

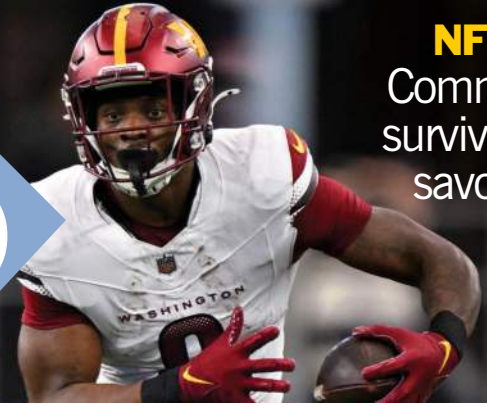
TELEVISION: The shows worth watching in 2025 **Pages 30-31**

MOVIES: Films to see in the new year **Page 15**

MUSIC: Kehlani on taking risks, Grammy noms **Page 28**

EUROPE
& PACIFIC
WEEKEND
EDITION

NFL PLAYOFFS
Commanders who survived 'darkness' savor postseason **Page 48**



STARS AND STRIPES®

stripes.com

Volume 83 Edition 188 ©SS 2025

FRIDAY, JANUARY 10, 2025

平成12年4月5日 第三種郵便物認可 日刊(土日除く)
発行所 星条旗新聞社 〒106-0032 東京都港区六本木7丁目23番17号 定価 ¥100

\$1.00

Mourners remember Carter, who 'waged peace'

By **BILL BARROW**
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Jimmy Carter was celebrated Thursday for his personal humility and public service before, during and after his presidency during a funeral at Washington National Cathedral featuring the kind of pageantry the 39th U.S. president typically eschewed.

All of Carter's living successors were in attendance, with President Joe Biden, the first sitting senator to endorse his 1976 run for the White House, delivering a eulogy. Biden and others took turns praising Carter's record — which many historians have appraised more favorably since losing his bid for a second term in 1980 — and extolling his character.

"He built houses for people who needed homes," said Joshua Carter, a grandson who recalled how Carter regularly taught Sunday school in his native hamlet of

SEE REMEMBER ON PAGE 5



JACQUELYN MARTIN/AP

President Joe Biden and first lady Jill Biden watch as the casket of former President Jimmy Carter is carried at Washington National Cathedral, on Thursday.



ETHAN SWOPE/AP

Megan Mantia, left, and her boyfriend Thomas, only first name given, return to Mantia's fire-damaged home after the Eaton Fire swept through the area, Wednesday, in Altadena, Calif.

Wildfires devastate LA

Firefighters battle raging blazes as winds calm somewhat

By **MANUEL VALDES,**
HALLIE GOLDEN
AND **JULIE WATSON**
Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Firefighters began to make progress battling the deadly and devastating fires in the Los Angeles area early Thursday, especially because the ferocious winds that have been driving the fast-moving flames are expected to slow down.

Firefighters were able to knock down a major threat that broke out Wednesday evening in

the Hollywood Hills as flames struck closer to the heart of the city, the roots of the entertainment industry. By morning, authorities lifted an evacuation order for the area.

The weather forecast could provide an opportunity for firefighters to make progress in reining in blazes that have killed five people, ravaged communities from the Pacific Coast to Pasadena and caused thousands of people to frantically flee their homes.

Flare-ups overnight illuminated the Santa Monica Mountains above Pacific Palisades.

Homes continued to burn, but unlike Tuesday night when a fierce wind blew embers sideways and fueled new outbreaks, sparks mostly drifted upward.

The flames from the Sunset Fire in the Hollywood Hills had put the densely populated neighborhoods on edge. Only about a mile away, the streets around the Hollywood Walk of Fame, the TCL Chinese Theatre and Madame Tussauds were bustling, and onlookers

SEE WILDFIRES ON PAGE 6

BUSINESS/WEATHER

EUROPE GAS PRICES

Country	Super E10	Super unleaded	Super plus	Diesel	Azores	..	..	\$4.199	..
Germany	\$3.456	\$3.996	\$4.344	\$3.970	..	..	..	..	..
Change in price	+4.1 cents	+3.3 cents	+2.8 cents	+5.8 cents	..	..	..	+2.8 cents	..
Netherlands	..	\$4.377	\$4.892	\$4.701	..	..	..	\$4.015	\$4.307*
Change in price	..	+1.2 cents	+1.0 cents	+4.6 cents	..	..	..	+2.8 cents	No change
U.K.	..	\$3.996	\$4.344	\$3.970	..	..	..	..	..
Change in price	..	+3.3 cents	+2.8 cents	+5.8 cents	..	..	..	..	..

Fuel prices are updated daily. These prices are effective Jan. 10. The change in price is from Jan. 3.

PACIFIC GAS PRICES

Country	Super E10	Super unleaded	Super plus	Diesel	South Korea	\$3.129	..	\$4.019	\$3.639
Japan	..	\$3.989	..	\$3.609	..	..	..	..	..
Change in price	..	+3.0 cents	..	+6.0 cents	+4.0 cents	..	+3.0 cents	+5.0 cents	..
Okinawa	\$3.379	..	..	\$3.609	..	..	..	..	..
Change in price	+1.0 cents	..	..	+6.0 cents	+4.0 cents	+3.0 cents	+3.0 cents	..	..

*DieselEFD **Midgrade
Pacific prices for the week of Jan. 10-16

EXCHANGE RATES

Military rates		Commercial rates	
Euro costs (Jan. 10)	0.95	Bahrain (Dinar)	0.3769
British pound (Jan. 10)	\$1.20	Britain (Pound)	1.2315
Japanese yen (Jan. 10)	154.00	Canada (Dollar)	1.4401
South Korean won (Jan. 10)	1419.00	China (Yuan)	7.3322
		Denmark (Krone)	7.2381
		Egypt (Pound)	50.6111
		Euro	0.9701
		Hong Kong (Dollar)	7.7820
		Hungary (Forint)	401.20
		Israel (Shekel)	3.6652
		Japan (Yen)	157.84
		Kuwait (Dinar)	0.3082
		Norway (Krone)	11.3984
		Philippines (Peso)	58.49
		Poland (Zloty)	4.14
		Saudi Arabia (Riyal)	3.7539
		Singapore (Dollar)	1.3611
		South Korea (Won)	1460.92

Switzerland (Franc) 0.9115
Thailand (Baht) 34.57
Turkey (NewLira) 35.3245

(Military exchange rates are those available to customers at military banking facilities in the country of issuance for Japan, South Korea, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. For nonlocal currency exchange rates (i.e., purchasing British pounds in Germany), check with your local military banking facility. Commercial rates are interbank rates provided for reference when buying currency. All figures are foreign currencies to one dollar, except for the British pound, which is represented in dollars-to-pound, and the euro, which is dollars-to-euro.)

INTEREST RATES

Prime rate	7.50
Interest Rates Discount rate	4.50
Federal funds market rate	4.33
3-month bill	4.31
30-year bond	4.93

WEATHER OUTLOOK

FRIDAY IN THE MIDDLE EAST



FRIDAY IN EUROPE



SATURDAY IN THE PACIFIC



The weather is provided by the American Forces Network Weather Center, 2nd Weather Squadron at Offutt Air Force Base, Neb.

TODAY IN STRIPES

- American Roundup 36
- Classified 12
- Comics 34,38-39
- Crossword 34,38-39
- Faces 35
- Opinion 40
- Sports 41-48

STARS AND STRIPES

However you read us, wherever you need us.

Mobile • Online • Print

EUROPE

ADVERTISING
CustomerService@stripes.com | +49 (0) 0631.3615.9111
DSN: 314.583.9111

MIDDLE EAST

ADVERTISING
CustomerService@stripes.com | +49 (0) 0631.3615.9111
DSN: 314.583.9111

PACIFIC

ADVERTISING
PacificAdvertising@stripes.com | +81 (42) 552.2511
DSN: 315.227.7310

Round-the-world news for America's military.

Stripes.com supplies constant updates, on news of interest — including reports from our overseas military bases in Europe, Pacific, Southwest Asia and the Mideast, and coverage of the Pentagon and Capitol Hill.

Also available on mobile apps for Android and iOS.

STARS AND STRIPES

Mobile • Online • Print

MILITARY

Austin urges Ukraine aid meetings to continue

By JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

RAMSTEIN AIR BASE, Germany — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy appealed to President-elect Donald Trump to help prevent his country from being “erased off the map,” following the announcement Thursday of a final \$500 million military aid package under the outgoing Biden administration.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin announced the weapons deal with Zelenskyy by his side at the U.S.-led Ukraine Defense Contact Group meeting at Ramstein, a gathering of representatives of about 50 partner nations who have come to Ukraine’s defense since Russia launched its full-scale invasion nearly three years ago.

Austin and other senior leaders made a case for continuing the meetings once Trump, who has criticized U.S. aid to Ukraine, assumes office.

“Here is the fundamental truth: Ukraine’s fight matters to all of us,” Austin said. “[Russian President Vladimir] Putin’s war is a challenge to free people everywhere.”

Zelenskyy expressed gratitude to Austin for leading the contact group and for his help sustaining Ukraine’s fight against the Russian invasion.

“It’s clear that a new chapter



MICHAEL ABRAMS/Stars and Stripes

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Pentagon spokesman Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder exit Austin's last press conference at a Ukraine Defense Contact Group meeting, on Thursday, at Ramstein Air Base, Germany.

starts for Europe and the entire world just 11 days from now, at a time when we have ... to rely on one another even more and achieve even greater results together,” Zelenskyy said, referring to Trump’s inauguration.

“We’ve come such a long way that it would honestly be crazy to drop the ball now and not keep building on the defense coalition we’ve created,” Zelenskyy said.

“No matter what’s going on in the war, everyone wants to feel sure that their country won’t just be erased off the map.”

Whether the contact group will continue under Trump remains to be seen, said German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius, while speaking to reporters during a break from meeting with allies. But “the best solution is to continue the format as it used to be with

the leadership of the United States of America,” he said.

If Trump decides to bow out of the group, then Europe must be prepared to work even more closely together “for its own defense,” Pistorius said.

But “we don’t know anything yet,” he said. “It’s a matter of politeness and democratic respect to wait and see what is the decision” of the new administration.

The aid announced by Austin will come from existing stockpiles and includes air defense missiles, ammunition, air-to-ground munitions and other equipment to support Ukraine’s F-16s.

Zelenskyy said his country particularly needs more drones and air-defense systems, and that the flow of supplies to the front lines must continue.

Since the contact group’s founding in April 2022, the coalition has committed more than \$122 billion in security assistance to Ukraine, Austin said, calling the collective effort to help Ukraine one of the greatest honors and causes of his life.

The United States has been the biggest supporter, providing more than \$65 billion in security assistance.

Whether the aid will continue under Trump is unclear. Trump has pledged to bring a quick end to the war, without offering details. His team is said to be considering a plan that would see European troops in charge of a demilitarized zone in Ukraine.

“No responsible leader would let Putin have his way,” Austin added during his closing remarks to reporters Thursday.

Zelenskyy has continued to rule out ceding territory to Russia, which controls a swath of Ukraine roughly equal in size to the state of Pennsylvania.

Fuel tank falls from F-16 flying near Eglin AFB

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

An F-16 fighter jet dropped a 300-gallon fuel tank Tuesday while flying over a residential part of Niceville, Fla., near its home base at Eglin Air Force Base, service officials said.

No one was injured and no property damage was reported in the incident that occurred at about 11 a.m., an Eglin spokesperson said in a statement on Wednesday. It was not immedi-

ately clear why the fuel tank dropped during the flight, and the Air Force was investigating the incident, according to the statement.

The Fighting Falcon that dropped the tank is assigned to Eglin’s 96th Test Wing, according to the base. That unit specializes in testing and evaluating the latest weapons and other technology for the Air Force, including systems for F-16, F-15 and A-10 jets. Its pilots routinely fly in the area where

the incident occurred, which was about two miles from Eglin’s gates, according to the service.

Niceville City Manager David Deitch told Mid Bay News, a local news website, that it was lucky the tank dropped without causing major harm.

“Only by the grace of God, it landed between two houses,” he said.

Those houses are just ¼ of a mile from Edge Elementary School, which was closed at the

time of the incident. Students, who were on winter break, returned to school Wednesday as scheduled, according to the Okaloosa County School District.

Eglin officials said Wednesday that they intended to fly a small drone over the area where the fuel tank fell “to thoroughly survey the impact zone.” They said authorities had already begun cleaning up the area and working to ensure the tank could be removed safely.

The Air Force has flown F-16s

since the 1970s, and they have proven critical to U.S. combat operations since, including in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Fighting Falcon is also used across the United States in a homeland defense role. The fighter jet can carry about 7,000 pounds of fuel internally and can add another 5,000 pounds of fuel in two external fuel tanks, which typically mount to the jet’s wings or its upper fuselage, according to the Air Force.

US soldier gets 9 years after pleading guilty to child sex crimes

By MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

VILSECK, Germany — A U.S. soldier who admitted to distributing child pornography and attempting to arrange the rape of a young girl was sentenced to nine years in prison during a two-day hearing at Rose Barracks that ended Thursday.

Spc. Adam Roof, 33, pleaded guilty to more than two dozen related counts and also received a reduction in pay grade to E-1.

Prosecutors said Roof, who was

a weapons maintainer at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels, solicited a woman so that he could molest her 8-year-old daughter. The woman he connected with, via the Kik chat app, was an undercover federal agent.

Roof sought to start a family with the woman so he could molest their children, and he asked her to rape her daughter in preparation for his own abuse, prosecutor Maj. Zachary Ray said Thursday. After Roof’s phone was seized, evidence was recovered of additional

crimes going back to 2021.

“He asked a mother to violate a child,” Ray said before sentencing. “His dark desires are fully realized. The longer he is in jail, the longer he will be prevented from taking the next step.”

Roof pleaded guilty to 32 counts of viewing child pornography, distributing child pornography, indecent language, and solicitation of rape and sexual assault of a child. One count was dropped under the plea agreement.

The case against Roof, a New

York resident, began in May 2023 when he started chatting with someone posing as a 28-year-old named Anna, judge Lt. Col. Tom Hynes said Wednesday while discussing the plea agreement.

Roof used the app to chat with others about incest, child sexual abuse and bestiality. He admitted to watching pornography involving children as young as 3 years old and shared the content with others.

Roof, who was assigned to 1st Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment,

said during the hearing that alcohol and the isolation of Hohenfels had led him to break the law.

“I knew it was wrong but I continued,” Roof told the court Thursday. “It’s not who I am.”

Roof had been in pretrial detention since Nov. 16 and was credited with 54 days of time served.

After his release from prison, he will be required to register as a sex offender. Roof said during sentencing that he plans to seek behavioral health treatment while incarcerated.

MILITARY

VA expands illness list covered under PACT Act

By LINDA F. HERSEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Acute and chronic leukemias and other life-threatening cancers will now be recognized as presumptive conditions for toxic-exposed veterans who served during the past 25 years in Afghanistan, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and across the Middle East, the Department of Veterans Affairs announced Wednesday.

Veterans deployed to specific locations in the Middle East during the Gulf War and after Sept. 11, 2001, will have a lower threshold to prove the cancers are related to their exposure to hazardous substances during military service to qualify for medical treatment and disability pay, the VA said.

The VA will automatically assume a service connection for the following diseases that develop in the blood and bone marrow: acute and chronic leukemias, multiple myelomas, myelodysplastic syndromes and myelofibrosis. The coverage goes into effect starting Friday.

VA Secretary Denis McDonough said Wednesday at a news conference that the VA has partic-

ular interest in helping veterans diagnosed with cancer following exposure to industrial solvents and chemical weapons at Karshi-Khanabad, also known as K2, a former air base in Uzbekistan. About 16,000 veterans served at the base, which borders Afghanistan, from 2001 to 2005.

“Covering multiple myeloma, leukemia and rare cancers is important to our K2 veterans,” McDonough said.

The inclusion of several cancers for VA coverage follows a review by the agency on the prevalence of cancer in veterans who had served at certain installations, including K2.

“We need to get to the bottom of what was [at K2]. It was a toxic soup,” McDonough said, referring to hazardous waste present throughout the former Soviet military installation, which contained abandoned chemical weapons, depleted uranium and industrial solvents pooling from the ground.

Establishing the presumptive conditions is a significant step for K2 veterans with serious illnesses to access care, said Matthew Erpelding, executive director of the Stronghold Freedom Foundation,

which advocates for K2 veterans.

