black Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Black Secretary of State; Harriet Tubman, an escaped slave who led numerous military expeditions to free thousands of enslaved Black Americans in the US South, including the 1863 raid on Combahee Ferry that freed 800 slaves; and several Medal of Honor recipients.

The process is notably being overseen by Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, the first Black American to hold the position.

The Confederacy formed in early 1861 out of 11 southern US states that feared the impending inauguration of US President Abraham Lincoln would lead to the end of slavery in the United States, which served as the basis for their plantation-based economies. The resulting war lasted four years, killed more than 1 million Americans, and left much of the South in devastation. However, it also resulted in the abolition of slavery and a Reconstruction program aimed at erasing the inequality between White Americans and the roughly 4 million freed Black slaves, most of whom could not read or write and had no knowledge of politics or business.

When the Reconstruction program was ended by political dealmaking in Washington in 1876 and the southern governments regained sovereignty from the US military, the old White aristocracy reasserted its power and erased most of the gains made by Black southerners, instituting a system of racial apartheid colloquially known as Jim Crow, which persisted until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. During this era of reasserted white supremacy is when places started being named after Confederate figures as the slavery era was looked at more favorably.

Amid the 2020 mass protests demanding justice for George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man from Minneapolis, Minnesota, who was murdered by a white police officer named Derek Chauvin, activists began tearing down statues of Confederate figures and other white supremacist figures erected during the Jim Crow era, calling them a commemoration of slavery and racism. The movement prompted numerous renamings and an end to many establishments flying the Confederate “Stars and Bars” battle flag, a widespread symbol of the US South, and sparked the Pentagon’s movement toward renaming, as well.

However, that effort was opposed by then-US President Donald Trump, who ordered the reversal of such plans and later fired his defense secretary, Mark Esper, for attempting to push ahead with the renaming process. Congress put the renaming commission into the Pentagon’s 2021 budget and passed it over Trump’s veto.

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US to Release 1 Million Barrels of Oil a Day From Strategic Reserves Over Next Six Months

Earlier in March, the Biden administration announced a total boycott of petroleum products from Russia, the world's largest exporter, in retaliation for Russia's special operation in Ukraine.

The White House announced on Thursday it would begin releasing 1 million barrels of oil per day from the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve, the largest such release in US history. The release will last for the next six months, totaling roughly 182 million barrels of oil.
The reserve's capacity is 727 million barrels, according to the US Department of Energy, spread out in storage facilities across the United States.
The White House said the goal of the historic release was to bring down gas prices, noting it will take months for additional oil production in the US to come online. A senior administration official told reporters that the US would restock the reserve when oil prices are lower.
The decision comes as petroleum prices on international markets remain at elevated levels, with Brent Crude trading at $108.6 per barrel on Thursday. In the US, gasoline prices have also spiked, averaging $4.26 per gallon across the United States on Thursday, according to the American Automotive Association (AAA).
On March 8, US President Joe Biden announced the US would boycott Russian petroleum in response to Russia launching a special "neutralization" operation in Ukraine. Oil prices had already risen sharplyin anticipation of the operation, the disruption it would cause to Russian gas exports, and the retaliation threatened by the West if the operation went ahead.
Biden has billed the price increases as "Putin's Price Hike," although a Quinnipiac poll released last week found that 41% of Americans surveyed held Biden responsible for rising prices, with 24% saying the sanctions had caused it and 24% saying oil companies were to blame.
The US has already released a considerable amount of oil from its reserve in recent months in response to rising gasoline prices, which have helped push inflation to its highest level in 40 years. However, after announcing the boycott, Biden announced a massive release of 30 million barrels of oil from the reserve.

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Israel's Hands 'Not Tied' by JCPOA Revival, US Ambassador to Jerusalem Says

The Israeli government has never trusted the 2015 Iran nuclear deal and supported then-US President Donald Trump's 2018 withdrawal from the treaty. Israeli agents have long carried out sabotage and assassinations against Iran's civil nuclear program, claiming without evidence that Iran was secretly pursuing a nuclear weapon.
While a deal to revive the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is on the cusp of agreement, Jerusalem has continued to assert its right to carry out unilateral action against Iran's nuclear program and other efforts it claims endanger the Zionist state, including Iranian facilities in Syria.
"If we have a deal, the Israelis' hands are not tied. If we don't have a deal, the Israelis' hands are certainly not tied," US Ambassador to Israel Tom Nides told Israel's Channel 12 TV news station on Thursday.
"Israel can do and take whatever actions they need to take to protect the state of Israel," he added.

The envoy added that US President Joe Biden "will do whatever he can do to make sure that Iran does not have a nuclear weapon… It's clear we'd like to do it through a diplomatic channel." Trump, Biden's predecessor, opposed the deal and unilaterally withdrew the US from it, reimposing strangling economic sanctions against Iran as part of a larger "maximum pressure" campaign intended to overthrow the Islamic republic. After Biden took office in January 2021, he started up talks to revive the deal, even as Iran continued to back away from its commitments under the treaty. After a new Israeli government came to power in June 2021, Jerusalem took a cautiously optimistic approach to the talks, even while asserting its right to act independently and unilaterally against Iran's nuclear program.

In January, Aharon Haliva, head of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF)'s Operations Directorate, told Israel's Walla News that a revival of the JCPOA is better than a collapse of talks, while the nation's foreign minister, Yair Lapid, said that Jerusalem has "no problem" with the JCPOA in principle and that "a good deal is a good thing."

Tehran has consistently denied pursuing a nuclear weapon, saying its uranium refining capacity is for civil nuclear power plants and medical research. The JCPOA limited its uranium purity to just 3.67%, enough for low-yield nuclear power plants, and limited its quantity to just enough to fuel a handful of facilities. Since backing away from its commitments in a bid to pressure the US to return to the deal, Iran has produced uranium of a purity of 60% U-235; a uranium bomb requires at least 90% purity, as do a bevy of other advanced weapons technologies that even Israeli intelligence agrees Iran has not pursued.

Jerusalem has nonetheless waged an extensive espionage campaign against Tehran's nuclear program, including acts of sabotage and assassinating a prominent Iranian nuclear scientist. Last autumn, Prime Minister Naftali Bennett ordered the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) to draw up plans for airstrikesagainst Iran's nuclear facilities in case the JCPOA talks fail.

The IDF carried out a similar operation in 1981 against Iraq's incomplete Osirak nuclear reactor, which they feared could be used to produce an Iraqi nuclear weapon. Ironically, the Israelis secretly got help from Iran for the attack, as Tehran was at war with Iraq at the time and equally feared an Iraqi nuclear weapon.

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US Stocks Plummet 500-Plus Points as Biden Announces Hefty Oil Reserves Release
By - Evan Craighead

On Thursday, the White House announced that it would begin the daily release of some 1 million barrels of oil, totaling around 182 million barrels of oil from the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve over the next six months. The move comes as the largest release of its kind in US history. Preliminary data shows that US stocks closed up the first quarter on Thursday with its largest quarterly decline in two years.

As the conflict in Ukraine persists and the Federal Reserve responds to inflation, the S&P 500 observed a loss of 1.57%, to 4,530.41, while theNasdaq Composite fell 1.54% to 14,220.52 and the Dow Jones Industrial Average plummeted 535.80 points (1.52%) to 34,693.01.

Losses deepened during the final hour of trading on Thursday, which marked the last day of trading for March, as well as the first quarter.
Brent crude, a waterborne crude oil used as the international benchmark for much of the world's oil, settled down $5.54 (4.9%), at $107.91 per barrel, following a session low of $104.20 per barrel. Brent was up nearly 7% for March, and rose some 39% for the first quarter.
West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude, the US oil benchmark, settled down $7.54 (7%), at $100.28. WTI was up nearly 5% for March, and rose some 33% for the first quarter.
Thursday's market close came hours after the White House announced it would releasing an unprecedented total of 180 million barrels from the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve over the next six months.
Overall, both the S&P 500 and Dow Jones Industrial Average respectively closed down 5.2% and 4.8%, and the Nasdaq shed around 10% in the first quarter.
Market data showed that although consumer prices rose a bit in February amid intensified pricing pressures, personal consumption expenditures (PCE) rose by 0.4% (excluding food and energy data).
The PCE number falls in line with the expectations of the Federal Reserve.
Ken Polcari, a managing partner at Kace Capital Advisors, told Yahoo Finance that although the number was on target for the Fed, the US central bank will likely become more aggressive in raising interest rates to address inflation.
"The PCE number came out today, which is the Fed's preferred number, and although that was right on target, it was higher than it was last month, and the sense is it is going to continue to go higher, therefore you are seeing some weakness," Polcari told the outlet.
"That only solidifies [Fed Chair Jerome] Powell and the Fed's position to be more aggressive so there are going to be multiple 50 basis point hikes."

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One Dead, Two Injured After US Navy Hawkeye Crashes Near Virginia's Eastern Shore
By - Evan Craighead

A public affairs officer with Naval Force Atlantic confirmed that a US Navy E-2D Hawkeye was conducting a routine exercise when it went down just north of Virginia's Chincoteague Island around 7:30 p.m., local time, on Wednesday.
At least one crew member has died and another two have been injured in a Wednesday night plane crash in the vicinity of the eastern shore's Wallops Island and Chincoteague, the US Navy Naval Air Force Atlantic confirmed in a March 30 memo.
Per the release, Maryland State Police rescued two crew members from the all-weather, carrier-capable aircraft's crash site and transferred the duo to Wallops Island for medical treatment. Both individuals are said to have non-life threatening injuries, and were later sent to Tidal Health Hospital in Salisbury, Maryland.
The names were not published by the service due to privacy concerns.

Authorities, including the Worcester County Fire Department, located a third crew member in the aircraft who was pronounced deceased at the scene.
Accomack County Department of Public Safety, the Virginia Marine Resources Commission, the Stockton Fire Company, Wallops Fire Department, the Atlantic Volunteer Fire and the New Church Fire Department, and Coast Guard personnel all responded to the scene.
Emergency responders were assisted by dive teams based in Maryland's Ocean City and Salisbury.
Lt. Cmdr. Rob Myers, a public affairs officer for the service, detailed that the $80 million, 58-foot aircraft assigned to an East Coast Airborne Command and Control Squadron took off from Naval Station Norfolk and was en route to Wallops Island when it went down. The aircraft was partially submerged upon authorities' arrival.
A probe has been launched regarding the situation. No individuals on the ground were injured.
"This serves as a reminder that our great servicemen and women risk their lives every day to serve our country," said Virginia Governor Glenn Youngkin (R), adding that he and his wife were personally devastated by the crash.
Rep. Elaine Luria (D-VA) offered that she would continue monitoring the situation, as it occurred in the district she represents.
"I'm continuing to monitor the Navy plane crash in Accomack County," the congresswoman offered in a same-day statement. "I'm keeping our naval aviators, their families, and our first responders in my thoughts and prayers tonight as rescue and recovery efforts continue."

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Inadequate Intervention - Cartoon
By - Ted Rail

For the third time in about four months, the administration of US President Joe Biden has tapped into the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve. The first two releases of 50 million and 30 million barrels of oil, respectively, occurred in November 2021 and in early March, during the US president's first State of the Union address.
As US President Joe Biden warned in early March, American consumers are continuing to pay the price for the administration's decision to ban Russian oil imports amid Russia's special military operation in Ukraine.
In its latest effort, the Biden administration has ordered the daily release of some 1 million barrels of oil from the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve, totaling around 182 million barrels of oil from the reserve over the next six months.
"The scale of this release is unprecedented: the world has never had a release of oil reserves at this 1 million per day rate for this length of time," Biden said. "This record release will provide a historic amount of supply to serve as a bridge until the end of the year when domestic production ramps up."

Brent crude, an international benchmark for much of the world's oil, settled down $5.54 (4.9%), at $107.91 per barrel on Thursday, which marked the last day of trading for March, as well as the first quarter. Brent held a session low of $104.20 per barrel.

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DC Police Launch Probe After Uncovering Five Aborted Fetuses in Home of Anti-Abortion Activist
By - Evan Craighead

Two Virginia residents are among nine individuals who have been indicted on felony charges for allegedly blocking the entrance of a women's center that offers abortions in Washington, DC. All of the accused are facing federal charges of intimidating employees and a patient, as well as preventing patients from receiving reproductive health services.
Homicide and forensic science detectives of the DC Police force were seen carrying red biohazard bags from the basement of a southeast DC rowhouse on Wednesday, not long after the US Department of Justice announced the indictment of nine people tied to an October 2020 "invasion" of a DC women's health clinic.
Lauren Handy, one of the nine indicted, reportedly lived at the 6th Street home where DC Police confirmed the discovery of five fetuses.
Handy, a self-proclaimed anti-abortion activist, is facing felony conspiracy against rights over her October 2020 blockade of the Washington Surgi-Clinic in northwest DC.
The accused told local outlet WUSA9 that she expected Wednesday's events to unfold "sooner or later."
She would later decline to expound on the evidence retrieved from the home, including the five fetuses. Handy did mention that "people would freak out when they heard."
Per the indictment, Handy pretended to be "Hazel Jenkins," a woman needing an abortion on October 22, 2020. Upon her appointment that morning, Handy reportedly checked in with an employee of the clinic before she and the co-defendants forced their way into the building.
A clinic employee reportedly injured her ankle in the incident.
Others indicted on Wednesday include Jonathan Darnell (Virginia); Jay Smith (New York); Paulette Harlow (Massachusetts); Jean Marshall (Massachusetts); John Hinshaw (New York); Heather Idoni (Michigan); William Goodman (Michigan); and Joan Bell (New Jersey).
DC Police are now investigating how the fetuses wound up in Handy's home.
"There doesn't appear to be anything criminal about that — except for how they got into that house," said DC Police Executive Assist. Chief of Police Ashan M. Benedict.
The fetuses were aborted in accordance with DC law, Benedict noted.

