The Christian Science Monitor Weekly

"The object of the Monitor is to injure no man, but to bless all mankind."

– MARY BAKER EDDY

WEEKS OF DECEMBER 29, 2025 & JANUARY 5, 2026 | VOLUME 118 – ISSUES 6 & 7

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Connecting to the world through a Monitor lens

When I took my first assignments for The Christian Science Monitor, from South Africa in the early 2000s, I was a newbie foreign correspondent wowed by the people, scenes, and stories I encountered. I was also dazzled by photojournalist Melanie Stetson Freeman, who had come from Boston to work with me for those weeks.

She traveled like the pro she is, nonchalantly moving herself and her cameras through townships and tiger enclosures, dance studios and bushlands. She seemed both fearless and lighthearted, connecting with everyone we met, posing key questions I had inevitably forgotten to ask.

BY STEPHANIE HANES
PRINT EDITOR

And she saw things. I remember how she would move quickly to take a shot, or slowly and deliberatively set up for a future one. Later, I would realize she had spotted the best scenes for my narratives – the best moments of light, both literally and figuratively, that I would try to capture in words.

Since then, I've been fortunate to learn from others on the Monitor's exceptional photo staff. Every reporting trip I took with Alfredo Sosa and Riley Robinson made me a better writer, opening my eyes to the world and connecting to what was around me. When I see Scott Peterson's stunning wartime photography, I am reminded of the imperative we writers have to remember the dignity and humanity involved in any conflict, and the people behind any policy we might analyze.

Indeed, the best piece of writing advice I have for young reporters is to go on an assignment with a skilled photojournalist. We're honored at the Monitor to have a team of these experts. And we're delighted to bring their work together in what has become one of our favorite magazine traditions, Our Year in Photos.

Our photo staff's selections – their favorite images from 2025 – show breathtaking journalistic craft and breadth as well as artistic skill. They demonstrate what makes the Monitor different. With our lens, we try to show you the world as it is, with all its beauty, compassion, and resilience.

NOTE TO READERS: *This is one of a handful of double-dated issues we produce each year. Your next issue will be dated Jan. 12, 2026.*

BERLIN

Europe wants Germany to arm up. But do Germans want to take up arms?

By Mark Sappenfield / Senior global correspondent

Germany's army is desperately in need of a few thousand good soldiers. Theo Riebel will most certainly not be among them.

"I don't want to fight for this country," says the student at Berlin's Technical University, sitting on a bench outside the cafeteria.

To him, the Russian threat seems remote, and diplomacy is a better solution anyway. Besides, why would he take up arms for a government that he says has only made his life harder, with crumbling schools and a rising cost of living?

"Young people have enough problems already," he adds.

On Dec. 5, the Bundestag, Germany's parliament, passed a bill to increase the army from 183,000 troops to at least 255,000 by 2035. It is hoping volunteers will fill that gap. But in January, it is also requiring all 18-year-olds to fill out a form about their willingness to serve, as well as submit to a physical examination, if requested. The move is seen as a first step to reinstituting mandatory military service, should the push for volunteers fall short.

Across a Europe awakened to the Russian threat, other nations are taking similar steps. Yet Germany faces perhaps the toughest challenge and the highest stakes.

WHY WE WROTE THIS

With Europe worried over the threat from Russia and finding the United States increasingly unreliable, Germany is feeling pressure to lead the way on European defense. Whether Germans themselves are ready to pick up arms is another matter.

In the words of one expert, Germany's efforts to remake itself as a peaceful nation after World War II have maybe been "a bit too successful." Older generations have been shaped by a powerful peace movement that held sway for decades, while younger generations have grown up in a time of unprecedented peace – without mandatory military service since 2011. Over all looms memories of the atrocities of the Nazi army and a fear of the past repeated.

A recent poll found that only 18% of Germans were "definitely" willing to take up arms in a national emergency. The passing of the Bundestag's bill was met by school strikes nationwide.

Germans' "mental barrier"

With Europe looking to Germany to lead, the country faces an immense task. To build an army capable of defending the nation, Germany will have to overcome the deep aversion to military might that has become a central pillar of its postwar identity.

"For decades, this antiwar culture played a largely positive role in shaping a new Germany: an open, peaceful, and diverse society," says Dmitri Stratievski, chairman of the Eastern Europe Center in Berlin, in an email interview. "But in today's world, this phenomenon also has another side. ... This has created a significant mental barrier for millions of Germans."

In many ways, this mindset is a testament to how thoroughly Germany has remade itself. A "remembrance culture" of the country's Nazi past has instilled a wariness of patriotism and military power. It also fueled a peace movement that saw 1 million protesters take to the streets in 1983, when NATO sought to put nuclear missiles on West German soil.

More recently, Germany's initial reluctance to send heavy weap-

ons to Ukraine had former Chancellor Olaf Scholz fighting accusations that he and his Social Democratic Party were still bound by their pacifist roots.

There are signs this is changing. Especially since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, there has been "an acceptance of realpolitik," says Jannis Grimm, a political scientist at the Free University of Berlin. "To defend human rights, peace politics means we need to defend peace."

The greater threat to Europe is not a strong Germany, but a weak one, says Patrick Keller, a defense expert at the German Council on Foreign Relations. "If Germany doesn't lead, many others in Europe will not move. If we do nothing, others will do nothing as well."

A November poll for Bild newspaper found that 58% of Germans say the restoration of national conscription is needed.

The view of German youths

The question is what Germany's young people think.

Berlin's Technical University is admittedly not the German army's most promising recruiting ground. Posters promoting the Revolutionary Communist Party are plastered on trash cans and lampposts, alongside others containing antifascist messages against the weapons industry.

But Linus Wilke brightens when the topic of military service is mentioned. The student sees himself staying at the university, "but if I weren't, I would consider it." His friends in the army have only positive things to say. "It is a good plan to grow the military, because [Russia] could become a threat."

The concerns voiced by Mr. Riebel, however, echo those of others nationwide. He feels like society is already throwing many of its unresolved problems on his generation's shoulders, with higher rents, increasing stress on social services, and climate change. Now, it wants to add another burden to his generation – without consulting them.

"Maybe if everyone was doing OK, it would be different," he says. "Lots of people would want to defend their friends, families, and communities. But the country itself? It's not really seen as worth fighting for."

In Germany and beyond, youths are feeling threatened, says Dr. Grimm, the political scientist. "But these insecurities do not lead to wanting to take up arms and defend something, it leads to paralysis. You just don't want to deal with it."

Moreover, many German young people see Gaza – not Ukraine – as the urgent crisis.

"A conversation as a society"

As a result, there are doubts that Germany can hit its targets through volunteers. Only men are required to fill out the new form, and the German constitution states that no one can be compelled into military service; community service must be an alternative.

"It will not be possible to get the numbers without a mandatory component," suggests Dr. Keller."What we need is a conversation as a society."

Maybe that is beginning. After the Bundestag passed the military service bill, Defense Minister Boris Pistorius commented on the school strikes.

They were "fantastic," he said. The prospect of young people wanting to be heard? "Be my guest; that's how it should be." ▪

Why US mass killings have dropped to a 20-year low, though violence persists

By Patrik Jonsson / Staff writer

The United States is on track to record the lowest number of mass killing incidents in two decades, according to one group of researchers tracking the data. This is true despite the persistence of wrenching events such as a Dec. 13 attack at Brown University that left two dead and nine injured.

There have been 17 mass killings as of the second week of December, 14 of which involved guns, according to a database maintained by Northeastern University, in partnership with The Associated Press and USA Today. While that number could change, it is the lowest since the database was established in 2006. And it represents a significant drop from recent years – including 2023, which saw more than three dozen such incidents.

Northeastern's database tracks incidents in which four or more people were killed intentionally, excluding the assailant, in a 24-hour period. Most mass violence is gun-related, which the chart accompanying this article focuses on. But the database also tracks other incidents of mass killing, such as stabbings or the use of vehicles to attack pedestrians.

WHY WE WROTE THIS

While acts of mass violence continue in the U.S., a slight reprieve from bloodshed this year suggests that policy shifts and healthier communities can make a positive difference.

The database offers an important perspective – but only one – on the nation's struggles with violence, which does not always end in fatalities. Another organization, for example, the Gun Violence Archive, counted 392 mass shootings by mid-December, compared with 503 for all of 2024. This group defines a mass shooting as an event in which four or more people are shot, though not necessarily killed.

