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Newsmas: A compendium

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Monday's mammoth holiday is unique because of its celebratory schizophrenia. It is simultaneously a hallowed religious observance honoring the birth of Jesus Christ, and a fervent secular festival invoking the giving spirit of Santa Claus.

Nationwide, an estimated 293 million Americans are expected to keep Christmas in one way or another. That's a degree of domestic unity no other cause or celebration even comes close to matching.

Given its truly titanic proportions, and its equally vast dimensions (stretching from hearth and home to mall and Main Street to choir and congregation), no single day dominates or colors the news cycle like the 25th of December.

Call it Newsmas--and enjoy this compendium gleaned from the more than 10 million results of simply searching "Christmas" in Google News.

For those dreaming of "white" this year, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's online interactive map is helpful, if not hopeful. Just click on the dots marking towns all over the U.S. to see the historical chance of a white Christmas.

Only three dots in the Natural State have any shade of blue, which signifies higher probability: Eureka Springs (13 percent) and Deer and Gravette (both at 14 percent). The chance at Adams Field in Little Rock is a puny 1 percent, and everywhere else is either in single digits or zero.

Shift your dreams to a frosty Christmas, however, and the odds go way up. AccuWeather forecasts "dramatically colder air" to plunge deep into the central U.S. Temperatures across Arkansas are expected to be well below normal on Sunday and Monday.

A *New York Times* book review names noteworthy holiday crime offerings, including one called *Murder on the Toy Town Express*, whose plot involves pediophobia (fear of dolls). A couple of highlighted anthologies: *Sleep No More* and *The Usual Santas*. The lore of yuletide mystery fiction lives on!

Lots of folks will be going home (or somewhere) for Christmas, and the American Automobile Association predicts the nation's roadways will be clogged with 97.3 million travelers over the weekend. Please drive safe: do buckle, don't text.

Out of Byram, Miss., comes the tale of a tyke who called 911 to save Christmas from that thieving Grinch. After watching YouTube videos about the Seuss character and his plan, 5-year-

old TyLon Pittman got worried last Saturday and decided to give the police a head's up. Officers dutifully responded, and the green-skinned crook was apprehended Monday night. Police took TyLon to a holding room, where the Grinch promised not to steal any presents. When he grows up, TyLon says he wants to be a policeman.

Satire flourishes this season, with bloggers at the Cato Institute posting their Santa wish list, in hopes that St. Nick might be able to step in where presidents have failed to trod and improve foreign relations.

USA Today published "A Very Twitter Christmas," by humorist Hart Seely, which parodied Dickens' tale using @Trumpmas_Carol. A few of the rib-tickling tweets:

"Uncle Roy warns of 3 visits tonight by Christmas spirits w/axes to grind. Haters and leakers. Says expect them to be wearing wires. HIT JOB!"...

"Wacky, unhinged Ghost of Christmas-future makes grand entrance, waves arms, says NOTHING! Just like Comey! Go back to CNN, Casper!"...

"On 2nd thought, PIVOT: Cratchits to get health care, tax cuts, oil pipeline, border wall & FREE TURKEY! Mexico to pay. *Feliz Navidad!*"

An updated Pew research project reports a small slide among Americans who observe Christmas as a Christian holy day. In 2013, 58 percent of survey respondents said they planned to celebrate Christmas as a religious holiday, compared to 55 percent in 2017.

A much starker division appears among generations, with only 42 percent of millennials celebrating the religious aspect of Christmas. More than half (51 percent) of Americans still plan to attend church on Christmas, down slightly from 54 percent four years ago. That will translate into 166 million souls swelling among the nation's more than 300,000 Christian churches--only Easter fills more pews.

In another survey, from the Monmouth University Polling Institute, respondents were asked to name their favorite animated holiday TV special. *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* nudged out *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, and given that everything is hyper-political in these times, researchers examined the results by partisan leanings.

"It's a Christmas miracle!" director Patrick Murray said. Across the spectrum, *Rudolph* held the top spot with *Charlie Brown* second.

Up in Ellsworth, Maine (nearby Bangor has a NOAA probability of 61 percent for Christmas snow), waitress and single mom Trisha Murphy wasn't exactly sure what an older customer meant when he said he would be Santa this year. But when he paid his bill, Murphy was surprised to receive a \$500 tip. Working two jobs and with her car recently towed, she posted on Facebook that he "literally saved Christmas" for her four children.

"Good people do still exist," she wrote, "Yesterday was the day I met Santa!"

Her post recalls the fabled words of Francis Church's famous 1897 Santa Claus editorial: "He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist, and you know that they abound and give to your life its highest beauty and joy."