MORE PUZZLES, MORE FUN FULL PAGE IN LIFE

WEEK IN REVIEW THIS WEEK'S TOP NEWS, 6A

USA TODAY WEEKEND

THE NATION'S NEWS | $3 | DECEMBER 1-3, 2023

MATT WINKELMEYER/GETTY IMAGES

Beyond the stats: Rise in gun suicides

In Wisconsin, where firearms are a way of life, epidemic touches many lives. **In Weekend Extra**

Which teams will crash NFL playoffs?

Changes are sure to come in final weeks. Let's rank 7 outsiders that could break through. **In Sports**

'Candy Cane Lane' stars talk twists

Eddie Murphy and Tracee Ellis Ross playfully envision remake of "Miracle on 34th Street." **In Life**

NORAD's daytime drinking revealed

Secret on-base 'saloon' ended after inquiries

Tom Vanden Brook and Kim Hjelmgaard
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON – The email arrived in the middle of a workday: Are you thirsty?

What followed was an afternoon drink at the "John Wayne Saloon," an invitation-only tavern operating unknown to senior commanders inside the headquarters of the U.S military command center critical to defending the homeland and keeping Americans safe.

The North American Aerospace Defense Command, or NORAD, is located at Peterson Space Force Base, at the foot of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado Springs, Colorado. It stands watch 24/7 defending the United States and Canada from attack by adversaries such as China, Russia and North Korea.

The day drinking at an installation tasked with safeguarding U.S. national security was worrying. The clandestine "saloon" at a base charged with crucial national security responsibility triggered alarms at high levels and led to the changes on site after USA TODAY raised questions.

A keypad with a code restricted access to the clandestine tavern, named after a poster of the iconic actor that was affixed to a door. No cellphones allowed. Inside the room in Building 2, six or seven bottles of top-shelf liquor, including bourbon and whisky, awaited. Nearby, lieutenant colonels and majors planned future NORAD operations. Also at hand: computers with access to the Pentagon's secret email system.

The official who received the email

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TODD PLITT/USA TODAY

Kissinger dies; diplomat shaped US foreign policy

Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who was influential in U.S. foreign policy, has died at 100. He won a Nobel Prize for brokering an end to the Vietnam War and was a lightning rod for critics of former President Richard Nixon's foreign policy.

Kissinger's influence, 2A

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An inmate sings along Nov. 6 as Blessing Offor performs during the Send Musicians to Prison event at the Metro Detention Facility in Nashville, Tenn. PHOTOS BY NICOLE HESTER/USA TODAY NETWORK

'I've seen grown men' weep

Program brings live music and hope to area prisons

Melonee Hurt Nashville Tennessean | USA TODAY NETWORK

Singer/songwriter Blessing Offor took his seat behind a baby grand piano at a recent show surrounded by a crowd most people would fear. He leaned into the mic and said, "OK, you guys, I am totally blind, so I'm trusting you all right now." • He needed to establish trust with the 40 or so inmates at the Metro Detention Facility waiting to hear him sing. • Clad in head-to-toe in orange, many sat uninterested, arms folded before the show. By the end, many stood, arms raised, clapping, playing air guitar and making requests.

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Blessing Offor received two nominations in November for the 2024 Grammys.

Small number may have big impact on climate

World leaders to discuss effects of 2.7 degrees

Elizabeth Weise
USA TODAY

Consider that 3 degrees Fahrenheit is the difference between a raging fever and a healthy toddler. Between a hockey rink and a swimming pool. Between food going bad or staying at a safe temperature.

Now consider that Earth is about 2 degrees Fahrenheit hotter on average than it was in the 1800s. It's little wonder that has already led to measurable shifts in the climate: The last eight years have been the hottest in recorded history and 2023 is expected to be the hottest yet.

But there's a looming threshold that will dictate the future of planet Earth. It could have cascading effects on how hot the planet gets, how much seas rise and how significantly normal daily life as we now know it will change.

The number is 2.7 degrees Fahrenheit.

World leaders at an annual gathering that began Thursday will be spending considerable energy pondering that number, although they will use the Celsius version: 1.5 degrees.

