



St. Patrick's Day

# Mountaineers begin NCAA play

Today: West Virginia vs. Southern Illinois, 2:45 p.m. on WOWK. Stories, commentary begin on 1B

## Boys state tournament

Charleston Catholic, Gilbert, GW, Woodrow Wilson, Wheeling Central and Williamstown are winners. Stories begin on 1B

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THE STATE NEWSPAPER



Rain  
High 44, low 28  
Details, 13A

## New Iraq assault opens

### Joint operation against militants largest airborne action since '03

By Alexandra Zavis  
The Associated Press

BAGHDAD, Iraq — U.S. forces and Iraqi troops launched what the military described as the largest airborne assault since the 2003 U.S.-led invasion Thursday, targeting insurgent strongholds north of the capital.

The U.S. military said the raid, called Operation Swarmer, is aimed at clearing "a suspected insurgent operating area" northeast of Samarra and is expected to last several days. The Pentagon said 41 people were arrested but it was not clear if suspected insurgents put up any resistance. Residents in the targeted area

said there was a heavy U.S. and Iraqi troop presence and large explosions could be heard in the distance. The U.S. military said there was no firing or bombing from the air and that the source of the blasts was not known.

"More than 1,500 Iraqi and coalition troops, over 200 tactical vehicles, and more than 50 aircraft participated in the operation," the military statement said.

The U.S. command in Baghdad said it is the largest number

of aircraft used to insert troops and the largest number of troops inserted by air in Iraq, although larger numbers of troops overall have been involved in previous operations.

Pentagon spokesman Lt. Col. Barry Venable said no bombs, missiles or other ordnance were fired from the helicopters. He said more than 650 U.S. troops and more than 800 Iraqi soldiers took part in the operation.

Please see IRAQ, 13A



U.S. military/AP photo

**Soldiers from the Iraqi 4th Army Division get off an American CH-47 Chinook helicopter in Samarra on Thursday during Operation Swarmer.**

## Congress approves increase in debt

### Ceiling reaches \$9 trillion, big bills then passed

By Andrew Taylor  
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Congress pushed the ceiling on the national debt to nearly \$9 trillion Thursday, and the House and Senate promptly voted for major spending initiatives for the war in Iraq, hurricane relief and education.

Sens. Robert C. Byrd, D-W.Va. and Jay Rockefeller, D-W.Va. voted against raising the ceiling.

The House approved \$92 billion in new money for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and for relief along the hurricane-ravaged Gulf Coast.

The Senate adopted a \$2.8 trillion budget blueprint that anticipates deficits greater than \$350 billion for both this year and next. The spending blueprint, approved 51-49, little resembles President Bush's proposal last month for the budget year that begins Oct. 1.

To the disappointment of budget hawks, the Senate's measure would break Bush's proposed caps on spending for programs such as education, low-income heating subsidies

Please see DEBT, 13A

## Security scan



Gazette photos by CHRIS DORST

**West Virginia Adjutant General Allen E. Tackett gets his iris scanned before gaining access to his office suite at the West Virginia National Guard headquarters building in Charleston.**

## Guard testing biometric ID gear

By Rick Steelhammer  
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Biometric identification gear developed in West Virginia is being used at the West Virginia National Guard's headquarters buildings, as well as 10 field locations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Iris-scanning identification technology produced through the U.S. Department of Defense's Biometrics Fusion Center in Clarksburg is being used to control access to key offices in the Guard's headquarters building.

Across Coonskin Drive, fingerprint-scanning gear is being used to control access to the National Guard's Operations

**The iris-scanning identification technology is produced through the U.S. Department of Defense's Biometrics Fusion Center in Clarksburg.**

Center.

"We're using their inventions and creations and testing them out," said Army Maj. Gen. Allen E. Tackett, the state's adjutant general, whose office suite access is controlled by an iris-scanning device.

"This allows the [biometrics center] to test the reliability and durability of their equipment, while we get the benefit of faster and more secure access

being used in the field in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Biometric Identification System for Access (BISA) modules were reportedly produced in response to the bombing of an American dining hall in Mosul, Iraq, in December 2004.

"BISA was integrated here in West Virginia under an extremely tight time constraint," said David M. Lohman, deputy director of the Biometrics Fusion Center. "Azimuth Corporation of Morgantown produced the first prototype within a month. Within another month, 10 of them were in the field and in use."

Please see SCAN, 13A

## Bidding bypassed again by Manchin

### Store received thousands for work at offices

By Scott Finn  
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Gov. Joe Manchin's office has paid almost \$33,000 to a Charleston wallpaper store without bidding out the work — at least the second time it has failed to do so.

The company, Wallpapers In Stock, recently settled a complaint by the West Virginia Attorney General's office that it engaged in unfair or deceptive practices.

Wallpapers In Stock sold and installed wallpaper and blinds in Manchin's office and those of his chief deputies, according to the state auditor's Web site.

The company broke the bill into 15 separate invoices between September and December. Together, they equal \$32,997, but separately, they are all below the \$10,000 threshold that requires competitive bidding.

On one day alone, the company submitted five separate invoices totaling \$14,660, according to the Web site.

State law prohibits "stringing," or breaking a large purchase into smaller units to evade competitive bidding. If found guilty, a person could serve up to a year in jail and be fined up to \$500 for the misdemeanor.

Clark Diehl, the owner of Wallpapers In Stock, said he asked to be paid in small installments, but he was not trying to avoid purchasing laws.

"We only did one room at a time because that's all they would give us the go-ahead to do at a time," Diehl said.

Please see BIDDING, 13A

## U.S. war dead

Iraq 2,311  
Elsewhere 278

Sources: AP/Department of Defense

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## Shamrock or sham? Ireland's 'clover' a St. Patrick's Day legend

By Shawn Pogatchnik  
The Associated Press

DUBLIN, Ireland — For one week a year, nursery owner Cecil Geddis is knee-deep in shamrocks, the delicate three-leafed plant that people the world over associate with Ireland and St. Patrick's Day.

"You have to move fast in this business. Nobody wants to buy a shamrock on March 18," said Geddis, whose nursery has produced 80,000 shamrock plants, most shipped out in cartons

bearing leprechaun decorations and labeled: "Authentic shamrock — grown in Ireland."

While wearing a freshly cut shamrock is a fading tradition in Ireland, a few savvy growers and seed merchants are wooing foreign buyers and tourists with claims that the shamrock seeds and plants they offer are unique to the emerald isle.

"About 10 or 15 years ago, the source of shamrock seeds disappeared, because there was in fact only one source in the

country, and the man died. He didn't pass it on to anybody else!" said Thomas Quearney, owner of a specialist Dublin seed importer, Mr. Middleton Garden Shop.

Quearney claims to have identified a new secret source for seeds that he soon will sell in packets of 100 for just under \$5. "These grow genuine shamrocks. It's not clover at all," he said.

Botanists say that's a load of

Please see SHAMROCK, 13A



AP photo

**The shamrock that is grown at this Northern Ireland nursery is sold to many countries around the world to celebrate St. Patrick's Day.**

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