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South African College Student Jailed After Spending $1 Million in Financial Aid on Shopping Sprees
By - Mary Manley

The South African accounting student initially came under the spotlight in 2017, some two months after having mistakenly received nearly $1 million in her bank account. Authorities had been tipped off after fellow students reported the undergrad's sudden change in lifestyle, such as her eye for pricey whiskey.
Sibongile Mani, a second-year accounting student from South Africa, was sentenced to prison after she spent nearly $1 million in financial aid on luxury goods following a clerical error that accidentally dumped the shocking sum into her bank account.
Judge Twanette Olivier, of the East London Regional Court, found Mani guilty of theft after she failed to report the R14 million that was accidentally credited to her account by the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) in 2017.
Mani was supposed to receive only $96 a month for food but was accidentally given close to $1 million on June 1, 2017, as the result of an NSFAS clerical error. Mani was sentenced to five years in prison on Wednesday after she failed to report the accident, allegedly opting to go on a monthslong spending spree instead.
The items which Mani bought reportedly included: bras, wine, cake plates, four hair straighteners, cook wear, calculators, cutlery, dinner sets, handbags, cigarettes, framed mirrors, 11 microwaves, 13 backpack trolleys, 13 extension cords, 12 cordless kettles, 11 blankets, shoes, and slow cookers.
Mani spent nearly $1,000 a day during a monthlong shopping spree at 48 stores in Eastern Cape, Western Cape, and Gauteng before the NSFAS noticed the error on August 13 and reported her - over two months after the money first hit her account in 2017.
Olivier told Mani in court in February that the receipts from her shopping sprees indicated that "you had definitely planned per day as to how much you can spend per day in as many places as possible on any given date."
Olivier dismissed Mani's claim that she didn't intend to deprive the NSFAS of its funds, as well as her claim that she had no knowledge of the details of the loan between her and the NSFAS.
"[The theft] was well-orchestrated. Your actions do not speak of a person who lacks knowledge. The evidence of each witness was clear and direct. Each witness testified on the certain aspect of the process followed by WSU, NSFAS and Intellimali per duties and tasks. Witness testimonies were further collaborated by documented evidence which was placed on record in detail," said Olivier.
Fellow students of the Walter Sisulu University say they reported Mani after they became suspicious of her new lifestyle, which included a new iPhone, a luxurious weave, and a newfound fondness for expensive whiskey.
The judge told Mani that over 500 students who attend Walther Sisulu University would have suffered due to the theft if the NSFAS had not been willing to cover the loss. Olivier determined that Mani's spending was on nonessentials, saying the shopping sprees were "inspired by greed, not need."
Mani, 31, will serve a third of her five-year sentence before she is eligible for parole consideration.

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Study Shows Shocking Increase in Percentage of Fentanyl Pills Confiscated Over Last Four Years
By - Mary Manley

Fentanyl in pill form is dangerous, researchers warn, as people who obtain counterfeit pills disguised as oxycodone or alprazolam will be at a greater risk of unintentional exposure to the lethal narcotic, which is 30 to 50 times stronger than heroin.
The number of fentanyl pills and powders seized by American law enforcement has jumped from 13.8% in 2018 to 29.2% in 2021, according to a study published by the Drug and Alcohol Dependence journal. The study also reported that over 2 million counterfeit pills were seized by authorities in the last three months of 2021 alone.
The study also noted that some 10 million fentanyl pills were confiscated in 2021.
Researchers say this increase in pill seizure reflects the amounts at which it's being produced by drug traffickers who manufacture fentanyl pills to look like prescription pills such as Percocet, Xanax, and even Adderall.
"Given that over a quarter of fentanyl seizures are now in pill form, people who obtain counterfeit pills such as those disguised as prescription opioids or benzodiazepines in particular are at risk for unintentional exposure to fentanyl," said the study, funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse.
"These look just like prescription pills, that's the scary part," said the study's lead author, Joseph Palamar, a professor of population health at NYU's Grossman School of Medicine. "One pill that contains fentanyl literally can kill you," he warns.
But according to experts, some users are actively seeking out the fake prescription meds because they are aware that they contain fentanyl. Washington state's biennial WA State Syringe Service Program Health Survey found that two-thirds of their respondents used fentanyl "on purpose" and most often in the form of a pill. The remaining third reported their fentanyl use to be an accident.
Caleb Banta-Green, a principal research scientist at the University of Washington School of Medicine, says that some fentanyl users may be misguided into thinking that consuming the drug via pill is safer than injecting opioids or heroin. He warns that fentanyl pills are not necessarily safer as the dosage can vary from pill to pill.
Fentanyl is 100 times more powerful than morphine, which is a Schedule II narcotic, but the "high" users get from fentanyl is also more fleeting than other drugs, so users end up consuming it more often, sometimes 20 to 30 times a day.
"Every time you're using, you also have a risk of overdose," says Banta-Green. "It's one of the reasons we're seeing these death rates that are so high, because there are so many more opportunities for a person to overdose, because they're using so much more frequently."
According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the opioid epidemic has been increasing since the late 90s, with an estimated 500,000 people dying between 1999 and

2019 as a result of an opioid overdose. The CDC says that the US has now entered a "third wave" of the opioid epidemic, which began in 2013. This third wave marks the increase in overdose deaths caused by synthetic opioids, such as fentanyl.
Recently, synthetic opioid-involved deaths increased 15% between 2018 and 2019. And by 2021, the death toll exploded to over 100,000.
As an example of the drug's recent growth; deaths were rare in California just five years ago, but now a person in the state who is under the age of 24 is dying every 12 hours due to fentanyl, according to The Guardian's analysis of state data through June 2021.
"Pills can disguise the risk," said study co-author Dr. Daniel Ciccarone, a University of California at San Francisco professor whose studies focus on addiction medicine. "A pill can be taken by a college student who is trying to stay up all night to study for an exam and doesn't know whether his buddy is selling him real Adderall or fake Adderall. A pill can be taken by a kid who goes to a club and thinks he'll have more fun if he takes the party drug MDMA – and instead he gets fentanyl."
Jaime Puerta found his 16 year-old son unconscious in his bedroom in 2020, after his son bought what he believed was an Oxycontin pill. The pill was actually fentanyl and left the teenager brain dead. His family later made the decision to remove him from life support.
Puerta has since then organized the nonprofit Victims of Illicit Drugs (VOID) to offer educational resources in the fight against the spiking death toll caused by fentanyl abuse. VOID is hoping to educate the public through any means possible, including both private and state organizations, on the dangers of fentanyl and other synthetic drugs.
"Not enough is being done about it. I wish people would see it as what it is. It's a national security crisis," said Puerta.
"People think this can't happen to them, because they don't have drug addicts in their families," he added. "But this is on the doorstep of every family."
Banta-Green says tackling this issue would involve a change in the way drug-addiction is viewed, labeling the opioid epidemic as a public health emergency a "necessity."
"Reconceptualizing opioid-use disorder as an urgent health emergency is necessary," he told CNN, noting the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, "mentally and financially depressed people are at increased risk for harms associated with opioids, so addressing wellness, poverty and housing are essential to health overall, including opioid-use disorder."

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Texas Man Arrested After Leaving Son's Corpse Inside His Kitchen for Nearly 4 Years
By - Mary Manley

Following a 2014 incident in which a couple was arrested for housing the decaying remains of eight individuals in their funeral home, lawmakers in the Lone Star State moved to increase the penalties for such crimes. Now, abuse of a corpse is a state jail felony punishable by six months to two years in a state jail and worth a fine of up to $10,000.

A Texas man was charged with abuse of a corpse on Wednesday after he left his son's rotting remains in his kitchen for four years. Police are currently investigating his son's cause of death.
The New Boston Police Department detailed Wednesday that David McMichael, 67, had been arrested after the discovery was in his home in New Boston, about 150 miles northeast of Dallas, Texas. Police had been called by other family members to perform a welfare check on McMichael's son, Jason.
Upon arriving at the New Boston home, McMichael relayed to police that he knew they were at the scene because he had his son's body in his kitchen, adding that he had died in May 2018. Police then discovered Jason's skeletal remains and determined that they "possibly" belonged to Jason McMichael.
Jason's father was then taken into custody by Bi-State Jail for abuse of a corpse.
The rest of Jason's family seemed to be unaware that he had died. Amber Nicole Hines, who claims to be related to Jason, took to Facebook writing: "Just to sum it up for acquiring minds… yes welfare checks were called in multiple time throughout the years, the most recent being 2020 and it was reported they were both seen outside and that all is fine."
Hines, who ended the social media post by writing, "Rest in Love cuz Jason McMichael", also said that Jason's death was "more than likely" due to natural causes as Jason was handicap and needed to be cared for 24/7. Hines writes: "he wasn't expected to even live long as he did, he lived to his 40s."
In the comment section of the same Facebook post, a woman named Connie Runnels Robinson said that "in 2016 David shut himself off from EVERYONE" following the death of his wife. She says the claim that the two men were seen together outside their home in 2020 is "not true." She then went on to explain that she was "actually the one that went out and talked to David" after that she got him to "tell me where Jason was" prompting her to call the police. Robinson also believes Jason died of natural causes, and that his father, David, failed to report his death.
The investigation into the incident remains ongoing.

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Fantasy Author Brandon Sanderson Breaks Kickstarter Campaign Record With $41.7 Million
By - Mary Manley

The Utah-based fantasy writer initially announced to fans on March 1 that he would be releasing several secret novels, underscoring that the surprise and added gifts would depend on the dollar amount his kickstarter campaign would be able to collect.
American fantasy author Brandon Sanderson just broke Kickstarter's record by receiving $41.7 million from over 181,000 backers, making it the highest-grossing campaign in the site's history. With a pledge of $40 or more, the kickstarter offers fans four secret novels.
Sanderson, who writes epic fantasy and young adult science fiction/fantasy, announced on March 1 to fans that four secret novels would be available in different formats, either in Ebook form or hardcopy, as well as "swag bags," depending on how much fans "pledged" on the site.

The Utah author's fanbase jumped on the offer, and by March 25 he had $33 million pledged, far outstripping his initial $1 million goal. In just three days it topped the $20.3 million record set by smartwatch company Pebble Technology.
On Thursday, the Kickstarter campaign closed with a record-breaking $41.7 million with 185,339 backers.
"I'm a bit of a showman. I love keeping secrets. I love having twists in my books. I love reveals," Sanderson told the Deseret News. "Knowing that is part of what drove me to write them, knowing that I would eventually be able to reveal it to them."
Sanderson, who has published over 50 books since 2005, said his secret novels started out as a surprise gift for his wife, Emily, during the pandemic in 2020. Sanderson found the experience of writing without the pressures of deadlines, publishers, nor fan expectations rejuvenating.
"That's when the whole Kickstarter thing started to build in my brain," he said. "And then I did that three more times. I wrote three more secret books for her… We are both book lovers. It was a lot of fun. I love my wife and so being able to share the surprise with her was a little extra special," said Sanderson.
The 46 year-old creative writing professor, who teaches at the Mormon-affiliated Brigham Young University, ended his quarantine experience with four new novels. The books will be released to those who pledged to his campaign in the 2023 months of January, April, July and October.
This is the second time Sanderson has used Kickstarter to publish a special edition of his work. In 2020, he received $6.7 million in funding from 30,000 supporters who in exchange received a leather-bound 10th anniversary edition of his novel "The Way of Kings".
Kickstarter, the crowdfunding platform first founded in 2009, will make a pretty penny as well. Their 5% fee will fetch them over $2 million from Sanderson's campaign. About a half of the money raised will cover printing and shipping costs for his books, as well as the estimated 30 employees who will need to be fairly compensated.
Sanderson also hopes to build a large independent bookstore in the future.
"I love community bookstores," Sanderson said. "This is probably a bad time business-wise to be opening a physical bookstore, everything's going digital. But I need a place to have a fulfillment center where my people are shipping out my books. The bookstore doesn't have to make money, that's the nice thing. We can just make it as a thing for the community where you can sell books, break even and I'll be happy."

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Biden's Budget Proposal: More Military, Police funding, Tax Hikes on the Rich (maybe)
By - Ian DeMartino

The White House unveiled a $5.8 trillion budget request for the 2023 fiscal year Monday, with the highlights including a tax hike on the richest Americans and a massive increase for military and law enforcement spending.
The bill is unlikely to pass as is, but it serves as a starting point for negotiations in Congress. By far the largest expense is military and defense spending. President Joe Biden is requesting

$813 billion for the Pentagon, including $13.6 billion earmarked to fund Ukraine's military efforts during Russia's special operation in the region.
Within the discretionary budget, $813 billion will be spent on defense-related programs, compared to $769 billion for domestic spending. Programs like Social Security and Medicare are not considered part of the discretionary budget because they are self funded and cannot be altered through normal budget proposals.
Last year, Biden requested $753 billion for defense, only to have Congress increase that number to $782 billion. That is likely to be the case again as more so-called progressive members of Congress have signaled a willingness to support ever growing military budgets in response to the situation in Ukraine.
Republicans will likely target $875 billion as the final defense spending budget, according to an analyst quoted in Defense News.
Another larger point of contention in the budget is what could be the largest tax increase by dollar amount in the country's history. If passed, the tax increase would drastically reduce the deficit, but Republican lawmakers are not likely to support the proposal.
As is, the budget includes a $2.5 trillion tax increase on large corporations over the next ten years and a 20% minimum tax on unrealized capital gains for households with a net worth of over $100 million.
However, conservative-leaning Democrats such as Arizona Senator Kyrsten Sinema have opposed similar tax increases in the past, and Democrats declined to include a billionaire tax in last year's budget proposal.
Without any Republican support, passage would require every Democratic senator and the vast majority of Democratic representatives to vote for the plan. President Biden, House Majority Leader Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer have struggled to get their party to move in lockstep on progressive proposals.
Tax breaks for oil and energy companies would also expire under the proposal, leading to $43.6 billion in revenue over the next ten years, but that is also unlikely to survive congressional adjustments to the budget. The president and state lawmakers are currently advocating increased oil production domestically to lower costs for consumers after sanctions on Russia increased oil prices worldwide.
Another $33.2 billion is set aside for law enforcement, as Biden attempts to distance himself from progressives who want to "defund the police," fulfilling his promise from his State of the Union speech on March 1.
"We should all agree: The answer is not to defund the police. The answer is to FUND the police with the resources and training they need to protect our communities[.]"
For context, $33.2 billion would be equivalent to the 11th largest military budget in the world.
The fiscal year 2023 will start in October of this year, giving Congress six months to negotiate the details.

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Rent In US Continue to Rise While Real Estate Firms Pocket The Profit

By - Ian DeMartino

Rents are continuing to rise in the US. According to realtor.com, February 2022 was the seventh month in a row with a double digit increase in rent prices from the year prior. Rents in February were 17.1% higher than in February 2021. The median rent in the 50 largest metro areas has risen to $1792 a month.

The Sun Belt has been the worst hit, with the top ten cities with rent increases coming from the southern states. Florida had four cities in the top ten: Miami, Orlando, Tampa, and Jacksonville. Arizona, California, Tennessee, and Texas also have cities in the top ten.

Unsurprisingly, the increase in rent corresponds with a decrease in affordable rentals. The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines “cost burden” as households spending more than 30% of their income on housing. HUD defines “severe cost burden” households as those that spend more than 50% of their income on housing. It is becoming increasingly common for households to fall into those two categories. Even before the recent rent increases, 48.4% of renters were cost-burdened in 2019, according to Census data.

One way to measure rental affordability is to look at the median rent in a city and compare it to the median income, called rent share. In Miami, which has seen the largest rent increase in the country over the past year, the rent share is 59.5%. Los Angeles is second, with median rent equalling 46% of median income in the city.

Two-bedroom rentals saw the largest increase in price over the past two years. Studio apartment rents initially decreased during the pandemic, but have been rapidly rising as more people return to urban areas.

The rent hikes are hurting ordinary Americans but it has been a boon for large real estate investment firms. In a recent 60 Minutes interview, CEO of Tricon Residential Gary Berman stated that they currently own 30,000 single-family rental homes, mostly in the Sun Belt. Tricon has seen profits increase 67% over the past year.