An Army study conducted in 2015 found K2 veterans had a 500% increased risk of developing certain cancers, including brain, colon, thyroid and pancreatic cancers.

“While this expansion is a welcome development, it is clear that more needs to be done. The health effects of K2 service extend beyond these conditions, and the time to address these broader issues is now,” Erpelding said. “Comprehensive action is needed to ensure that all K2 veterans receive the care and recognition they have earned.”

The VA also is extending coverage for diseases connected to breathing matter from burn pits and other sources of airborne pollution during deployments in the Middle East. The diseases are urinary bladder, ureter cancer — also known as renal-pelvic cancer — and related genitourinary cancers.

The new presumptions apply to veterans on active duty in southwest Asia or Somalia during the Gulf War and in Afghanistan, Syria, Djibouti, Uzbekistan, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Yemen during the Gulf War or after Sept. 11, 2001, according to a notice publish-



MARK JACKSON

A sign posted outside the Karshi-Khanabad Air Base in Uzbekistan warned of radiation at the former Soviet military installation, where thousands of U.S. military forces were deployed from 2001 to 2005.

ed Jan. 2 in the Federal Register.

“This airborne pollution includes smoke from oil well fires, sand, dust, mechanical fumes from aircraft, vehicle, and ship engines, wood, plastic, rubber, metals, munitions, chemicals, and food and human waste,” according to the notice. “Incomplete combustion of organic and inorganic material in burn pits results in high volumes of toxic particulate matter in the air that includes metals, benzene, and other toxic compounds.”

Under the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring Our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act, or PACT Act, the VA extends benefits including health care and disability compensation to former service members who developed illnesses following

exposure to hazardous materials while on active duty.

More than two dozen medical conditions are covered, depending on the deployment and dates of service for affected individuals. Medical conditions include chronic bronchitis, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, emphysema, brain cancer, gastrointestinal cancer, head cancer, melanoma and neck cancer.

The PACT Act removed the requirement for veterans to prove that identified exposures from burn pits, Agent Orange, radiation, asbestos and other toxins caused more than two dozen different illnesses. Nearly 5 million claims for benefits have been submitted since the PACT Act became law nearly three years ago.

Del Toro embarks on new year by naming 2 future destroyers

Stars and Stripes

Secretary of the Navy Carlos Del Toro last week announced the names of two new Arleigh Burke-class Guided Missile Destroyers, the future USS Robert Kerrey and USS Intrepid to start off the new year.

The USS Robert Kerrey honors former Robert Kerrey, a U.S. senator, Nebraska governor and Navy SEAL officer who received the Medal of Honor for heroism displayed during the Vietnam War, according to a Navy news release.



Kerrey

“This will be the first Navy vessel named in his [Kerrey’s] honor, and it is most appropriate we do so, for his actions in Vietnam and his continued service to this country well beyond his naval service,” Del Toro said Saturday.

On Friday, Del Toro and Kerrey met in New York to share the news of the naming of the destroyer.

“My sincere thanks to President Biden, Secretary of the Navy Del Toro and the United States



SECRETARY OF THE NAVY CARLOS DEL TORO/Instagram

Secretary of the Navy Carlos Del Toro announces the future USS Intrepid during a news conference at the Intrepid Museum in New York City on Jan. 3.

Navy that gave me the opportunity to serve my country for three of the best years of my life,” Kerrey said. “I am very grateful for this recognition.”

Before the meeting with Kerrey on Friday, Del Toro named the future USS Intrepid aboard the for-

mer aircraft carrier which shares its namesake at the Intrepid Museum, N.Y.

The Intrepid honors the skilled, fearless crews of the four previous Navy ships to bear the name. This will be the fifth vessel named Intrepid, according to a Navy

news release.

“It is deeply meaningful to stand aboard USS Intrepid — the fourth vessel to bear the name and whose proud legacy continues to inspire and remind so many visitors of the courage, resilience and sacrifice that define the U.S.

Navy — and it is with profound respect that we also look to the future of our Navy from these decks,” Del Toro said.

Del Toro also announced that his wife, Betty Del Toro, will be the sponsor for the future Intrepid.

“I am especially proud to serve as sponsor for a ship whose name embodies American courage and resilience,” said Betty Del Toro. “Having had the honor and opportunity to stand alongside my husband throughout his active duty Navy career and as the 78th Secretary of the Navy, I embrace this new role — one which emphasizes something that is deeply important to me; supporting Navy sailors and Marines, and their families.”

Arleigh Burke-class destroyers are the backbone of the U.S. Navy’s surface fleet providing protection to America around the globe.

They incorporate stealth techniques, allowing these highly capable, multi-mission ships to conduct a variety of operations, from peacetime presence to national security, providing a wide range of warfighting capabilities in air, surface and subsurface domains.

NATION

Remember: Eulogies highlight Carter's moral character**FROM PAGE 1**

Plains, Ga., after leaving the White House. "He eliminated diseases in forgotten places. He waged peace anywhere in the world, wherever he saw a chance. He loved people."

Joshua said Carter explained his dedication by saying that, as a Christian and a follower of Jesus Christ, "he worshipped the Prince of Peace."

Jason Carter, another grandson, praised his grandfather and his wife, Rosalynn, who died in 2023.

"They were small-town people who never forgot who they were and where they were from no matter what happened in their lives," said Jason, who chairs the Carter Center, a global humanitarian operation founded by the former president shortly after leaving office.

Carter died Dec. 29 at the age of 100, living so long that two of the eulogies were written by people who died before him — his vice president Walter Mondale and his White House predecessor Gerald Ford.

"By fate of a brief season, Jimmy Carter and I were rivals," said the eulogy from Ford, which was read by his son Steven. "But for the many wonderful years that followed, friendship bonded us as no two presidents since John Adams and Thomas Jefferson."

Carter defeated Ford in 1976 but the presidents and their wives became close friends, and Carter eulogized Ford at his own funeral.

The extraordinary gathering offered an unusual moment of comity for the nation in a factionalized, hyper-partisan era. Former President Barack Obama and President-elect Donald Trump, political rivals who have mocked each other for years, sat next to each other Thursday and talked for several minutes, even sharing a laugh.

Biden, who will leave office in 11 days, hinted at politics in repeating several times that "character" was Carter's chief attribute. Biden said the former president taught him the imperative that "everyone should be treated with dignity and respect."

"We have an obligation to give hate no safe harbor," Biden said, also noting the importance of standing up to "abuse in power." Those comments echoed Biden's typical criticisms of Trump, his predecessor and successor.

Days of formal ceremonies and remembrances from political leaders, business titans and rank-and-file citizens have honored Carter for decency and using a prodigious work ethic to do more than obtain political power.

The proceedings began on Thursday morning as military service members carried Carter's flag-draped casket down the east



JACQUELYN MARTIN / AP

From left, former President Bill Clinton, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, former President George W. Bush and Laura Bush, former President Barack Obama, President-elect Donald Trump and his wife, Melania Trump, arrive before the state funeral Thursday for former President Jimmy Carter at Washington National Cathedral in Washington.



RICKY CARIOTI, The Washington Post / AP

Amy Carter touches the flag-draped casket of her father, former President Jimmy Carter, at the U.S. Capitol on Tuesday.

steps of the U.S. Capitol, where the former president had laid in state, to be transported to the cathedral. There was also a 21-gun salute.

At the cathedral, the Armed Forces Chorus sang the hymn "Be Still My Soul" before Carter's casket was brought inside.

Mourners also heard from 92-year-old Andrew Young, a former Atlanta mayor, congressman and U.N. ambassador during the Carter administration. Carter outlived much of his Cabinet and inner circle, but remained especially close to Young — a friendship that brought together a white Georgian and Black Georgian who grew up in the era of Jim Crow segregation.

"Jimmy Carter was a blessing that helped create a great United States of America," Young said.

Thursday concludes six days of national rites that began in Plains, Ga., where Carter was born in 1924, lived most of his life and died after 22 months in hospice care. A second service was planned later Thursday in Plains.

Long lines of mourners waited several hours in frigid temperatures to file past his flag-draped casket in the rotunda, as tributes focused as much on Carter's humanitarian work after leaving the White House as what he did as president from 1977 to 1981.

After the morning service in Washington, Carter's remains, his



MARK SCHIEFELBEIN / AP

A joint services body bearer team carries the flag-draped casket of former President Jimmy Carter into the Washington National Cathedral on Thursday for a state funeral.

four children and extended family were to return to Georgia on a Boeing 747 that serves as Air Force One when the sitting president is aboard.

The outspoken Baptist, who campaigned as a born-again Christian, will then be remembered in an afternoon funeral at Maranatha Baptist Church, the small edifice where he taught Sunday school for decades after leaving the White House and where his casket will sit beneath a wooden cross he fashioned in his own woodshop.

Following a final ride through his hometown, past the old train depot that served as his 1976 presidential campaign headquarters,

he will be buried on family land in a plot next to Rosalynn, to whom Carter was married for more than 77 years.

Carter, who won the presidency promising good government and honest talk for an electorate disillusioned by the Vietnam War and Watergate, signed significant legislation and negotiated a landmark peace agreement between Israel and Egypt.

But Carter also presided over inflation, rising interest rates and international crises — most notably the Iran hostage situation with Americans held in Tehran for more than a year. Carter lost a landslide to Republican Ronald Reagan in 1980.

NATION

Wildfires: High winds fuel destruction in Calif.

FROM PAGE 1

used their phones to record video of the blazing hills.

Los Angeles Fire Department Capt. Erik Scott said they were able to keep the fire in check because “we hit it hard and fast and Mother Nature was a little nicer to us today than she was yesterday.”

On Wednesday, hurricane-force winds blew embers, igniting block after block in the coastal neighborhood of Pacific Palisades and in Altadena, a community near Pasadena. Aircraft were grounded for a time because of the winds, hampering firefighting efforts.

Nearly 2,000 homes, businesses and other structures have been destroyed in those blazes — called the Palisades and Eaton fires — and the number is expected to increase. The five deaths recorded so far were from the Eaton Fire near Pasadena.

More than 100,000 people are under evacuation orders, and the fires have consumed about 45 square miles — roughly the size of the city of San Francisco. The Palisades Fire is already the most destructive in Los Angeles’ history.

Jose Velasquez sprayed his family’s Altadena home with water as embers rained down on the roof. He managed to save their home, which also houses their family business selling churros, a Mexican pastry. Many of his neighbors were at work when they lost their homes.

“So we had to call a few people and then we had people messaging, asking if their house was still standing,” he said. “We had to tell them that it’s not.”

In Pasadena, Fire Chief Chad Augustin said the city’s water system was stretched and was further hampered by power outages, but even without those issues, firefighters would not have been able to stop the fire due to the intense

winds.

“Those erratic wind gusts were throwing embers for multiple miles ahead of the fire,” he said.

Still, questions were being raised about why some hydrants ran dry and what caused the water system to buckle when it was needed most.

The dramatic level of destruction was apparent in a comparison of satellite images before and after the fire.

About 250 homes in Altadena that had been dotted with green leafy trees were reduced to rubble. Only a few homes remained, some still in flames according to images from Maxar Technologies. Just a handful of 70 wall-to-wall homes overhanging the Pacific Ocean in Malibu appeared intact.

In Pacific Palisades, a hillside area along the coast dotted with celebrity homes, block after block of California Mission Style homes and bungalows were reduced to charred remains. Ornate iron railing wrapped around the smoldering frame of one house. Swimming pools were blackened with soot, and sports cars slumped on melted tires.

The main fires grew rapidly in different areas that had two things in common: densely packed homes in places that are choked with dry vegetation that was primed to burn.

Flames moved so quickly that many barely had time to escape, some abandoning their vehicles and setting out on foot. Police sought shelter inside their cars, and residents at a senior living center were pushed to safety in wheelchairs and hospital beds.

In Palisades Village, the public library, two major grocery stores, a pair of banks and several boutiques were destroyed.

“It’s just really weird coming back to somewhere that doesn’t really exist anymore,” said Dylan



CHRIS PIZZELLO/AP

Pedestrians help a firefighter stretch a hose as an apartment building burns Wednesday in the Altadena section of Pasadena, Calif.



ETHAN SWOPE/AP

Residents embrace outside of a burning property as the Eaton Fire swept through Wednesday in Altadena, Calif.

Vincent, who said his elementary school had burned down.

California’s wildfire season is beginning earlier and ending later due to rising temperatures and decreased rainfall tied to climate change, according to recent data.

Rains that usually end fire season are often delayed, meaning fires can burn through the winter months, according to the Western Fire Chiefs Association.

Dry winds, including the notorious Santa Anas, have contribut-

ed to warmer-than-average temperatures in Southern California, which has not seen more than 0.1 inches of rain since early May.

Winds gusted at 80 mph Wednesday, according to the National Weather Service. Fire conditions could last through Friday, but wind speeds were expected to be lower on Thursday.

President Joe Biden signed a federal emergency declaration after arriving at a Santa Monica fire station for a briefing with Gov. Gavin Newsom, who dispatched National Guard troops to help.

Hollywood studios suspended production, and Universal Studios closed its theme park.

Several Southern California landmarks were heavily damaged, including the Reel Inn in Malibu, a seafood restaurant. Owner Teddy Leonard and her husband hope to rebuild.

“When you look at the grand scheme of things, as long as your family is well and everyone’s alive, you’re still winning, right?” she said.

Billy Crystal, Mandy Moore among those in LA who lost homes

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES—Fires burning in and around Los Angeles have claimed the homes of numerous celebrities, including Billy Crystal, Mandy Moore and Paris Hilton and led to sweeping disruptions of entertainment events.

Three awards ceremonies planned for this weekend have been postponed. Next week’s Oscar nominations have been delayed. And tens of thousands of Angelenos are displaced and awaiting word Thursday on whether their homes survived the flames — some of them the city’s most famous denizens.

More than 1,900 structures have

been destroyed and the number is expected to increase. More than 130,000 people are also under evacuation orders in the metropolitan area, from the Pacific Coast inland to Pasadena, a number that continues to shift as new fires erupt.

Late Wednesday, a fire in the Hollywood Hills was scorching the hills near the famed Hollywood Bowl and Dolby Theatre, which is the home of the Academy Awards.

Here are how the fires are impacting celebrities and the Los Angeles entertainment industry:

Celebrities like Crystal and his wife, Janice, were sharing memories of the homes they lost.

The Crystals lost the home in the Pacific Palisades neighborhood that they lived in for 45 years.

“Janice and I lived in our home since 1979. We raised our children and grandchildren here. Every inch of our house was filled with love. Beautiful memories that can’t be taken away. We are heartbroken of course but with the love of our children and friends we will get through this,” the Crystals wrote in the statement.

Mandy Moore lost her home in the Altadena neighborhood roughly 30 miles east of the Palisades.

“Honestly, I’m in shock and feeling numb for all so many have lost, including my family. My chil-

dren’s school is gone. Our favorite restaurants, leveled. So many friends and loved ones have lost everything too,” Moore wrote on Instagram in a post that included video of devastated streets in the foothill suburb.

“Our community is broken but we will be here to rebuild together. Sending love to all affected and on the front lines trying to get this under control,” Moore wrote.

Hilton posted a news video clip on Instagram and said it included footage of her destroyed home in Malibu. “This home was where we built so many precious memories. It’s where Phoenix took his first steps and where we dreamed of

building a lifetime of memories with London,” she said, referencing her young children.”

Elwes, the star of “The Princess Bride” and numerous other films, wrote on Instagram on Wednesday that his family was safe but their home had burned in the coastal Palisades fire. “Sadly we did lose our home but we are grateful to have survived this truly devastating fire,” Elwes wrote.

Flames burned parts of the Palisades Charter High School, which has been featured in many Hollywood productions including the 1976 horror movie “Carrie,” the 2003 remake of “Freaky Friday” and the TV series “Teen Wolf.”

NATION

'America First' candidate sounds like imperialist

Trump aide defends rhetoric that irritates, confuses allies

BY JILL COLVIN
AND ROB GILLIES
Associated Press

NEW YORK — Donald Trump ran on a return to his "America First" foreign policy platform. The U.S., he said, could no longer afford to be the world's policeman. On his watch, he pledged, there would be no new wars.

But since winning a second term, the president-elect has been embracing a new imperialist agenda, threatening to seize the Panama Canal and Greenland — perhaps by military force — and saying he will use economic coercion to pressure Canada to become the nation's 51st state.

"Canada and the United States, that would really be something. You get rid of that artificially drawn line, and you take a look at what that looks like and it would also be much better for national security," Trump said of the world's longest international border and the U.S.'s second-largest trade partner.

