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The Washington Post

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Memphis shuts down Scorpion police unit

A day after defending it, chief reverses amid hail of criticism over beating

BY MARK BERMAN

Fallout from the brutal Memphis police beating of Tyre Nichols continued Saturday, as the department shut down the specialized unit that had included the officers charged with second-degree murder in his death while a broadening web of investigations scrutinized additional local authorities. In a reversal, the Memphis police announced Saturday that it was dismantling the Scorpion unit that had employed the five officers in the case. Only a day earlier, the Memphis police chief had defended the Scorpion unit, saying it "did good work" at combating crime but that this particular group of officers "went off the rails that night."

Nichols, a 29-year-old Black man, was stopped while driving in early January by police officers with that unit.

Video footage released Friday evening captured what happened after, showing officers pummeling an unarmed Nichols, who cried out for his mother during the beating. In the aftermath, the videos show, officers conversed among themselves while a bloodied Nichols was left propped against a car, waiting minutes after agonizing minutes for an ambulance to arrive. It didn't come until 22 minutes after the police said Nichols was in custody.

Nichols died three days after the beating. Five officers involved, all of them Black, were fired from the Memphis police and charged with second-degree murder, aggravated kidnapping and other counts.

But while the video recordings — captured by police body cameras — **SEE MEMPHIS ON A11**

New chapter of pain: Memphians feeling sorrow more than rage. **A10**

Footage: An overview of what the released videos show. **A10**

Shining a light: Raw images reflect a history of grief, frustration. **A12**

At sunset, the murmuration of starlings is a marvel of the skies over Rome. At night, the birds' 'abundant manure' is a hazard.



FEDERICA VALABREGA FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

A stunning spectacle — and a huge mess

BY CHICO HARLAN AND STEFANO PITRELLI IN ROME



This time of year in Rome, the evening sky is a marvel.

Just before sunset, there among the cupolas, starlings mass by the hundreds of thousands, performing an aerial dance. They dip and soar, bunch together and spread out.

Seen from the ground, their ephemeral parabolas look like calligraphic brushstrokes. But when the sun sets, the magic ends. The birds descend — and wreak havoc.

They spend their nights roosting, sometimes thousands to a tree and overloading the branches. They poop prolifically, and their droppings — thanks to their olive-heavy diet — are oily and slick.

Those droppings can cause street closures and motorbike accidents. They can bury cars, bus stops, business awnings, even gravestones, under a Jackson Pollock coating of black and white. "Abundant manure," Rome's environmental department called

A sunset sky full of starlings beginning their night murmuration as seen from the Altare della Patria in Piazza Venezia in Rome. The birds' beauty is offset by the havoc their oily droppings wreak on the places they roost.

it in a report on the starlings.

The contrast between the transfixing 30-minute murmuration and the subsequent mess makes for an uneasy relationship between the starlings and their chosen winter home.

For Romans, life would be a bit more convenient if the birds went elsewhere.

But what's become increasingly evident amid attempts to manage the birds, is that the starlings have more say in the matter than the people do.

"It's impossible to move that many animals," said Alessandro Montemaggiore, an ornithologist at Rome's Sapienza University. **SEE STARLINGS ON A15**

Tanks for Ukraine: How we got there

U.S. PROMISE SWAYS RESISTANT GERMANY

Long-term pledge of MIs helps end allies' dispute

BY KAREN DEYOUNG, DAN LAMOTHE AND LOVEDAY MORRIS

After weeks of failing to persuade Chancellor Olaf Scholz to free up Germany's Leopard 2 tanks for shipment to Ukraine, President Biden was ready to make one more try. Kyiv's forces were convinced that if Western tanks weren't on the battlefield by spring, it might be too late for them to thwart a coming Russian offensive and launch a successful one of their own.

In a late morning call with Scholz from the White House on Jan. 17, Biden tried several tactics.

Britain had announced it would send 14 of its Challenger tanks, he reminded Scholz, addressing the chancellor's concern that Germany not be the first to challenge the Russians by giving Ukraine a major new weapons system. The United States and other NATO partners, following mid-December consultations among the "Quad" of U.S., British, French and German leaders, had tentatively approved the transfer of hundreds of lesser, but effective, armored combat vehicles, he said, including American Bradleys and Strykers.