Buying a house to avoid increasing rental costs is not a viable option for many Americans either. With investment firms buying up houses, prices increased 20% last year and home buying site Zillow predicts mortgages will be 16.4% higher next year.

An alternative for some might be to move to colder locales in the middle of the country. Kansas City (19.9%) Oklahoma City (21.1%) and Denver (21.9%) had the lowest rent shares in the top 50 metro areas in the US.

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Network News Refuses to Cover Hunter Biden Laptop, Even After Confirmation From NYT
By - Ian DeMartino

Nearly two weeks after The New York Times confirmed the authenticity of the Hunter Biden "laptop from hell" first reported on by the New York Post in October 2020, network TV news has yet to report on those findings in any significant way.

According to a Media Research Centre study, it has been 37 weeks – 12 July 2021 – since ABC, NBC, or CBS has said the name "Hunter Biden" on their morning or evening shows. Research Director Scott Whitlock analysed the most popular shows from each network: ABC's "Good Morning America" and "World News Tonight", "CBS Evening News", and NBC's "Today" show and "NBC Nightly News" and found no mentions of Hunter Biden on any of the programmes since July of last year.

The laptop was first revealed weeks before the 2020 election. The New York Post published emails, images, and documents from the laptop, obtaining them from then President Trump's personal attorney and former New York City Mayor Rudy Guiliani. The laptop had allegedly been left at a computer repair shop in Delaware.

Contained in the leaked documents were images of Hunter Biden in various states of undress and sobriety. More significant was information related to his time sitting on the board of directors of Burisma Holdings, a job he was paid $50,000 a month for, and how he purportedly used his political connections through his father in his business dealings.

The emails revealed that Hunter Biden introduced his father to a top energy firm executive and adviser to the Burisma board. Less than a year later, Biden would pressure the Ukrainian government to fire prosecutor Viktor Shokin, who was looking into Burisma, though he was accused of corruption before Biden's involvement.

The lack of coverage after The New York Times confirmed the laptop's authenticity follows a long censorship and smear campaign by major media outlets and tech giants.

Politico ran a story with the headline "Hunter Biden story is Russian disinfo, dozens of former intel officials say" though buried deep within that story was the admission, in the letter that the former intelligence officials signed, that they had no evidence of the laptop being Russian disinformation, only that they suspected it was.

NPR called the documents "suspect" while explaining that they were holding back coverage.

The Guardian's Siva Vaidhyanathan called the entire story a "third-rate, bungled pile of nonsense" in an op-ed. Glenn Greenwald quit the Intercept and started a substack in response to that outlet refusing to let him cover the story.

Meanwhile, Facebook said it was suppressing the story algorithmically and Twitter went as far as preventing users from linking the New York Post's story through their public tweets or private DMs. The NYP was subsequently locked out of its Twitter account for 16 days. The tech giant claimed the material may have been hacked.

Nearly a year and a half after the election, the IRS and FBI are still investigating Hunter Biden for tax issues, and The New York Timesadmitted last week that the documents are real. Yet most outlets refuse to cover the story in any significant way.

A recent Rasmussen Reports poll of 1,000 US voters found that 66% feelthat the Hunter Biden laptop story is either "important" or "very important". Additionally, nearly half of the Rasmussen poll respondents believe Trump would have won if the laptop story was fully reported. The poll findings suggest the media's lack of critical coverage over Hunter Biden's "laptop from hell" may have pushed the election in favour of Joe Biden.

Maybe it isn't Russian interference that should concern American voters as much as the entities influencing the elections right here at home.

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YouTube Continues its Assault on the Press, Removes 6 Years of Chris Hedges' RT Show From Platform
By - Ian DeMartino

On Monday, YouTube removed six years' worth of episodes of the Emmy-nominated show On Contact by Pulitzer prize-winning journalist Chris Hedges. The show was produced by RT, formerly Russia Today, but Hedges maintained editorial control.
No explanation, forewarning or notice was given by YouTube, the videos simply disappeared, according to Hedges, who wrote about the experience on ScheerPost in an article titled "On Being Disappeared."
"I received no inquiry or notice from YouTube. I vanished. In totalitarian systems you exist, then you don't. I suppose this was done in the name of censoring Russian propaganda, although I have a hard time seeing how a detailed discussion of "Ulysses" or the biographies of Susan Sontag and J. Robert Oppenheimer had any connection in the eyes of the most obtuse censors in Silicon Valley with Vladimir Putin. Indeed, there is not one show that dealt with Russia."
On Contact contained interviews with a wide range of individuals. From social commentators like Noam Chomsky and Cornel West, novelist Russell Banks, journalists Glenn Greenwald and Matt Taibbi and human rights lawyer Steven Donziger, among many others, the show provided a platform for many different voices.
RT America (formerly Russia Today America) is funded by the Russian government, not unlike Sputnik News. RT was dropped from American cable networks and YouTube after Russia's special operation in Ukraine. The EU and the UK also banned RT and in the case of the EU, Sputnik News.

The justification for Russian media's disappearance in the West was over allegations of "Russian disinformation" being spread, particularly as it pertains to the situation in Ukraine. With the removal of On Contact, the justification has seemingly been expanded to include not just Ukraine but any information with even a tenuous connection to Russia.
On Contact did not discuss the situation in Ukraine, its primary focus was on the multitude of issues facing the West. Hedges, the former New York Times journalist and creator of On Contact, explains.
"I was on RT because, as a vocal critic of US imperialism, militarism, the corporate control of the two ruling parties, and especially because I support the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement against Israel, I was blacklisted. I was on RT for the same reason the dissident Vaclav Havel, who I knew, was on Voice of America during the communist regime in Czechoslovakia. It was that or not be heard. Havel had no more love for the policies of Washington than I have for those of Moscow."
Hedges' channel is not the only one to be censored as US tech giants look to appease their government's foreign policy objectives. As he mentions, Progressive Soapbox was recently

demonetized and Status Coup was suspended for airing footage of the January 6 riots, something nearly every mainstream outlet also aired.
As OpIndia points out, the Indian news channel WION was suspended for airing parts of a speech by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. WION claims Western outlets also covered the speech but were not de-platformed.
YouTube, as a private entity, can choose what it allows on its platform. However, YouTube's dominance of its marketplace essentially makes it the video platform of record on the internet. If a video is not on YouTube, it might as well not exist. Its biggest direct competitors are Dailymotion and Vimeo, which have a fraction of YouTube's audience.
Congress has recently begun pressuring social media platforms to combat 'disinformation.' With the massive scope of large tech companies, corporate censorship is almost as impactful as government censorship.
"A few decades ago, we still had a press that, however flawed, had not rendered whole segments of the population, especially the poor and social critics, invisible. It is perhaps telling that our greatest investigative journalist, Sy Hersh, who exposed the massacre of 500 unarmed Vietnamese civilians by US soldiers at My Lai and the torture at Abu Ghraib, has trouble publishing in the United States. I would direct you to the interview I did with Sy about the decayed state of the American media, but it no longer exists on YouTube."
Fans of Hedges can find his remaining work on ScheerPost or by subscribing to his substack.

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NFL: Teams Must Have a Female or Minority on Coaching Staff This Year

The National Football League (NFL) has announced that starting this season, teams will be required to have at least one minority or female coach on the offensive side of the ball.
As part of their ongoing attempts to improve diversity in the upper echelons of the league, the NFL is amending the Rooney Rule to mandate the hiring of female or minority offensive assistant coaches.
The minority or female coach must work closely with the head coach and offensive staff, the NFL stated. Teams will be reimbursed for the hire, $200,000 for the 2022 season and $205,000 for 2023. That reimbursement does not preclude teams from paying the coach a higher wage.
The league decided to focus on offensive coaches because there are already a significant number of minority defensive coaches and head coaches have increasingly come from the offensive side of the ball.
Diversity among coaches in the NFL, a league in which only 25% of players identify as white, has been an issue for decades. In 1989, Art Shell became the first black head coach since the 1920s, but his hiring did not result in a flood of minority head coaches in the league.
Currently, the vast majority of NFL head coaches are white. Out of the league's 32 teams, only the Steelers' Mike Tomlin, Washington Commanders' Ron Rivera, New York Jets' Robert Saleh, Miami Dolphins' Mike McDaniel and Houston Texans' Lovie Smith are minorities.

The new rule is designed to get women and minorities the experience and exposure they need to become more attractive head-coaching candidates.
"It's a recognition that at the moment, when you look at stepping stones for a head coach, they are the coordinator positions [...] and we clearly do not have as many minorities in the offensive coordinator [job]." Steelers owner and chairman of the NFL diversity, equity and inclusion committee Art Rooney II stated via ESPN.
Teams that already satisfy the requirement by having a minority or female coach on the offensive staff will not be required to hire another candidate to satisfy the new rule.
The mandate does not force teams to hire a female coach but doing so will fulfill the new requirement of the Rooney Rule. The league is not worried that will result in less hiring of minority candidates because there aren't a lot of women in football in general right now.
"We hope that is going to change over the years, but [since there are not a lot of female candidates] we didn't see it as inhibiting the number of interviews for racial minorities at this point in time. Obviously, we can address that as time goes on, but for now we didn't see that as an issue." Rooney said, via ESPN.
There are currently 12 women on coaching staffs in the NFL, per ESPN.
The Rooney Rule was adopted in 2003 and requires teams to interview at least two minority candidates for open head coaching positions. The rule has been mired in controversy.
Brain Flores, who was recently fired after a three year stint as the Miami Dolphins head coach, is suing the league and three separate franchises after participating in what he calls two "sham interviews," accusing teams of interviewing him to satisfy the Rooney Rule and not because they had a legitimate interest in his qualifications.
"The Rooney Rule is also not working because management is not doing the interviews in good-faith," the lawsuit reads, "and it therefore creates a stigma that interviews of Black candidates are only being done to comply with the Rooney Rule rather than in recognition of the talents that the Black candidates possess."
Two unnamed plaintiffs are expected to join his lawsuit, according to ProFootballTalk.

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Nancy Pelosi Says Democracy Is on the Line During Midterms But Isn't Worried
By - Ian DeMartino

The party that controls the White House historically loses seats in Congress in the midterms, but that does not concern Nancy Pelosi, even as she states that democracy itself is at risk.
House Speaker Nancy Pelosi stated that American democracy itself is on the ballot and fears for its future if Democrats lose control of Congress in the upcoming midterms.
In an interview on Monday with Time's Molly Ball during a celebration of the Toner Prize for Political Reporting, Pelosi stated that it is "absolutely essential for our democracy that we win. I fear for our democracy if Republicans ever get the gavel. Democracy is on the ballot in November."

Democrats are expected to lose some seats in November. Typically, the party that controls the White House loses seats in midterm elections. Adding to the troubles for the Democrats is President Biden's cratering poll numbers. A recent Harvard CAPS-Harris poll found that only 39% of voters approve of Biden's job performance.

None of that worries Speaker Pelosi. "I don't have any intention of the Democrats losing Congress in November," the speaker said. "We do have a plan, we have a vision of victory. We have a plan to get it done. We are going to own the ground."

Pelosi dismissed as outdated the conventional wisdom which suggests that the sitting president's party typically struggles in the midterms. "There's nothing conventional anymore, because of the way people communicate with social media and how they receive their information, how they are called to action, how they're called to meetings and the rest is quite different. So any past assumptions about elections are obsolete."

She bizarrely pointed to the Democrats' performance in previous midterm elections while a Republican was in the White House in order to bolster her point.

"When we won in '06 we didn't have a Democratic president in the White House. We had our own message and we won. In '18 we didn't have a Democratic president in the White House, capital 'D' or small 'd' and we won the Congress."

She also does not think that Biden is as unpopular as polls seem to indicate. When asked if she thought any Democratic members of Congress up for election would distance themselves from Biden, she rejected the idea forcefully. "Absolutely, positively not. This is a great president. With all due respect to polling, we intend to turn out the vote. [...] No one is going to be rejecting the president."

In fact, Pelosi believes Biden will be an asset to Democrats in the midterm elections. "This time we do have a great president with a great vision for America. [...] As we get closer to the campaign season, we will be working with the president on our message of empathy, progress and hope for the American people as well as the excellence of our members of Congress."

Pelosi also had some choice words for former President Trump in the interview, stating that she did not think America's democracy would have survived a second term and could not survive another term if Trump runs in 2024.

"The country could withstand one term of the former president. I don't think it is strong enough to survive two terms of office of the former president for his assault on democracy, on the press, on truth, on facts and using the office of the White House as a force of misrepresentation."

Trump is currently leading both Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris in a hypothetical presidential election, according to a Harvard CAPS-Harris poll.

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Trump: America Looks 'Like a Third World Country'
By - Ian DeMartino

Former President Trump has compared the United States to a third world country due to supply chain issues causing a shortage of bread, jewelry and office furniture.

Speaking to John Solomon and Amanda Head in a 25-minute interviewthat touched on a variety of topics and started with what Trump would do in a potential second term, the former president said that in his opinion, the most urgent issue was the supply chain.
"You go to a store, they don't have bread. We're like a third-world country. They don't have things. You go to buy something at Tiffany's, you go to buy something at a hardware store – high, low – they don't have product," the former president explained.
"Even me, when I order things like furnishing for a building they say it's going to take nine months to get it. Used to be same day service. Supply chain, we never heard the term [when Trump was in office]. The system was working. The system is broken. We are going into socialism and we are going into communism," Trump asserted.
It should be noted that the supply chain issues began during the COVID19 pandemic and product shortages were present during the Trump Administration. Multiple media outlets covered empty shelves in stores from the early days of the pandemic and after the 2020 election. The CEO of Tyson Foods warned about supply chain issues in April 2020 and Axios reported that 75% of American companies were being "disrupted" by supply chain issues as early as March 2020.
President Biden and his administration are not immune from criticism on the issue. The supply chain issues that began at the onset of the pandemic remain unsolved over a year after Biden took the White House. However, Trump's assertion that the US supply chain was working throughout the duration of his administration is a tenuous claim.
Trump would go on to talk about Hunter Biden's laptop, immigration, inflation, oil prices, China, the 2020 election and other issues. He also asked Russian President Vladimir Putin to reveal any dirt they have on the Biden family.
This was not the first time Trump has compared the US to a third-world country. He did it in reference to the 2020 election results and in 2017 when touting an executive order designed to address infrastructure problems in the country.