Some experts credit recent crime policies on both local and national levels for some of the progress – as well as stepped-up school safety measures. In part, the shift might also represent what statisticians refer to as a "reversion to the mean," suggesting a return to more average crime levels after a spike in preceding years.

While the long-term trend in mass killings is characterized by spikes and dips – not a clear rising or falling direction – the recent data shows a decline.

"The overall violent crime picture seems to be getting a little better in the United States," says Adam Lankford, author of "The Myth of Martyrdom," which identifies motivations for violent rampages.

The challenge of determining cause

For public officials and citizens alike, any evidence of a drop in mass violence is welcome news – a reprieve from bloodshed in a nation that sees tens of thousands of gun-involved deaths each year.

Determining what factors cause such violence to rise and fall is a challenging task, especially when attempting to draw scientific conclusions. Criminologists are still debating why homicides dropped precipitously during the 1990s.

While other violence databases also suggest a general decline in mass violence, Professor Lankford notes that the kind of premeditated public mass killings that tend to change the behavior of Americans did not decline in the new findings, with most of the shift attributed to a decline in mass killings in or near people's homes.

What's more, he says, a rise in targeted political killings might well deflate any sense of relief from a slowdown of mass killings.

The type of violent acts that inspire fear and motivate responses are "school shootings, shootings at malls, movie theaters," says Professor Lankford, who is also a criminologist at the University of Alabama. That means "that the type of mass killing that has decreased most significantly is not the type of mass killing that Americans appear to be most afraid of."

Still, one of those categories has seen a big recent drop.

In years past, some of the nation's most tragic mass shootings have occurred at schools – including Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut; Robb Elementary in Uvalde, Texas; and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. Part of a shift might be the result of changes in school policy and practice.

Twenty-two states, for example, now mandate the establishment of school threat-assessment teams, and the 2022 Safer Communities Act included millions of federal dollars to support gun violence prevention programs.

"You can make the case that we're seeing more threats but not as many attacks as schools have implemented threat assessment programs," says Eric Madfis, director of the Violence Prevention and Transformation Research Collaborative at the University of Washington in Tacoma.

"When I talk to people who have averted a school shooting, a big part of it is breaking through a code of silence of students reporting things," he adds.

As part of that, "we have gone from zero tolerance policies where we punish a kid who accidentally brings a knife to school to looking at the substance and content of threats," he continues. "Do they have the ability to carry it out, access to weapons, plans of who they are going to kill, when, and where? We've seen amazing outcomes" from that shift.

A return to normalcy after the COVID-19 pandemic's whiplash might also be a contributing factor, alongside an overall decline in violent crime rates since 2022.

Renewed focus by police on tackling gun proliferation in high crime areas and making arrests in more murder cases might also be having a positive impact.

Experts say improved emergency care is also leading to fewer deaths when mass shootings do occur.

A shooting in Minnesota in August, for example, didn't reach Northeastern's definition of a mass killing, even though about 20 people were injured. Why? Despite the enormous tragedy, in which two children died, experts say the quick actions of Minneapolis responders likely saved many lives.

A society's feeling of well-being

Social scientists suggest that one significant causal factor of violent crimes throughout American history has been levels of societal well-being, including political agency and expression.

Following the American Revolution, the expansion of the voting franchise, a vibrant economy based on business ownership, and a shared sense of patriotism contributed to the New England region achieving the lowest homicide rates in the Western world in the late 1700s.

Conversely, from deadly 1960s riots in several U.S. cities to instances of violence accompanying some protests after the murder of George Floyd in 2020, the prevalence of protest-related violence has been among the historical predictors of high homicide rates in the modern age.

Yet in 2025, the U.S. has seen numerous protests, including large "No Kings" demonstrations, without a spike in homicides. The protests have been defined not by violence but by social commentary (posters, costumes, and speeches) aimed at politicians, most notably President Donald Trump.

Partisan echo chambers might also be concealing shifts in feelings among Americans about their own prospects and those of the communities where they reside, as partisanship intensifies.

"The key to low homicide rates is successful nation-building," writes Randolph Roth, author of "American Homicide," in a 2024 research paper on why homicide rates rise and fall.

Despite the data, factors to watch

At the same time, stubbornly high numbers of gun deaths overall – including suicides, which are far more numerous than homicides – challenge the notion that general well-being is pushing down mass violence, at least at this moment.

Just because a society might be getting better at preventing mass shootings doesn't mean the threat is diminishing, says Professor Lankford. He cites targeted political violence and a 2023 report from the U.S. surgeon general on an epidemic of loneliness and isolation as matters of concern.

"If anybody is interpreting this [dip in mass killings] as, 'Congratulations, we've stopped school shootings or workplace shootings,' then they're just wrong about what the data show," he says. ▪

PEOPLE MAKING A DIFFERENCE

KANO, NIGERIA

In Nigeria, a 'soccer sister' steers teen boys away from gangs

By Uchenna Igwe / Contributor

Kabir Abubakar makes a quick run, reaching the ball just before the onrushing goalkeeper and slotting it into the net. The crowd at the Kano Race Course field erupts in jubilation, and his teammates rally around him.

On the soccer pitch sideline, his coach, Hidaa Ahmad Ghaddar, is cheering, too.

Not long ago, both Kabir and Ms. Ghaddar were chasing different kinds of goals. At age 15, Kabir found himself entangled with a youth gang, hurtling toward a life of violence and drugs.

For her part, Ms. Ghaddar was pursuing a career as a professional soccer player, kitting up for tournaments across Nigeria and Europe.

WHY WE WROTE THIS

For boys caught up in gang violence in the Nigerian city of Kano, a female soccer coach has become an unlikely mentor.

But two years ago, after injuries derailed her ambitions, Ms. Ghaddar returned to Kano, the northern Nigerian city where she grew up. Troubled by the number of boys like Kabir she encountered there, she decided to start a soccer team.

Her hope was that soccer could do for these boys what it had done for her. "I want to teach them how to live life with purpose," she says.

Not afraid to stand out

On the dusty soccer fields at Kano's historic horse-racing track, Ms. Ghaddar cuts an unusual profile.

In this conservative Muslim city, it is uncommon to see a woman on the pitch – let alone coaching. But Ms. Ghaddar has never been afraid of standing out.

Born to Lebanese parents, she grew up here playing pickup soccer with her brothers and their friends.

"Being an introvert, playing football gave me the avenue to express myself," she says.

Then, at age 16, Ms. Ghaddar moved to Lebanon to attend uni-

versity, where she played with other girls for the first time.

"I did not know ... that women's teams existed," she recalls.

While studying physical education at Antonine University in Baabda, Lebanon, Ms. Ghaddar was also selected for the Lebanese women's futsal team – a five-a-side variation of soccer. She competed in international tournaments, such as the World InterUniversities Championships in Spain and the World University Championships in Portugal.

After she graduated, Ms. Ghaddar played for teams in Lebanon, Nigeria, and England. She was repeatedly sidelined by knee injuries, though, so she quit playing competitively and began coaching at a youth soccer club in Lebanon.

Breaking the cycle

But Ms. Ghaddar found herself troubled by a social problem facing her hometown. Boys as young as age 9 were being recruited into gangs, which roamed Kano carrying sticks, knives, and clubs, which they used to mug people. Drug abuse was rampant.

The gangs, known locally as "Yan Daba," are often backed by political parties, which use them to rough up supporters of opposing parties. For boys swept into gangs, it can be the beginning of a lifetime of cycling in and out of overcrowded, dangerous prisons.

"We must decide if we want to keep warehousing young people in deplorable conditions that harden them and support their return to crime," says Bukunmi Akanbi, a researcher focused on conflict and human rights at the Centre for Journalism Innovation and Development in Abuja.

Ms. Ghaddar saw another way. In 2023, she decided to move back to Kano and set up a community football academy where young boys could both train as soccer players and learn skills that would help them stay away from the gangs permanently.

Today, Breakthrough Academy has around 25 players between ages 8 and 17, who come from neighborhoods across Kano. Three times a week, they meet at Kano's racecourse, running drills on a field beside the racetrack.

One recent afternoon, Ms. Ghaddar stands at the center of the field, her black hijab neatly tucked under her jersey and a whistle around her neck. She paces slowly, watching the players' moves and giving instructions.