Such talk of undermining sovereign borders and using military force against allies and fellow NATO members — even if said lightly — marks a stunning departure from decades-old norms about territorial integrity. And it is rhetoric that analysts say could embolden America's enemies by suggesting the U.S. is now OK with countries using force to redraw borders at a time when Russia is pressing forward with its invasion of Ukraine and China is threatening Taiwan, which it claims as its own territory.

"If I'm Vladimir Putin or Xi Jinping, this is music to my ears," said John Bolton, Trump's former national security adviser-turned-critic, who also served as ambassador to the United Nations.

Trump's language, reflecting a 19th century world view that de-



JOSE LUIS MAGANA/AP

President-elect Donald Trump flanked by Sen. John Barrasso, R-Wyo., and Sen. Shelley Moore Capito, R-W.Va., talks to reporters after a meeting with Republican leadership at the Capitol on Wednesday.

financed European colonial powers, comes as international allies were already grappling with the implications of his return to the world stage.

Gerald Butts, outgoing Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's former top adviser and a longtime close friend, said Trump seems more emboldened than when he first took office in 2017.

"I think he's feeling a lot less encumbered than he was the last time. There are no restraints. This is maximum Trump," he said.

Butts is part of a WhatsApp group with others who staffed heads of state and government during the first Trump term. "Someone joked that the big fear the last time was that he didn't know what he was doing and the big fear this time is that he does," he recounted.

Trump's swaggering rhetoric also marks a continuation of the kind of testosterone-heavy energy that was a signature of his campaign, particularly as he worked to win over younger male voters with appearances on popular podcasts.

Charlie Kirk, a key Trump ally who joined Trump's eldest son, Donald Trump Jr., on a trip to Greenland this week, argued on his pod-

cast Wednesday that it was imperative for the U.S. to control Greenland. The island is an autonomous territory of Denmark, a longtime U.S. ally and a founding NATO member.

Beyond the country's strategic location in the Arctic and its rich resources, Kirk said, "there is this other component. It makes America dream again, that we're not just this sad, low-testosterone, beta male slouching in our chair, allowing the world to run over us."

"It is the resurrection of masculine American energy. It is the return of Manifest Destiny," said Kirk, whose Turning Point group helped with Trump's get-out-the-vote effort.

Trump allies have long argued that his bluster and most audacious statements are all part of his complex negotiating tactics. Aides note that nearly half of U.S. shipping containers travel through the Panama Canal and that key canal ports are controlled by a Hong Kong-based firm.

Greenland is home to the Pituffik Space Base, the northernmost U.S. post, which plays a key role in missile warnings and space surveil-

lance. And China and Russia have been making their own investments in the Arctic at a time when new potential shipping routes are opening as ice caps melt.

Canada, Trump's team notes, spends far less on defense than its southern neighbor.

"Every decision President Trump makes is in the best interest of the United States and the American people. That's why President Trump has called attention to legitimate national security and economic concerns regarding Canada, Greenland and Panama," said Trump-Vance Transition spokesperson Karoline Leavitt.

But Michael McFaul, the Obama-era ambassador to Russia who now serves as director of the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University and a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, said Trump's language is counterproductive to U.S. national security interests.

"President Trump is about to take over at one of the most dangerous times in American history," he said. "We will be best at addressing those threats with allies. Allies are our superpower. And so I wish he would fo-

cus on the real threats and not invent threats."

Trump's trolling is not the negotiating ploy of "crazy genius," he said, and will have consequences.

"We've got serious enemies and adversaries in the world, and we're better off with the Canadians and the Danes with us than pissed off with us," he said.

Indeed, Canadian officials have responded with increasing anger.

"The joke is over," Dominic LeBlanc, the country's finance minister and point person for U.S.-Canada relations, said Wednesday. "It's a way for him, I think, to sow confusion, to agitate people, to create chaos knowing this will never happen."

Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum responded with sarcasm Wednesday to another Trump proposal: to rename the Gulf of Mexico as the "Gulf of America." Standing before an old map, she quipped that North America should be renamed "América Mexicana," or "Mexican America," because a founding document dating from 1814 that preceded Mexico's constitution referred to it that way.

"That sounds nice, no?" she said.

Denmark and Panama have responded similarly, with Panama's foreign minister, Javier Martínez-Acha, saying, "The sovereignty of our canal," which the country has controlled for more than 25 years, "is not negotiable and is part of our history of struggle and an irreversible conquest."

Bolton has long criticized Trump for lacking a coherent policy strategy, saying his approach is "transactional, ad hoc, episodic and really viewed from the prism of how it helps Donald Trump."

He said Trump has never liked Trudeau, and was clearly enjoying trolling the Canadian leader as he railed against the nations' trade imbalance. Canada, a resource-rich nation, sells more goods to the U.S. than it buys.

But Bolton said the president-elect's expansionist talk about Canada and Greenland is likely to backfire, adding: "When you do things that make it less likely you're going to achieve the objectives, that's not master bargaining, that's crazy."

Trump's inaugural committee raises record \$170M in donations

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President-elect Donald Trump has raised more than \$170 million for his upcoming inauguration, a record amount as tech executives and big donors have eagerly written large checks to help bankroll the ceremony.

The private donations collected thus far were confirmed by a person with firsthand knowledge of the fundraising who was not au-

thorized to speak publicly. The person said Trump's inaugural committee is expected to raise more than \$200 million by the end of the effort.

Trump's inaugural committee did not immediately respond to a message seeking comment Wednesday. The committee has not yet detailed how it plans to spend the donations.

The private donations are typically used to help pay for events

surrounding the inauguration, such as costs related to the oath of office ceremony itself, along with a parade and glitzy inaugural balls. Money leftover from the inaugural committee is expected to be used toward a future Trump presidential library, according to the person.

The whopping amount raised thus far by Trump's presidential inaugural committee is more than double the amount President Joe

Biden raised four years ago when he brought in nearly \$62 million for his inauguration, according to Federal Election Commission records.

Donations to Trump's first inauguration in 2016 also set a record when he brought in nearly \$107 million.

After the former president's victory in November, along with Republicans winning control of both chambers of Congress, major

donors, including tech companies, have been writing big checks as they've sought to improve their relationship with the incoming president.

Amazon and Meta, the parent company of Facebook and Instagram, said last month they were each planning to donate \$1 million to Trump's inaugural fund. OpenAI CEO Sam Altman also said he was planning to make a \$1 million personal donation.

NATION

Southern states weather new storms

Winter blast closes schools, affects travel

By JAMIE STENGLE
AND SEAN MURPHY
Associated Press

DALLAS — Another blast of winter storms in the U.S. on Thursday closed schools, snarled flights and put millions of residents across the South under warnings of snow and freezing rain that could cause dangerous travel conditions.

The storm started dumping a mix of sleet and heavy snow Thursday morning in north Texas and Oklahoma, where schools canceled classes for more than 1 million students. Closures also kept students home in Kansas City and Arkansas, while in Virginia, frustrations mounted in the state capital over a boil-water advisory caused by an earlier round of winter storms.

Hundreds of flights were canceled by Thursday morning in Dallas, according to tracking platform FlightAware, with more than 2,100 delays and 1,500 cancellations reported nationally.

The cold snap coincided with rare January wildfires tearing through the Los Angeles area, forcing residents to flee from burning homes through flames, ferocious winds and towering clouds of smoke.

Road crews began treating roads in Arkansas, Oklahoma and Texas ahead of the expected arrival of as much as 7 inches of snow in some parts of those states. The precipitation early Thursday was mostly wet snow in the Dallas metroplex, with heavier snowfall farther north into Oklahoma, according to the National Weather Service.

"The roads are slushy, but there's also slick spots," said Charles Daniel, a truck driver



LM OTERO/AP

Phillip Stanford prepares firewood for sale Wednesday, in Dallas, ahead of a winter storm expected to hit the North Texas region. Roads could be slick Friday as 75,000 fans were expected to head to AT&T Stadium in Arlington for the college football championship semifinal between Texas and Ohio State.

hauling a 48-foot trailer in south-central Oklahoma on Thursday. "I have not seen any accidents, but I have seen a couple of people get stuck out on the road and sliding around.

Gov. Greg Abbott said the state deployed emergency crews in advance and urged residents to avoid driving in bad weather if possible. In Arkansas, Gov. Sarah Sanders mobilized 140 National Guardsmen to assist State Police with transporting any stranded motorists.

Roads could be slick Friday as 75,000 fans were expected head to AT&T Stadium in Arlington for the college football championship semifinal between Texas and Ohio State in the Cotton Bowl. Arlington spokesperson Susan Shrock said crews will be ready to address any hazardous road conditions.

A mix of sleet, snow and freezing rain was expected along a stretch from New Mexico to Ala-

bama. Forecasters said the heaviest amounts were likely in parts of Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma and Texas.

The system was expected to push northeastward by Friday with heavy snow and freezing rain all the way to the Virginia and North Carolina coasts. As much as 8 inches of snow could fall in parts of Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee and West Virginia through Saturday, the weather service said.

Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp declared a state of emergency across the state on Thursday as the northern half of the state girded for snow and ice beginning Friday morning.

Kemp's move came as increasing numbers of schools and universities, including the University of Georgia in Athens, called off in-person classes for Friday.

National Weather Service forecasters are warning that snow and ice are likely to accumulate

across metro Atlanta, making roadways treacherous and possibly threatening power outages. Up to 2 inches of snow and up to a quarter inch of ice are expected in the Atlanta metropolitan area.

Tennessee Emergency Management Agency Director Patrick Sheehan said he expected schools across the state to close Friday, although decisions will be made at the local level.

The polar vortex of ultra-cold air usually spins around the North Pole, but it sometimes ventures south into the U.S., Europe and Asia. Some experts say such events are happening more frequently, paradoxically, because of a warming world.

Richmond will remain under the boil-water advisory until at least Friday as officials work to restore the water reservoir system, which malfunctioned after a storm caused a power outage, Mayor Danny Avula said.

A quarter of freshwater animals said to be in peril

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Nearly a quarter of animals living in rivers, lakes and other freshwater sources are threatened with extinction, according to new research published Wednesday.

"Huge rivers like the Amazon can appear mighty, but at the same time freshwater environments are very fragile," said study co-author Patricia Charvet, a biologist at Brazil's Federal University of Ceará.

Freshwater habitats — including rivers, lakes, ponds, streams, bogs and wetlands — cover less than 1% of the planet's surface, but support 10% of its animal species, said Catherine Sayer, a zoologist at the International Union for Conservation of Nature in England.

The researchers examined around 23,500 species of dragonflies, fish, crabs and other animals that depend exclusively on freshwater ecosystems. They found that 24% were at risk of extinction — classified as vulnerable, endangered or critically endangered — due to compounding threats from pollution, dams, water extraction, agriculture, invasive species, climate change and other disruptions.

"Most species don't have just one threat putting them at risk of extinction, but many threats acting together," said Sayer, a study-co-author.

The tally, published in the journal *Nature*, is the first that time researchers have analyzed the global risk to freshwater species. Previous studies have focused on land animals including mammals, birds and reptiles.

Duke University ecologist Stuart Pimm, who was not involved in the study, called it "a long-awaited and hugely important paper."

"Almost every big river in North America and Europe is massively modified" through damming, putting freshwater species at risk, he said.

In South America, the vast Amazon River ecosystem also faces threats from deforestation, wildfires and illegal gold mining, said Charvet.

Illegal fires to clear forest result in waves of ash polluting the river, and unlicensed gold miners dump mercury into the water, she said.

Rivers and wetlands "concentrate everything that happens around them," she said. "If something goes really wrong, like an acid or oil spill, you can threaten an entire species. There's nowhere else for these animals to go."

Energy czar appointed amid Puerto Rico's power crisis

Associated Press

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico — Puerto Rico's new governor appointed a so-called energy czar on Wednesday to help pull the U.S. territory out of a power-supply crisis.

The nomination of Josué Colón comes days after a massive blackout hit the island, leaving nearly all its 3.2 million inhabitants in the dark as they prepared for New Year's Eve.

"Right now, we're in an emergency," said Gov. Jenniffer González Colón. "Our electrical system is in such a precarious situation that anything can cause the power to go out."

Josué Colón is currently the execu-

tive director of Puerto Rico's Electric Power Authority but would step down if lawmakers approve his new position, which they're expected to do in upcoming days. In his new role, he will supervise Genera PR, which oversees the generation of power on the island, and Luma Energy, which handles transmission and distribution.

As outages persist and officials investigate what caused the Dec. 31 blackout, critics have called on the government to cancel its contracts with the two private power companies. Last year, the average duration of power interruptions per client in

Puerto Rico increased by nearly 20% to 1,432 minutes a year, far above the established benchmark of 102 minutes, according to Puerto Rico's Energy Bureau. The average frequency of interruptions also increased last year.

In an update Wednesday, Luma said more than 2,500 clients remain without power since the Dec. 31 blackout and that it would continue cooperating with government officials and others to overcome the grid's "latent challenges."

"I want to not only send a message that we here are not going to be lenient with contracts made with Puerto

Rico's government, but that we are going to ensure Puerto Rico has power," González told a news conference. She noted that the U.S. government has not yet released \$18 billion slated for Puerto Rico's crumbling grid, and that Colón would push to help obtain those funds.

The federal government has already released millions of dollars to help stabilize the grid and rebuild it after Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico in September 2017.

The grid, however, was already in a fragile state because of a lack of maintenance and investment when the Category 4 storm hit.

NATION



MANUEL BALCE CENETA/AP

President Joe Biden speaks at a reception for new Democratic members of Congress in the State Dining Room of the White House, on Sunday.

Biden casts doubt on fitness to serve another four years

BY DARLENE SUPERVILLE
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden, in a new interview days before he leaves office, cast doubt on his fitness to serve another four years even as he maintained that he could have won election to a second term.

The outgoing Democratic president also told USA Today in the interview published Wednesday that he tried during his Oval Office meeting with President-elect Donald Trump to discourage the Republican from going after his political opponents, as he has said he would.

And Biden said he had not decided whether to issue sweeping pardons to preemptively protect those individuals from any possible retribution by Trump or the incoming administration.

“I don’t know,” Biden responded when USA Today Washington Bureau Chief Susan Page asked if he would’ve had the vigor to serve another four years in office. Biden and Page sat down at the White House on Sunday for the president’s rare interview with a print publication.

Biden, 82, talks about how he didn’t intend to run for president in 2020, but says that when Trump sought reelection last year, “I

really thought I had the best chance of beating him. But I also wasn’t looking to be president when I was 85 years old, 86 years old.”

“But I don’t know. Who the hell knows?” he added. “So far, so good. But who knows what I’m going to be when I’m 86 years old?”

Did he believe he could have been reelected? “It’s presumptuous to say that, but I think yes,” Biden said. He said his assessment was “based on the polling” he reviewed, but he did not elaborate.

Concerns about Biden’s age and fitness had followed him since he announced his bid for reelection, but he dropped out of the presidential race under pressure last July after faltering in a debate against Trump. He endorsed Vice President Kamala Harris. She lost to the Republican.

In the interview, Biden said he was considering preemptive pardons but had not decided whether to issue any. When he and Trump met in the Oval Office after the election, Biden said, “I tried to make it clear that there was no need, and it was counterintuitive for his interest to go back and try to settle scores.”

Trump didn’t answer one way or the other, Biden said, adding, “He just basically listened.”

Accused 9/11 mastermind’s lawyers fight for plea deal

BY ELLEN KNICKMEYER
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Lawyers for accused 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed are urging a federal appeals panel to let his scheduled guilty plea Friday in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, go forward in a plea agreement that would spare him and two co-defendants the risk of the death penalty in al-Qaida’s notorious Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

Defense lawyers in a filing late Wednesday described Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin’s attempts to throw out a plea deal that his own military had negotiated and approved as the latest in two decades of “fitful” and “negligent” mishandling of the case by the U.S. military and successive administrations.

Mohammed is due to enter his plea Friday morning in the attacks, in which 19 al-Qaida hijackers smashed airliners into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and another crashed into a Pennsylvania field, killing nearly 3,000 people. Family members of some of the victims are gathered at Guantanamo for the moment.

Austin unexpectedly renounced the plea agreement after it was announced this summer, and the Biden administration’s Justice Department is seeking to block Mohammed’s plea from going forward at a U.S. military commission courtroom.

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A former FBI informant who fabricated a story about President Joe Biden and his son Hunter accepting bribes that became central to Republicans’ impeachment effort was sentenced Wednesday to six years in prison.