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Biden: US Running Out of Funds For COVID-19
By - Ian DeMartino

Earlier this week, the CDC announced that people 50 and older are now eligible for a fourth COVID19 shot in the nation's ongoing fight against the pandemic. Hospitalizations and cases are falling but some experts warn that the BA.2 variant may lead to a surge in the fall.
In the White House briefing room, President Biden urged Congress to pass additional funding to fight the COVID19 pandemic. Biden says the government is rapidly running out of money to provide free vaccine shots, monoclonal antibodies for therapeutic treatments and testing supplies.
The lack of funding is already affecting the fight against the pandemic, Biden said. "Congress hasn't provided enough money to keep purchasing these monoclonal antibodies. We've had to

cancel planned orders and cut the supply we're sending to the states. Without more funding, we'll start to run out of them by the end of May."
Biden is asking Congress to allocate an additional $22 billion for the fight against COVID. Congress recently debated an additional $15 billion in funding, but the measure stalled, with Republicans stating that the administration did not make a strong case that the funds are needed.
The briefing seemed to, at least in part, be an attempt to address those concerns.
"Congress, we need to secure additional supply now. Now. We can't wait until we find ourselves in the midst of another surge to act. It'll be too late."
Besides asking for more funding, Biden announced the launch of a new website, covid.gov. Calling it "a one-stop shop where anyone in America can find what they need to navigate the virus," Biden explained that the website offers "free vaccines and boosters, free at-home tests, high-quality masks. And the latest information about the level of COVID-19 spread in your community."
After the briefing, Biden received his fourth COVID19 vaccine shot on live television.
In June 2021, Biden encouraged states to use the remaining COVID19 funds from the American Rescue Plan, then estimated at $350 billion, to fund law enforcement in an effort to head off a crime wave.
"We're now providing more guidance on how [state and local governments] can use the $350 billion nationally that the American Rescue Plan has available to help reduce crime and address the root causes," Biden said (via Politico). "For example, cities experiencing an increase in gun violence were able to use the American Rescue Plan dollars to hire police officers needed for community policing and to pay their overtime."
It is not clear how many state and local governments have used those funds to prop up their law enforcement instead of combating COVID19, but it showcases how different the administration views the COVID19 pandemic compared to less than a year ago.

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Three Deutsche Bank Executives Fired After Expensing Strip Club Trip, Firm Tipster Left Spared
By - Ian DeMartino

A failed strip club trip write-off by a a group of mischievous executives comes as Deutsche Bank has taken on a new initiative to double down on its compliance measures and improve the overall culture of its workplace.
Three banking executives at German financial giant Deutsche Bank were fired for expensing a trip to a strip club last week and covering it up claiming that they had dined at the club's steakhouse. It was later revealed that one junior executive was spared for fessing up to the crime.

Last week, Bloomberg reported the firings, which were confirmed in an emailed statement from the company that did not provide details other than to say the bank "thoroughly investigates allegations of possible misconduct comprehensively and without bias."
According to The New York Post and Bloomberg, the firing stemmed from a trip to New York City's Sapphire Club, a gentlemen's club that also includes a steakhouse. The executives who remain fired attempted to claim the expense came from the steakhouse, not the strip club. However, the junior executive admitted the expenses came from the strip club portion of the establishment.
Initial reports listed four executives that were fired for the incident, it is not clear which of the four had their job spared after admitting to the trip.
The lucky individual was called a "junior executive" by The Post, suggesting it is unlikely the spared employee was neither Ben Darsney, who was Deutsche Bank's Americas head of equity capital markets, nor Ravi Raghunathan, who ran most of the bank's Special Purpose Acquisition Company. Likely, the once fired, now spared employee is either Brandon Sun, described as a director by Bloomberg, or Daniel Gaona, an associate.
The tab was around $1,000, but the foray cost the executives a lot more than that. As part of their firing, the executives lost millions in stocks and cash they were set to receive in deferred bonus payments. Insiders told The Post that Darsney and Raghunathan lost up to $6 million in deferred bonus payments over multiple years.
According to sources speaking to The Post, at least one and possibly more of the executives fired were not actually present at the strip club, but participated in the attempted coverup, leading to their firing.
The German lender is coming off of a restructuring in 2019 that saw 18,000 staff lose their jobs. The bank has also been trying to improve its culture and compliance, with several of what Bloomberg calls "mishaps" happening recently, including a breach of a deferred prosecution agreement with the US Department of Justice over accusations that the bank was slow to report a whistleblower complaint.

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Trucker Convoy Leaving Washington DC En Route to California After Weeks of Upping Traffic Hurdles
By - Ian DeMartino

En route to the Golden State, participants of the "People's Convoy" are expected to take their cause to the US' West Coast as part of a larger effort to gain new supporters as the movement saw a variety of factors contribute to their dwindling numbers.
The so-called "People's Convoy" is leaving Washington, DC, and heading to California, without accomplishing much besides adding slightly to the already congested traffic that plagues the capital region.
Maybe someone should have told them DC drivers are used to sitting in traffic.

Organizers said that the convoy will be moving to California to protest proposed vaccine bills. They hope that the move across the country will inspire more people to join the protest.
Cold weather, a lack of funding, and infighting among leaders of the group have been cited as some of the reasons why the group camping in Hagerstown has been dwindling overtime. One of the de-facto leaders, Brian Brase, left the camp last weekend, further hurting morale.
The Speedway's season also begins this Sunday, so organizers would have to find a new place to camp if they planned to remain in the region.
By the time the convoy arrived in Washington, DC, on March 6, the vaccine mandate had already been lifted. The mask mandate was removed soon after. They did meet with some conservative lawmakers - the fully vaccinated Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) took a ride in one of their trucks - but their stated goals of repealing the pandemic emergency declaration and an investigation into the government's COVID-19 response were left unfulfilled.
Co-organizer Mike Landis said that they plan to come back to the nation's capital after they are done in California, but with dwindling numbers and COVID-19 restrictions being dropped in most of the country, that looks unlikely.
"So what I want to know is, what do you think about going to California?" Landis asked the crowd to cheers. "Then, once we stop [the bills in California], we will come back to finish this job."
The protest was inspired by the "Freedom Convoy" that shut down downtown Ottawa for three weeks over regulations that required truckers to be vaccinated in order to cross the US-Canada border. In contrast, the much smaller People's Convoy camped out in the small town of Hagerstown, MD, at the Hagerstown Speedway, and then drove an hour and a half daily in an attempt to create gridlock on the Capital Beltway, and occasionally inside DC itself.

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Rep. Maxine Waters to Homeless Crowd: Go Home, No One Works F***ing Harder Than Me!
By - Ian DeMartino

California's City of Angels is in the midst of one of the worst housing crises, with 66,436 people experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles County in 2020, a 13% increase from 2019.
US Representative Maxine Waters (D-CA) told a crowd of homeless people to "go home" and then asked a Los Angeles Times reporter not to cover the story.
Hundreds of unhoused Los Angeles county residents showed up to the nonprofit Fathers and Mothers Who Care advocacy group last week after having been misled into thinking that the group was handing out vouchers for Section 8 subsidized housing. An erroneous and unofficial social media post was blamed for the confusion.
The group had been planning three events, on Thursday and Friday of last week and one on Tuesday of this week, to help people apply for emergency temporary housing.
Things quickly heated when Waters spotted the growing situation and relayed to the crowd that no more applications would be taken that day. "I want everyone to go home," the congresswoman stated, later adding, "Nothing is going to happen here today."

One of the individuals had responded: "We don't got no home, that's why we're here … What home we gonna go to?"
Answering a question from Kridikel Race Truth Bey, the founder of the Kingdom Warriors Foundation, Waters is said to have dropped an expletive during the exchanges. "Excuse me, there's nobody in Washington who works for their people any f***ing harder than I do. I don't want to hear this. No, no, no."
Waters pointed to the $25 billion she added to the Build Back Better plan to address homelessness as evidence of her hard work. However, it's worth noting that the Build Back Better plan has stalled in Congress since its decoupling from US President Joe Biden's infrastructure plan.
After the incident, Waters reportedly attempted to stop the publication of a story about the homeless crisis in Los Angeles, telling the paper during a call that, "You'll hurt yourself and the community trying to put this together without background, I don't want you to start trying to write it, you won't understand it."
Further questions emailed to Waters' district director Blanca Jimenez by the Los Angeles Times went unanswered. Jimenez instead linked the paper to a local TV news report that painted Waters in a positive light.
Truth Bey says she counted more than 450 people in the crowd on Friday. "Maybe not even five people got their paper applications in their hand that day," she told the Times. "Everyone else got the shaft."

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US Adds 431,000 Jobs In March, Unemployment Rate at 3.6% - Labor Dept.
(Adds context in paras 4-11)
WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - US employers added 431,000 jobs in March, some 12% lower than economists' expectations, but the jobless rate still moved down to 3.6% from a previous 3.8%, Labor Department data showed on Friday.
"Total nonfarm payroll employment rose by 431,000 in March, and the unemployment rate declined to 3.6 percent," the Bureau of Labor Statistics, a unit within the Labor Department, said in a news release. An unemployment rate of 4% or below is defined by the Federal Reserve as maximum employment.
Economists polled by US media had forecast jobs to expand by 490,000 in March from a growth of 678,000 in February.
The monthly growth or decline in jobs is being closely watched by the Fed to decide on the rate hikes that will be needed to contain inflation expanding faster than an economy growing at its quickest pace in four decades.
After contracting 3.5% in 2020 from disruptions forced by COVID-19, the US economy expanded by 5.7% in 2021, growing at its fastest pace since 1982.
But inflation grew even more. The Personal Consumption Expenditure Index, a US inflation indicator closely followed by the Fed, rose by 5.8% in the year to December and 6.4% in the 12

months to February, Both readings also indicated the fastest growth since 1982. The Fed's own tolerance for inflation is a mere 2% per year.
The central bank slashed rates to nearly zero after the coronavirus outbreak in March 2020 and kept them unchanged for two years to enable economic recovery. Last month, for the first time since the pandemic, the Fed's policy-making Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) raised rates by 25 basis points.
Now, unyielding inflation is prodding FOMC officials to consider a 50-basis point increase at the committee's next two meetings in May and June. The central bank has stated that it could raise rates by a maximum seven times this year and continue its monetary tightening into 2023 to bring inflation back to its 2%-per year target.
Fed Chairman Jerome Powell said last month the labor market was "extremely tight" with robust demand and subdued supply. He also noted that more than a million positions were filled within the first two months of the year.
The government's monthly Job Openings and Labor Turnover Summary report earlier this week showed that job openings hovered near record highs in February as vacancies continued to outpace hires in an unemployment market that remained overwhelmingly in favor of workers.
Aside from ramping job numbers, the United States is experiencing one of the greatest transformations of its employment market as COVID-19 measures upended labor supply and work trends, putting employees' demands above those of employers.

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January 6 Panel Interviewed Trump Son-in-Law Kushner for Over 6 Hours - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - The US House committee investigating the January 6 Capitol riot interviewed Jared Kushner, former President Donald Trump's son-in-law and top advisor, for more than six hours, NBC News reported on Friday, citing a source in the know. Kushner appeared before the panel on Thursday by video after agreeing to speak to the committee, which Trump has accused of waging a "witch hunt."
The former top White House advisor was cooperative and friendly, and spoke for himself, not through his lawyer, according to the source. The content of the conversation has not been revealed.
On January 6, 2021 a group of Trump supporters entered the US Capitol to protest the certifying of the 2020 presidential election results from several US states which Trump claimed were fraudulent.
Since then, the committee in charge of the probe has interviewed several hundred people, requested White House records from the National Archives and held several former Trump advisers, including Steve Bannon and Mark Meadows, in criminal contempt of Congress for refusing to cooperate with the investigation.
In March, US district judge David Carter ruled that Trump likely committed obstruction of Congress on January 6.

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RPT: FEATURE - US Activists Fear Slow-Moving Justice System Could Undermine New Anti-Lynching Law

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - America's slow-moving justice system could impede enforcement of a new anti-lynching measure that President Joe Biden signed into law this week, activists told Sputnik.
On Tuesday, Biden signed the Emmett Till Antilynching Act into law, marking the culmination of a more than century-long odyssey by African Americans to coax, cajole and shame Congress into passing federal legislation that would make lynching a federal hate crime.
REPUBLICAN INTRANSIGENCE
The measure is named after Emmett Till, a 14-year-old Chicago boy who was abducted, tortured and killed by two white men, Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam, in 1955 after he was was accused of whistling at and grabbing Carolyn Bryant, a white woman. Bryant, Bryant's husband, and Milam, Roy Bryant's half-brother were all acquitted by an all-white jury.
The pair revealed in an interview for Look magazine that they had murdered Till and Carolyn Bryant told a historian five decades after the teen's gruesome murder that Emmett had never touched her.
"Unfortunately, we have a strong, very strong anti-democratic and slow-moving justice system. It been moving very slowly ever since [civil rights activist] Ida B. Wells made lynching a national issue well over 100 years ago," Dr. Bernard Demczuk, who taught African American history and culture at the DCPS School Without Walls for 13 years and is the faculty advisor of the GW Williams House (The Black House) at George Washington University, said.

"The democratic process has been blocked by rightwing ideologues who honestly believe this. This includes much of the Republican Party which has been able to block calls from Wells and others to make it a federal crime to lynch Black people," he added.

Demczuk — a longtime DC resident who lectures widely on Black history and culture, labor history and governmental policy — said despite progress in a number of areas, some key issues around race haven't changed.

"There are certain political groups who are unwilling to acknowledge racism lynching and white supremacy exists although it is evident to most people in America," he said.

Demczuk mentioned the 2015 Charleston church shooting, in which teen Dylann Roof killed nine people, all African-Americans, at Mother Emanuel Church in South Carolina.

"The Klan still exists. They have changed from robes to camouflage and toting AR-15s. And it's legal. But I'm excited, happy, pleased that this is now law. Whatever Republicans did, thank you," he continued.

Barbara R. Arnwine, a human rights and social justice attorney and longtime activist, echoed Demczuk, saying that while she expected the bill to pass Congress, Republicans have been essentially playing both ends against the middle.

"I think we know that the Republican Party wants to appeal to its racist base but can't afford to do it in a consistent way," Arnwine said.

In the end, Republicans have become masters at supporting "lightweight measures which will not change things substantially and won't result in any systemic change," Arnwine, who served as the executive director of the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law from 1989 until 2015, said.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Kerra Bolton, an independent filmmaker and former political strategist, said she was surprised by the bill's passage.

"Yes, I'm surprised that it passed. White supremacy has a hold on the US and there is a strong desire to punish Black people in public spaces," Bolton, a writer and documentarian, said. "I believe passage of this bill is more symbolic than real, but some gestures make a difference. In the wake of the Arbery murder, it's symbolic but meaningful."

Bolton said the jury is still out about whether America has the capacity or the willingness to confront and deal with the country's Original Sin – slavery – and the vast array of racist and racial tentacles that emanate from it.

"I have watched and sometimes been engaged in broader discussion about race and white people reveal themselves by what they say, defend and embrace," she said softly.

"The question is if human beings can evolve. So many people are attached to the personaes and hold on tightly to what they think that represents. You see how people's connection to white supremacy reveals itself."

Bolton said overcoming this racial conundrum is truly difficult because these racist feelings are deeply engrained over centuries. She cautioned that Europeans aren't the only ones who have work to do.

"For Black people, overcoming the trauma is our work to do. When the two proceed and work in parallel, we will be able to save ourselves. The country has to be committed to heal itself before it can save itself," Bolton explained. "It's sad. People keep dying because white people keep centering on themselves."