Scholz did not budge. Berlin and Washington must face down Moscow in lockstep, he told the president. German tanks would not send its main battle tanks if the United States continued to decline sending some of its own — the powerful Abrams M1.

"I think the chancellor had the impression ... he made a good case," a German official said. **SEE UKRAINE ON A9**

Trump mark on judiciary isn't just at high court

BY ANN E. MARIMOW

NEW ORLEANS — Months before the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, the federal appeals court based in this Southern city cleared the way to ban most abortions in Texas. The same court appeared to jump the line to block the White House's signature coronavirus vaccination mandate and split from other courts to back restrictions on social media companies and constrain President Biden's immigration powers.

The U.S. Court of Appeals for the 5th Circuit in New Orleans has long leaned conservative. But the arrival of a half-dozen judges picked by President Donald Trump — many of them young, ambitious and outspoken — has put the court at the forefront of resistance to the Biden administration's assertions of legal authority and to the regulatory power of federal agencies. Their rulings have at times broken with precedent and exposed rifts **SEE JUDGES ON A16**

Trump stumps: In two states, new vulnerabilities come into focus. **A3**

DeSantis gears up: Advisers prepare for possible 2024 run. **A3**

Downtown D.C. is a deflated balloon as workers stay home

Anemic market for office space imperils tax coffers that fund public services

BY PAUL SCHWARTZMAN

As his only tenant was moving out the other day, Anthony Lanier walked through his glass office tower in downtown Washington, all too aware of the looming financial danger he faces.

Mortgage payments of about \$1 million a month. A \$3 million annual property tax bill. And, beginning in March, no rental income.

In September, Lanier installed on the outside of his building near the White House a promotional splash worthy of Times Square: a 13-story-high, bright greenish-yellow sign offering discounted rent, "move in ready" offices, and the almost unheard-of option of "month-to-month" leases. "See it to believe it!" declares a

second, equally impossible-to-miss billboard overlooking Pennsylvania Avenue NW.

Lanier, whose hunt for a new tenant began before 2020, is still searching for a deal. He fears it could be two years before he replaces WilmerHale, the law firm that has occupied his building since it opened in 2006 and is moving to a new tower across the street.

"It's humbling," Lanier said as he walked the empty corridors of what he touts as "the best 300,000 square feet in Washington," with a 150-foot-high atrium, lobby waterfall and rooftop views of the Washington Monument. "There are a lot of desperate real estate owners out there."

As the third anniversary of the pandemic approaches, downtown Washington is a wounded rendition of its once robust self. Even as more of the workforce shows up daily, many streets at the city's core are pocked by vacant storefronts, moribund sidewalks and offices that, even on the busiest days, are just over half occupied. **SEE DOWNTOWN ON A6**

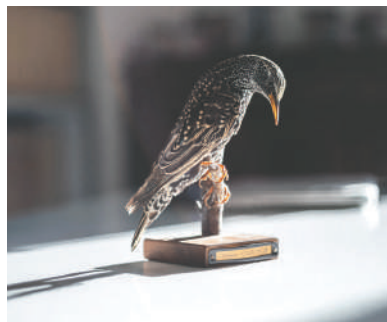


The evolution of Santos's falsehoods

George Santos has admitted that the biography he gave was not accurate. The Post presents a look at how he defined and redefined himself on his campaign website from 2020 through 2023. **Inside, A8; related news, A9, C1**

ELENA LACEY/WASHINGTON POST ILLUSTRATION: JONATHAN ERNST/REUTERS





TOP: At sunset, a sky full of starlings appears in the EUR neighborhood of Rome. Night murmurations are a marvel in the city sky in the evening, sometimes almost blotting out the sun, but at night, the birds' oily droppings are a nuisance and a safety hazard, leading to efforts to move the birds to other parts of the city. **ABOVE:** An embalmist starlings sits on the desk of Alessandro Montemaggiori, an expert in the study of the birds. **MONTENAGGIORI** says moving the birds out of the city would be impossible. **RIGHT:** Starlings' droppings proliferate on the streets in Rome.

Rome cleans up starlings' mess

STARLINGS FROM A1

The mysterious murmurations

Starlings are one of the world's most common bird species, but Rome stands out in Europe as one of their primary gathering points. The starlings have been migrating here annually since the 1920s, attracted by the mild climate. The traffic and paved surfaces and lights make it several degrees warmer than even the surrounding countryside.