Alexander Smirnov pleaded guilty last month in Los Angeles federal court to tax evasion and lying to the FBI about the phony bribery scheme in what prosecutors say was an effort to influence the outcome of the 2020 presidential election.

Smirnov, a dual U.S. and Israeli citizen, falsely claimed to his FBI handler that executives from the Ukrainian energy company Burisma had paid then-Vice President Biden and his son \$5 million each around 2015.

Smirnov’s explosive claim in 2020 came after he expressed “bias” about Joe Biden as a presiden-

“An 11th-hour stay will accomplish nothing but more delay and it will reward the government for its — at best — negligent handling” of the 9/11 prosecutions, Mohammed’s lawyers argued in a filing to a District of Columbia federal appeals panel just before midnight.

The federal appeals panel appears on track to possibly rule Thursday on the request by the Biden administration.

Legal and logistical challenges have bogged down the 9/11 case in the 17 years since Mohammed, who prosecutors say conceived the idea of using hijacked planes in the attacks, was first charged. The case remains in pre-trial hearings, with no trial date set.

Years of defense and prosecution testimony are ongoing about how much the sustained torture of Mohammed and other defendants in CIA custody renders their later statements legally inadmissible.

With the prosecution dragging on for decades and no conclusion in sight, military prosecutors this summer notified families of the victims that the senior Pentagon official overseeing Guantanamo had approved a plea deal after more than two years of negotiations.

The deal was “the best path to finality and justice,” military prosecutors told families then. In it, Mohammed and co-defendants Walid bin Attash and Mustafa al-Hawsawi agreed to plead guilty to 2,976

murder charges in exchange for life sentences.

Austin unexpectedly announced Aug. 2 that he was nullifying the plea deal, and he has fought since then to scrap it. He argues that a decision on death penalties in an attack as grave as Sept. 11 should only be made by the defense secretary.

Defense attorneys say that the plea agreement is already in effect and that Austin has no legal standing to throw it out after the fact. The Biden administration went to the federal appeals court Tuesday after the Guantanamo judge and a military review panel sided against Austin’s request.

Mohammed’s attorneys argued in the new filing that Austin’s “extraordinary intervention in this case is solely a product of his lack of oversight over his own duly appointed delegate,” meaning the senior Pentagon official overseeing Guantanamo.

The Justice Department’s brief earlier this week said that the government would be irreparably harmed if the guilty pleas were accepted for Mohammed and the two co-defendants.

It said the government would be denied a chance for a public trial and the opportunity to “seek capital punishment against three men charged with a heinous act of mass murder that caused the death of thousands of people and shocked the nation and the world.”

Ex-FBI informant who fabricated Biden bribery story given 6 years

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A former FBI informant who fabricated a story about President Joe Biden and his son Hunter accepting bribes that became central to Republicans’ impeachment effort was sentenced Wednesday to six years in prison.

Alexander Smirnov pleaded guilty last month in Los Angeles federal court to tax evasion and lying to the FBI about the phony bribery scheme in what prosecutors say was an effort to influence the outcome of the 2020 presidential election.

Smirnov, a dual U.S. and Israeli citizen, falsely claimed to his FBI handler that executives from the Ukrainian energy company Burisma had paid then-Vice President Biden and his son \$5 million each around 2015.

Smirnov’s explosive claim in 2020 came after he expressed “bias” about Joe Biden as a presiden-

tial candidate, according to prosecutors. In reality, investigators found Smirnov had only routine business dealings with Burisma starting in 2017 — after Biden’s term as vice president.

Prosecutors noted that Smirnov’s false claim “set off a firestorm in Congress” when it resurfaced years later as part of the House impeachment inquiry into President Biden, a Democrat who defeated Republican then-President Donald Trump in 2020. The Biden administration dismissed the House impeachment effort as a “stunt.”

Before Smirnov’s arrest, Republicans had demanded the FBI release the unredacted form documenting the unverified allegations, though they acknowledged they

couldn’t confirm if they were true.

couldn’t confirm if they were true.

“In committing his crimes he betrayed the United States, a country that showed him nothing but generosity, including conferring on him the greatest honor it can bestow, citizenship,” Justice Department special counsel David Weiss’ team wrote in court papers. “He repaid the trust the United States placed in him to be a law-abiding naturalized citizen and, more specifically, that one of its premier law enforcement agencies placed in him to tell the truth as a confidential human source, by attempting to interfere in a Presidential election.”

Smirnov will get credit for the time he has served behind bars since his arrest last February in the case accusing him of lying to the FBI. Prosecutors in November brought new tax charges alleging he concealed millions of dollars of income he earned between 2020 and 2022.



Smirnov

NATION

Flying taxi services on the horizon in US

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE
Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — When he was still a boy making long, tedious trips between his school and his woodsy home in the mountains during the 1980s, JoeBen Bevirt began fantasizing about flying cars that could whisk him to his destination in a matter of minutes.

As CEO of Joby Aviation, Bevirt is getting closer to turning his boyhood flights of fancy into a dream come true as he and latter-day versions of the Wright Brothers launch a new class of electric-powered aircraft vying to become taxis in the sky.

The aircraft — known as “electric vertical take-off and landing vehicle, or eVTOL — lift off the ground like a helicopter before flying at speeds up to 200



Goldstein

miles per hour with a range of about 100 miles. And these craft do it without filling the air with excessive noise caused by fuel-powered helicopters and small airplanes.

“We are just a few steps from the finish line. We want to turn what are now one- and two-hour trips into five-minute trips,” Bevirt, 51, said before a Joby air taxi took off on a test flight in Marina, Calif., — located about 40 miles south from where he grew up in the mountains.

Archer Aviation, a Silicon Valley a Silicon Valley company backed by automaker Stellantis and United Airlines, has been testing its own eVTOLs over farmland in Salinas, Calif., where a prototype called “Midnight” could be seen gliding above a tractor plowing fields last November.

The tests are part of the journey that Joby Aviation and other ambitious companies that collectively have raised billions of dollars are taking to turn flying cars into more than just pie-in-the-sky concepts popularized in 1960s-era cartoon series, “The Jetsons,” and the 1982 science fiction film, “Blade Runner.”

Archer Aviation and nearby Wisk Aero, with ties to aerospace giant Boeing Co. and Google co-founder Larry Page, are also at the forefront in the race to bring air taxis to market in the United States. Joby has already formed a partnership to connect its air taxis with Delta Air Lines passengers while Archer Aviation has lined up a deal to sell up to 200 of its aircraft to United Airlines.

Flying taxis have made enough regulatory inroads with the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration to result in the recent creation of a new aircraft category called “po-



JoeBen Bevirt, CEO of Joby Aviation, stands next to an “electric vertical take-off and landing” aircraft, also known as an eVTOL, in Marina, Calif. in October.

PHOTOS BY TERRY CHEA/AP

wered lift,” a step that the agency hadn’t taken since helicopters were introduced for civilian use in the 1940s.

But there are more regulatory hurdles to be cleared before air taxis will be allowed to carry passengers in the U.S., making Dubai the most likely place where eVTOLs will take commercial flight — perhaps by the end of this year.

“It’s a tricky business to develop a whole new class of vehicles,” said Adam Lim, director of Alton Aviation Consultancy, a firm tracking the industry’s evolution. “It is going to be like a crawl, walk, run situation. Right now, I think we are still crawling. We are not going to have the Jetsons-type reality where everyone will be flying around everywhere in the next two to three years.”

China is also vying to make flying cars a reality, a quest that has piqued President-elect Donald Trump’s interest in making the vehicles a priority for his incom-



A Joby Aviation employee works on the assembly of an eVTOL aircraft in Marina.

ing administration during the next four years.

If the ambitions of eVTOL pioneers are realized in the U.S., people will be able to hop in an air taxi to get to and from airports serving New York and Los Angeles within

the next few years.

Because its electric taxis can fly unimpeded at high speeds, Joby envisions transporting up to four Delta Air Lines passengers at a time from New York area airports to Manhattan in about 10 minutes or less. To start, air taxi prices almost certainly will be significantly more than the cost of taking a cab or Uber ride from JFK airport to Manhattan, but the difference could narrow over time because eVTOLs should be able to transport a higher volume of passengers than ground vehicles stuck in traffic going each way.

“You will see highways in the sky,” Archer Aviation CEO Adam Goldstein predicted during an interview at the company’s San Jose, Calif., headquarters. “There will be hundreds, maybe thousands of these aircraft flying in these individual cities and it will truly change the way cities are being built.”



An “electric vertical take-off and landing” aircraft built by Joby Aviation is parked at an airfield in Marina.

Investors are betting Goldstein is right, helping Archer raise an additional \$430 million late last year from a group that included Stellantis and United Airlines. The infusion came shortly after a Japanese automaker poured another \$500 million into Joby to bring its total investment in that company to nearly \$900 million.

Those investments were part of the \$13 billion that eVTOL companies have raised during the past five years, according to Alton Aviation.

Both Joby Aviation and Archer Aviation went public in 2021 through reverse mergers, opening up another fundraising avenue and making it easier to recruit engineers with the allure of stock options. Both companies have been able to attract workers away from electric automaker Tesla and rocket maker SpaceX and, in Archer’s instance, raiding the ranks of Wisk Aero.

The Wisk defections triggered a lawsuit accusing Archer of intellectual property theft in a dispute that was resolved with a 2023 settlement that included an agreement for the two sides to collaborate on some facets of eVTOL technology.

Before going public, Joby also acquired eVTOL technology developed by ride-hailing service Uber in an \$83 million deal that also brought those two companies together as partners.

But none of the deals or technological advances have stopped the losses from piling up at the companies building flying cars. Joby, whose roots date back to 2009 when Bevirt founded the company, has sustained \$1.6 billion in losses since its inception while Archer has amassed nearly \$1.5 billion in losses since its founding in 2018.

While they moved to commercial air taxi services, both Joby and Archer are trying to bring in revenue by negotiating contracts to use their eVTOLs in the U.S. military for deliveries and other other short-range missions. Archer has forged a partnership with Anduril Industries, a military defense technology specialist founded by Oculus headset inventor Palmer Luckey, to help it win deals.

The uncertain prospects have left both companies with relatively low market values by tech industry standards, with Joby’s hovering around \$7 billion and Archer’s \$6 billion.

But Bevirt sees blue skies ahead. “eVTOLs are going to transform the way we move,” he said. “It’s a dramatically better way to get around. Seeing the world from the air is better than being stuck in the traffic on the interstate.”

WORLD

Iran holds military drills amid difficulties

By JON GAMBRELL
Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Iran is reeling from a cratering economy and stinging military setbacks across its sphere of influence in the Middle East. Its bad times are likely to get worse once President-elect Donald Trump returns to the White House with his policy of “maximum pressure” on Iran.

Facing difficulties at home and abroad, Iran last week began an unusual two-month-long military drill. It includes testing air defenses near a key nuclear facility and preparing for exercises in waterways vital to the global oil trade.

The military flexing seems aimed at projecting strength, but doubts about its power are high after the past year's setbacks.

The December overthrow of Syrian President Bashar Assad, who Iran supported for years with money and troops, was a major blow to its self-described “Axis of Resistance” across the region. The “axis” had already been hollowed out by Israel's punishing offensives last year against two militant groups backed by Iran — Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Israel also attacked Iran directly on two occasions.

An Iranian Revolutionary Guard general based in Syria offered a blunt assessment this week. “I do not see it as a matter of pride that we lost Syria,” Gen. Behrouz Esbati said, according to an audio recording of a speech he gave that was leaked to the media. “We lost. We badly lost. We blew it.”

At home, Iran's economy is in tatters.

The U.S. and its allies have maintained stiff sanctions to deter it from developing nuclear weapons — and Iran's recent efforts to



HOSSEIN ZOHREVAND, TASNIM NEWS AGENCY/AP

Iranian Revolutionary Guard troops sit in a plane traveling from Rasht in northern Iran to Kermanshah in western Iran, during a drill in this photo released on Sunday.

get them lifted through diplomacy have fallen flat. Pollution chokes the skies in the capital, Tehran, as power plants burn dirty fuel in their struggle to avoid outages during winter. And families are struggling to make ends meet as the Iranian currency, the rial, falls to record lows against the U.S. dollar.

As these burdens rise, so does the likelihood of political protests, which have ignited nationwide in recent years over women's rights and the weak economy.

How Trump chooses to engage with Iran remains to be seen. But on Tuesday he left open the possibility of the U.S. conducting preemptive airstrikes on nuclear sites where Iran is closer than ever to enriching uranium to weapons-grade levels.

“It's a military strategy,” Trump told journalists at his Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida during a wide-ranging news conference. “I'm not answering questions on military strategy.”

Iran insists its nuclear program is peaceful, yet officials there increasingly suggest Tehran could

pursue an atomic bomb.

It's not just Trump or Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, a longtime foe of Tehran, that paint Iran's nuclear program as a major threat. French President Emmanuel Macron, speaking Monday to French ambassadors in Paris, described Iran as “the main strategic and security challenge for France, the Europeans, the entire region and well beyond.”

“The acceleration of its nuclear program is bringing us very close to the breaking point,” Macron said. “Its ballistic program threatens European soil and our interests.”

While Europe had previously been seen as more conciliatory toward Iran, its attitude has hardened. That's likely because of what Macron described as Tehran's “assertive and fully identified military support” of Russia since it's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

France, as well as Germany and the United Kingdom, had been part of Iran's 2015 nuclear deal with world powers. Under that deal, Iran limited its enrichment

of uranium and drastically reduced its stockpile in exchange for the lifting of crushing, United Nations-backed economic sanctions. Trump unilaterally withdrew America from the accord in 2018, and with those U.N. sanctions lifted, it provided cover for China's to purchase oil from Iran.

But now France, Germany and the United Kingdom call Tehran's advances in its atomic program a “nuclear escalation” that needs to be addressed. That raises the possibility of Western nations pushing for what's called a “snapback” of those U.N. sanctions on Iran, which could be catastrophic for the Iranian economy. That “snapback” power expires in October.

On Wednesday, Iran released a visiting Italian journalist, Cecilia Sala, after detaining her for three weeks — even though she had received the government's approval to report from there.

Sala's arrest came days after Italian authorities arrested an Iranian engineer accused by the U.S. of supplying drone technology used in a January 2024 attack on a U.S. outpost in Jordan that killed three American troops. The engineer remains in Italian custody.

The length of the military drills started by Iran's armed forces and its paramilitary Revolutionary Guard may be unusual, but their intended message to the U.S. and Israel — and to its domestic audience — is not. Iran is trying to show itself as capable of defending against any possible attack.

On Tuesday, Iran held air-defense drills around its underground nuclear enrichment facility in the city of Natanz. It claimed it could intercept a so-called “bunker buster” bomb designed to destroy such sites.

However, the drill did not involve any of its four advanced S-300 Russian air defense systems, which Israel targeted in its strikes on Iran. At least two are be-

lieved to have been damaged, and Israeli officials claim all have been taken out.

“Some of the U.S. and Israeli reservations about using force to address Iran's nuclear program have dissipated,” wrote Kenneth Katzman, a longtime Iran analyst for the U.S. government who is now at the New York-based Soufan Center. “It appears likely that, at the very least, the Trump administration would not assertively dissuade Israel from striking Iranian facilities, even if the United States might decline to join the assault.”

There are other ways Iran could respond. This weekend, naval forces plan exercises in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz. Iran for years has threatened to close the strait — a narrow lane through which a fifth of global oil supplies are transported — and it has targeted oil tankers and other ships in those waters since 2019.

“Harassment and seizures are likely to remain the main tools of Iranian counteraction,” the private maritime security firm Ambery warned Thursday.

Its allies may not be much help, though. The tempo of attacks on shipping lanes by Yemen's Houthi rebels, long armed by Iran, have slowed. And Iran has growing reservations about the reliability of Russia.

In the recording of the speech by the Iranian general, Esbati, he alleges that Russia “turned off all radars” in Syria to allow an Israeli airstrike that hit a Guard intelligence center.

Esbati also said Iranian missiles “don't have so much of an impact” and that the U.S. would retaliate against any attack targeting its bases in the region.

“For the time being and in this situation, dragging the region into a military operation does not agree (with the) interest of the resistance,” he says.

South Korean lawmakers seek independent probe of Yoon declaration

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korean opposition parties introduced a bill Thursday calling for an independent investigation into impeached President Yoon Suk Yeol's brief martial law declaration, as thousands of his supporters and critics held tense rallies near his residence ahead of his potential detention.

The bill, jointly submitted by six parties, including the main liberal opposition Democratic Party, proposes that a special prosecutor investigate whether Yoon's martial law decree on Dec. 3 constituted an attempted rebellion.