VICTORY, FINALLY

At the bill signing in the Rose Garden, President Biden reminded those gathered that the freshly minted law "isn't just about the past," referring to the February 2020 murder of 25-year-old Ahmaud Arbery, who was shot and killed by three white men in Brunswick, Georgia while jogging in the area in what was classified as a racially-motivated hate crime.

He also spoke about the white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017 where White nationalists marched and one killed Heather Heyer, a counter-protestor, and injured scores more when he drove through a crowd of anti-racist demonstrators.

Illinois Congressman Bobby Rush introduced the bill Biden made law. He introduced a similar version of his current bill in 2019. In 2020, the House of Representatives passed the bill but Kentucky Republican Sen. Rand Paul refused to support the bill supposedly because it was too broad. He expressed his support of the bill earlier this month which opened the way for the US Senate unanimously passed the Emmett Till Antilynching Act.

The bill passed the House of Representatives in February. Republican representatives Andrew Clyde of Georgia, Thomas Massie of Kentucky, and Chip Roy of Texas were the only members to vote against the legislation.

Demczuk said Bryan Stevenson, through the Equal Justice Initiative has documented 4,473 lynchings of mostly Black men, women and children, between 1868 and 1968.

"We know of another 3,000 people who're missing and we can't find them. They were likely lynched and tossed in a pond or a hole. We know how many people have been lynched. Why did it take so long?" Demczuk asked.

Demczuk, Arnwine, and other supporters of the bill, said Wells and other advocates had tried and failed to push through passage of federal anti-lynching legislation for more than a century.

"We've got to give Biden credit because he got it done," Arnwine said.

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US House Passes Legislation Capping Insulin Price at $35 Per Month

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives passed legislation to cap the price of prescribed insulin at $35 per month for Medicare beneficiaries that was a policy initially included in the Democrats Build Back Better legislation.

The House passed on Thursday the Affordable Insulin Now Act in a vote of 232-193 that fell mostly along partisan lines.

"House Democrats have long led the charge to lower the cost of prescription drugs. So it's with great pride that the Democratic House today will advance one of the pillars of this vision: capping the cost of insulin at $35 a month," Speaker Nancy Pelosi said during her floor speech on the bill.

Americans pay more than ten times for insulin compared to what other consumers around the world pay on average, Pelosi noted.

The price of insulin in the United States increased by 54% from 2014 to 2019 while pharmaceutical companies made record profits, producing insulin at about $10 a vial and charging up to 30 times more, Pelosi added.
The cap on insulin prices was initially included in the Biden administration's Build Back Better legislation, but was taken out and put into a separate bill.

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Lockheed Martin Wins $1.4Bln THAAD Air Defense Contract From US, Saudis - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - Lockheed Martin has won a more than $1.4 billion modification contract extension to produce more Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) interceptors for the United States and Saudi Arabia, the Defense Department announced in a press release.
"Lockheed Martin Corporation Missiles and Fire Control [of] Dallas, Texas is being awarded a $1,423,660,558 modification to a previously-awarded contract for the production of THAAD Interceptors and associated one-shot devices to support the US. government and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA)," the release said on Thursday.
The sale to Saudi Arabia will follow so-called foreign military sales case requirements and the interceptors and associated one-shot devices will be procured under fixed-price incentive contract line items, the release added.
On February 4, the Biden administration also approved the sale of $65 million of spare parts for Patriot radars and THAAD systems to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), according to media reports.

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Lockheed Martin Wins $3.2Bln US Army Radar Systems Production Contract - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - Lockheed Martin has won a more than $3.2 billion contract to make AN/TPQ-53 radar systems for unidentified US allies, the Defense Department announced in a press release.
"Lockheed Martin [of] Liverpool, New York was awarded a $3,268,232,049 firm-fixed-price contract for full-rate production of AN/TPQ-53 radar systems and associated spare parts and services, and deployment to various Foreign Military Sales countries," the release said on Thursday.
Work on the contract is projected to take five years with an estimated completion date of March 30, 2027, the release said.

The solid-state phased array AN/TPQ-53 radar system, or, Q-53, detects, classifies, tracks and determines the location of enemy indirect fire in either 360 or 90 degree modes, Lockheed Martin said.
The Q-53 is replacing the aging AN/TPQ-36 and AN/TPQ-37 medium-range radars in the US Army's inventory, it added.

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US Aligned With Russia, China, Pakistan to Push Taliban in 'Right Direction' - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - The United States is aligned with Russia, China and Pakistan to push the Taliban in the right direction regarding governing Afghanistan, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said at a briefing.
"It is especially critical with countries that have a good deal of leverage with the Taliban - the United States would be included in that, Russia would be included in that, the People's Republic of China would be included in that, and Pakistan would be included in that," Price said during a press briefing on Thursday. "It is incumbent on all of these countries to use that leverage to push the Taliban in the right direction."
US Special Representative Tom West attended the Troika meeting in Tunxi, China, on Thursday with his counterparts from China, Russia and Pakistan, Price said.
The interests of the United States, China, Russia and Pakistan are aligned with respect to Afghanistan, Price said.
The members of the Troika believe it is imperative for girls to return to secondary schools and to encourage an inclusive government in the country, Price also said.
The United States wants to see a broader collection of countries, besides its European partners, to encourage the Taliban to move in the right direction, Price added.

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Wall Street Sees Biggest Quarterly Dip in 2 Years Amid Soaring Inflation, Ukraine Crisis
(Updates with more details, background in paras 4-12)
WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - Wall Street's leading stocks gauge, the S&P 500 index, fell almost 5% in the first quarter trading that closed on Thursday as economic concerns over the soaring US inflation and the Russia-Ukraine conflict left the market with its worst quarterly losses since the COVID-19 breakout two years ago.
The S&P 500 - which groups the top 500 US stocks - closed Thursday's trade down 59 points, or 1.3%, at 4,544. For all of March, it rose 3.8%. But for the first quarter, it fell 4.7%.
That was its biggest quarterly decline since the 20% drop in the first quarter of 2020, at the height of market and economic disruptions caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

"The latest economic data shows inflation is weighing on the consumer," Ed Moya, analyst at online trading platform OANDA, said. Moya also noted that even with its worst quarter in two years, the S&P500 was just about 5% away from record highs.
"Wall Street will have a lot to debate over the next few months but a choppy stock market seems likely as no clear answers will be had on when peak inflation happens and how aggressive will the Fed be with tightening until geopolitical risks are resolved," he said.
Earlier this week, the monthly Job Openings and Labor Turnover Summary showed that job openings hovered near record highs in February as vacancies continued to outpace hires in an unemployment market that remained overwhelmingly in favor of workers.
US consumer confidence, meanwhile, rose for the first time this year in March despite inflation and economic fallout likely from the war in Ukraine remaining high on Americans' worry list, The Conference Board said. Consumer spending accounts for 70% of the US economy.
To balance that optimism, Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia President Patrick Harker warned that inflation was "running too high" and economic growth would likely be capped at 2.5% over the next two years.
US inflation, measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI), grew 7% in 2021 and 7.9% during the year to February - both at their fastest in four decades. The CPI's expansion outpaces GDP growth at 5.7% last year and projected by the Federal Reserve to be at 2.8% this year.
Policy-makers at the central bank, such as Harker, have a mere tolerance of 2% for inflation in a year. They have vowed to bring inflation back to their target with a series of interest rate hikes through 2023. The Federal Reserve approved its first pandemic-era rate hike on March 16, raising rates by 25 basis points, or a quarter percentage point. Harker, commenting on the Federal Reserve's forthcoming action, said he wouldn't rule out a 50-basis-point rate hike at the next meeting of the central bank in May.
Aside from the S&P 500, the Dow Jones Industrial Average, which lists travel, aviation and cross-industry value stocks, fell 487 points, or 1.4%, on Thursday, settling at 34,742. For the month, the Dow rose 2.4%, but for the quarter it lost 4.6%.
The Nasdaq Composite - which houses the biggest technology names of the world, including Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google - finished down 195 points, or 1.4%, at 14,247. For the month, the Nasdaq climbed 3.4%, but for the quarter it fell 9.1%.

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US Extends Deployment of Harry S. Truman Carrier Strike Group in Mediterranean - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has decided to extend the deployment of the aircraft carrier Harry S. Truman strike group in the Mediterranean Sea through the summer to bolster support for NATO's eastern flank amid the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said.
"He [Austin] has decided that he's going to keep the 82nd [Airborne Division] there for a while longer, and he has decided that the that the Harry S. Truman and her strike group will stay in the Med [Mediterranean] for a while longer," Kirby said during a press briefing on Thursday.

The Harry S. Truman carrier strike group was deployed from the United States in December and came under NATO command in the Mediterranean Sea in January - the first such development since the end of the Cold War. The carrier strike group participates in the NATO-led Neptune Strike 2022 exercise in the Mediterranean.
The decision comes amid the Russian special military operation in Ukraine that Moscow launched on February 24 after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help to defend them from attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Ministry of Defense said the operation is solely targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure and the civilian population is not in danger.

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US Lawmakers Demand White House Documents on Hunter Biden's Activities in 'Russian Sphere'

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - Republican members of the US House Oversight Committee on Thursday said Russia's newly imposed sanctions on Hunter Biden raise fresh questions about his business dealings in the Russian sphere of influence and demanded that the White House release documents regarding his activities in Ukraine and Russia.
Earlier in the month, Russia included Hunter Biden in its sanctions list alongside President Joe Biden and members of his administration, even though the former is not an official.
The call for the White House to shed light on Hunter's dealings comes as Western media reveal that entities controlled by Biden's son and brother received $4.8 million in payments from a Chinese energy giant in the period after Biden left the vice presidency and before he announced his presidential bid, and as the Russian Defense Ministry publishes documents about Hunter's role in funding pathogen research in Ukraine.
“Hunter Biden’s connections throughout the Russian sphere of influence have now become especially relevant in the fast-moving and developing Russian war in Ukraine,” the lawmakers wrote in letters to the White House and National Archives. "The nation’s adversaries apparently see the President’s son as a pressure point to exploit. Additionally, his inclusion on the list is the latest evidence that Hunter Biden has indeed engaged in business schemes with our adversaries. Therefore, we request information the White House Counsel’s Office (WHCO) possesses regarding Hunter Biden’s dealings in Russia and Ukraine."
The lawmakers, in particular, mentioned the $3.5 million payment to Hunter Biden or a firm linked to him by Elena Baturina, wife of former Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov.
They highlighted his overall rich record of benefitting from his father’s status - "from managing a Ukrainian energy conglomerate, to selling cobalt mines in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), to connecting his father to Kazakhstani oil oligarchs, and preventing a Romanian real estate tycoon’s conviction for bribery charges."
Hunter Biden’s foreign business relationships in Russia and Ukraine in the current international landscape raise concerns about whether he continues to profit off his status as US President

Joe Biden's son, as well as whether foreign adversaries may be attempting to exploit his questionable business dealings, according to the letter.
The lawmakers asked the White House and National Archives to provide the requested documents no later than April 14.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY
WASHINGTON, March31 (Sputnik) -

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS
* The United States has delivered $350 million worth of security assistance to Ukraine in a record three weeks, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said on Thursday.
* Submitted documents confirm the fact that Germany is implementing its own military biological program in Ukraine, Gennady Gatilov, Russia's Permanent Representative in the UN Office in Geneva, said.
* Ukrainian engine-building enterprise Motor Sich asked the Turkish manufacturers of Bayraktar drones about the possibility of spraying aerosols from them, which raises concern in the context of the US military biological program, has been implemented on the territory of Ukraine, Igor Kirillov, the head of the radiation, chemical and biological defense of the Russian armed forces, said.
* Hunter Biden, the son of US President Joe Biden, played an important role in financing the work involving pathogens in Ukraine, Igor Kirillov, the head of the radiation, chemical and biological defense of the Russian Armed Forces, said.

ENERGY MARKETS
* The United States sees Russia's decision to require countries to purchase its gas with rubles as a sign of desperation, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.
* US President Joe Biden authorized a record release of oil from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) in the amount of one million barrels per day for the next six months amid increasing gasoline prices in the United States.
* Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree on the procedure for the fulfillment of obligations to Russian natural gas suppliers by foreign buyers, which stipulates that all contracts for pipeline gas deliveries with companies registered in unfriendly countries must be settled in rubles.
* the price of gas futures in Europea increases to nearly $1450 per 1,000 cublic meters after Putin signed a decree on ruble payments for gas, according to the London-based ICE exchange.
* The OPEC+ alliance agreed to increase the oil production in May by 432,000 barrels per day as planned, according to the communique published following the Thursday meeting.

UK SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA MEDIA

* The United Kingdom has announced a new package of sanctions against Russia, targeting media sector and related prominent figures, the government said on Thursday.
* Journalists should have the right to do their work everywhere, UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric said, commenting on the UK decision to impose sanctions on Russian media.
* Editor-in-Chief of the RT broadcaster and the Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency Margarita Simonyan described the UK sanctions against the media outlets as another insult from London.

WEST-RUSSIA SANCTIONS
* Russia is banning the entry of top officials of the European Union to the country in response to sanctions, the Foreign Ministry said on Thursday.
* The United States has expanded sanctions authorities to apply to Russia's aerospace, marine and electronics sectors, the Treasury announced.
* The United States unveiled sanctions against 13 individuals and 21 entities in Russia for alleged cyberactivities and under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA).

RUSSIA-NORWAY TALKS
* Russian President Vladimir Putin and Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store discussed the situation in Ukraine during a phone conversation on Thursday, the Kremlin said.
* Store called on Putin to end the military operation in Ukraine during a phone conversation, Store's press office said.

REFERENDUM IN SOUTH OSSETIA
* The Kremlin is not taking any steps, including legal action, in connection with the statement by South Ossetian President Anatoly Bibilov about plans for a referendum on joining Russia, spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Thursday.
* The United States will not recognize the results of the referendum in South Ossetia to join Russia, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

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Oil Prices Slide After US Strategic Reserves Release, But Brent Gains 39% in 1st Quarter

NEW YORK, March 31 (Sputnik) - The largest oil release from the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) left crude prices down on Thursday, while the market still posted a massive quarterly gain of 39% as OPEC+ group of oil producing nations reaffirmed its intent to keep global supply at well below demand with just a modest hike in its monthly output.
London-traded Brent, the global oil benchmark, settled down $5.54, or 4.9%, at $107.91 per barrel, after a session low at $104.20. Week-to-date, Brent was down around 11%. But for March, it was up nearly 7% and for the first quarter, it rose around 39%.