"We can still make a big difference and every single tenth of a degree is enormously important," said Anthony Leiserowitz, director of the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication.

Representatives and negotiators from 197 nations are gathering at an event called COP (Conference of the

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Climate

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Parties) in the United Arab Emirates, a 13-day meeting that comes at what scientists say is a critical moment in the fight to keep the already dangerous effects of climate change from tipping over into the catastrophic.

Research published in October estimated humanity has only six or so more years before so much carbon dioxide has been pumped into the atmosphere that there's only a 50% chance of staying below the threshold.

Why 2.7 degrees Fahrenheit is so important to climate

In 2016, the United States and 195 other parties signed the Paris Agreement, a legally binding international treaty on climate change aimed at lowering the amount of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere to keep global warming at bay.

All the nations that signed the Agreement pledged to try as hard as possible to keep the global average temperature increase below 2.7 degrees, and to definitely keep it below a 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit rise. (Only the Agreement said it in Celsius, which comes out to the smoother-sounding 2.0 degrees Celsius and 1.5 degrees Celsius.)

The numbers sound pretty small – but they aren't.

A few degrees is a big deal

The difference between 65 degrees and 67.7 degrees (that critical 2.7-degree difference) isn't even worth carrying a sweater. So why does it worry climate scientists?

It's because they're thinking about global temperature averages, and when the global average goes up, the extremes go way up.

The Earth is already 1.1 degrees Celsius warmer than it was in the 1800s, about 2 degrees Fahrenheit. And it's warming fast.

Ocean surface temperatures were the highest ever recorded this year, causing fish die-offs and increasing red tides.

People across America are already noticing the effects. Storms are more extreme, drenching areas with more water that's causing an increasing number of devastating flash floods. Dozens of people in Vermont, Tennessee and Pennsylvania are only the most recent victims.

These aren't just normal storms, these are deluges where four months of rain falls in one day.

We're also experiencing more devastating droughts catastrophic wildfires and wetter hurricanes.

2.7 vs. 3.6 degrees

Using published research and reports from the U.N.'s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Carbon Brief laid out the likely measurable difference between a world that is 2.7 degrees warmer and one that is 3.6 degrees warmer:

Sea level rise by 2100 of

18 inches vs. 22 inches.

Ice-free Arctic summer chance of

10% vs. 80%.

Central U.S. warm spells last

10 days vs. 21 days.

Percentage of people facing at least one severe heat wave in five years is

14% vs. 37%.

Why is it important to not let the Earth warm an extra degree?

The difference between an aspiration of no more than 2.7 degrees warming and a serious commitment to no more than 3.6 degrees might not seem large.

But multiply the extremes and their effects, and each results in a vastly different world. One is difficult, resulting in a less reliable and more chaotic climate than the one we live with today. The other verges on a movie cataclysm.

At their heart, the 13 days of COP28 negotiations are the place global governments sit down to hammer out just how much each will lower its carbon emissions, though many other climate change topics are on the table as well.

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- Central U.S. warm spells last 10 days vs. 21 days
- Percentage of people facing at least one severe heat wave in five years is 14% vs. 37%

Why is this all about fossil fuels?

Before the Industrial Revolution, the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere – which is what's causing global warming – was 280 parts per million.

The current measurement is 421.47 parts per million.

The change has been underway for decades, but the extent of the shift is only now becoming clearly evident. In the 1980s, the country experienced on average a $1 billion, adjusted for inflation, disaster every four months. It now experiences one every three weeks. This year, the country has set a record with 25 billion-dollar disasters.

The Earth crossed a key warming threshold in 2023, with one-third of the days so far having an average temperature at least 1.5 degrees Celsius higher than preindustrial levels. On Nov. 17, it reached 2.07 degrees above. This year is expected to be the warmest in recorded history, warmer than any other in 125,000 years.

What is COP28?

COP28 is the annual United Nations meeting of the 197 parties that have agreed to the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change, originally adopted in 1992. The meeting is the decision-making body of the countries that signed onto the U.N. framework. It is held to assess how well nations are dealing with climate change and set agendas and goals.