"Pass the ball; keep your head up and play," she shouts in Hausa, which is the first language of most of her players.

After training, Ms. Ghaddar sits the boys in a circle under a nearby neem tree. As they gulp water, she tells them that "this game will teach you about life. You will win some days and lose some other days, but you must always show up."

For many players, Ms. Ghaddar is more than just a coach. She is a mentor, a "soccer sister," and to some boys, a mother figure. Off the field, she organizes classes to help them improve their English and math skills, and sometimes she even takes them on camping trips.

"She has helped all of us here to become better boys," says Ahmed Al-Mustapha, who joined the academy nearly a year ago. "She advises us about life and encourages us to go to school. If I hadn't gotten into this academy, I don't know what I would have been doing by now."

Kabir, who says joining the Breakthrough Academy helped him leave a gang, agrees. His teammates fondly call him "Vinícius," after Brazilian superstar Vinícius Júnior.

"I hope that soon I will get the opportunity to play abroad like my coach and get signed to a big club," Kabir says with a shy smile. "It will happen someday."

▪ *Enoch Stephen contributed reporting for this article.*

BOSTON

Trump disparages Somalia. But it is key to US counterterrorism efforts.

By Audrey Thibert / Staff writer

Early in December, President Donald Trump ended a Cabinet meeting with a vitriolic attack against Somali migrants. He called them "garbage," said their country "stinks," and declared that he does not want them in the United States. Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids and a promise to revoke protected status for certain Somali migrants followed.

The president's actions are a response to recent charges brought against 78 people, mostly of Somali descent, in Minnesota who are accused of stealing hundreds of millions of dollars earmarked for social services in the state. But they mirror a broader trend of the Trump administration using the criminal conduct of individuals as a pretext to target an entire immigrant community, such as Haitians in Ohio and Venezuelans in Colorado.

WHY WE WROTE THIS

President Donald Trump's recent dehumanizing remarks about Somali Americans play to stereotypes and obscure a complex history.

As in those cases, critics say the president's remarks play to stereotypes and obscure complex history.

"Anyone who violates the law of the land must face the consequences of that," says Afyare Abdi Elmi, a research professor of political science at the City University of Mogadishu, in Somalia's capital. "But racially and ethnically targeting and profiling one group is not acceptable."

Q: Who are the Somalis in the U.S. and how did they end up here?

About a quarter of a million people of Somali descent live in the United States – one of the largest Somali communities outside of Africa. Of these, around 80,000 live in Minnesota, including prominent figures such as Rep. Ilhan Omar, the first Somali American elected to the U.S. House.

Ms. Omar's story mirrors that of the diaspora at large: In 1991, when she was 8 years old, her family fled Somalia to escape a brutal civil war. The same year, a coalition of rebel groups overthrew the country's longtime dictator, Mohamed Siad Barre, leaving the clan-based society in a power struggle and unable to form a united government.

Between December 1991 and February 1992, 14,000 people died in Mogadishu alone, while in one town hosting displaced people in the country's southwest, drought and famine killed as many as 70% of children under the age of 5. Human Rights Watch called it the "most tragic year in [Somalia's] modern history."

By the mid-1990s, a community of Somali migrants fleeing the conflict began to settle in Minnesota, drawn to the wide availability of jobs that didn't require fluent English – notably in the meatpacking industry.

Meanwhile, back in Somalia, a mosaic of rival warlords and clan-based militias surged into the sudden power vacuum created by Mr. Barre's overthrow, including a group called Al Shabab – Arabic for "the youth."

The Al Qaeda-affiliated group has now spent two decades waging a grinding terror campaign against Somali civilians, setting off bombs in buildings and on crowded streets, enforcing sharia law with stonings and amputations, and blocking access to humanitarian aid.

At the same time, repeated cycles of drought and flooding in recent decades have devastated Somalia's farms – the engine of the country's economy – leading to a deep hunger crisis and making "a bad situation worse," says Thomas Warrick, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council and a former Department of Homeland Security deputy assistant secretary for counterterrorism policy.

All of these circumstances – terror attacks, hunger, and poverty – continue to push Somalis to migrate. Some 4 million people are currently internally displaced in the country, and more than 700,000 live as refugees in other countries, including the United States.

Q: Why is Trump so angry at the Somali community in Minnesota?

Mr. Trump's most recent comments refer largely to a COVID-19-era fraud scandal when hundreds of millions of dollars were stolen from a federally funded nutrition program designed to provide meals to children during the pandemic. Federal prosecutors have charged dozens of people in the case, most of them of Somali ancestry.

Meanwhile, President Trump has also recently announced plans to terminate Somalis' Temporary Protected Status, an immigration designation that lets migrants from certain countries stay in the U.S. temporarily because of wars, environmental disasters, or "other extraordinary ... conditions." He also initiated an ICE operation in the Minneapolis area called Operation Metro Surge, which has detained at least 400 immigrants of different backgrounds.

That has created fear and panic among Somalis in Minnesota, the vast majority of whom are American citizens with no criminal ties.

"Somalis are contributing to society in so many ways," notes Dr. Elmi, the Somali academic. "They have made positive contributions in hospitals, in the education sector, in the bureaucracy sector, in the service sector. They are a hardworking community."

Those who commit crimes should be tried in courts, rather than the court of public opinion, he says, adding that Mr. Trump's comments are "absolutely false and racist."

Q: Does the U.S. play any role in what's happening in Somalia?

Yes. Because Somalia is the home base of one of Al Qaeda's most powerful affiliates and is located on a vital global shipping route, it has long been an important U.S. ally in the Horn of Africa.

So, when President Trump posted recently on social media about sending Somalis "back to where they came from," he was talking about a country whose challenges his administration knew intimately.

"While the president speaks of Somalia as a domestic political concern, his counterterrorism advisers are trying to figure out how to end the terrorist threat from Al Shabab [there]," Mr. Warrick says.

At the core of Somalia's current troubles is this: Although the country has had an internationally recognized government since 2012, that government does not control all of Somalia's territory.

In an effort to strengthen Somalia's government, the United States has spent $500 million since the early 2000s training and equipping the Somali military. It has also conducted airstrikes against Al Shabab since 2003, the pace of which accelerated dramatically during President Trump's first term.

The goal of this counterterrorism support is for Somalia to eventually be able to deal with Al Shabab and other terror groups on its own, Mr. Warrick says. But that requires more than military support. "There has to be considerable investment in building up the capacity of the Somali government," he notes.

Historically, the U.S. has played a vital role in those efforts, but massive cuts to American aid are putting the future of that work at risk, Mr. Warrick says. That, in turn, leaves Somalia in a fragile situation that could drive even more people to flee. ▪

Tracking pandemic aid fraud: Five years on, the toll continues to grow

By Story Hinckley / Staff writer

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the U.S. government spent an unprecedented amount to prop up the economy and aid Americans whose daily lives had come to a sudden halt. Between 2020 and 2021, President Donald Trump and former President Joe Biden signed a combined six laws shelling out over $5 trillion – helping small businesses guarantee paychecks and paying for COVID-19 tests. Money also went toward health care, housing, and to things like food programs for children going without free school lunches.

A lot of the money, it turns out, went to fraudsters.

Five years on, the total amount of pandemic relief fraud remains unknown, with estimates ranging from hundreds of billions of dollars to $1 trillion. While federal investigators, private experts, and even citizen sleuths continue to uncover new schemes, they say much of the stolen money may never be identified, much less recovered.

The latest example comes from Minnesota, where a nonprofit obtained more than $240 million to feed children but instead spent the money on cars and real estate. Prosecutors say the sprawling case is linked to a web of other "massive fraud schemes," including some involving the state's housing support program, that together could exceed $1 billion.

WHY WE WROTE THIS

A high-profile fraud case in Minnesota has spotlighted the lack of safeguards during the COVID-19 pandemic surrounding funds intended to prop up vulnerable Americans. The looting of taxpayer dollars holds lessons about the social safety net and the federal bureaucracy that oversees it.

Many of the defendants are of Somali descent, adding fuel to debates over immigration policies as well as the state's social safety net, which ranks among the most generous in the country. Conservatives have excoriated Democratic Gov. Tim Walz and his administration for mismanagement, and point to the state as an example of the unintended consequences of big government spending. Governor Walz, who is running for a third term in 2026, has defended the Somali community while signing an executive order to combat fraud within state programs and moving to shutter the housing program altogether.