New York-traded US crude benchmark West Texas Intermediate (WTI) settled down $7.54, or 7%, at $100.28. Week-to-date, WTI was down 12%. But for March, WTI was up almost 5%. For the first quarter, WTI rose around 33%.
The White House said it will release an unprecedented 1 million barrels per day from the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve over the next six months - amounting to roughly 180 million barrels - to add to crude circulating in the market.
It also said fees will be imposed on US energy firms that sit on idle oil wells to make extraordinary profits from a supply crunch.
Meanwhile, OPEC+ group of 32 oil producing nations led by Saudi Arabia and steered by Russia approved a modest addition of 432,000 barrels per day (bpd) in output for the month of March.
The OPEC+ has been sticking to monthly increments of around 400,000 bpd despite the global market being in deficit of anywhere from 5-6 million barrels daily, especially after the US ban on Russian oil and other Western sanctions that have impacted energy exports from Russia.
"President Biden is feeling the pressure from Americans as inflation is getting uglier and this speculated release will show the public he is trying to get gas prices down with the exception of encouraging more drilling," Ed Moya, analyst at online trading platform OANDA, said. "[But] crude prices pared losses after OPEC+ decided 'to stay the course' and maintained the gradual output increase strategy."
The White House said US oil drillers were ignoring the energy crunch in order to "to make extraordinary profits ... without investment," adding that one industry chief executive had acknowledged refusal to pump more oil at even $200 a barrel.
The US president's dare to energy firms on idled oil wells was "Use it or Lose It," a Biden administration official, speaking on condition of anonymity, told US media.
"Today, President Biden is calling on Congress to make companies pay fees on wells from their leases that they haven't used in years and on acres of public lands that they are hoarding without producing," the White House said in a statement. "Companies that are producing from their leased acres and existing wells will not face higher fees. But companies that continue to sit on non-producing acres will have to choose whether to start producing or pay a fee for each idled well and unused acre."
Biden ordered the release of 50 million barrels from the SPR in November and 30 million earlier this month, in coordination with the reserves released by other countries that included China, Japan, India, South Korea and Britain.
The SPR had 568.3 million barrels in its stock as of the week ended March 25, according to the US Energy Information Administration. With the current release plan of 180 million barrels over the next six months, the nation's reserve could be drawn down to a third of its current size.
The Biden administration began tapping the SPR to provide US refiners with oil loaned from the reserve that they would not have to pay for but return within a stipulated period. By doing this, the Biden administration hoped there will be fewer transactions of oil in the open market and prices for both crude and fuel products like gasoline and diesel would come down.
In recent weeks, the administration has released some 3 million barrels weekly from the SPR. But its efforts have had a negligible effect so far on prices, with refiners turning out more products than they usually do at this time of year, resulting in extraordinarily high usage that has kept prices little changed on both the crude and oil products fronts.

On Wednesday, US media reported that Biden is likely to invoke this week Cold War-era powers to boost domestic production of critical minerals for the making of electric-vehicle and other types of batteries as the president leans more heavily on renewable energy sources to wean the nation off oil.

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US Refutes Allegations It Seeks Removal of Pakistan's Prime Minister - White House

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - White House Director of Communications Kate Bedingfield on Thursday said there is "absolutely no truth" to allegations that Washington is working with the opposition in Pakistan to remove Prime Minister Imran Khan.
"There is absolutely no truth to that allegation," Bedingfield said during a press briefing.
In a live TV address to the nation earlier in the day, Pakistan's Prime minister Imran Khan said that the US "threatened" him and is currently seeking his removal from office ahead of a no-confidence vote in the coming days, according to a report by The Guardian. Khan in the speech also said foreign powers wanted to oust him due to his visit to Russia.

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White House Says Biden Currently Has No Plans to Talk With Putin

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has no plans at present to talk with Russian President Vladimir Putin, White House Director of Communications Kate Bedingfield said during a press briefing on Thursday.
"Not currently," Bedingfield said when asked whether any plans exist for the two leaders to speak. "We've been very clear that any re-engagement of diplomacy at that level would require significant demonstration from the Russians of serious de-escalation and we have not seen that."

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US Stands Together With EU in Rejecting Paying for Russian Gas in Rubles - White House

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - The United States stands together with the European Union member states who have rejected to pay for Russian gas supplies in rubles, White House Director of Communications Kate Bedingfield said on Thursday.

When asked whether the United States stands with European Union member states in rejecting payments for Russian gas in rubles, Bedingfield said, "We do."
"The German Chancellor, I think, has been very clear that the contracts exist as they exist and there is going to be no change there."

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White House Says Stands by Biden's Denial of Alleged Corrupt Hunter Biden Business Deals

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - The White House stands by US President Joe Biden's comments as a candidate during a debate in 2020 in which he denied any corrupt business deals or profiting by his son Hunter Biden with China or Ukraine, White House Communications Director Kate Bedingfield said on Thursday.
"We absolutely stand by the President's comments ... I don't speak for Hunter Biden, so there's not more I can say on that," Bedingfield said during a White House press briefing when asked whether they stand behind the remarks.
Biden during the debate was asked whether there were any inappropriate or unethical business deals between Hunter Biden and actors in China or with Ukrainian energy company Burisma, to which he responded "nothing was unethical."
Biden in response to the question at the debate also said that Hunter did not make money from China.
Hunter Biden and James Biden, Joe Biden's brother, were paid approximately $4.8 million over the course of 14 months by Chinese Communist Party-linked businesses with which they were involved, according to a Washington Post report on Wednesday. However, there was no evidence found indicating personal knowledge of the deals by Joe Biden, the report noted.
US Republican lawmakers on Thursday sent letters to the White House Counsel's Office and National Archives and Records Administration requesting info about Hunter Biden's business deals in Russia and Ukraine after he came under sanctions by Moscow.
US lawmakers also sent letters to social media companies Facebook and Twitter requesting information about their censorship of a story during the 2020 election season about Hunter Biden's foreign business dealings, sourced from the contents of a laptop he abandoned at a computer repair shop.

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US Commerce Dept to Add 120 Russian, Belarusian Entities to Export Blacklist - White House

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - The United States will in the coming days add another 120 entities in Russia and Belarus to its export blacklist, Director of Communications Kate Bedingfield said in a press briefing on Thursday.

"In the coming days, the US Commerce Department will take further action to degrade Russia's defense, aerospace and maritime sectors by adding 120 entities in Russia and Belarus to the entity list," Bedingfield announced. "Being added to this list means that these entities can no longer get US cutting-edge technology without a license which will in most or if not all of these cases be denied."

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Wall Street's S&P 500 Index Ends First Quarter Down 4.7%, Biggest Dip in 2 Years

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - Wall Street's leading stocks gauge, the S&P 500 index, fell almost 5% in the first quarter trading that closed on Thursday as economic concerns over soaring US inflation and the Russia-Ukraine conflict left the market with its worst quarterly loss since the advent of the coronavirus pandemic two years ago.
The S&P 500 - which groups the top 500 US stocks - closed Thursday's trade down 59 points, or 1.3%, at 4,544. For all of March, it rose 3.8%. But for the first quarter, it fell 4.7% - its biggest decline since the 20% drop in the first quarter of 2020 at the height of market and economic disruptions caused by the COVID-19 breakout.
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International Energy Agency to Discuss Collective Oil Release on Friday - White House

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik). -The International Energy Agency (IEA) will discuss the coordination of collective oil releases from the Western strategic reserves on Friday, White House National Economic Council Director Brian Deese said.
"There is a meeting tomorrow morning of the International Energy Agency in Paris, an emergency meeting," Deese said during a press briefing on Thursday. "[A]s the presidency, we are confident that our allies and partners will provide tens of millions of barrels additional into the market. So, we're looking at well in excess of a million barrels a day of additional supply onto the market for several months."

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US Sees No Indications That Javelins, Stingers Ended Up in Russian Hands - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - The United States so far has not seen any indications that Javelin or Stinger systems have been seized by Russian forces in Ukraine, Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said on Thursday.

"I don't think we have any indication that's happened," Kirby said when asked to provide an estimate on the number of Javelins or Stingers seized by the Russians in Ukraine.
Russian media as well as news channels of the Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic have repeatedly demonstrated dozens of the US-made Javelins and Stingers captured by Russian forces in Ukraine.
Javelin is a US-made anti-tank missile system that has been the key item on the list of military aid sent to Ukraine by the United States to boost the Ukrainian army capabilities in its fight against Russia.
Last week, CNN reported that Ukraine was asking the US to provide it with 500 Stinger and 500 Javelin missiles daily amid the ongoing conflict with Russia.
The last security package authorized for Ukraine by US President Joe Biden included 800 Stinger anti-aircraft missiles and 2,000 Javelin missiles.
Unlike Javelins, the US Stinger missile production line was shut down, but has been restarted to fulfill overseas sales orders.
On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Ministry of Defense said the operation is solely targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure and the civilian population is not in danger.

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US Says Will Not Recognize Results of Referendum in South Ossetia to Join Russia

\WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - The United States will not recognize the results of the referendum in South Ossetia to join Russia, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.
"Neither de facto authorities nor the Russian government have the right to make decisions about the future of South Ossetia, which is part of Georgia," Price said during a press briefing when asked about the State Department's position on the referendum.
The head of the breakaway republic of South Ossetia, Anatoly Bibilov, said on Wednesday that the country's strategic goal is to join Russia and the necessary legal steps will be made in the near future. According to the South Ossetian leader, the world is currently at a tipping point, with "the Russian world defending today the interests of those who are committed to it." Bibilov later told the Soloviev Live YouTube channel that the republic should organize a referendum on the issue as stipulated by the country's constitution.

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US Sees Russia's Move to Gas Payments in Rubles as Sign of 'Desperation' - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - The United States sees Russia's decision to require countries to purchase its gas with rubles as a sign of desperation, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday.
"It's a sign of desperation is what it is," Price said during a press briefing regarding Russia's decision to require gas payments in rubles.
Price said Moscow's decision is proof of the effectiveness of Western sanctions placed on Russia.

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US Lawmakers Launch Probe Into Censorship of Hunter Biden Laptop Reports - Statement

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - US House Republican lawmakers are launching a probe into censorship of news stories related to Hunter Biden's business dealings by social media platforms Facebook and Twitter, the lawmakers said on Thursday in letters to Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg and Twitter CEO Parag Agrawal.
"Shortly before the 2020 election, Facebook suppressed an explosive New York Post article detailing how Hunter Biden used the position and influence of his father, now-President Joe Biden, for personal gain… Now, with even the New York Times confirming the accuracy of the Post's reporting, we are investigating Facebook's actions to interfere in free and fair election-related public discourse on its platform to the benefit of President Biden and the detriment of former President Trump," the letter to Zuckerberg said.
The lawmakers also wrote a similarly worded letter to Agrawal announcing the launch of a probe into Twitter's actions related to the news story as well.
Facebook decided to censor the story on Hunter Biden due to concerns about its veracity, which was likely to have significant implications for the presidential election, the letter to Zuckerberg said. It appears that Facebook deliberately used its platform to control election-related information to the benefit of Biden, according to the letter.
Twitter similarly blocked users from sharing links to the news story, labeling the materials "unsafe" for users, the letter said. The lawmakers in the letter also said that Twitter's actions likely had significant implications on the election to Biden's benefit.
The lawmakers requested from Facebook and Twitter information related to their decisions to censor the story and related policies and procedures, the letters said.
Signatories of the letters include Representatives Jim Jordan, Steve Chabot, Louie Gohmert and Matt Gaetz among others.

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Trudeau Says G20 Leaders in Discussion That Russia Can't Be Constructive Partner in Group

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - Russia cannot be viewed as a constructive partner of the G20 group at the moment, and Canada is discussing the matter with other member nations, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Thursday.
"Russia right now with its illegal invasion of Ukraine upended economic growth for everyone around the world, and can't possibly be a constructive partner in how we manage in part the crisis created by Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine," Trudeau said. "So this is obviously a reflection we are having as G20 leaders, lots of conversations going on."
"It can't be business as usual to have Vladimir Putin just sitting around the table pretending that everything's okay. Because it's not okay and it's his fault," Trudeau argued.
Earlier in the month, US President Joe Biden said that Russia should be removed from the G20 group and that the matter was discussed during the latest NATO meeting. He also proposed allowing Ukraine to participate in G20 meetings.
Later, the United States said it will have talks with G20 partners and 2022 summit host Indonesia about Russia's expulsion.
Reacting to the US calls, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the G20 format is important, but if Russia is excluded from the group, "nothing fatal" will happen.

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US Completes Delivery of $350Mln Security Package to Ukraine in Record 3 Weeks – Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) – The United States has delivered $350 million worth of security assistance to Ukraine in a record three weeks, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said on Thursday.
"We completed the $350 million that President Biden authorized a month or so ago, that was completed in a record three weeks," Kirby said during a press briefing.

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UPDATE - Biden Says Putin Has Fired, Put Under House Arrest Some of His Advisers
(Adds Kremlin's reaction in para 4)
WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that he believes Russian President Vladimir Putin has fired or put under house arrest some of his advisers over matters related to the special military operation in Ukraine, but admitted he lacks "hard evidence."
"I'm not saying this with certainty, [Putin] he seems to be self isolated and there's some indication that he has fired or put under house arrest some of his advisers," Biden told a press conference when asked if he believes Putin is being misinformed by some of his advisers. However, Biden admitted there's a lot of speculation and there's not too much hard evidence to back up those claims.

Earlier in the day, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov denied that Putin is not being fully informed of the Ukraine situation by the military, while reacting to similar claims made by the Pentagon. He noted that the State Department and the Pentagon have no real information about decision-making in Russia.
On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Ministry of Defense said the operation is solely targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure and the civilian population is not in danger.

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Biden Says Putin Has Fired, Put Under House Arrest Some of His Advisers

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Thursday that he believes Russian President Vladimir Putin has fired or put under house arrest some of his advisers over matters related to the special military operation in Ukraine, but admitted he lacks "hard evidence."
"I'm not saying this with certainty, [Putin] he seems to be self isolated and there's some indication that he has fired or put under house arrest some of his advisers," Biden told a press conference when asked if he believes Putin is being misinformed by some of his advisers. However, Biden admitted there's a lot of speculation and there's not too much hard evidence to back up those claims.
On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Ministry of Defense said the operation is solely targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure and the civilian population is not in danger.

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Biden Authorizes Record Release of 1Mln Barrels Per Day From US Strategic Reserves

WASHINGTON, Mach 31 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Thursday authorized a record release of oil from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) in the amount of one million barrels per day for the next six months amid increasing gasoline prices in the United States.
"Today, I'm authorizing the release of one million barrels per day for the next six months over 180 million barrels from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve. This is a wartime bridge to increase oil supply," Biden said during a press briefing. "It is by far the largest release of our net National Reserve in our history and provide historic amount of supply for historic amount of time, a six months bridge to the Fall."

Biden added that the United States has received commitments from other countries to release tens of millions of additional barrels into the market in order to lower the prices.

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Biden Says US Needs to End Long-Term Reliance on China, Other Countries

WASHINGTON, Mach 31 (Sputnik) - The United States needs to end its long-term reliance in China and other countries for inputs that will "power the future," US President Joe Biden said on Thursday.
"We need to end our long-term reliance on China and other countries for inputs that will power the future and I'll use every tool I have to make that happen. Yes, building a made in America clean energy future will help safeguard our national security," Biden said during a press briefing.