The birds venture south from Germany, Hungary and as far away as Russia, arriving in October and November and remaining for a few months. During the day, they commute outside the city, seeking out farmland and olive groves.

They return to Rome, bellies full, soon after 4 p.m. They meet in the sky.

The birds move with such synchronicity that one pioneering British ornithologist, Edmund Selous, hypothesized that the starlings were telepathic.

Modern experts have concluded that the movements are not orchestrated by any one leader, but rather by a chain reaction of microsecond influences. Giorgio Parisi, a Nobel Prize-winning physicist, found that each bird interacts with six or seven other starlings in its immediate vicinity. In an interview, Parisi said the birds tend to move in a formation that resembles a "pancake." But its shape-shifting appears more dramatic from the ground, depending on how the pancake is angled in the sky.

"It's based on perspective," he said.

When The Washington Post embedded with a work crew in late December, the birds had taken to congregating in a particularly troublesome spot: EUR, a suburb perceived as a fascist showpiece by Benito Mussolini that today serves as a hub for office headquarters.

One late afternoon, the birds arrived above EUR in such numbers that they prematurely darkened the sky. By 4:45 p.m., they resembled an airborne tidal wave, and even then, more and more birds — returning late from their countryside foraging — kept joining the mass.

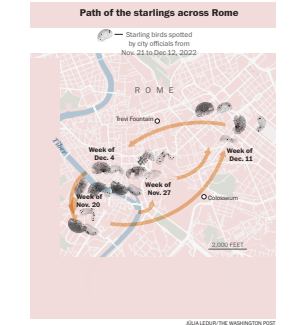
At ground level, crews waited to see which trees the birds would choose for their roost. At 4:58, the birds began descending in astonishing columns, crowding so thickly in the branches that it looked like certain trees had suddenly sprung to life.

The workers took off, aiming their bullhorns upward.

"Screeech. Screeech," went the bullhorn soundtrack on repeat.

The noise was shrill, projecting a kind of guttural terror: It was a recording of a starling in distress. The noise echoed off the buildings so that all of EUR — in its full commuting buzz — seemed to be letting out eerie screams. The tactic worked. The birds, apparently sensing that one of their own was signaling danger, kept taking to the air, looking for new roosting spots.

"You can see they are agitated," Ferrantini said. Starlings are common across North America, and Washington at one point even tried spraying eye-irritating fog into trees. (The solu-



The murmurations work like signals to the returning birds — a way for starlings, which are highly social, to gather together.

But they are also thought to have a defensive purpose. With so many birds swirling together, it's hard for a predator, like a peregrine falcon, to lock in on any one target. Falcons are fearless foes, capable of reaching 200 mph in the air. There's a small population of falcons living year-round in Rome. Others migrate south with the starlings.

"When you see the starlings make these tight balls, that means there is a falcon next to them," said Montemaggiori, the ornithologist. "It's strength in numbers. That is their success."

On a mission to contain the damage

As the sun sets in Rome most winter days, small teams of workers put on white protective smocks and grab their bullhorns. They're part of a program, deployed throughout Rome, to disturb the starlings and prevent them from roosting where they cause the greatest annoyance.

"If we can move them to greener areas, then that is a victory," said one of the workers, Alessia Ferrantini, soon after she'd put fresh batteries in a music player connected to a bullhorn.

tion proved only temporary.) Other parts of the world have found starlings so troublesome that they've tried to kill them off with poisons. But experts say the birds are so adaptable, and have such short life spans anyway, that culling tends not to work that well.

Rome, since the 1920s, has used the recorded distress calls, a strategy devised by Bruno Cignini, a longtime leader of the city's environmental department. Cignini borrowed a starling from a center that rehabilitates wounded animals, brought it to his office and recorded its noise as it reacted to the stress.

Through trial and error, Cignini found the parts of the recording that registered most viscerally with other birds.

Typically, after three days of hearing the noises in a given spot, the starlings abandon the roosting site until at least the next season.

In the 1980s, Montemaggiori said, some Rome administrators suggested trying to expand the falcon population as a way to contend with the starlings.

But it was quickly pointed out that falcons prey on only one bird a night.

"Can you imagine how many falcons we'd need?" Montemaggiori said.

JULIA LEONARDI/THE WASHINGTON POST