Yet while the Trump administration has made targeting government waste, fraud, and abuse a stated priority of the president's second term, experts say little is being done at the federal level to correct the systemic problems and lack of oversight that allowed so much taxpayer money to be pillaged.

Lessons about pandemic spending remain relevant, as Washington debates the merits of the welfare state and the bureaucracy that manages it. As Congress considered whether to extend Affordable Care Act subsidies that were enacted as part of one pandemic spending bill, many congressional Republicans cited a recent watchdog report that found a high percentage of fraudulent accounts as a reason to let them expire.

"There are examples based on hard experiences from the pandemic that should be built into any response to a recession going forward," says Matt Weidinger, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute who previously worked on the House of Representatives' Ways and Means Committee, which oversees unemployment benefits. "One of my roles in life now is to make this argument: Don't do the stuff that was so objectively wrong during the pandemic again."

"We operated in a trust system"

Many experts say they expected some fraud during the pandemic, given the vast sums being spent in a hurry. The CARES Act alone, signed by President Trump in late March 2020, sent out more than $2 trillion, making it the largest stimulus package in U.S. history. One part of the CARES Act, the $800 billion Paycheck Protection Program, also known as PPP, was equivalent in size to the entire stimulus package that Congress passed in response to the 2008 recession.

Haywood Talcove, CEO of LexisNexis Risk Solutions for Government, which works with governments to detect fraud, says that roughly 8% of government funds are routinely stolen due to fraud. That's in line with an April 2024 report from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) estimating government-wide fraud between 2018 and 2022 to be between 3% and 7%. But Mr. Talcove estimates this percentage went up to 20% for pandemic spending.

Lower estimates put the fraud total in the hundreds of billions. A 2023 analysis by The Associated Press suggested that 10% of pandemic relief funding went to fraud, with $280 billion stolen and $123 billion misspent. Government agencies have been slow to update pandemic fraud estimates in recent years, which Mr. Weidinger attributes to "embarrassment and desire to move on."

Experts agree that three programs accounted for much of the fraud: the Small Business Association's COVID-19 Economic Injury Disaster Loan (EIDL) program and PPP, as well as the expanded unemployment insurance program. In many ways, these new or expanded programs were unique to that moment in time. Government officials – both Republicans and Democrats – believed speed was of the essence to prevent economic catastrophe. Some guardrails were removed either intentionally or as a result of changed circumstances (most field offices that typically verify identities for benefits were closed).

The Small Business Association (SBA), for example, distributed $343 billion in partially or fully forgiven PPP loans to cover payrolls and other expenses in just the first two weeks. This allowed many businesses to forgo immediate layoffs amid stay-at-home orders. But in the name of speed, the government let prospective borrowers "self-certify" that their information was valid.

"We operated in a trust system," says Mr. Talcove. He and other experts say that speed shouldn't have come at the cost of basic identification requirements.

A 2023 report from the SBA found that of the $1.2 trillion in PPP and EIDL spending, $200 billion, or 17%, was disbursed to fraudsters. A 2023 GAO report flagged 3.7 million of the 13.4 million PPP and EIDL recipients, or 27%, as potentially fraudulent.

Self-certification also contributed to high levels of unemployment insurance fraud. Mr. Weidinger describes this as a one-two punch: Pandemic Unemployment Assistance offered benefits to workers previously not covered by unemployment insurance, such as independent contractors and the self-employed, who were then allowed to claim retroactive benefits. Essentially, says Blake Hall, co-founder of ID.me, which partnered with some states during the pandemic to help with identification, the government allowed applicants to "pinkie promise" that they were newly out of work.

Mr. Hall cites an example from Arizona, where his company was hired to help with identity verification. Half a year into the pandemic, there were hundreds of thousands of initial claims filed in a single week alone – an improbable number for a state of roughly 7 million (including children), says Mr. Hall. After ID.me services were implemented, such spikes didn't recur.

The government also added hundreds of dollars onto typical unemployment checks. "The reward for being a bad guy went up by record amounts," says Mr. Weidinger. Money was "sent through this system that had very little in the way of identity verification, much less work verification. … The bad guys quickly figured this out."

The GAO has estimated that $100 billion to $135 billion of unemployment insurance, or between 11% and 15%, went to fraudsters. Mr. Hall puts the estimate closer to $400 billion, a number Mr. Weidinger agrees is likely closer to the actual number. Mr. Talcove thinks the amount is somewhere in the middle, around $250 billion.

"The first step to fixing a problem is acknowledging it," says Mr. Hall. But "no government wants to be known as the administration that lost all this money to fraud."

Some of the stolen money has actually been clawed back. But not much.

As of April 2024, the Department of Justice had criminally charged more than 3,500 defendants and recovered more than $1.4 billion in seized or forfeited CARES Act funds. That's less than 1% of what was stolen from just the two SBA programs alone.

A 2025 congressional report says that the Department of Labor has recovered $5 billion in stolen unemployment insurance funds – roughly 4% of what was lost, according to the government's estimate. Before the pandemic, unemployment insurance investigations made up 11% of the case inventory of the Department of Labor's Office of the Inspector General. As of 2025, it is 96%. With fewer than 130 criminal investigators, the DOL-OIG has focused on large-scale theft schemes that "pose the greatest risk" to the unemployment insurance program.

And there is a larger question of whether more can now legally be recovered. The Senate failed to vote on the Pandemic Unemployment Fraud Enforcement Act, which passed the House in March, and which would have extended the statute of limitations on pandemic unemployment insurance fraud from five to 10 years. President Biden signed laws in 2022 that extended the statute of limitations within the SBA's pandemic programs; a 2023 update said that about 15% in EIDL and PPP funds were seized or returned.

What happens next time

But as prosecutors continue to hunt down stolen PPP funds, experts say Washington needs to be looking forward. For example, if the federal government uses enhanced benefit structures to prop up the economy in a recession, there should be a "shared partnership" with the states, says Mr. Weidinger, with "clearer lines of responsibility." Getting money to people quickly doesn't need to come at the expense of basic verifications, such as running applicants' names through the Treasury Department's "Do Not Pay" database.

As former SBA Inspector General Hannibal Ware told The Associated Press, a few days of checking applications during the pandemic would not have forced businesses to shutter. "You have to have some oversight," says Mr. Talcove. "And it doesn't mean that you are trying to deny a benefit." ▪

LOS ANGELES

One year after the LA wildfires, a slow recovery but 'a feeling of hope'

By Ali Martin / Staff writer

Almost a year ago, Marisol Espino lost the home she shared in Altadena with her father, child, sister, and sister's children to the Los Angeles wildfires. Since then, she moved at least 10 times before finding an apartment where she could stay for a little while. Now, she spends hours each day getting her son to and from school. Her old neighbors, she says, remain close, even if they are scattered.

But "we kind of still feel stuck," she says. "A lot of us can't even believe it's been a year because a lot of us feel like we haven't made progress."

Her sentiment is shared in Pacific Palisades, another Los Angeles community that was also devastated. "There's a little frustration that [recovery is] not faster, but there's also recognition from previous nearby experiences that this takes five years or more," says Patrick Healy, a retired LA newscaster-turned-Palisades historian.

With property and other financial losses estimated between $95 billion and $164 billion, the Eaton and Palisades wildfires are the costliest disaster in the LA area's history. The fires killed 31 people, destroyed 13,000 homes – mainly in Altadena and Pacific Palisades – and left thousands more homes uninhabitable. An October report showed about 80% of Altadena residents and 90% of Pacific Palisades residents were not living in their homes.

WHY WE WROTE THIS

Wildfires devastated LA-area communities about a year ago. There are some signs of recovery, but many residents remain uncertain about whether, or when, they will be able to rebuild their homes.

The fires came amid an insurance crisis, with carriers pulling out of high-risk areas over the past few years and forcing many homeowners onto a state-run plan that was more expensive for less comprehensive coverage. The statewide gap in private insurance coverage for single-family homes is estimated at up to $1.3 trillion. In many cases, residents' decisions to rebuild may be determined by whether they had insurance, and if their coverage pays enough for them to stay in one of the nation's most expensive real estate markets.