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Biden Says No Evidence Russia Pulling Back From Kiev, Skeptical of Kremlin Claims

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Thursday said that there is no evidence that Russian forces have pulled back from Kiev as purported by the Kremlin and that he is skeptical of their claims on the matter, adding that there is evidence Moscow is bolstering forces in the self-declared Donbas republics.
"Thus far, there is no clear evidence that he's pulling all of his forces out of Kiev. There is also evidence that he is beefing up his troops down in the Donbas area.... I'm a little skeptical. It's an open question whether he's actually pulling back," Biden said during remarks on rising energy prices.
Roughly 20% of Russia's forces around Kiev were repositioned over the last several days, with some units being moved into Belarus, Pentagon Spokesperson John Kirby said on Wednesday.

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Biden Says Oil Firms Exploiting Situation, Reluctant to Boost Supply Amid Price Hike

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - Some US oil companies are exploiting the situation and do not want to increase supply because high prices mean higher profits, President Joe Biden said on Thursday.
"For US oil companies that are recording their largest profits in years, they have a choice: one, they can put those profits to productive use by producing more oil, restarting idle wells, or

producing on the sites they are already leasing, giving the American people a break by passing some of the savings on to their customers and lowering the price at the pump or they can - as some of them are doing - exploit the situation," Biden said.

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Biden Urges Congress to Charge Oil Companies Fees for Unused Wells

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden urged the Congress on Thursday to charge firms fees for oil wells that have been unused for years.
"Congress should make companies pay fees on wells on federal leases," Biden said. "They haven't used them in years and acres of public land they're hoarding without production."
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Biden Announces Plan to Increase Oil Supply, Establish US Energy Independence

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said on Thursday that his administration will implement several measures to attempt to lower the rising prices of fuel and other energy products and establish US energy independence.
"Today, I'm laying out a two-part plan, not only to ease the pain that families are feeling right now, but to end this era of dependence and uncertainty, and lay a new foundation for a true and lasting American energy independence," Biden said.
The president said his plan includes measures to increase the US oil supply, including through releasing 1 million of barrels of oil a day from the Strategic Petroleum Reserves (SPR) and fining companies with inactive oil wells that could be producing but are not.

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NSA Employee Indicted for Sending Top Secret Information Via Email - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - The US authorities have indicted Mark Robert Unkenholz, an employee of the National Security agency (NSA), on charges of willfully transmitting and retaining secret or top secret defense-related information, the Justice Department said on Thursday.
"The indictment alleges that the information Unkenholz transmitted was classified at the Secret and Top Secret/SCI levels and that Unkenholz transmitted the classified information using his personal email address to the other person's private company email addresses," the Justice Department said in a press release.

The Justice Department said Unkenholz willfully transmitted 13 times between February 2018 and June 2020 the restricted information via e-mail to another person who was not entitled to receive it, the release said.
If convicted, Unkenholz faces a maximum prison sentence of 10 years for each of the 13 counts of willful transmission and a maximum prison of ten years for each of the 13 counts of willful retention of the restricted information.

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US Lawmakers Urge Blinken to Work to Revoke Russia's OAS Observer Status - Letter
WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - A bipartisan group of US lawmakers in a letter on Thursday urged Secretary of State Antony Blinken to work with other Organization of American States (OAS) countries to revoke Russia's permanent observer status at the group.
"We write to encourage the Biden administration to work with like-minded member states of the Organization of American States (OAS) to revoke Russia's status as a Permanent Observer in response to its unprovoked, inhumane, and illegal invasion and occupation of Ukraine," the letter said.
OAS granted Permanent Observer status to Russia nearly 30 years ago as a reflection of the organization's democratic aspirations for the country, the letter also said. However, Moscow's actions domestically and abroad have since resulted in the need for a reassessment of engagement between the OAS and Russia, the letter added.
Signatories to the letter include Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Menendez, Ranking Member Jim Risch, and Senators Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz among others.

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SpaceX Crew-4 Mission to International Space Station Postponed to April 20 - NASA

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - NASA has moved the date of SpaceX Crew-4 mission to the International Space Station (ISS) to April 20 with a launch time at 6:37 EST (10:37 GMT), Manager of Commercial Crew Program Steve Stich said on Thursday.
"We are going to adjust the launch date a little bit for Crew-4. We are doing that today. The program control board will move that mission to no earlier than April the 20th with a launch time of 6:37am Eastern Time. The docking time may be adjusted a little bit on April 21, probably around 6 a.m. Eastern [Time] or so and we'll work that with the ISS team," during a mission overview.
Stich explained the idea behind the move is to provide more spacing time between the AX-1 and the Crew-4 flights.
The Crew-4 mission will take NASA astronauts Kjell Lindgren, Bob Hines and Jessica Watkins, as well as European Space Agency astronaut Samantha Cristoforetti, to the ISS on the Falcon 9

rocket bearing the Crew Dragon capsule. The rocket will be launched from NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Florida.

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Biden Tells US Energy Firms Sitting on Idle Oil Wells 'Use It or Lose It'

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - Fees will be imposed on US energy firms that sit on idle oil wells to make extraordinary profits from a supply crunch, the Biden administration said on Thursday as it announced the largest ever daily release of 1 million barrels from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR).

"Today, President Biden is calling on Congress to make companies pay fees on wells from their leases that they haven't used in years and on acres of public lands that they are hoarding without producing," the White House said in a statement. "Companies that are producing from their leased acres and existing wells will not face higher fees. But companies that continue to sit on non-producing acres will have to choose whether to start producing or pay a fee for each idled well and unused acre."

The US president's stance toward energy firms on idled oil wells was "use it or lose It," a Biden administration official speaking on condition of anonymity was quoted as saying by US media.

The White House said US oil drillers were ignoring the energy crunch in order to "to make extraordinary profits ... without investment," adding that one industry chief executive had acknowledged refusal to pump more oil at a price of even $200 per barrel.

In Thursday's trade, US crude traded at above $103 per barrel. The pump price of gasoline hovered near record highs, at above $4.20 per gallon.

The global price of oil, as dictated by London-traded Brent crude, hit 14-year highs of almost $140 a barrel on March 7, in the aftermath of US and EU sanctions imposed on major energy exporter Russia in response to Moscow's special military operation in Ukraine.

An estimated 3 million barrels per day of Russian oil is impacted directly by a US import ban and indirectly by sanctions, adding to a prior shortage of about 2-3 million barrels daily in the market.

To alleviate the supply crunch at home, the White House said it will release a record of 1 million barrels per day of oil from the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) over the next six months, totaling 180 million barrels, to alleviate a supply crunch that has sent fuel prices to all-time highs.

"After consultation with allies and partners, the President will announce the largest release of oil reserves in history, putting one million additional barrels on the market per day on average – every day – for the next six months," the White House said. "The scale of this release is unprecedented: the world has never had a release of oil reserves at this 1 million per day rate for this length of time. This record release will provide a historic amount of supply to serve as [a] bridge until the end of the year when domestic production ramps up."

Biden ordered the release of 50 million barrels from the SPR in November and 30 million earlier this month, in coordination with the reserves release by other major oil consuming countries that included China, Japan, India, South Korea and Britain.

The SPR had 568.3 million barrels in its stock as of the week ended March 25, according to the US Energy Information Administration. With the current release plan of 180 million barrels over the next six months, the nation's reserve could be drawn down to a third of its current size.
Biden began tapping the SPR to provide US refiners with oil loaned from the reserve that they would not have to pay for but return within a stipulated period. By doing this, the administration hoped there will be fewer transactions of oil in the open market and prices for both crude and fuel products like gasoline and diesel will come down.
In recent weeks, the administration has released some 3 million barrels weekly from the SPR. But the government's efforts have had negligible effect so far on prices, with refiners turning out more products than they usually do at this time of year, resulting in extraordinarily high usage that has kept prices little changed on both the crude and oil products fronts.
US media reported on Wednesday that Biden is likely to invoke this week Cold War-era powers to boost domestic production of critical minerals for the making of electric-vehicle and other types of batteries as the president leans more heavily on renewable energy sources to wean the nation off oil.

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UN on UK Sanctions Against Russian Media: Journalists Have Right to Do Work Everywhere

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) – Journalists should have the right to do their work everywhere, UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric said on Thursday, commenting on the UK decision to impose sanctions on Russian media.
"As a matter of principle, we very much do believe in the right of journalists to do their work everywhere," Dujarric told reporters.
Earlier in the day, the United Kingdom unveiled sanctions against Russian media and prominent media figures in connection with the Russian military operation in Ukraine.
The sanctions list includes RT, Sputnik news agency parent company Rossiya Segodnya, TV anchor Sergey Brilev, Sputnik International Broadcasting head Anton Anisimov, Managing Director of RT Alexey Nikolov, and former head of the Russian communications watchdog Aleksandr Zharov.

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US Lawmakers Introduce Bill to 'Hold Russia Accountable' for Alleged War Crimes

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - US lawmakers on the House Foreign Affairs Committee introduced legislation to coordinate evidence collection for alleged war crimes committed by Russia during its special operation in Ukraine as a means of deterring them, the lawmakers said on Thursday in a press release.

"This week, House Foreign Affairs Committee Lead Republican Michael McCaul (R-TX) and Chairman Gregory Meeks (D-NY) introduced H.R. 7276, the Ukraine Invasion War Crimes Deterrence and Accountability Act. This bill will ensure the U.S. has a coordinated effort to collect evidence to be used to prosecute Russian war crimes in Ukraine, and will help to deter future war crimes by ensuring Russian troops and their commanders know the world is watching closely," the press release said.
The legislation requires the Biden administration to detail the US government's evidence collection process of potential war crimes in order to ensure that perpetrators are held accountable, according to the press release.
The bill also requires the Biden administration to describe the process domestic and international courts could use to request and obtain information on potential war crimes from the US government, the press release added.
Russia began a special operation to demilitarize and "denazify" Ukraine last month, responding to calls for help from the Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics in countering the aggression of Ukrainian troops.
Moscow has vociferously rejected claims that Russian troops have violated conventions regulating armed conflict, while Donbas residents have accused the International Criminal Court and other international bodies of ignoring Ukrainian aggression against the breakaway Russian-speaking region over the past eight years. Russia also said that Ukrainian forces are using typical terrorist methods, such as hiding behind civilians and positioning weapons systems in civilian areas.

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US Considering Rebate Card, Direct Payment to Ease Impact of Rising Energy Costs - Pelosi

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - The United States is considering offering Americans a rebate card or the possibility of a direct payment in order to offset the impact of the rising prices of gas as well as other energy products, US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said on Thursday.
"If you're going to have to pay for it and you don't want it to come out of the [highway] trust fund, [there] could be a rebate card or a direct payment, and those are the things that are being considered," Pelosi said during a press conference.
On Thursday, the White House announced it would impose fees on inactive US oil wells in an attempt to address the rising fuel prices caused by a supply crunch. The White House also announced that the Biden administration will release a record 1 million barrels of oil a day from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve over the next six months.
Biden is expected to deliver remarks later on Thursday about his administration's ongoing efforts to lower gas prices at the pump, according to the White House schedule.

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US Ambassador to UN Will Visit Moldova, Romania Hosting Ukrainian Refugees

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) – US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield will visit Romania and Moldova on April 2-4 to discuss their efforts in accommodating Ukrainian refugees.
"U.S. Representative to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield will travel to Moldova and Romania April 2-4 to focus on Moldova and Romania's efforts to assist refugees coming from Ukraine and humanitarian needs created by the Russian Federation's aggression and war against Ukraine," the statement said.
She will talk to government officials, United Nations agencies and NGO partners to learn more about their efforts to help people displaced by conflict. The envoy is also expected to meet with Ukrainian refugees.
According to the United Nations, over 4 million people have left Ukraine since Russia launched its special militarily operation to defend the Russian-speaking republics of Donbas against intensifying attacks from Ukrainian military.
The Russian Defense Ministry said the operation is targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure only, but later accused Ukrainian forces of using typical terrorist methods, such as hiding behind civilians and positioning weapons systems in civilian areas.

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Pentagon Says No Indications Russia Preparing to Use Nuclear Weapons

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) – The United States sees no indications at this time that Russia is preparing to use nuclear weapons, a senior US defense official said on Thursday.
"I haven't seen any activity by the Russians that would change our assessment or our strategic deterrent posture. And no indications at this time that they're preparing to use those kinds of [nuclear] weapons," the official said during a press briefing.

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US to Finish Delivery of $800Mln Military Aid for Ukraine by Mid-April - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - The United States expects to be able to finish the delivery of $800 million worth of military aid for Ukraine by the middle of April, a senior US Defense Department official said on Thursday.
"We expect that we'll be able to finish the delivery of the $800 million by the middle of April. So, roughly two weeks from now," the official said during a press briefing.

The first deliveries as part of the security package arrived to Eastern Europe on March 20 and there have so far been five flights made in total, the official said.
On March 16, US President Joe Biden announced the $800 million package of military aid for Ukraine. The new security package includes 800 anti-aircraft systems, 9,000 anti-armor systems, 7,000 small arms such as machine guns, shotguns and grenade launchers.

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US Sanctions Russian Tech Companies, Expands Sanctions to More Sectors - Treasury Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - The US government has designated a number of Russian individuals and entities in the tech sector over their alleged involvement in evading US sanctions and is also expanding the sanctions authority to cover more areas of the Russian economy, the Treasury Department said on Thursday.
"OFAC [Office of Foreign Assets Control] is designating 21 entities and 13 individuals as part of its crackdown on the Kremlin's sanctions evasion networks and technology companies," the Treasury Department said in a press release. "In addition to the sanctions imposed on Russian actors today, Treasury is also enhancing and expanding its Russia sanctions authorities. Today, the Secretary of the Treasury, in consultation with the Secretary of State, determined that sanctions apply to the aerospace, marine, and electronics sectors of the Russian Federation economy."
The newly designated entities and individuals were targeted over their alleged connections to sanctions evasion networks and for producing technological products used by the Russian government, the release said.
The sanctions authority expansion allows for sanctions to be imposed against any person or entity determined to operate or have operated in any of those sectors and provides powers to promptly impose additional economic costs on Russia over its special operation in Ukraine, the release added.
On Thursday, OFAC removed the subsidiary bank of the Russian e-commerce firm Ozon from its sanctions list following an appeal from the company that challenged the allegations of having links to the sanctioned Sovcombank.
The move to designate additional individuals and entities comes after the United States imposed numerous sanctions and export controls on Russia over its ongoing special operation in Ukraine.
On February 24, Russia launched a special military operation to demilitarize and de-Nazify Ukraine after the breakaway Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics requested help to defend them from attacks by Ukrainian troops. Negotiations between Moscow and Kiev have been taking place in Istanbul, where the parties have been laying out their respective concerns in an attempt to formulate a peace agreement.