How important is this COP?

In a major report, the U.N.'s climate change body said in November that global greenhouse gas emissions need to fall by 45% by the end of this decade compared to 2010 levels to meet the goal of limiting global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees Celsius.

Things are not going in the right direction. Instead, emissions are set to rise by 9%.

COP28 is where changes can be made.

Scientists say humanity has about a decade to dramatically reduce heat-trapping gas emissions before thresholds are passed that may make recovery from climate collapse impossible.

To do so will require cutting nearly two-thirds of carbon pollution by 2035, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change said. That means ending new fossil fuel exploration and weaning wealthy nations away from coal, oil and gas by 2040.

"Humanity is on thin ice – and that ice is melting fast," United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said in the spring. "Our world needs climate action on all fronts – everything, everywhere, all at once."

NY appeals court restores gag order on Donald Trump

Bart Jansen
USA TODAY

A New York appeals panel restored the gag order Thursday in Donald Trump's contentious civil fraud trial, rejecting the former president's argument that the restrictions violated his right to free speech.

Trump

The trial judge, Arthur Engoron, had imposed the gag order Oct. 3 to prevent the 2024 GOP presidential front-runner from commenting on his staff. Engoron has fined Trump a combined $15,000 for publicly attacking the judge's principal law clerk, Allison Greenfield, as a partisan Democrat with undue influence in the case.

Trump appealed and an appellate judge temporarily lifted the gag order while the case was argued.

On Thursday, a four-judge panel of the state Supreme Court's appellate division ruled that, after reviewing written arguments by state Attorney General Letitia James, Trump's attorneys, and lawyers for the state court system with "due deliberation," the gag order would stand.

Trump attorney Christopher Kise called the ruling "a tragic day for the rule of law." Trump is scheduled to testify again at the trial Dec. 11.

Engoron imposed the gag order on Trump after the former president made a social media post that falsely accused Greenfield of being Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer's girlfriend. Engoron fined Trump $5,000 for leaving the post up two weeks after the order. Kise said the delay in removing it was an accident.

The Manhattan judge then fined Trump $10,000 for hallway remarks he made to reporters outside the courtroom about partisans on the bench. Trump testified under oath he was referring to a witness, Michael Cohen, Trump's former personal lawyer and fixer, rather than Greenfield, who sits near Engoron. But the judge ruled his explanation was "not credible."

James has accused Trump, his two elder sons, two company executives and several business entities with defrauding banks and insurance companies by inflating the value of the former president's assets, including his own Trump Tower apartment.

NORAD

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left after one drink in the middle of 2022. Like several others interviewed by USA TODAY about daytime drinking at the command, the official spoke on condition of anonymity fearing reprisal. All of the officials, a mixture of uniformed and civilian, expressed unease, dismay or disgust at presence of alcohol and drinking at the command. It was designed, as one of the officials put it, to protect America from "its worst day."

Air Force Gen. Glen VanHerck shuttered the bar last week after USA TODAY inquired about the allegations made by the officials. VanHerck, who also leads the associated U.S. Northern Command, ordered an investigation into the conditions that allowed NORAD officers to operate the off-the-books drinking establishment.

NORTHCOM, the entity charged with coordinating the Pentagon's response to attacks on the homeland and natural disasters, is also headquartered at Peterson Space Force Base. NORTHCOM and NORAD tracked and shot down the Chinese spy balloon that transited the United States and Canada early this year.

"Based on your inquiry, what I did was immediately direct a walkthrough of all spaces in the command with the intent to corroborate any of the allegations," VanHerck said in an interview Wednesday. "We did find the John Wayne poster outside a door. Behind the locked door, what we found was an office space with a refrigerator that did contain some alcohol. We did find some beer … some hard liquor."

VanHerck described the setting as a standard office rather than a bar. It has about six desks, a medium-sized conference table, storage for books and a refrigerator. "This facility did have access to classified networks for planning purposes," he said.

The presence of alcohol was "certainly something that was concerning enough to me to direct a commander's-directed investigation."