Both Altadena and Pacific Palisades have deep roots and homeowners who have lived there for decades – many of whom could not afford to buy into their neighborhoods at today's rates. Survivors also understand that some of the impacted residents may not be interested in a yearslong rebuild, and that selling an empty lot could bring a substantial windfall.

Still, some optimism is spreading in each community as businesses begin to reopen and some building gets underway.

"Every day I go and I see a new house going up," says Veronica Jones, president of the Altadena Historical Society. "In that state of recovery, there's a feeling of hope. ... It'll be not the same, of course, but we will be Altadena."

Historic change

Residents in Pacific Palisades and Altadena are frustrated by a lack of clarity regarding who qualifies for financial assistance and what resources are available to renters, and by the malaise of loss and displacement.

"This is by far the single most significant event in the century since the [Pacific Palisades] was founded," says Mr. Healy, secretary of the neighborhood's historical society. The fire destroyed every essential community element: Homes, schools, most businesses and churches "just disappeared," he says.

In both areas, residents have expressed concern that building back might erase the neighborhoods' distinct characters. If too many properties go to developers, they argue, the focus will be on profit, not spirit.

"I'm all about things getting better and looking better and being better for the community," says Ms. Espino. "I don't want it to be better and not affordable for us who were there before, and we just permanently get displaced and essentially shoved out of our community that was ours."

Ocean Development and Black Lion Properties – two developers active in the recovery – did not respond to requests for interviews.

"A lot of human stuff"

A survey by The Department of Angels – created by the California Community Foundation and Snap co-founder Evan Spiegel to help residents affected by the fires – shows just over one-third of survivors said they would rebuild no matter what. Two-thirds of people whose homes were a total loss said out-of-pocket costs are an obstacle, and about 1 in 5 plan to sell their lot and move on.

A handful are back in rebuilt homes. Many are still trying to figure out how to bridge the gap between temporary housing and the years it may take to piece together funding, find a contractor, and complete construction. At the same time, those affected are managing jobs, families, school, and for many, intense distress from the disaster.

"It's not just a real estate project," says Bea Hsu, CEO of the nonprofit Builders Alliance. "There's a lot of human stuff going on here that is very real."

Builders Alliance is connecting fire-impacted homeowners with homebuilders. An online portal allows owners to search an address and find dozens of turnkey designs in a range of prices that fit the parcel. "Their eyes really open," Ms. Hsu adds. "I think there were a number of people who, through the course of the year, had come to believe that they could not afford to rebuild. And maybe this is helping people think about it again."

Shumin Zhen isn't there yet – she wants to rebuild the condo she lost in Altadena, even though she has no idea how she'll get the money to do it. She and her husband found temporary housing nearby in a Pasadena apartment complex for seniors.

Ms. Zhen's story underscores the difficulties of recovery. She has tried to use publicized resources, such as mortgage assistance, but was turned down. Her insurance policy for additional living expenses expires in January, so she'll have to pay rent on top of her mortgage.

The median loss for survivors – those who lost their homes and those whose homes were damaged – is $200,000. Net losses for more than half of them exceed their annual income.

Hundreds of lawsuits have been filed over both fires. In the Palisades and Malibu, homeowners are suing state and city agencies, claiming a mismanaged response made damage worse. Ms. Zhen is among those who are suing Southern California Edison, forgoing settlements offered by the utility company, which acknowledges its equipment may have started the Eaton Fire. The offer, says Ms. Zhen, would be a "huge loss" for her.

Meanwhile, she says, she is changed by the fires. "Life is not about stuff," she says. "Life is about happiness and health." ▪

NUMBERS IN THE NEWS

67

Percentage of American high school seniors who say they want to get married someday, according to a new analysis of data from 2023. That's a decrease from 80% in 1993, driven primarily by a 22-point drop from female respondents. Boys' intention to marry has stayed almost the same for 30 years.

150 MILLION

Dollar value of a U.S. deal with a Silicon Valley drone delivery firm, Zipline, if they contract with Rwanda, Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, and Ivory Coast to expand their business. It's an example of the State Department's new development aid approach.

50,000

Unionized employees of museums, libraries, and zoos in the United States who are represented by the growing AFSCME Cultural Workers United campaign.

5,280

Crystals and LED light pucks that make up the largest-ever Times Square New Year's Eve ball. Since the tradition began in 1907, eight different balls have descended the flag pole.

5

Percentage of the surface of Mars covered in drainage basins from ancient watersheds, according to a new analysis. These basins could contain sediment preserving troves of information about Mars' environment.

80

MILLION

Years ago, when a stampede of sea turtles may have trundled across the seafloor during an earthquake, researchers suggest, leaving footprints that can now be seen on cliff faces in the Marche region of Italy.

– Audrey Thibert / Staff writer

Sources: Pew Research Center, Axios, WBEZ Chicago, New York Real Estate Journal, Space.com, The New York Times

OUR YEAR IN PHOTOS 2025

Getting 'the shot' when there's no do-over

Story by Alfredo Sosa */ Director of photography*

Before every work trip, I endure the photojournalist's version of stage fright. I know I have the right gear, but do I have the talent to pull off the shoot? While cost weighs on my mind, what most gives me pause is that my peers at the Monitor expect only excellence from me. I typically get a single opportunity to photograph a story – and if I blow it, there is no do-over.

But as I start thinking more about a story and immersing myself in the people and places involved, I undergo a transformation. I decide on the pieces I need to construct a visual narrative, and I proceed in search of them. From that point on, the job is a treasure hunt. Every person, object, and landscape is vetted in my head for the potential to perfectly encapsulate the story.

For this essay, I was asked to choose my favorite photo from all my shoots this year. The photo I am most attached to is one that almost did not happen.

This summer, I headed from Boston to Scandinavia. Monitor Senior Global Correspondent Mark Sappenfield and I had to travel back and forth between Denmark's capital, Copenhagen, and the Swedish city of Malmö while working on a story on immigration. The first time we crossed the Øresund Bridge that connects the two locales, I came up with a plan to help capture the essence of the story. Mark and I would walk to most of our appointments and see what we found on our path. As I said: a hunt!

When we arrived in Malmö, we got off the train and began walking toward the water, hoping to get a view of the Øresund Bridge from there. Indeed we did, but the bridge was distant and dull. I waited for a ship to travel under it to have some extra element to try to salvage what started to seem like a not-very-photogenic situation. Then, we passed two women chatting by the sea under a blue sky. But I hesitated to take the photo: I didn't know the women's language or how they would react to being interrupted by a stranger with a camera. As Mark and I kept walking, though, I pictured myself back in the newsroom explaining that the best I could deliver were bland images of a bridge. So, after a 10-minute internal debate, I grabbed a camera, asked Mark to keep an eye on the rest of my equipment, and raced back toward the women.

Snap! I took the photo, which became a cover image I'm proud of. Stage fright, one more time, was vanquished. ▪

A spotlight on grace under pressure

Story by Melanie Stetson Freeman */ Staff photographer*

It's hard to choose a favorite photo from a year of work. Is it the dapper Scottish man at the New Hampshire Highland Games & Festival with the sun reflecting on his face? The people serving time who transformed their lives by performing with Shakespeare Behind Bars, and are now out in the world and thriving?

No, for 2025, the ballerinas at Youth America Grand Prix, waiting backstage for their big moment, are my choice. The vivid colors, the lighting on their faces, their concentration, and the maturity coming through despite their ages combine to create an image that tells a story.

People often ask how I decide whom to train my lens on. Sometimes it's just a matter of where the light falls. But the background matters, too. I don't like clutter, so I move higher, lower, to the left, or to the right to get a "clean" shot. Photographers can't arrange candid photographs, but they can arrange themselves to get the best composition possible. In the ballerinas photo, the positions of the dancers create dynamism and depth. And look at the girl on the right with the tilted head. For me, it would be a weaker photo if her head were completely vertical like the others.

Most of all, I look for a spark, an energy in someone's expression. I often tell people, "Just pretend I'm not here," because it's optimal to record subjects acting naturally. These ballerinas barely registered my presence, allowing me to capture their grace. ▪

Amid destruction, a determination to live

Story by Scott Peterson */ Staff writer*

How is it possible to bring new visual insight to a war as vast, destructive, and comprehensively photographed as the continuing Russian onslaught against Ukraine?