The bill also calls for an investiga-

tion into opposition claims that Yoon sought to provoke a clash with North Korea by allegedly flying drones over Pyongyang or discussing the possibility of shooting down trash-laden balloons launched from North Korea across the border, to justify a power grab at home. Yoon's lawyers and the South Korean military have denied the suspicion.

Yoon remained holed up at his official residence in the capital city of Seoul, where the presidential security service has fortified the grounds with barbed wire and rows of vehicles blocking the roads, anticipating another attempt by law enforcement to detain him after last

week's failed effort.

The Corruption Investigation Office for High-Ranking Officials, leading a joint investigation with police and the military, has pledged to work with police to make a more forceful effort to detain Yoon. It has warned that members of the presidential security staff could be arrested if they obstruct attempts to apprehend the embattled president.

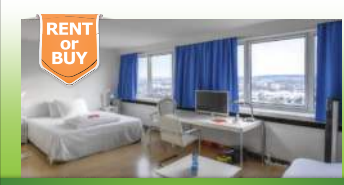
Yoon's lawyers argued against bringing him to custody, claiming he isn't a threat to flee or destroy evidence. They claimed that images of him being dragged out in handcuffs could spark a “civil war” in the divided country.

At a news conference Thursday, Seok Dong-hyeon, a lawyer on Yoon's legal team, highlighted the fervent protests by Yoon's supporters and claimed that the anti-corruption office's “reckless” attempts to detain Yoon would “provoke a significant backlash from outraged citizens.”

“It would essentially be a civil war situation,” he said, claiming that attempts to detain Yoon are aimed at humiliating him by displaying him in handcuffs.

Separated by police lines and fences, thousands of Yoon's supporters and critics continued their daily rallies near his residence, shouting passionate slogans either vow-

ing to protect him or calling for his ouster. They occasionally exchanged verbal insults, though there were no immediate reports of major clashes.



**Serviced Apartments Cicero
im SI-Centrum Stuttgart**

☎ 01716474840 WhatsApp
✉ stuttgart-rooms@gmx.de
📍 located near Kelly and Panzer

SCIENCE/TECHNOLOGY

Nvidia unveils new graphics tech at CES

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — In a packed Las Vegas arena, Nvidia founder Jensen Huang stood on stage and marveled over the crisp real-time computer graphics displayed on the screen behind him. He watched as a dark-haired woman walked through ornate gilded double doors and took in the rays of light that poured in through stained glass windows.

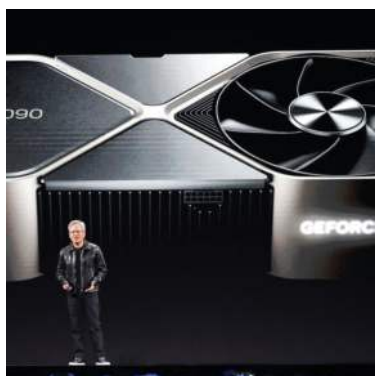
“The amount of geometry that you saw was absolutely insane,” Huang told an audience of thousands at CES 2025 Monday night. “It would have been impossible without artificial intelligence.”

The chipmaker and AI darling unveiled its GeForce RTX 50 Series desktop and laptop GPUs — its most advanced consumer graphics processor units for gamers, creators and developers. The tech is designed for use on both desktop and laptop computers.

Ahead of Huang’s speech, Nvidia stock climbed 3.4% to top its record set in November. Nvidia and other AI stocks keep climbing even as criticism rises that their stock prices have shot too high, too fast. Despite worries about a potential bubble, the industry continues to talk up its potential.

Huang said the GPUs, which use the company’s next-generation artificial intelligence chip Blackwell, can deliver breakthroughs in AI-driven rendering.

“Blackwell, the engine of AI, has arrived for PC gamers, developers and creatives,” Huang said, adding that Blackwell “is the most



ABBIE PARR / AP

Nvidia founder and CEO Jensen Huang unveiled new GPUs Monday at the CES tech show.

significant computer graphics innovation since we introduced programmable shading 25 years ago.” Blackwell technology is now in full production, he said.

Building on the tech Nvidia released 25 years ago, the company announced that it would also introduce “RTX Neural Shaders,” which use AI to help render game characters in deep detail — a task that’s notoriously tricky because people can easily spot a small error on digital humans.

Huang said Nvidia is also introducing a new suite of technologies that enable “autonomous characters” to perceive, plan and act like human players. Those characters can help players plan strategies or adapt tactics to challenge players and create more dynamic battles.

In addition to Nvidia, tech giants such as AMD, Google and Samsung are at CES 2025 to unveil artificial intelligence tools.



PNRA/IPEV BEYOND EPICA/ AP

An ice core drilled by a research team is displayed at Little Dome C field base in Antarctica, during the cutting phase on Tuesday.

Scientists in Antarctica drill 2 miles, reach 1.2 million-year-old ice core

Associated Press

An international team of scientists announced Thursday they’ve successfully drilled one of the oldest ice cores yet, penetrating nearly 2 miles to Antarctic bedrock to reach ice they say is at least 1.2 million years old.

Analysis of the ancient ice is expected to show how Earth’s atmosphere and climate have evolved. That should provide insight into how Ice Age cycles have changed, and may help in understanding how atmospheric carbon changed climate, they said.

“Thanks to the ice core we will understand what has changed in

terms of greenhouse gases, chemicals and dusts in the atmosphere,” said Carlo Barbante, an Italian glaciologist and coordinator of Beyond EPICA, the project to obtain the core.

The same team previously drilled a core about 800,000 years old. The latest drilling went about 1.7 miles deep, with a team of 16 scientists and support personnel drilling each summer over four years in average temperatures of about minus 25.6 degrees Fahrenheit.

Italian researcher Federico Scotto was among the glaciologists and technicians who completed the drilling at the beginning of January

at a location called Little Dome C, near Concordia Research Station.

“It was a great a moment for us when we reached the bedrock,” Scotto said. Isotope analysis gave the ice’s age as at least 1.2 million years old, he said.

Both Barbante and Scotto said that thanks to the analysis of the ice core of the previous Epica campaign they have assessed that concentrations of greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide and methane, even during the warmest periods of the last 800,000 years, have never exceeded the levels seen since the Industrial Revolution began.

STARS AND STRIPES
SERVICE DIRECTORY
 The Daily Guide to Navigating The Military Business Market

Transportation

944

VEHICLE SHIPPING SERVICES

- International Shipping
- Import & Export
- Inland trucking (U.S. & Europe)
- Door to door pick-up/delivery service
- Customs clearance
- All Risk Marine Insurance
- Auto Insurance (Germany only)

For Further Information Please Contact

Phone: +49-(0)6134-2592730	UNITED KINGDOM +44-(0)1638-515714	U.S.A +1-972-602-1670 Ext. 1701
Toll-free: 0800-CARSHIP (Germany only)	enquiries@carshipuk.co.uk	+1-800-264-8167 (US only)
E-Mail: info@transglobal-logistics.de	www.carshipuk.co.uk	info@tgal.us
WEB: www.transglobal-logistics.de		www.tgal.us

For 2nd POV Shipments - Offices / Agencies near Military Installations

Trans Global
LOGISTICS EUROPE GMBH

Are you in the picture?

Reading Stars and Stripes gives you a better handle on issues that affect you most. No one covers the bases the way we do.

STARS AND STRIPES
However you read us, wherever you need us.

WEEKEND



Grammy-nominated Kehlani finding balance
Music, Pages 28-29

Shows worthy of celebration

Strike-delayed returns of programs such as 'The Last of Us,' 'The White Lotus,' 'Severance' join intriguing newcomers in must-see season

Television, Pages 28-29



Pedro Pascal, "The Last of Us"
HBO



Walton Goggins, "The White Lotus"
HBO



Morris Chestnut, "Watson"
CBS



Adam Scott stars in "Severance," returning for Season 2 on Jan. 17.
Apple TV+

WEEKEND: GADGETS & TECHNOLOGY

‘It’s like your own little private show’

Interest in bird-watching growing with help of smart feeders

BY HOLLY RAMER
Associated Press

Marin Plank truly had no interest in birds when she gave her husband a camera-equipped bird feeder for his birthday. But by Christmas, she had become so obsessed with birds that most of the gifts she received this year — books, stickers, note cards — were related.

“This is who I am now,” she said.

Acquaintances have stopped Plank on the street to discuss the bird photos she shares on Facebook. From copious amounts of research, she now knows the best birdseed blend and has a premium membership to a store that delivers giant bags of it to her Delaware home.

It all started when she got her first postcard from the Bird Buddy app, which provides photos and video clips that can be downloaded or shared.

“You’ve just got to click, and then the bird is in your face looking at you and mugging for you, and it’s like your own little private show,” she said. “Something about their little eyes and their goofy little faces just drew me in, and now I’m a bird enthusiast.”

While North American bird populations decline dramatically, paradoxically, the number of people watching them has increased. While the coronavirus pandemic spurred many people to head outside in search of birds, for others, smart feeders that snap photos and video of backyard visitors have brought the hobby inside.

“It really delivers value with very little input,” said Franci Zidar, founder and CEO of Bird Buddy, which has sold 350,000 smart bird feeders since 2022. “If you’re actually kind of a hardcore bird watcher, that can be a very demanding hobby. There are, however, 20 to 30 species of birds in most U.S. backyards that people either don’t really know or appreciate.”

Several other companies, including Birdfy, make similar bird feeders that are mounted with cameras. And while stan-

dard bird feeders tap into people’s altruistic sides by allowing users to take care of animals, smart feeders take it a step further, Zidar said.

“Ultimately, I think it marries two really beautiful things. One is your need to nurture and to give back and to connect with nature, and the other one is to kind of see it and appreciate it,” he said.

Bird Buddy has proven so successful that the company is expanding its portfolio to include a tiny flower-shaped camera called Petal, and Wonder Blocks, which can be assembled to provide habitats for butterflies and other insects. Details were announced Monday at CES, formerly known as the Consumer Electronics show, in Las Vegas, with a Kickstarter campaign coming this spring.

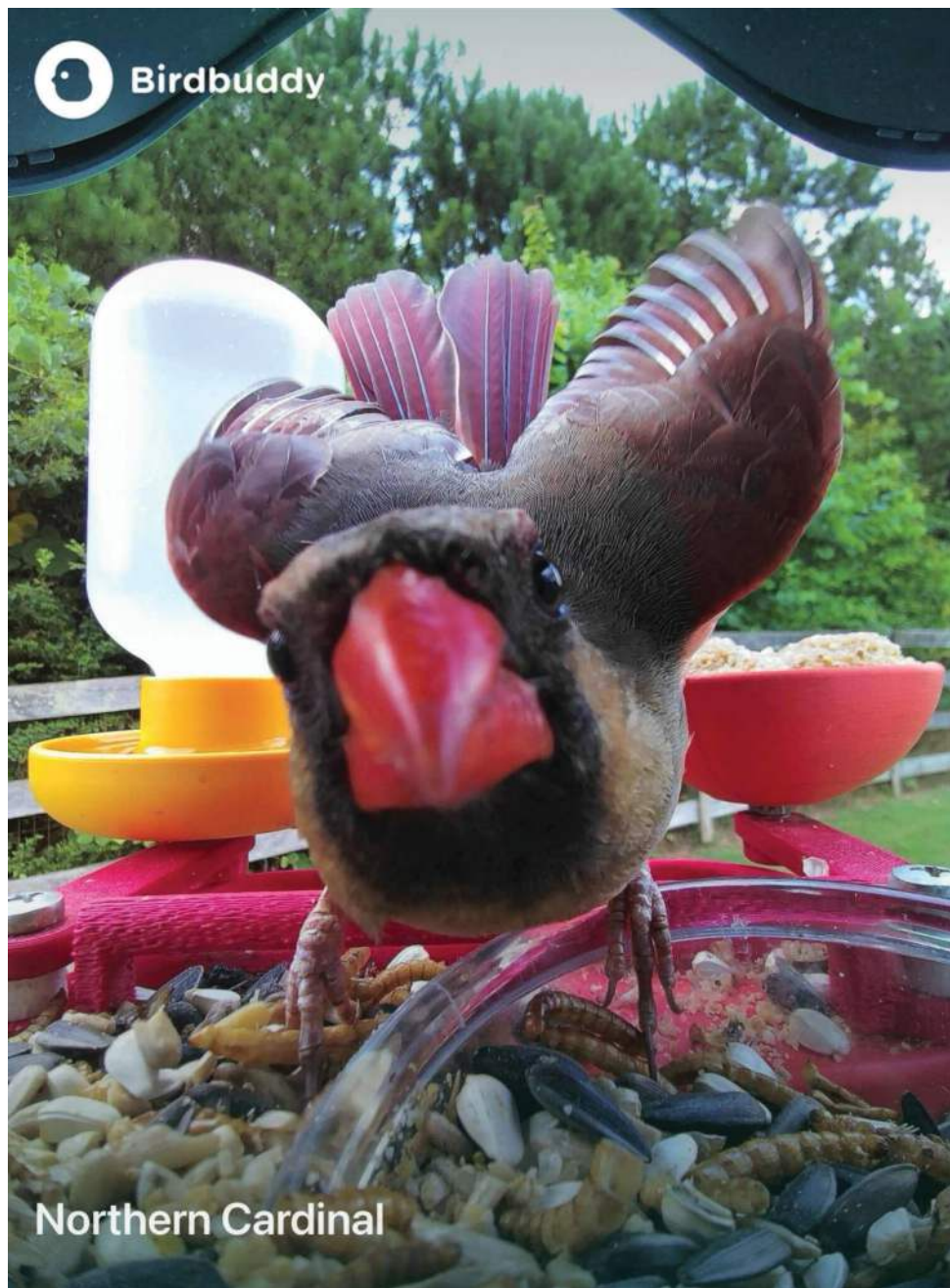
“Let’s not ask people to do crazy things, because they won’t. Let’s just give them value by just pointing a camera into this beautiful natural space,” Zidar said. “We’ll give you the drama, the happenings, the life that’s happening in that corner of your home.”

In Ipswich, Mass., Judy Ashley already had 11 bird feeders in her yard when she got a Bird Buddy last year. She has taken down some of the older feeders in hopes of attracting more birds to the camera to capture photos of those hanging out lately in her yard, especially a yellow-throated warbler, which is rarely seen in New England. She finally succeeded on Monday.

“What’s amazing is how close you can see the details of backyard birds that you just wouldn’t see if you just stood there for hours with binoculars,” she said. “You just realize how amazing nature is.”

Rachel Matthews in Austin, Texas, has three camera-equipped feeders, including one specifically for hummingbirds. While she grew up with bird feeders, the smart feeders have increased her interest, she said.

“I love having the camera, and I see detail that even with my binoculars I’d never seen,” she said. “The female cardinals with their red eyebrows and little



MARK PILCH/AP

A cardinal on Mark Pilch’s Bird Buddy bird feeder in his backyard in Cumming, Ga. Like other smart bird feeders, Bird Buddy is equipped with cameras.

feathers — it’s just phenomenal.”

In November, the National Audubon Society announced a partnership with Bird Buddy to increase awareness about bird conservation. The arrangement could provide a pathway to get data from the company’s community science platform to scientists, said Nicolas Gonzalez, a spokesperson for the Audubon Society.

“We’re eager to see how smart feeders and kind of just the whole bird-feeding industry can continue fostering this appreciation for birds and nature,” he said.

In Delaware, Plank has grown attached to specific visitors to her feeder — a “ba-

dass” female Red-winged blackbird, a tufted titmouse who she said seems to know he’s handsome and blue jays who act like “drunk uncles.”

“I give them these personalities in my mind, and it’s about having them right in front of my face, doing their little silly things,” she said. “That really has drawn me in.”

So, too, have the frequent alerts and notifications she gets on her phone.

“It’s just like a little spark of joy,” she said. “There’s something about being interrupted to remind you about this little part of the world that is just really lovely.”



SATECHI/TNS

The Satechi 3-in-1 Foldable Qi2 Wireless Charging Stand can charge three devices.

Satechi releases 2 new wireless chargers

BY GREGG ELLMAN
Tribune News Service

Now that the gifts are open and many of us received new smartphones, wireless earbuds or Apple Watches that must be charged, why not do it with the latest and greatest?

The latest and greatest chargers include the newer charging standard Qi2. It charges faster than the original Qi standard and seems to have a better magnetic system.