The investigation will determine if drinking inside the headquarters affected national security, VanHerck said.

So far, the general said, "I don't sense any compromise."

Pentagon policy bans alcohol in office settings without a waiver.

Drinking on the job can have huge implications when the stakes involve military strategy and tactics, the launch of enemy ballistic missiles and potentially nuclear war, according to a third official.

Why NORAD matters

NORAD traces its origins to the Cold War when fear peaked of nuclear attack by bombers flying over the North Pole from the Soviet Union. Today, as tension with Russia rises again, NORAD commanders regularly scramble sophisticated warplanes to intercept Russian bombers off the coast of Alaska.

NORAD personnel defend against attacks by warplanes and ballistic missiles, and from space and the sea. They detect threats with satellites and high-powered radar systems.

It was NORAD and Northern Command, or NORTHCOM, that tracked and downed the Chinese spy balloon that crossed the United States and Canada in February. Chinese spies posing as tourists also have sought access to sensitive U.S. military installations in Alaska, according to military and civilian authorities.

NORAD may be best known to the public for ostensibly tracking Santa's sleigh on Christmas Eve, a tradition since 1955. Today, millions of people follow Santa's journey on the internet and through widespread news media coverage.

In July, VanHerck fired the two-star Army general in charge of operations at NORTHCOM for loss of trust and confidence. The fired officer, Maj. Gen. Joseph Lestorti, was described as gruff, demanding and intolerant of alcohol use in the workplace, according to several U.S. officials who have served with him.

Gen. Glen VanHerck ordered an investigation into the conditions that allowed for the off-the-books drinking establishment. WIN MCNAMEE/GETTY IMAGES

Frank Levedque, who served with Lestorti, described him as a "great American" who was always prepared to do the "hard" right thing even if it sometimes "rubbed people the wrong way."

Lestorti, when reached by USA TODAY, declined to comment.

The military's drinking problem

Daytime drinking among officials charged with protecting the United States from attack raises troubling questions about their fitness for duty. The military has long struggled with alcohol abuse in its ranks, and related crimes like sexual assault. One of the most infamous examples was the 1991 Tailhook scandal in which drunken Navy aviators assaulted scores of women at a convention in Las Vegas.

Since then, career flameouts fueled by alcohol have roiled the military. In 2013, the Air Force fired Maj. Gen. Michael Carey after a two-day binge in Moscow that saw him cavorting late at night with local women and offending his Russian hosts. Carey had been the senior Air Force officer overseeing nuclear missiles.

Last year, a Pentagon survey found nearly 36,000 troops had reported crimes from groping to rape.

Inside the Pentagon, drinking is prohibited without special permission. Alcohol is routinely approved for retirements, when officers transfer to new jobs and at Christmas parties.

Permission, however, does not prevent misconduct. In 2016, a boozy Christmas party at the Pentagon triggered discipline for the Navy's top officer after one of his aides, dressed in a Santa Claus outfit, slapped a woman's buttocks and allegedly made sexual advances in a "predatory" way toward subordinate women officers.

Nor do all officers and senior officials seek permission for the occasional, end-of-week drink, according to several current and former Pentagon officials. Two commanders recalled a regular round of drinks in their Pentagon offices after the workday had been completed on Friday.

What's next

VanHerck said the investigation could take weeks to complete. It will focus on the conditions that allowed the covert tavern to flourish. He will recuse himself to avoid swaying its conclusions, he said.

Until last week's inquiry by USA TODAY, VanHerck said he had not heard about drinking on the job at the base. It's unclear what commanders, if any, knew about the practice.

"Nobody has come forward to me with any concerns or questions about unauthorized drinking," VanHerck said. "Now the investigation may find that folks have expressed concerns. If that's the case, then we'll deal with that appropriately."

He said he disclosed his investigation and initial findings in a spirit of openness.

"I think you ought to be clear that we're as transparent as we can be to you," he said. "There's nothing to hide here."

" I would tell the people in the United States and Canada: trust the commands that defend them each and every day," VanHerck added. "We are professionals, we are ready to go, and … they should expect and to demand nothing less."