That is the challenge every time I visit Ukraine and its front lines, and raise my cameras to record what I see. I have been to Ukraine 12 times during this current conflict, which will enter its fifth year in February 2026. And every time – just when I think there can be little new visual storytelling left to do – I come across scenes of yet more extraordinary human resilience, of resolute coping, and of finding life in a place where the term "normal life" has become an oxymoron.

That sense came to me during a Russian double missile attack on a vast food warehouse on the edge of Ukraine's battered northeastern city of Kharkiv in July. I heard the missiles land while reporting not far away, and then our team followed the column of smoke to the civilian target.

Firefighters everywhere are built tough, but those in Kharkiv – just 25 miles from the Russian border – have to manage the carnage

from almost daily Russian bombardments. Inside, the scene took on apocalyptic proportions, with the floor slick with spilled cooking oil and water, and smoke that glowed with fire. One firefighter, pushed to exhaustion, stepped away from the blaze for better air and a drink of water. When he knelt down, he had the reddened eyes of a fire warrior on an endless mission. His look of fatigue captured for me the grave weight of what he must do, every day, to keep his fellow citizens safe.

Other images encapsulate the human toll – and the life in Ukraine that still laughs and carries on, despite the war. There are soldiers on a snow-frozen front line. And drone pilots deeply buried in their dugout, their whole world confined to aerial scenes on screens.

In Kyiv, a flag-packed memorial numbs from the sheer density of fallen soldiers – and the emotions they evoke. Yet there are photographs also of schoolgirls with painted hands for an art project, their classroom not far from advancing Russians. A marriage and smiles, too, are shared unexpectedly close to the war. One couple express gratitude after being evacuated from their burning front-line town.

But the quintessential image of resilience I captured this year is Bogdana Zhupanyna, who surveyed the remains of a Kyiv apartment she owns after a drone strike – when she was just two weeks from giving birth to new life. ▪

That moment when everything clicks

Story by Riley Robinson */ Staff photographer*

When I'm on a photo assignment, I always think about this advice I received as a student: A great image, at its most basic, is a real moment in great light. If you're graced with a golden daybreak or dusk, the elements might come together quickly. More often, it takes sprinting, crouching, or climbing on chairs to get that ephemeral mix of angle, timing, light.

On this unusually warm September morning, the sky is on my side. I meet the runners under a peach-skin dawn in Prospect Park, Brooklyn's big backyard. I'm here to photograph the running club of the New York City chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America, and those runners are easy to spot in their DSA T-shirts. But the large camera swinging at my side is a dead giveaway, so they find me first.

Before the runners take off, one of them pulls out his phone and traces out their route. Since I wouldn't be running alongside them with all my gear, I know I probably have just two chances to capture the action: when they set off, and when they complete their loop. As they finish their warmup and lean in to an easy pace, I sprint ahead, looking back to frame them against Grand Army Plaza. *Click*.

Then they pass, and I wait again. Specifically, I crouch in the bushes, as though I'm on some kind of stakeout, dodging an endless stream of spandex-clad early risers. I test my composition at different curves in the road, feeling vaguely like a part of the loathsome New York paparazzi. I keep an eye on my watch, tracking the time against the runners' estimated pace. I watch and wait again. I train my camera's focal point on the path and wait for the runners to reemerge. As I wait, the dawn burns off, and no other frames I shoot that day will surpass that first early morning glow.

Sometimes, though, the image doesn't come together until the very last moments, right before I have to pack it all up.

A few weeks after the DSA run, I wait at a park in Queens with dozens of other journalists as New York Democratic mayoral candidate Zohran Mamdani arrives at the last public event of his campaign. I stretch and squat to get a clear line of sight between a TV journalist's ear and someone else's elbow. It's after dark, and my framing just isn't working – until it is! Mr. Mamdani turns from the microphones after finishing his remarks. The air is peppered with flashes from other photographers. I hit the shutter just before he's swarmed on the sidewalk leading to a waiting car. I scavenge for the good light until the end. ▪

PERSPECTIVES ON THE WORLD

THE MONITOR'S VIEW

The democracy of a free press

United States Founding Father Thomas Jefferson was a firm believer in "the good sense of the people" when it came to exercising citizenship in a democracy. To promote constructive public engagement, he urged, "give them full information ... thro' the channel of the public papers."

"Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter," Jefferson wrote to a friend in 1787.

The third U.S. president could likely not have imagined the huge volume and varied forms of today's "newspapers" – available 24/7, in print, over the airwaves, and online.

However, even as media access has increased exponentially, press freedoms in 2025 are shrinking globally.

News outlets are facing unprecedented political and financial pressures, and journalists are increasingly being silenced or targeted.

In its annual December report, the watchdog group Reporters Without Borders lists 503 journalists in detention, 67 killed, and 135 missing over the past year. In most cases, the organization says, governments are responsible, although criminal cartels and rebel groups are also implicated.

Amid this sobering picture, citizens around the world continue to strongly believe in the value and importance of a free press.

A Pew Research Center survey of 35 countries reported that 84% of respondents viewed the ability to report news freely as important. (For the U.S. alone, that figure rose to 93%.) Over the past 10 years, the share of respondents defining press freedom as "very" important increased in one-fourth of those countries.

Citizens are also expressing concern over increasing partisanship in the media, reflective of broader political divisions. In the case of the U.S., according to historian Miles Smith, "The founding fathers understood that a free press would often be a messy press."

The system, Professor Smith said on a podcast in July, was designed to present "competing ideas and narratives" to "an educated citizenry capable of self-government."

Perceptions of a vibrant press appear to correlate with civilians' satisfaction with governance. Citizens who think the media in their country can freely report the news rate their democracies positively; those who believe that journalists in their country are constrained or censored tend to view their governments and leaders in a more negative light.

Perhaps Walter Cronkite, the legendary 20th-century American journalist, captured this dynamic most aptly when he observed: "Freedom of the press is not just important to democracy; it is democracy." ▪

THE MONITOR'S VIEW

Financial fluency in the cradle

A global survey two years ago found that 84% of people understood the definition of inflation. Only 42% understood compound interest, or the accumulated earnings from interest on savings and investments. In December, the United States offered initial details on a new program passed by Congress that could help Americans enhance their financial fluency on that latter key aspect of free enterprise.

Starting next July through 2028, parents of newborns will be eligible to receive $1,000 as seed money for an investment account. Additional funds can be added by family members, donors, or employers. Once a child reaches age 18, this cradle-to-diploma money – "compounded" in government-regulated mutual funds or index funds – can be tapped to pay school tuition, buy a home, or start a business.

The ultimate goal is not material advancement. Rather, it is to teach young people to manage money with informed confidence, not fear, and to learn how to plan for crises and long-term needs.

That particular part of the plan – better financial literacy – inspired tech billionaire Michael Dell and his wife, Susan Dell, to put $6.25 billion into the initiative in order to reach children older than newborns, especially those in lower-income homes.

"We've seen what happens when a child gets even a small financial head start – their world expands," Mr. Dell said in announcing his donation on GivingTuesday. "As children begin to understand that they have these accounts, that creates a real need for our schools, our parents, our community organizations to really begin to grow financial literacy in the country."

The idea of tax-advantaged savings vehicles for children is not new. It has had mixed results in a few states and in other countries. But the scale of this federal program – estimated at $15 billion through 2034 – is vast enough to give Americans less stress and more control over their financial futures, providing them with a larger stake in the growth of the overall economy. If it works over time, each "seed" of $1,000 will bring a payback in safety and security. ▪

ANALYSIS

LONDON

Trump revises transatlantic partnership

For President Donald Trump, the main transatlantic threat is Europe's democracies. The recent National Security Strategy of the United States, or NSS – a policy document that rarely breaks new ground – portrays Europe as an ideological threat, using language typically reserved for countries like Russia.

The NSS warns that non-Europeans might eventually become a majority in some countries. And it accuses Europe's leadership of allowing this "stark prospect of civilizational erasure." Even more unsettling, perhaps, the document singles out far-right populists as the sole cause for U.S. optimism: "patriotic European parties" whose "resistance" Washington would seek to "cultivate."

GLOBAL PATTERNS
BY NED TEMKO

Connecting key themes in the world's news.

The NSS has left a deep wound: the strong suggestion that for the United States, the shared interests, values, and common worldview binding the transatlantic alliance may no longer hold.