Satechi’s new Qi2 Trio Wireless Charging Pad will simultaneously wirelessly charge a Qi2-enabled iPhone or other Qi-compatible smartphone. It will also

charge AirPods and an Apple Watch. The stand feature allows the smartphone to work hands-free so you can watch media in portrait or landscape modes while charging or keep it in standby mode.

The Qi2 Trio Wireless Charging Pad’s (\$129.99) travel-friendly design, with durable hinges for the smartphone and watch chargers, allows it to pack up easily. Charging works just as well while it’s folded up.

Included are a 45W U.S. power adapter, United Kingdom and European Union travel adapters and a 40-inch USB-C cable.

Satechi’s other new charger is the 3-in-1

Foldable Qi2 Wireless Charging Stand (\$129.99). With the charging pad, each item charging sits in a row, while on the stand, the smartphone is front and center, with AirPods on the bottom and Apple Watch on the back. The 3-in-1 Qi2 charging stand has many of the same features as the pad.

A 45W power adapter, USB-C cable and U.K. and EU travel adapters are included. Both chargers have foreign object detection, temperature regulation and overcharge protection. They automatically detect problems and cut power when necessary to ensure a safe charge.

Online: satechi.net

WEEKEND: MOVIES



PARAMOUNT PICTURES/TNS

Tom Cruise, center, returns as Ethan Hunt in “Mission: Impossible —The Final Reckoning,” which ties up the events of 2023’s “Dead Reckoning Part One.”

Stuffed bears, sequels and ‘Superman’

There’s much for moviegoers to anticipate in 2025

BY ADAM GRAHAM
The Detroit News

The “Final Reckoning” for the “Mission: Impossible” series, Paddington’s trip home to Peru and an even “Freakier Friday” are all on top as Hollywood heads into 2025.

After largely taking 2024 off to regroup, superheroes will be back in full force: A new “Captain America” movie is due out in February, and “Superman” returns to the big screen in July. The Fantastic Four and the Thunderbolts crews will also be bringing their superpowers to cinemas.

And the year will also see the return of Bridget Jones, “Jurassic Park” and Paul Thomas Anderson, for starters.

Here’s a list of movies to circle on the calendar as the dust settles on 2024 and we head into the new year. Dates are subject to change. Movies are headed to theaters except where otherwise noted.

‘Wolf Man’

After reinventing “The Invisible Man” for modern audiences in 2020, writer-director Leigh Whannell takes on another Universal Monsters franchise, this time with Christopher Abbott and Julia Garner in the lead roles. (Jan. 17)

‘Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy’

Renée Zellweger returns for the fourth film in the rom-com franchise (its first since 2016), with Hugh Grant, Colin Firth and Emma Thompson also back. (Feb. 13, streaming on Peacock)

‘Paddington in Peru’

Everyone’s favorite marmalade-loving bear heads home to the jungles of Peru. With Hugh Bonneville, Olivia Colman and Antonio Banderas, and Ben Whishaw as the voice of Paddington. (Feb. 14)

‘Sinners’

Michael B. Jordan stars as twin brothers Elijah and Elias (who are vampires, if early reports are to be trusted) in writer-director Ryan Coogler’s (“Black Panther”) first original film since 2013’s “Fruitvale Station.” (March 7)

‘Thunderbolts’

Florence Pugh (as her “Black Widow” character, Yelena Belova), Sebastian Stan (as his “Captain America” character, Bucky Barnes) and David Harbour (as

Red Guardian) kick off the summer moviegoing season with this Marvel entry about a group of antiheroes leading missions for the U.S. government. (May 2)

‘Mission: Impossible — The Final Reckoning’

Tom Cruise returns for the eighth installment in the death-defying “Mission: Impossible” series, the direct sequel to 2023’s “Mission: Impossible — Dead Reckoning Part One,” which may or may not be the end of the franchise. (May 23)

‘28 Years Later’

The apocalyptic franchise returns for the first time since 2007 with Jodie Comer, Ralph Fiennes and Aaron Taylor-Johnson trying to outrun some really fast zombies. Danny Boyle directs. (June 20)

‘M3gan 2.0’

Everyone’s favorite meme turned successful movie franchise is back as the menacing, lifelike doll doles out more mayhem. (June 27)

‘F1’

“Top Gun: Maverick” director Joseph Kosinski turns his camera to Formula One racing, with Brad Pitt as a veteran driver mentoring a rookie (Damson Idris) who feels the need for speed. (June 27)

‘Jurassic World Rebirth’

Gareth Edwards (“Rogue One: A Star Wars Story”) directs Scarlett Johansson



Jonathan Bailey, left, and Scarlett Johansson in “Jurassic World Rebirth.”

UNIVERSAL PICTURES/TNS

and Mahershala Ali in the latest chapter in this dino franchise that is starting to feel rather long in the tooth. (July 2)

‘Superman’

James Gunn reboots the entirety of the DC Comics Universe starting with this new take on Supes, with David Corenswet donning the iconic cape, Rachel Brosnahan as his squeeze, Lois Lane, and Nicholas Hoult as his nemesis, Lex Luthor. (July 11)

‘The Fantastic Four: First Steps’

Pedro Pascal, Vanessa Kirby, Joseph Quinn and Ebon Moss-Bachrach are the latest group of four tasked with making this twice-failed superhero franchise fantastic. This story is set in a ’60s-inspired world, and features Julia Garner as the Silver Surfer. (July 25)

‘The Naked Gun’

Liam Neeson, funnyman? The “Taken” butt-kicker shows off another special set of skills in the role of Frank Drebin Jr., in Akiva Schaffer’s reboot of the classic comedy series. With Pamela Anderson and Paul Walter Hauser. (Aug. 1)

‘Freakier Friday’

Jamie Lee Curtis and Lindsay Lohan reunite, 22 years after they swapped bodies in 2003’s “Freaky Friday.” Is Pink Slip still together? (Aug. 8)

‘The Battle of Baktan Cross’

Leonardo DiCaprio was once pegged to star in Paul Thomas Anderson’s “Boogie Nights,” but he turned down the role of Dirk Diggler in favor of “Titanic.” Now, nearly 30 years later, the pair is working together for the first time. (Aug. 8)

‘Michael’

High season for musical biopics continues with Antoine Fuqua directing Michael Jackson’s life story. Jackson’s nephew Jaafar Jackson plays the King of Pop, and Colman Domingo is his domineering father, Joe. (Oct. 3)

‘Tron: Ares’

Fifteen years after “Tron: Legacy” — and 43 years after the original “Tron” — the futuristic series continues, headed up by Jared Leto and featuring a returning Jeff Bridges with a soundtrack by Nine Inch Nails. (Oct. 10)

‘Wicked: For Good’

The first part is a smash sensation and is possibly headed toward Oscar glory. Part 2 — filmed at the same time as the first — picks up right where we left off. (Nov. 21)

‘Avatar: Fire and Ash’

The first two films in the franchise made a combined \$5.2 billion worldwide. James Cameron can do whatever he wants. (Dec. 19)

WEEKEND: MOVIES



JORDAN STRAUSS, INVISION/AP

Pamela Anderson arrives at the 82nd Golden Globes on Jan. 5 in Beverly Hills, Calif. She had been nominated for best performance by a female actor in a motion picture — drama for her role in “The Last Showgirl,” but didn’t win.

A new chapter for Pamela Anderson

With ‘The Last Showgirl,’ the ‘Baywatch’ babe, 57, finally getting a chance to prove herself as an actor

BY ADAM GRAHAM
The Detroit News

Pamela Anderson has lived many a life over the decades — “Baywatch” babe, animal rights activist, international sex symbol — and now serious actress.

Anderson has entered a new chapter with her role in “The Last Showgirl,” out this weekend in theaters. The movie casts Anderson as a dancer at a shuttering Las Vegas revue, and the movie earned the actress a nomination for best performance by a female actor in a motion picture — drama at Sunday’s Golden Globes, the first major awards nomination she’s received in her career.

While she didn’t win — the statue went to “I’m Still Here’s” Fernanda Torres — it’s a reinvention for the 57-year-old, who these days is more likely to be growing pickles on her farm in Canada than she is traipsing a Hollywood red carpet. (She showed up makeup-free to the Globes ceremony.)

It comes as Anderson has had time to look back and reflect on her life and legacy.

“This is such a wild, exciting time. I had no idea this is how it all worked,” says Anderson, who after her interview was getting ready to attend the Golden Globes first-time nominees luncheon, alongside stars such as Ariana Grande, “Anora’s” Mikey Madison and Zoe Saldana. “I’m very new at all of this, and who would have thought this would be the beginning of my career at 57 years old?”

From Canada to Hollywood

Anderson grew up in Ladysmith, British Columbia, outside of Vancouver, and she was famously discovered at a Canadian Football League game when she was spotted in the stands and featured on the stadium’s jumbotron.

At 22, her first ride on an airplane brought her to Los Angeles and the Playboy Mansion, and by the time she was the magazine’s Playmate of the Month in February 1990, she was on her way to becoming the decade’s defining bombshell.

From “Home Improvement” to “Baywatch” to her on-again, off-again (and very videotaped) relationship with Mötley Crüe drummer Tommy Lee, Anderson was the physical embodiment of sexuality for an entire generation. In 2006’s “Borat,” Sacha Baron Cohen’s character attempts to kidnap her because of the crush he’s harbored on her for years as a worldwide beauty icon.

During those years, Anderson says she always wanted more substance for her

career but wasn’t sure how to pursue it.

“I just knew that I was capable of more as an artist, maybe?” she says, her soft voice slightly wavering when she says “artist.” “But I don’t come from an artist family. I come from a small town and I never knew anyone in this industry. And then I just kind of played it by ear, and I felt a little bit like Mrs. Magoo, navigating it the best I could. But I wasn’t being offered serious material, so I just tried to be the best I could at those style of jobs, like ‘Baywatch’ or ‘Barb Wire.’”

Her way of reconciling was using the light that was thrust upon her to bring awareness to her pet causes.

“I knew I was getting attention for superficial things,” she says, “and I was trying to share the attention with something more meaningful, like animal rights or environmental rights or vulnerable communities.”

All the while, she says her work ethic — which goes back to her high school volleyball days — kept her going.

“I just knew that I was capable of more as an artist, maybe?”

Pamela Anderson

“I love hard work. You can’t outwork me,” Anderson says. “This is why I’m insistent I do everything, and I do everything right, and I

go the extra mile. Because I have to. I’ve always had to, and I always will.”

Recent years have seen a softening and a reconsideration of Anderson’s image in the media. She had a successful run playing Roxie Hart in Broadway’s “Chicago” in 2022, and in 2023 she starred in “Love, Pamela,” a Netflix documentary where she openly and honestly looked back at her life and her personal struggles, which coincided with the release of her autobiography of the same name.

The 2022 Hulu series “Pam & Tommy,” meanwhile, spurred a re-evaluation of her famous sex tape with Tommy Lee, which was stolen from their home without permission; that the series was also made without her permission helped paint a more sympathetic portrait of Anderson, who for many years was chewed up and spit out by a vicious and unrelenting media.

Because everyone already knows so much about her, “I don’t have anything to hide,” Anderson says. “I’m an easy interview, because I’m an open book.”

A ‘Showgirl’ rises

All of those lives she has lived are rolled into “The Last Showgirl,” in which Anderson plays Shelly Gardner, a Vegas dancer who is desperately clinging to the last shimmer of glamour in a long faded show. She co-stars in the movie with Ja-

SEE PAMELA ON PAGE 17

WEEKEND: MOVIES

Pamela: Film director likens beauty icon to Marilyn Monroe

FROM PAGE 16

mie Lee Curtis, Dave Bautista and Billie Lourd.

"I couldn't have played Shelly the way I played her if I didn't have the life experience I had," says the five-time divorcee. "Being married and having children and being there for my kids and trying to navigate some personal crises that happened to many of us while trying to have grace and dignity? It's been a wild, messy life to draw from."

"The Last Showgirl," which was adapted from an unproduced play that was written more than a decade ago, was shot over 18 days, on film, in early 2024. It's directed by Gia Coppola, the granddaughter of legendary Detroit-born filmmaker Francis Ford Coppola, who says she considered Anderson for the role after seeing her in "Love, Pamela."

"In watching that, I could see that she is kind of like our modern Marilyn Monroe," Coppola says. "She's known so much for the exterior, and typecasted in that way but really craving to express herself more deeply. She's really interested in theater and classical cinema, and she kind of got stuck in this trope. Which is similar to Marilyn, and similar to our character Shelly, who is this lover of nostalgia, and very vulnerable and soft, but has a strong vision. And also she seemed like such a wonderful person, so it just made sense."

Coppola says she pursued Anderson for the part but was initially rejected by her representation. She eventually approached Anderson's son Brandon, who brought the project to his mother.

"She loved it. She was so excited about the project," says Coppola, who says Anderson brought something to the role no one else could have.

"I think, because of her similarities in her personal life, it adds a layer of meaning that I think as an audience we're really intrigued by and have so much love for," says Coppola, 38. "And Shelly, just because of being undervalued as an artist, and the way (Anderson) worked on set and gave so much of herself to this project, you couldn't have gotten it from someone who's just been doing this for so long. Because she had so much of what Shelly was yearning for as well."

"The Last Showgirl!" premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in September and has been received warmly by critics. Anderson says she bonded with the cast and crew while making the film, and she first heard about her Golden Globe nomination on her "Last Showgirl" text thread.

"It's a team sport, and everyone's real thrilled for each other," she says.

And no one is more thrilled than Anderson herself. She's on the ride of her life, she says, and this time around, she gets to enjoy it.

"It's been a roller coaster, and this is the fun part," she says with a giggle. "Woo!"



ROADSIDE ATTRACTIONS/AP

Pamela Anderson plays Shelly, a veteran Las Vegas performer accustomed to being a sex symbol, in "The Last Showgirl."

Respect the razzle-dazzle

Anderson's 'The Last Showgirl' a dreamy portrait of a Vegas dancer with high aspirations

BY AMY NICHOLSON

Los Angeles Times

You may be just as surprised to find a Werner Herzog cameo in Pamela Anderson's breezy 2023 memoir "Love, Pamela" as you'd be to see her in one of his films. Nevertheless, a potential collaboration nearly happened, and the German auteur gave the Canadian bombshell a few words of career guidance: Never audition — hold out for directors who see your worth.

And now, filmmaker Gia Coppola has constructed a dreamy character piece around Anderson and her dizzy megawatt grin. In "The Last Showgirl," Anderson's first solo lead in a movie since 1996's "Barb Wire," she plays Shelly, a veteran Las Vegas dancer accustomed to being a sex symbol. It's part of a current trend for movies to erect a flimsy hall of mirrors around a female icon to reflect how pop culture has warped her image. (See also "The Substance," elevated into an awards contender solely on the strength of Demi Moore's backbone.) But this is not a blood-and-guts show business exposé — it's a diaphanous portrait of a woman who, like Anderson herself, wafts through life like a marabou feather. It's less a story than a vibe.

Coppola recently called Anderson the "Marilyn [Monroe] of our time" for her intellectual curiosity. Anderson might have grown up culture-starved in rural British Columbia, but she feasted on the French New Wave as soon as she could, and here, she does a pretty good job at acting as though she's in a Godard film herself, piling her hair on top of her head à la Brigitte Bardot and gazing off toward, presumably, Las Vegas' half-scale Eiffel Tower as we stare at her and hope things work out. Shelly, who speaks in a height-

ened version of Anderson's breathy coo, is a fellow Francophile. To her, her longtime gig at the Razzle Dazzle isn't just some tacky nude show — it's "the last descendant of Parisian Lido culture."

Everyone else in Shelly's orbit disagrees, including her estranged daughter Hannah (Billie Lourd), her stage producer Eddie (Dave Bautista) and her younger, more cynical co-workers Mary-Anne (Brenda Song) and Jodie (Kiernan Shipka).

We don't see Shelly's onstage routine until the last sequence, so for most of the film, we're not sure whom to believe. The scenes are zingier if you laugh at Shelly's artistic ambitions. Yet, if you respect Shelly's commitment, Kate Gersten's script becomes more interesting. Rhinestones aren't diamonds, but they still make a heavy crown.

Hollywood usually insists that people should follow their dreams — Shelly even gives that advice herself to Hannah, an aspiring photographer. But the movie asks a follow-up question: even this foolish dream? Is it possible to see Anderson's bedazzled creation in pink and orange feathers as not just feminine but also feminist? Is it feminist to cheer, "Go girl!" as someone follows her dream off a cliff?

Autumn Durald Arkapaw's cinematography looks at Shelly's life the same way she does: What's right in front is in focus; everything else is a blur. The truth is that Shelly can't, or won't, see her own future beyond the stage. She's naive, but she's no victim.