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IMF Says Up To Russia to Decide on Participation in Meetings

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) – Russia's participation in the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank Spring Meetings in Washington in April will depend solely on its own initiative, IMF spokesman Gerry Rice said on Thursday.
"Attendance at the IMF/World Bank Spring Meetings is decided by each member country," Rice said, when asked if the Russian delegation's in-person participation would be appropriate in the current situation.
The spokesman added that there is still a plenty of time before those meetings, and arrangements regarding attendance are being finalized.
The Spring Meetings will take place on April 18-24 in Washington, DC in a hybrid format. Small official delegations will participate in-person, but all public media events will be virtual, Rice explained.
The Financial Times reported earlier in March, citing an IMF spokesperson, that the fund's executive board had temporarily suspended the ceremonial role of dean held by Russian representative Aleksei Mozhin due to Russia's military operation in Ukraine.
On February 24, Russia launched a military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk appealed for help in defending themselves against attacks by Ukrainian troops. In response to Russia's operation, Western countries have rolled out a comprehensive sanctions campaign against Moscow.

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NASA Says Partners Including Roscosmos Making Progress Toward Extending ISS Through 2030

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - NASA and its international partners, including Roscosmos, are working out budget arrangements to extend their work on the International Space Station (ISS) despite current tensions between Russia and the United States, NASA engineer Kathy Lueders said on Thursday.
"All of our international partners, including Roscosmos, are making progress on moving toward station extension through 2030," Lueders said in a press briefing. "We all understand the importance of this continued partnership, even in really really, really tough times, and that this is important for us to continue to work together and maintain for what some of us has been decades [of cooperation] in lower orbit, and continue to create the safe place for us to continue to do research and technology development together in space."

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US to Put Fees on Long Unused Oil Wells as Energy Firms Ignore Supply Crunch - White House

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration plans to impose fees on US oil wells that have been unused for years as energy firms in the country continue ignoring the supply crunch that has sent domestic fuel prices to record highs, the White House said on Thursday.

"Today, President Biden is calling on Congress to make companies pay fees on wells from their leases that they haven't used in years and on acres of public lands that they are hoarding without producing," the White House said in a statement. "Companies that are producing from their leased acres and existing wells will not face higher fees. But companies that continue to sit on non-producing acres will have to choose whether to start producing or pay a fee for each idled well and unused acre."

The statement referred to the energy crunch that US energy companies were ignoring in order to "make extraordinary profits ... without investment," adding that one industry chief executive had even acknowledged refusal to pump more oil at $200 a barrel. In Thursday's trade, US crude traded at above $103 while the pump price of gasoline was at a record high at above $4.20 per gallon.

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Biden's Oil Interventions Will Not Lower Prices, But Only Deplete US Reserves - Trump

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's release of oil reserves will not lower prices but will deplete the nation's strategic stocks, his predecessor Donald Trump said on Thursday.

Earlier in the day, the White House said the US will release a record 1 million barrels of oil per day from its emergency reserve over the next six months to alleviate a supply crunch that has sent fuel prices to all-time highs.

"He's [Biden] going to take what we so carefully and magically built, and what will be a futile attempt to reduce oil and gasoline prices. They will soon bring it down to empty again," Trump said in a statement.

The former president gave his own administration credit for building up American oil reserves to 100% full during the period of low prices.

"It's called the Strategic National Reserves, and it hasn't been full for many decades. In fact, it's been mostly empty. It's supposed to only be used for large-scale emergency or conflict," Trump argued.

Biden is expected to deliver remarks on his administration's actions to lower gas prices at the pump on Thursday.

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US Announces Record Release of 1Mln Barrels Daily From Oil Reserve Over 6 Months

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - The United States will release a record of 1 million barrels per day of oil from its emergency reserve over the next six months to alleviate a supply crunch that has sent fuel prices to all-time highs, the White House said on Thursday.
"After consultation with allies and partners, the President will announce the largest release of oil reserves in history, putting one million additional barrels on the market per day on average – every day – for the next six months," the statement said, referring to the release that is to come out of the Strategic Petroleum Reserve. "The scale of this release is unprecedented: the world has never had a release of oil reserves at this 1 million per day rate for this length of time. This record release will provide a historic amount of supply to serve as [a] bridge until the end of the year when domestic production ramps up."

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US Expands Russia Sanctions Authorities to Apply to Aerospace, Marine, Electronics Sectors

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - The United States has expanded sanctions authorities to apply to Russia's aerospace, marine and electronics sectors, the Treasury announced on Thursday.
"In addition to the sanctions imposed on Russian actors today, Treasury is also enhancing and expanding its Russia sanctions authorities," the press release said. "Today, the Secretary of the Treasury, in consultation with the Secretary of State, determined that sanctions apply to the aerospace, marine, and electronics sectors of the Russian Federation economy pursuant to section 1(a)(i) of Executive Order (E.O.) 14024."
The Treasury explained that the move will allow for sanctions to be introduced against any person or entity determined to operate or have operated in any of those sectors and provides powers to promptly impose additional economic costs on Russia over its special operation in Ukraine.

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US Weekly Jobless Claims Up 1st Time in 3 Weeks - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - US jobless claims rose for the first time in three weeks, the Labor Department reported on Thursday ahead of monthly employment data awaited by the markets.

"In the week ending March 26, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 202,000, an increase of 14,000 from the previous week's revised level," the US Labor Department said in a statement.

In the previous week to March 19, jobless claims hit the lowest level since December 5, resuming their downtrend in a labor market described by the Federal Reserve as extremely tight.

The rise in jobless claims during the week to March 26 was the first since the opening week of this month. It came ahead of the more important non-farm payrolls report from the Labor Department due on Friday that will comprise both private and public sector jobs. Economists have said they expect non-farm payrolls to have grown by 490,000 in March, versus 678,000 in February.

US unemployment reached a record high of 14.8% in April 2020, with the loss of some 20 million jobs in the aftermath of the coronavirus breakout. Jobs numbers have recovered over the past year, with the unemployment rate moving down to 3.8%. An unemployment rate of 4% or below is regarded by the Federal Reserve as maximum employment.

Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said earlier this month that the labor market was extremely tight, with robust demand and subdued supply. Powell also noted that more than a million positions were filled within the first two months of the year.

Since Powell's remarks, private US payrolls processor ADP reported that private employers in the United States added 455,000 jobs from February to March, sustaining growth in the labor market that is driving economic recovery from the effects of the coronavirus pandemic measures.

In addition to the increase in the number of jobs , the United States has also experienced one of the greatest transformations of its employment market as pandemic measures upended labor supply and work trends, putting employees' demands above those of employers.

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New Shepard Makes Fourth Space Flight With Six Tourists On Board - Blue Origin

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - Jeff Bezos' spaceflight company Blue Origin carried out its fourth successful tourism flight on Thursday, launching six people on an approximately 10 minute flight to the edge of space.

Gary Lai, the chief architect of the New Shepard system, businessman Marty Allen, entrepreneur Marc Hagle and his wife, Sharon, businessman and mentor Jim Kitchen and President of Commercial Space Technologies George Nield joined the flight as space tourists.

Lai replaced comedian Pete Davidson, who Blue Origin originally said would be a passenger on the mission. Blue Origin later said the Saturday Night Live comedian was "no longer able to join" the mission after the mission was delayed from its original launch date on March 23.
Blue Origin is one of the three private US space flight companies. Along with Virgin Galactic, Blue Origin flights are suborbital and only SpaceX has the ability to take people into orbit. The first manned flight of the New Shepard suborbital spacecraft took place last summer with Blue Origin owner Jeff Bezos on board.

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US Targets 13 Russian Individuals, 21 Entities Over Alleged Cyberactivities, Under CAATSA

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - The United States on Thursday unveiled sanctions against 13 individuals and 21 entities in Russia for alleged cyberactivities and under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA).
Among those targeted are Russia's Serniya Engineering, Sertal, Vektor, Joint Stock Company Mikron, T-Platforms, the Treasury said.
At the same time, the Treasury deleted Ozon Bank from its sanctions list.

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FEATURE - US Activists Fear Slow-Moving Justice System Could Undermine New Anti-Lynching Law

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) - America's slow-moving justice system could impede enforcement of a new anti-lynching measure that President Joe Biden signed into law this week, activists told Sputnik.
On Tuesday, Biden signed the Emmett Till Antilynching Act into law, marking the culmination of a more than century-long odyssey by African Americans to coax, cajole and shame Congress into passing federal legislation that would make lynching a federal hate crime.
REPUBLICAN INTRANSIGENCE
The measure is named after Emmett Till, a 14-year-old Chicago boy who was abducted, tortured and killed by two white men, Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam, in 1955 after he was was accused of whistling at and grabbing Carolyn Bryant, a white woman. Bryant, Bryant's husband, and Milam, Roy Bryant's half-brother were all acquitted by an all-white jury.
The pair revealed in an interview for Look magazine that they had murdered Till and Carolyn Bryant told a historian five decades after the teen's gruesome murder that Emmett had never touched her.
"Unfortunately, we have a strong, very strong anti-democratic and slow-moving justice system. It been moving very slowly ever since [civil rights activist] Ida B. Wells made lynching a national

issue well over 100 years ago," Dr. Bernard Demczuk, who taught African American history and culture at the DCPS School Without Walls for 13 years and is the faculty advisor of the GW Williams House (The Black House) at George Washington University, said.
"The democratic process has been blocked by rightwing ideologues who honestly believe this. This includes much of the Republican Party which has been able to block calls from Wells and others to make it a federal crime to lynch Black people," he added.
Demczuk — a longtime DC resident who lectures widely on Black history and culture, labor history and governmental policy — said despite progress in a number of areas, some key issues around race haven't changed.
"There are certain political groups who are unwilling to acknowledge racism lynching and white supremacy exists although it is evident to most people in America," he said.
Demczuk mentioned the 2015 Charleston church shooting, in which teen Dylann Roof killed nine people, all African-Americans, at Mother Emanuel Church in South Carolina.
"The Klan still exists. They have changed from robes to camouflage and toting AR-15s. And it's legal. But I'm excited, happy, pleased that this is now law. Whatever Republicans did, thank you," he continued.
Barbara R. Arnwine, a human rights and social justice attorney and longtime activist, echoed Demczuk, saying that while she expected the bill to pass Congress, Republicans have been essentially playing both ends against the middle.
"I think we know that the Republican Party wants to appeal to its racist base but can't afford to do it in a consistent way," Arnwine said.
In the end, Republicans have become masters at supporting "lightweight measures which will not change things substantially and won't result in any systemic change," Arnwine, who served as the executive director of the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law from 1989 until 2015, said.
WHAT'S NEXT?
Kerra Bolton, an independent filmmaker and former political strategist, said she was surprised by the bill's passage.
"Yes, I'm surprised that it passed. White supremacy has a hold on the US and there is a strong desire to punish Black people in public spaces," Bolton, a writer and documentarian, said. "I believe passage of this bill is more symbolic than real, but some gestures make a difference. In the wake of the Arbery murder, it's symbolic but meaningful."
Bolton said the jury is still out about whether America has the capacity or the willingness to confront and deal with the country's Original Sin – slavery – and the vast array of racist and racial tentacles that emanate from it.
"I have watched and sometimes been engaged in broader discussion about race and white people reveal themselves by what they say, defend and embrace," she said softly.
"The question is if human beings can evolve. So many people are attached to the personaes and hold on tightly to what they think that represents. You see how people's connection to white supremacy reveals itself."
Bolton said overcoming this racial conundrum is truly difficult because these racist feelings are deeply engrained over centuries. She cautioned that Europeans aren't the only ones who have work to do.

"For Black people, overcoming the trauma is our work to do. When the two proceed and work in parallel, we will be able to save ourselves. The country has to be committed to heal itself before it can save itself," Bolton explained. "It's sad. People keep dying because white people keep centering on themselves."

VICTORY, FINALLY

At the bill signing in the Rose Garden, President Biden reminded those gathered that the freshly minted law "isn't just about the past," referring to the February 2020 murder of 25-year-old Ahmaud Arbery, who was shot and killed by three white men in Brunswick, Georgia while jogging in the area in what was classified as a racially-motivated hate crime.

He also spoke about the white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017 where White nationalists marched and one killed Heather Heyer, a counter-protestor, and injured scores more when he drove through a crowd of anti-racist demonstrators.

Illinois Congressman Bobby Rush introduced the bill Biden made law. He introduced a similar version of his current bill in 2019. In 2020, the House of Representatives passed the bill but Kentucky Republican Sen. Rand Paul refused to support the bill supposedly because it was too broad. He expressed his support of the bill earlier this month which opened the way for the US Senate unanimously passed the Emmett Till Antilynching Act.

The bill passed the House of Representatives in February. Republican representatives Andrew Clyde of Georgia, Thomas Massie of Kentucky, and Chip Roy of Texas were the only members to vote against the legislation.

Demczuk said Bryan Stevenson, through the Equal Justice Initiative has documented 4,473 lynchings of mostly Black men, women and children, between 1868 and 1968.

"We know of another 3,000 people who're missing and we can't find them. They were likely lynched and tossed in a pond or a hole. We know how many people have been lynched. Why did it take so long?" Demczuk asked.

Demczuk, Arnwine, and other supporters of the bill, said Wells and other advocates had tried and failed to push through passage of federal anti-lynching legislation for more than a century.

"We've got to give Biden credit because he got it done," Arnwine said.

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US Alerted Firms About Kaspersky Software Day After Russia Entered Ukraine - Reports

WASHINGTON, March 31 (Sputnik) – The US government began issuing private warnings to some American companies about the alleged potential danger of using software developed by Moscow-based cybersecurity firm Kaspersky Lab the day after Russia launched its special military operation in Ukraine, Reuters reported on Thursday, citing a senior US official and other people in the know.

The senior US official believes that Russian law enforcement or intelligence agencies could force Kaspersky Lab's employees to grant remote access to customers' computers.

"The risk calculation has changed with the Ukraine conflict," a US official was quoted as saying. "It has increased."

The official didn't specify whether there was any incident or piece of intelligence that led the US government to believe Kaspersky Lab may pose a threat, according to the report.
The Russian cybersecurity firm reacted in a statement by saying that the accusations are capable of "further damaging" Kaspersky Lab's reputation "without giving the company the opportunity to respond directly to such concerns" and that it "is not appropriate or just," the report said.
On March 25, the US Federal Communications Commission added Kaspersky Lab to its list of foreign companies allegedly posing a threat to national security.
On Wednesday, The Wall Street Journal reported that the Biden administration is split on whether to impose sanctions on Kaspersky Lab as part of the US response to Russia's special operation in Ukraine. Treasury Department sanction experts have reportedly expressed concern about the scale of such an effort, given that the company's software is used by hundreds of millions of individuals worldwide.
On February 24, Russia launched a military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk appealed for help in defending themselves against Ukrainian provocations. In response to Russia's operation, Western countries have rolled out a comprehensive sanctions campaign against Moscow, which includes airspace closures and restrictive measures targeting numerous Russian officials and entities, media, and financial institutions. Some foreign companies have suspended their Russian operations altogether.