Some of its specific targets are familiar. It attacks the European Union as a behemoth stifling its nations' sovereignty and overregulating businesses. Equally unsurprising is the call for European NATO members to do more for their own security. While they are far from self-sufficient, they have been pouring billions more into that effort since 2022.

But this NSS, especially regarding Europe, is unrecognizably different. Mr. Trump's first NSS heaped praise on a European alliance rooted in a joint triumph over "fascism, imperialism and Soviet communism," and accused Moscow of eroding "American security and prosperity." Now, all that is gone.

In its place is a revision of America's alliance with Europe – through the lens of assertive nationalism, "traditional" social values, and reducing immigration.

That narrative resonates not only with Europe's far right, but also with Moscow. The report portrays these new policy priorities as essential to the very future of Western civilization.

The NSS echoes the "great replacement theory." That posits an elite conspiracy to supplant native populations with non-Christian, non-white interlopers.

European leaders can hope that the NSS might have less of an effect on U.S. policy than the day-to-day decisions of President Trump, with whom they will almost certainly attempt to reach common ground. But they might well feel most reassured by European polls over the past year. People in most European countries hold strongly negative views of Mr. Trump. ▪

HOME FORUM

Full hearts, fresh starts

From folding gyoza to beating old pots, five writers share their favorite year-end traditions.

BANGING IN THE NEW YEAR

EVERY NEW YEAR'S EVE, when the clock struck midnight, my family in St. Louis turned into a traveling percussion section. Pots, pans, wooden spoons – the whole kitchen emptied as though it were fleeing a fire. My father claimed it was an old Irish custom brought over by my great-grandparents, who must have believed the cacophony chased away bad spirits.

We'd run outside clanging and shouting, the air cold enough to freeze the echo. Neighbors peeked from behind curtains as though we were the circus that missed its train. Still, we marched down the block, banging, laughing, and hollering "Happy New Year!" at anyone unfortunate enough to open their door.

At 7 years old, I thought it was glorious. Wild drumming, total mayhem, and parental approval. My grandmother banged a frying pan like it owed her money, and my grandfather led the charge, saucepan in hand.

Only years later did I realize how peculiar we must have looked: a clan of lunatics clanging cookware beneath the streetlights. But to us, it wasn't madness; it was inheritance. Ireland had its bodhrans; we had Teflon.

The next morning, some pans would be bent, the spoons splintered, and anarchic trails left in the snow. But the year always felt properly started. Some families watched the ball drop. Ours just made sure the neighborhood never forgot we existed.

– Jeffery Allen Tobin

A TOAST TO QUIET CONTEMPLATION

IN HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE, New Year's Eve meant one thing: party time. For everyone, that is, except me. While my buddies cajoled me to go out with them, my mom, who hails from Japan, encouraged – er, mandated – our family to spend the evening together in "quiet reflection." (This is in line with how the holiday is celebrated in Japan, where it most closely resembles America's Thanksgiving.)

On New Year's Eve, my mom prepares gyoza, or Japanese dumplings, cooked four ways: shrimp- or pork-filled, steamed or fried. We sit around the table with a stack of dumpling skins, big bowls of the fillings, and fold and pinch, fold and pinch, until we have a mountain or two of dumplings. The past couple of years, my 6- and 9-year-old boys have started to help, too. My mom also makes *toshikoshi soba*, a simple but elegant noodle dish. The noodles represent a bridge from the past to the present, from the present to the future, as a new year unfolds.

Sometime around the middle of my college years, while my friends froze outside in long lines for the privilege of paying a $50 entrance fee to a sardine can, and another $30 for a beverage, if they could navigate past the throng of sweaty, shouting partygoers, I realized I had the better part of the deal, by far. Here's to quiet reflection and delicious food.

– Zachary Przystup

DIGITAL DIARY

GROWING UP IN THE DIGITAL AGE, I have had much of my life documented, from old home videos with my siblings to hundreds of prints neatly tucked away on the top shelf of my grandma's closet.

In 2017, I decided I wanted to document my life myself.

Feeling inspired in my bubble-gum pink bedroom, I set up my phone, perched on my trendy butterfly chair, and whispered quietly to the camera about the prior year.

I talked about how I met my best friend, started high school, and got an A on my first research paper. I also lamented my sister leaving home to go to college, and moving into a new house I didn't quite like.

The short video offered space for reflection for the past year and excitement for the new one.

Before I knew it, 2018 was coming to an end. Again, I perched on my chair and whispered to my phone everything I learned and saw that year. Then again, each year after that. These videos have captured me getting my driver's permit, meeting my current partner, receiving college acceptances, and getting my first job.

Whenever I stumble across a video, I feel as though I'm catching up with an old friend as I listen to her words, joys, and losses. It allows me to see all the ways I've grown, the dreams I've achieved, and the promise each new year holds.

– Victoria Hoffmann

COUNTING DOWN IN COMFORT

ONE NEW YEAR'S EVE IN MY 20s, a young woman I knew from college invited me to her party. When my roommate and I arrived, we saw people I knew from school but hadn't clicked with. I wanted to leave immediately. But first, we had to dance to "Pump Up the Jam."

We stayed, and I started to enjoy myself and revel in the camaraderie, not wanting the evening to end. On the drive home, my friend and I replayed every detail, still giddy. Days later came the best surprise: a handful of photos from the festivities, taken on film.

I still have the pictures in my photo album, 30-some years later. Nights like that were milestones in my young adulthood. Now, as an empty nester, my life holds different joys.

There's a freedom that comes with maturing and tuning in to what lights you up. For me, it's quiet and stillness, especially on raucous nights like New Year's Eve.

Staying home in loungewear with a good book sounds divine. While others are out celebrating, we order in Chinese and my husband puts the countdown on. It's simple and familiar, and there's no place I'd rather be.

– Courtenay Rudzinski

GRAPE EXPECTATIONS

MY HUSBAND'S GREAT-GRANDMOTHER insisted the grapes had to be big and red, with seeds. For years, we ran around New York's Chinatown in the cold searching for proper grapes to ring in the new year the Cuban way. Tata was adamant that, at midnight, we had to peel and eat a dozen grapes, one for each month of the coming year.

Observing this tradition, we would diligently peel the fruit and remove the seeds for good fortune. Sticky juice would roll down our wrists, and thin skins would pile up on our plates. We would make a wish upon each grape. I treated mine like birthday candles, keeping my hopes for health, wealth, and world peace a secret. My spouse, on the other hand, announced things such as

"I hope the next one is less sour," and "I wish next year's grapes are easier to peel."

My husband and I now live in suburban New Jersey, but after toasting with sparkling cider, we still celebrate the new year by eating 12 grapes. Our girls, 9 and 14 years old, are old enough to stay up until midnight. No longer under the watchful eye of Tata, who passed away years ago at nearly 108, we've stopped peeling our grapes, purchased at the local supermarket.

I might start peeling the grapes again this year, though. I feel like the world could use some extra good fortune.

– Ingrid Ahlgren

A CHRISTIAN SCIENCE PERSPECTIVE

Turning our inspiration into action

At the beginning of a new year, I can't help but step back and take a look at my life's direction. As a waymark, I've come back often to this Bible verse: "If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit" (Galatians 5:25).

We are all created by God, divine Spirit. To me, "walk in the Spirit" means to strive to see a little more, day by day, how my thoughts and acts reflect God. To know that Spirit is what gives us life is a wonderful thing. The opposite of Spirit is matter, but Christian Science reveals that Spirit is all that truly is real; Spirit doesn't mix into its creation any matter. Spirit, as the source of all that we are, causes us to have a fully spiritual identity. We can be healed by this inspiring knowledge of our true identity, and heal others, too.

I've found that consistently studying the Science of Christ – the truth about God and God's creation – is inspiring. But we really go forward when, in response to what we've studied, we have a change of behavior, a change of heart – seen in a willingness to follow God's leading.

Anytime our study and prayer lead to a change of perspective, we end up seeing more of God in everything. We abandon what we used to think, and even fear, in exchange for the elevated viewpoint that God, divine Love, has provided about our real existence as God's spiritual, perfect creation. Then we have the joy of bringing these new perspectives into action. Everything we do, even the simple things, can overflow with our love for God and what God is doing in us.

In her book "No and Yes," Monitor founder Mary Baker Eddy challenges readers to connect more solidly and actively with the fact that Spirit's goodness is the sole reality: "In divine Science, God is recognized as the only power, presence, and glory" (p. 20). In place of fear, then, we recognize the abundance of God's love. In place of restriction, we behold the infinite freedom we each have in God. In place of any lie about God's creation, we see the likeness of God, the reflection of God's utter goodness.