Coppola periodically reminds us that this sweetheart can also be selfish and mercurial and snobby. Waitressing is beneath her, the adjoining erotic circus is too low-class and, as for the Rockettes, she finds all that kicking "very redundant."

Anderson plays her real, as though she's perhaps met variations of Shellys at Hugh Hefner's grotto. She has a self-awareness that allows her to be at once sincere and girlish, while recognizing that strangers might find Shelly synthetic. Her Shelly is serious about her version of reality while not expecting others to conform to her delusions.

No one roots for an industry that chews up women. Yet how should we feel about a woman who keeps throwing herself in the meat grinder expecting to be reborn as filet mignon? One casting director (Jason Schwartzman) seems offended when Shelly tries to pass herself off as 36, about as long as she's been shimmying in the show.

There's truth in the idea that a person can freeze at the age they felt most confident. For Shelly, that means wearing acid-washed denim. Meanwhile, her older former colleague Annette (a giddy, scene-stealing Jamie Lee Curtis) sports frosted white lipstick and a hair color so bizarre you can't imagine what it was labeled on the drugstore box. (Gingerdead? Strawberry Futility?)

Curtis has some of my favorite lines in the movie plus a great burlesque sequence where she impulsively climbs onto a platform and gyrates to "Total Eclipse of the Heart" for an apathetic casino crowd. You could plop her performance into a big Hollywood comedy and it would work just as well.

Only Anderson's part with all its hazy contradictions — neither comic nor tragic, neither pathetic nor heroic, neither subtle nor showy — seems to transcend. More than the film around her, Anderson earns our respect. For an encore, maybe she'll finally work with Herzog.

"The Last Showgirl" is rated R for language and nudity. Running time: 89 minutes. Now playing in select on-base theaters.

WEEKEND: MOVIE REVIEWS

A lesser 'Ronin' along the Riviera

'Den of Thieves 2: Pantera' moves the action to France, offers less payoff than predecessor

BY KATIE WALSH
Tribune News Service

Christian Gudegast's juiced-up "Heat" homage "Den of Thieves" has become a bit of a cult hit in the seven years since it was released, due in large part to co-star Gerard Butler's boisterously haggard performance as "Big Nick" O'Brien, a Los Angeles Sheriff's Department detective (and gang member) on the tail of a well-connected master thief, Merrimen (Pablo Schreiber).

If "Den of Thieves" was a kind of "Dumb Heat," then the sequel, "Den of Thieves 2: Pantera," pays tribute to another Robert De Niro thriller, "Ronin," with car chases set on the hairpin turns in the hills of Nice, France, and a new crew of skilled thieves led by a charismatic woman, Jovanna (Evin Ahmad).

Hawthorne, California's own Donnie Wilson (O'Shea Jackson Jr.), the promising young driver from the first film who pulled one over on both Big Nick and Merrimen, has now joined the Serbian mafia (aka Pantera) on some high-ticket diamond heists. Cat burglars on the French Rivi-

era? Sounds like "To Catch a Den of Thieves," non?

In his loose remakes of the De Niro filmography, Gudegast by now knows the appeal is Big Nick, so he's got to get our man — the ink still wet on his divorce papers — to France, hot on the heels of young Donnie. And so "Den of Thieves 2: Pantera" becomes a travelogue for our antihero, an "A Propos de Nick," if you will. While he munched and guzzled on doughnuts, fried chicken and glasses of wine through the first film, now he's drinking espresso and enjoying "croy-sants" and gelato in Europe.

Nick shows up in France under the guise of identifying his suspect, having tracked Donnie's bank account, but he all too easily falls in with Donnie and the Pantera crew, linking up with them to rob the vault in the World Diamond Center, where a large pink diamond they stole from a plane in Antwerp is in residence.

Nick is bedeviled by his thieving foes, fascinated by them, and now has nothing to lose. He's tired of hunting, he claims. So rather than going toe-to-toe in a



LIONSGATE/AP

"Den of Thieves 2: Pantera" sees the return of star Gerard Butler as "Big Nick" O'Brien.

Torrance Benihana with the snarling ex-con/ex-Marine/ex-Long Beach high school football star Merrimen, he's getting wasted in a French club with the affable Donnie (posing as "Jean-Jacques," a wealthy diamond dealer), and drunkenly scootering to go get shawarma. It's amusing, but it's not exactly the same kind of electrifying tension that animated the first film.

"Pantera" is a bit too goofy, leaning on the silly side of Nick's persona. The first film was played straight, which is why it worked so well, and no one in "Pantera" matches Schreiber's nostril-flaring intensity and simmering rage, so it's more of a

buddy comedy between Donnie and Nick. The Serbian gang members aren't well-established, and the Sicilian mafia, who also enter the ring, aren't fleshed out as proper antagonists either. In fact, they all start to blend into a mass of indistinguishable Euro-mobsters, and there's no real sense of danger.

Gudegast tackled the script on his own (he co-wrote the first with "Prison Break" showrunner Paul T. Scheuring), and while he has a knack for inventive heists, and the film really comes together during the big job, the sequel does not boast the lore of its predecessor, and relies heavily on coincidence and deus ex ma-

china to move things along. At a hefty two hours and 24 minutes, the film is flabby, not jacked, and lacking an unpredictable live-wire element.

While it is fun to reconnect with Big Nick and watch him try new foods, there's just something missing in this rote "Ronin" rip-off — an energy, a danger. It seems Gudegast and his cast of characters alighted for Europe with only a few ideas in place, and the tapestry of this world is not woven as tightly as the original. Ah well, we'll always have Torrance.

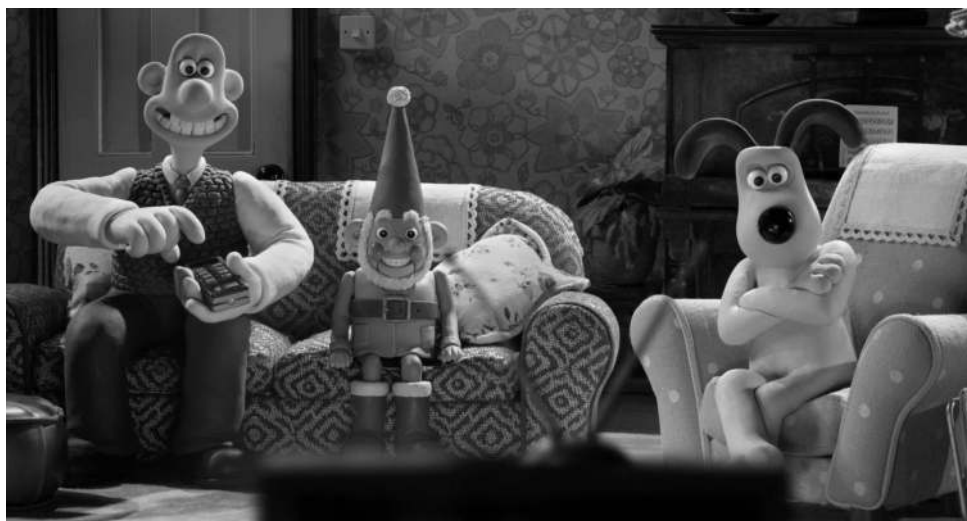
"Den of Thieves 2: Pantera" is rated R for pervasive language, some violence, drug use and sexual references. Running time: 144 minutes. Now playing at select on-base theaters.

'Wallace & Gromit: Vengeance Most Fowl' a rollicking adventure

BY MOIRA MACDONALD
The Seattle Times

As a reward for surviving 2024, here's a gift from the heavens for all of us: a new Wallace and Gromit movie called "Wallace & Gromit: Vengeance Most Fowl," with plot points involving turnips, Wellington boots, garden gnomes, a knitted onesie complete with tie and vest, and the return of a scheming villain named Feathers McGraw who's actually a penguin disguised as a chicken. Need I say more?

Well, OK, I'll say a little more, but don't pretend you aren't scurrying right over to Netflix without reading the rest of this. Wallace (voiced by Ben Whitehead, replacing the late Peter Sallis) is an eccentric inventor living in cozy comfort in the north of England with his best friend, his dog Gromit (voiced by no one, as Gromit is eloquently silent). This film marks the 35th year of their adventures, beginning with the short film "Wallace & Gromit: A Grand Day Out" in 1989, all of them rendered in lovingly detailed stop-motion animation. "Vengeance Most Fowl" is only the second feature-length film, following "Wallace & Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit" in 2005. It's a long wait between features, as it takes a long time to



Netflix

Wallace, voiced by Ben Whitehead, left; Norbot, voiced by Reece Shearsmith, center; and Gromit go on an adventure in "Wallace & Gromit: Vengeance Most Fowl."

film in stop-motion; publicity documents for the film state that one stop-motion animator produces, on average, 4.2 seconds of footage per week.

But "Vengeance Most Fowl," directed by franchise creator Nick Park and Merlin Crossingham, is most certainly worth the wait: It is, like every Wallace and Gromit

outing, a rollicking adventure involving breathless chases (well, one involving two river barges is a fairly sedate chase), elaborate inventions and delightful sprinkles of wit. (I don't know why it's so funny that Gromit reads Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own" in bed, but it just is.) The plot here is that Feathers, who years ago was

nabbed by Wallace in an act of robbery, has long plotted revenge from his lonely incarceration in a zoo. With help from an army of automated gnomes created by Wallace only to turn against him (Gromit disapproved of them from the beginning), Feathers soon has the upper hand, or wing, or whatever it is that claymation penguins disguised as chickens have. It's up to our heroes to save the day.

The movie's a playful commentary on overdependence on technology — Wallace has machines that bathe him, dress him and make his tea — but it's also just fast-paced fun, and you look forward to watching it a second time to catch the sight gags you missed. (I quite liked a TV reporter named Onya Doorstop, a brief sight of a wanted poster for a criminal known as Pesky Myrtle and a sign in the gnome factory reading "Pointy Hats Must Be Worn At All Times.") It's pure pleasure, all the more so for its laboriously low-tech artistry that hasn't changed much over 35 years. As Wallace reminds us, late in the film, "there are some things a machine just can't do." Thank goodness.

"Wallace and Gromit: Vengeance Most Fowl" is rated PG for some action and rude humor. Running time: 79 minutes. Now streaming on Netflix.

WEEKEND: TRAVEL

One fantastic day in Madrid

I'm standing on a tiny balcony overlooking the Times Square of all of Spain — Madrid's Puerta del Sol. Within a 10-minute walk I can visit one of the greatest palaces in Europe (Madrid's Royal Palace), the ultimate town square (Plaza Mayor), or my favorite collection of paintings under any single roof in Europe: the Prado Museum.

Just like in New York's Times Square, crowds in Madrid fill on New Year's Eve while the rest of Spain watches the action on TV. As Spain's "Big Ben" atop the governor's office chimes 12 times, Madrileños eat one grape for each ring to bring good luck through the next 12 months.

But unlike New York's famous gathering space, this square — like so many in Europe — has gone from a traffic nightmare to a more park-like people zone. It's what makes Madrid livable. Car traffic has been limited (made possible by the excellent public transportation system), letting the fine old buildings show off their original elegance in an inviting, wide-open setting.

From Puerta del Sol, I'm going to do a blitz tour of three major sights. I start by strolling toward

the Royal Palace, which I consider Europe's third greatest palace (after Versailles, near Paris, and Schönbrunn in Vienna). Over the years, I've visited it at least 10 times — and I always learn more fascinating facts to include in my guidebook.



Rick Steves

It's big — more than 2,000 rooms, with tons of luxurious tapestries, a king's ransom of chandeliers, priceless porcelain and bronze decor covered in gold leaf. While these days the royal family lives in a mansion a few miles away, this place still functions as a royal palace and is used for formal state receptions, royal weddings and tourists' daydreams.

One highlight is the throne room, where red velvet walls, lions and frescoes of Spanish scenes symbolize the monarchy in a Rococo riot. Another eye-stopper is the dining room, where the king can entertain as many as 144 guests at a bowling-lane-size table. The ceiling fresco depicts Christopher Columbus kneeling before King Ferdinand and Queen Isabel, presenting exotic



DOMINIC ARIZONA BONUCCELLI/Rick Steves' Europe

The Puerta del Sol in Madrid, Spain, is an engaging place for evening crowd-watching.

souvenirs and his New World "friends" to the royal couple.

My next stop is Plaza Mayor. Each side of the square is uniform, as if a grand palace were turned inside-out. Whether hanging out with old friends, enjoying a cup of coffee, or finding a treasure at the weekly stamp-and-coin market, it's an appealing place where people gather.

Bronze reliefs under the lamp-posts show how, upon this stage, much of Spanish history was played out. The square once hosted bullfights. It was the scene of generations of pre-Lent carnival gaiety. And during the Inquisition, many suspected heretics were tried here and punished by being strangled or

burned at the stake. Thankfully, the brutality of the Inquisition is long gone.

My last stop is the Prado Museum, which holds my favorite collection of paintings anywhere. These artworks give an eye-pleasing overview of Spain's rich history, from its golden age through its slow fade.

The Prado is the place to enjoy the great Spanish painter Francisco de Goya. You can follow this complex man through the stages of his life — from dutiful court painter to political rebel and scandal-maker, to the disillusioned genius of his "black paintings." It's also the home of Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, considered by some to be the

world's finest painting. In addition to Spanish works, you'll find paintings by Italian and Flemish masters, including Hieronymus Bosch's fantastical *Garden of Earthly Delights* altarpiece.

With thousands of canvases, including entire rooms of masterpieces by superstar painters, the Prado can be overwhelming. It's always crowded on weekends and for the last two hours before closing time (when entry tickets are free); it's worth planning for a weekday visit and paying the admission price to enjoy it well before evening.

This article is used with the permission of Rick Steves' Europe (www.ricksteves.com). Rick Steves writes European guidebooks, hosts travel shows on public TV and radio and organizes European tours.

Undersung places for travelers seeking something special

The year is fresh, and the time is right for dreaming of where to go and what to see in the months to come. Should more travel be on your wish list for 2025, here's a look at European places promising special events, anniversaries, grand openings and other experiences.

Anniversaries

Bath and Hampshire, England, will be marking the 250th anniversary of Jane Austen's birth with celebrations of her literary legacy throughout the year, starting with a *Pride and Prejudice* Festival at Jane Austen's House in Chawton, Hampshire slated for Jan. 23-28. Her Hampshire birthplace, the village of Steventon, plans to host historic exhibits, chamber concerts and a country fair. The city of Bath plans three costumed balls and a festival in September. A statue of Austen will be unveiled in Winchester Cathedral. Online: tinyurl.com/t9vr2zed



Karen Bradbury

Vienna, Austria, celebrates the 200th anniversary of the birth of its native son, Johann Strauss, the composer known as "the Waltz King," with events slated throughout the year. These range from concerts by renowned orchestras and contemporary artists alike to performances of his works in unexpected venues. On April 6, the date of the Vienna City Marathon, runners will warm up to the strains of the Blue Danube, while 200 individuals costumed as Strauss compete for prizes of their own. Online: johannstrauss2025.at/en

Rome is braced for up to 30 million pilgrims to visit during what has been designated a "Jubilee," or "Holy



iStock

Gorizia, Italy — and its baroque Church of St. Ignatius on Piazza della Vittoria — is, with Nova Gorica in Slovenia, designated as European Capitals of Culture in 2025.

Year." The tradition was first observed back in 1300, and nowadays such years are organized at least once every 25 years. For the faithful, participation in the Holy Year means the granting of a plenary indulgence. Topping the pilgrim's to-do list will be a visit to St. Peter's and St. Paul's Basilica, where he or she can pass through an exceptionally opened Holy Door. "Hope" has been selected as the theme of this year's observances.

European Capitals of Culture

Each year, the European Union designates two cities as

European Capitals of Culture, allowing lesser-known cities the chance to share their cultural heritages and aspirations. In 2025, the cities of Nova Gorica in Slovenia and its Italian neighbor Gorizia serve as an example of successful cross-border cultural collaboration, with a program of events dedicated to art, cinema, fashion, music, photography and theater, including multimedia and performance art set in natural landscapes. Simultaneously holding the title is Chemnitz, Germany, an industrial city reshaping its infrastructure into means of artistic expression. A vast program of events titled "C the Unseen" kicks off Jan. 18.

Sporting moments

Turin, Italy, is preparing to welcome more than 1,500 athletes from 103 countries taking part in the Special Olympics World Winter Games, billed as the world's largest sports and humanitarian event, March 8-15. Geneva, Switzerland, will host the UEFA Women's EURO football tournament July 2-27. The 2025 Women's Rugby World Cup will take place in England from Aug. 22 to Sept. 27.