Once, when I was ill with an infection, I realized it was an opportunity to see Spirit's glory, presence, and power in action. My prayers, I knew, shouldn't just be dry words. My God-given spirituality had to become what fully and vibrantly interested me.

I reasoned this way: My prayer and study so far had prepared my thoughts to shift, but it's generally when I've put what I've learned into action that I've noticed significant changes. Christian Science teaches that our experience is transformed when Spirit's inspiring presence and guidance move our thought.

Knowing that a change of thought means a change of experience, I made the decision to be very consistent in loving the purely spiritual way that Spirit has made each of us. My progress was hard-earned but paid off a couple of days later in my full recovery.

Each of us can really bring inspiration into action, inviting Spirit's goodness, authority, and presence to transform us. This brings into view Spirit's present, tangible goodness, for which the world has so much need.

– Mark Swinney

GLOBAL NEWSSTAND

VANCOUVER SUN / VANCOUVER, BRITISH COLUMBIA

People want renewables, but mostly they want energy

"[Canadian] politicians, once mostly opposed to pipelines, are now falling over themselves to promise new gas, oil and hydroelectric mega-projects," writes Douglas Todd, a columnist. "... Polls reveal ... a hunger for new sources of energy – especially wind and solar, but also [liquefied natural gas], nuclear and crude oil. ... In the past 20 years, wind and solar power have indeed been expanding. ... But coal, oil and natural gas are not being phased out. ... Take, for example, China. ... Wind and solar power now [accounts] for about one-third of its energy production. ... China also continues to build more coal plants, while expanding natural gas production and escalating oil consumption. ... [Renewables] will become more important. ... Yet, ... we must realize there is a long road ahead."

AL JAZEERA / DOHA, QATAR

Bangladesh's economy is reforming, not collapsing

"The recent wave of pessimism surrounding Bangladesh's economy under its interim administration ... offers an incomplete ... portrait of the country's actual economic trajectory," writes Faisal Mahmud, press minister of the Bangladesh High Commission in New Delhi. "... The previous administration left behind a financial system ... propped up by manipulated data and systematic concealment of risk. ... Bangladesh's inflation is ... driven partly by ... lingering market distortions, and the aftereffects of earlier monetary expansion. It is difficult, but not destabilising. ... The battle ahead is ... about dismantling entrenched corruption, extortion networks, and bureaucratic bottlenecks. ... These are ... the early foundations of a more transparent, durable economic future."

THE DAILY STAR / DHAKA, BANGLADESH

We need a climate passport. There's historical precedent.

"When lands become uninhabitable and sometimes disappear under water, where do vulnerable people go, and under what law?" writes Zeba Farah Haque, a lecturer of law at North South University in Dhaka. "... Bangladesh must push for a climate passport. ... It would function much like the historical Nansen passport issued to stateless people after World War I, granting them legal status and the right to cross borders. ... When entire coastal regions ... become uninhabitable, Dhaka and other cities cannot endlessly absorb these populations. ... A climate passport would ensure that losing land does not mean losing ... identity, culture, or protection."

THE MOSCOW TIMES / AMSTERDAM

Despite war, Russian culture persists

"For a time, [Russia's] publishing industry continued in the face of government pressure," writes Yan Levchenko, a journalist and cultural studies scholar. "In the early years of the war, even the texts of so-called 'foreign agents' were released without major difficulty. ... In May 2025, security services raided ... [the parent company of two] publishing houses. Three employees were slapped with extremism charges. ... The war affected cinema, too. ... But most people involved in Russian film production stayed. ... The war has even raised the status of some Russian films that are shown internationally. ... If one manages to say something human in the face of censorship, repression and war, the value of that message naturally increases."

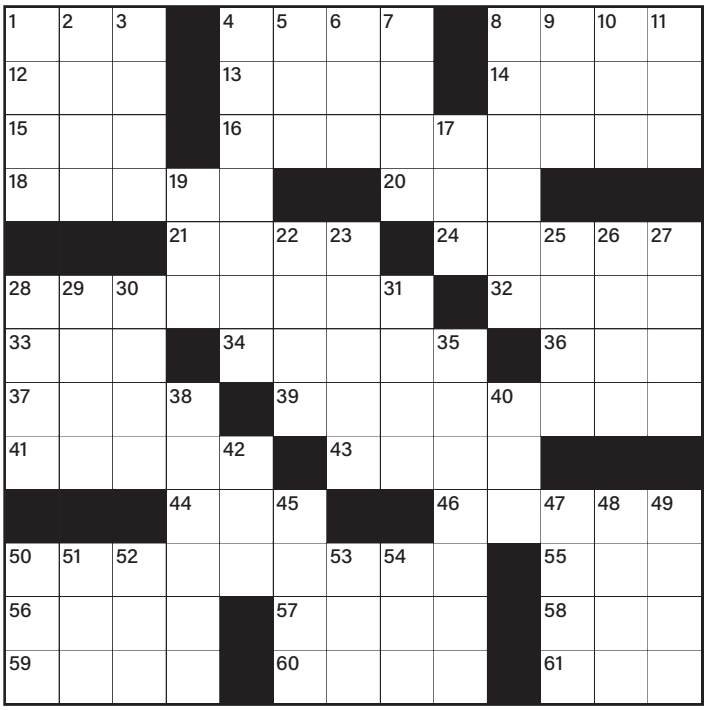
BUENOS AIRES HERALD / BUENOS AIRES, ARGENTINA

Home shows itself everywhere – if you look

"How do you carry the taste of home with you when home is half a world away?" asks Aditi Shah, a writer. "... [When I left Mumbai for Buenos Aires three years ago,] I ... tried to replicate the flavors I missed most. ... Most days something was off. ... Until one random Tuesday. ... I grabbed a plastic container of *arroz con leche*. ... When I dug my spoon in, ... I froze. ... It *was* the kheer that my mother made. ... I [was] overwhelmed by the unexpected gift of tasting home. ... After that, I began searching for echoes of home ... in unfamiliar dishes. Slowly, Argentina began to answer back. ... Every time I found another overlap, it felt like this city was trying to tell me: *You're not as far from home as you think*."

– Compiled by Victoria Hoffmann / Staff writer

Crossword



© Lovatts Puzzles

Across

1. Big dog, familiarly

4. Word with fancy or imagine

8. Melt down

12. Campus creeper

13. Meat-and-potatoes dish

14. Paragon of bravery

15. It precedes 'com'

16. Brass

18. Workout result

20. Obstruction for salmon

21. Lip-balm target

24. Exclude

28. Became proficient in

32. Female V.I.P.

33. Forest ranger?

34. Passage happenings

36. Animal house?

37. Fell, as interest rates

39. Unlike a slacker

41. Bishop's group

43. Fork point

44. Ad-___ (improvise)

46. Put an end to

50. Worthy of respect

55. High fling

56. Propped

57. Hitchcock's "___ Window"

58. Clumsy boat

59. ___ shui: architectural art

60. Beat slightly

61. Co-___ (some apartments)

Down

1. Tupperware tops

2. Make an assertion

3. Computer data amount

4. Response to "Whence?"

5. Third son of Noah

6. Adder's cousin

7. Muffled sound

8. Having a motif

9. Brooding one

10. Theater light

11. Agony

17. Palindromic patriarch

19. Operetta division

22. Like the surface of Mars

23. Word before four or point

25. Summoned

26. "And all the people shall say, ___" (Deut. 27:16)

27. Overhead expense

28. Untidy situation

29. TV's McBeal

30. Banana cover

31. Sandwich supplier

35. Not forced

38. Allotting

40. Wow!

42. Shadowy

45. Unadorned, as facts

47. Trombone's range

48. First course, often

49. Subsides

50. North Pole employee

51. Get the picture

52. Get what you bask for?

53. Snooze site

54. Straggle

6					4			
						8		
4	2		1		7			
			6					3
9				1	8		5	
1			4			2		8
7				9			4	
	4			5	6			
5	8					3		

Sudoku difficulty: ★★★☆

How to do Sudoku

Fill in the grid so the numbers 1 through 9 appear just once in each column, row, and three-by-three block.

Crossword and Sudoku solutions