Art exhibitions

Daily Art Magazine has compiled a list of the 10 Best Art Exhibitions to See in 2025; among those mentioned is Siena 1300-1350: The Rise of Painting, which can be seen at the National Gallery in London March 8-June 22. Another exhibition, Gothic Modern: From Darkness to Light, combining 250 works by 60 artists, runs Feb. 28-June 15 at the National Museum in Oslo before traveling to the Albertina in Vienna, Austria, Sept. 19-Jan. 11, 2026.

WEEKEND: TRAVEL



PHOTOS BY ABDELLAH AZIZI/For The Washington Post

The streets and shops of Rabat's relaxed medina, or walled old town, are easy to explore, owing to the city's small size. Other Moroccan cities like Fes and Marrakech are bigger.



Mohammed VI Tower is the tallest building in Morocco and one of the tallest in Africa.

Underrated Rabat

Capital of Morocco a historic seaside jewel being energized by a new wave of boutiques and galleries

BY GRAHAM CORNWELL
The Washington Post

The National Photography Museum in Rabat, Morocco's capital city, sits right on the Atlantic Ocean inside a 19th-century fortress. On a recent visit, I was surprised to find just a few people inside admiring its innovative galleries. The only other people, enjoying the stunning views outside, were two fishermen, casting into the crashing waves.

I wondered the same thing I do every time I'm in Rabat: How do so many travelers miss this city?

Most visitors to Morocco want to see Marrakech, Fes and Tangier, and for good reason. But Rabat is Morocco's most underrated city in plain sight, a tranquil and historic seaside jewel that hasn't yet turned into one big Instagram reel. You can still discover it on its own terms.

When the French colonized Morocco in the early 20th century, they envisioned Casablanca as Morocco's New York — the international port and economic hub — and Rabat as its Washington. But Rabat

has grown into much more than a government center. Today, it boasts a relaxed and pristine medina, or walled old town; a dramatic and undeveloped coastline; my favorite collection of museums in the country; and a new wave of artists and artisans energizing boutiques and galleries across town.

All without the crowds you'll find elsewhere.

"It's a city where you can breathe easily," said Rachid Maalal, director of the region's new heritage preservation initiative.

A historic old city and ruins

The biggest attraction of most Moroccan cities is their medina, whether it's the labyrinthine streets of Fes or the vibrant bazaars of Marrakech. Rabat is no different, but its smaller size makes it easier to explore and find idyllic streets, quirky dead ends and the intricate doorways to zawiyas, or Sufi lodges. You can follow cloth-covered trays of dough as Rabatis

SEE MOROCCO ON PAGE 21

WEEKEND: TRAVEL

Morocco: City gets less attention than others, contributing to its appeal**FROM PAGE 20**

carry them to the communal ovens or, in the evenings, just keep walking until you encounter a flattop serving griddle breads coated in honey.

As in the walled cities of Marrakech and Fes, old houses built around courtyards in Rabat's medina are being repurposed into small hotels. The best ones — like Dar Rabiaa, just off Avenue Legza in the medina — showcase intricate stucco designs and wood-carved mashra-biya, as well as stunning Moroccan rugs and textiles.

Anytime I'm in the medina, but especially in the mornings, I like to make my way to Rue Bouqroune. At its busiest, vendors line both sides of the street, where you'll encounter half a dozen varieties of mint piled high on little tables, silver sardines on big trays of ice and beautiful "beldi" eggs still with traces of feathers stuck to them.

The medina's most touristy street, Rue des Consuls, is where you'll find shops selling rugs, pottery and painted wooden platters. Just off it is an inventive new art space called Tassarout, whose goal is to foster appreciation for traditional crafts like zellij (tile mosaics) through hands-on classes. It's all housed amid bazaar stalls in a lovingly restored 17th-century funduq, where merchant caravans once stayed and stored their wares and animals.

But perhaps no place brings together the old, the new and Rabat's natural beauty quite like Chellah, a maze of ruins that dates to at least the 3rd century B.C., spanning Morocco's Phoenician, Roman and Islamic pasts. A necropolis and UNESCO World Heritage site, it recently reopened with renovations to its massive 14th-century gate and the addition of Ciconia, Rabat's prettiest café.

The objective was to make Chellah "more than just a historic site," Maalal explained. "We want to be a true cultural destination." Ciconia's name comes from the Latin term for the famous white storks that nest atop Chellah's medieval towers. From the café, you can look across the wide Bou Regreg estuary to the brand-new Grand Theatre of Rabat, among the celebrated architect Zaha Hadid's final designs, and the Mohammed VI Tower, one of the tallest towers in Africa.

A museum renaissance

Over the past decade, Morocco has poured money into its museum infrastructure, rehabilitating historic buildings and repurposing them for new collections across the country. Rabat has gotten the biggest boost.

The Mohammed VI Museum



PHOTOS BY ABDELLAH AZIZI/For The Washington Post

Tourists ride an auto rickshaw at the Roman and Marinid archaeological site of Chellah in Rabat. The UNESCO World Heritage site, which dates to at least the 3rd century B.C., recently reopened with renovations to its massive 14th-century gate and the addition of Ciconia, a new café.



The Mohammed VI Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, which opened in 2014, led a national movement in Morocco of museum revitalization. It is located in the French-designed Ville Nouvelle.

of Modern and Contemporary Art, one of a handful of gems located in the French-designed Ville Nouvelle, spearheaded that national movement. Its opening in 2014 brought contemporary Moroccan and international artists to a wider public, with exhibitions ranging from Moroccan postcolonial art to Cuban expatriate painters.

Down the street is the Bank al-Maghrib Museum, housed in an architectural masterpiece of a building that incorporates Moroccan aesthetic flourishes into modern European design. The museum, fresh off a recent renovation,

recounts millennia of Moroccan history through old coins and some of the best Moroccan paintings of the last century. After a visit, stop by Cinéma Renaissance, an art-house theater with an airy upstairs café and the best views from its tiny balconies down Rabat's prettiest boulevard, Avenue Mohammed V.

But the National Photography Museum, in the quaint L'Océan neighborhood, is Rabat's most spectacular offering. The exhibition space is small but well curated, with a series of subterranean rooms connected by dim hall-

ways. A recent show pulled together innovative photographers from across Africa. The moody interior offers a stark contrast with the museum's exterior, where the geometric lines of the 19th-century concrete structure — Morocco's first — intersect with the bright blues of the Atlantic and the sky.

Markets and shopping

Rabat's produce markets are one of its great pleasures, and I like to get a feel for the rhythms of daily city life at the morning one in L'Océan, around the Centre Culturel Ben Barka. On Fridays you'll see stacks of bright-orange pumpkins, sliced into portions and ready for Rabatis to add to their Friday couscous. Grab an outdoor table afterward at nearby Himmi, a stylish café and patisserie, for coffee and croissants, or go heartier with eggs and khlea, an intensely flavored Moroccan jerky dried and preserved in its own fat.

Shoppers in Rabat also can find terrific painted woodwork and, in its souks, great kilim carpets and pottery, though the city has never had the shopping reputation of Marrakech or Tangier. A small movement of small business owners is trying to grow it.

Husband and wife Wassim El Hallioui and Zaynab Salik are a

big part of that movement. They're the founders of MaliMalo, a shop located down the road from the beach with an unobstructed Atlantic view, which sells one of the most impeccably curated collections of modern Moroccan crafts anywhere, including massive pastel rugs and striking pottery painted with bold lines and evil eye motifs. El Hallioui describes the couple's mission partly as education.

"We want to be a shop for all, not just for tourists," he said. "We want to keep prices accessible, but we truly want to tell stories about our culture and our traditions." You can witness the same energy elsewhere in Rabat, including at the multimedia art space and publishing house Kulte.

Not far away is Le 17 Océan, a gorgeous emporium of Moroccan jewelry and artwork. It's housed in an old auto repair shop where founder Nathalie Marmey's grandmother used to bring her car.

"We try to constantly renew ourselves," Marmey said, and she credits tireless sourcing for the shop's popularity among Rabatis. Take a seat at 17's adjoining café, which serves healthy but substantial salads and strong coffee, while you feel the ocean breeze come up the hill.

WEEKEND: QUICK TRIPS

Center of British resistance to Nazis

Churchill War Rooms in London show where PM directed WWII war effort

BY LORETTO MORRIS
Stars and Stripes

Few historic sites are as well-preserved as London's Churchill War Rooms, which have benefited from their location in a fortified basement that housed a British government command center throughout World War II.

A colleague and I recently took an audio tour of the spots where famed prime minister Winston Churchill and his military leadership had directed the defiant defense against Nazi invasion. The self-guided tour allowed us to move at our own pace and soak up the history.

Located beneath the streets of Westminster, the Churchill War Rooms are a branch of Britain's sprawling Imperial War Museum.

We spent a little over an hour covering the 17 sections, though history buffs interested in the details and speaking with the knowledgeable staff members along the way could certainly be there longer. The feature-rich re-creations captured the wartime intensity that once pulsed throughout the place.

During our tour stop in the war Cabinet exhibits and others, we heard about how decisions were made and listened to anecdotes about the living quarters of the British command.

This area also contains the trans-Atlantic telephone room, which enabled Churchill to speak securely with President Franklin Roosevelt in Washington. Visitors aren't allowed to enter, but it is interesting just for the chance to see what even the command could not.

From there, we got our first look at the Churchill Museum, where we learned that the location was referred to as a "fortified basement" instead of a bunker because its fortification was never tested by actual bombs.

Churchill said that he wished the Nazi bombs had landed closer, giving him a chance to see how the protection held up amid the blasts.

About halfway through the tour, we saw a café, which is stocked with a variety of sandwiches and coffee selections. We then headed toward an area with wax figures acting out how the British command operated from the space.

The switchboard room shows women outfitted with modified gas masks working tirelessly during the Blitz.

They stayed underground day and night, sleeping between shifts in a sub-basement. They dubbed the switchboard room the "dungeon galleries" because the only sound was the clacking of typewriters.

At the end of the tour is the famous map room, where Churchill and military commanders directed the war effort.

It is filled from top to bottom with artifacts, which include multicolored phones that light up rather than ring so as not to produce sound.



PHOTOS BY RICHARD ASH/Imperial War Museum

The Cabinet room at the Churchill War Rooms in London provided seating for the heads of the British army, navy and air force as well as others reporting to Prime Minister Winston Churchill. The Churchill War Rooms, a branch of Britain's sprawling Imperial War Museum, offers various ways to experience the former nerve center of British resistance to the Nazis.



Churchill's bedroom on display at the Churchill War Rooms in London. He stayed overnight there only three times, according to an audio guide provided to visitors.

Wall-to-wall maps chart in detail the advance of the German forces in the Soviet Union in 1941 to 1942 and their retreat in the years that followed.

I was surprised by the amount of detail and effort put into the preservation of such

an important location. History was shaped in those rooms, and the fullness of the sightseeing experience made me feel like I was a part of the journey.

morris.javed@stripes.com
@morris_stripes



The Churchill War Rooms entrance is across the street from St. James Park in London. The Westminster site is near major landmarks like Big Ben and parliament.

On the QT

Address: Clive Steps, King Charles Street, London

Hours: 9:30 a.m.-6 p.m. daily; last entry 5 p.m.

Cost: adults, 32 pounds; children 5 to 15, 16 pounds; students, disabled and those 65 and over, 28.80 pounds

Information: Phone: +44 20 7416 5000, online: iwm.org.uk/visits/churchill-war-rooms

Loretto Morris

WEEKEND: FOOD & DINING

Ooh la Layers

Croissant shop in Bahrain channels Paris with alluring pastry assortment

BY SHANNON RENFROE
Stars and Stripes

Upon arriving in Bahrain this past spring, I found myself on a long and hollow quest for a good croissant.

There's something about its simplicity that serves as the ultimate litmus test. If a bakery can master the croissant, it opens the door to other indulgent, flaky creations. It's more than just a pastry; it's the gateway to a universe of endless layers of carbohydrate bliss.

In the Juffair district of Manama, I finally stumbled upon Layers Artisan Croissanterie, where each croissant undergoes a meticulous 72-hour proofing process.

From the moment you step inside, it's easy to forget you're in Bahrain. A few two-person tables line the front of this cozy space, which welcomes customers at the entrance with a chalkboard displaying whimsical daily quotes.

The counter is adorned with Mediterranean-inspired blue tile, and simple chairs face the window, allowing patrons to indulge in people-watching.

Layers uses artisanal ingredients, including French dairy products maker Elle & Vire's 84% fat butter, which lends a rich texture to the croissants and Danishes. You can smell the butter when you bite into the pastries.

I ordered a plain croissant; a mango-and-coconut tart; a roast beef and smoked cheese pain Suisse; a caprese Danish; an eggplant Parmesan Danish; and a pistachio-and-rose babka.

Each item showcased the bakery's commitment to quality and craftsmanship. The undeniable winner was the namesake croissant, a sculpture of buttery, flaky layers that shattered with every bite.

The interior maintained a perfect chewiness, almost al dente, while the shell stayed crisp and delicate, a deceptively difficult balance. I resisted the urge to devour it in two bites and instead savored it for a bit longer.

The tart was another standout. It featured a base of coconut frangipane topped with mango pastry cream and finished with roasted coconut flakes. Specks of vanilla bean dotted the custard, and sweet chunks of mango were artfully scattered on top.

Larger than the palm of my hand, it felt like good value for



**AFTER
HOURS
BAHRAIN**

Layers Artisan Croissanterie

Address: 2603 Building L172, Qudai-biya Ave., Qudai-biya, Bahrain

Hours: 8 a.m.-9 p.m., seven days a week

Prices: Pastries range from 3.50-7 BD.

Information: +973 3403 6541, layers_croissant on Instagram. Talabat delivery and pickup are also available.

Shannon Renfro



Layers serves this mango and coconut pastry. It combines a rich coconut frangipane base with a creamy mango custard and is topped with roasted coconut flakes.

the price. I highly recommend trying one of the fruit tarts if available. Skip the more predictable strawberry options and opt for something more inventive.

The rose-and-pistachio babka was a generously sized wreath and not too sweet, as promised by the cashier. It shined with a glossy finish and was sprinkled with rose petals, warming cardamom and pistachios folded throughout the yeasted dough.

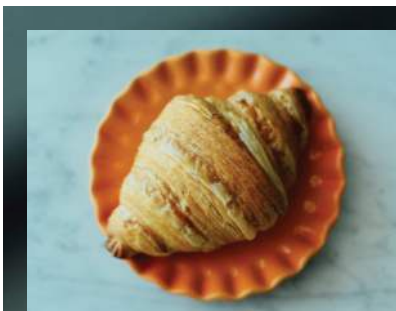
This treat could easily be saved for the following day, reheated alongside morning coffee or enjoyed as a midday snack.

The roast beef pain Suisse was a revelation. A pain Suisse is a French pastry, traditionally sweet, known for its flaky, buttery layers filled with rich custard and chocolate chips.

However, this savory twist featured thin slices of roast beef and smoked cheese folded into the pastry, with the cheese bubbling to a golden, crisp edge.

The pairing of caramelized cheese and a pickled pepper pinned to the bread by a toothpick was delicious. It reminded me of a mini Reuben sandwich without the sauerkraut.

My only suggestion to the staff



PHOTOS BY SHANNON RENFROE/Stars and Stripes

The croissant, seen above and in inset, at Layers Artisan Croissanterie, isn't just a pastry; it's a lesson in craftsmanship. The croissants at the shop in Manama, Bahrain, have more than 81 layers created through a traditional folding process. The croissants also go through a 72-hour proofing process.



The pistachio and rose babka from Layers features delicate rose petals and crunchy pistachios folded into a soft, yeasty dough. Layers rotates its babka flavor offerings.

would be to consider adding a touch of mustard to the pastry before baking.

The caprese Danish was visually stunning, with long ribbons of green pesto garnishing its surface. Its flavor did not disappoint, either.

The generous slices of mozzarella, juicy tomatoes and fresh pesto, combined with the golden pastry, delivered a fresh, pizza-like quality. With each bite, I felt a little closer to both France and Italy.

Layers offers a variety of other baked goods that are equally worth mentioning. Its New York rolls are croissants filled with chocolate, hazelnut praline or pistachio cream.



Pastries at Layers Artisan Croissanterie in Bahrain include, clockwise from top right, the caprese Danish with fresh pesto and tomatoes, pain Suisse with roast beef and cheese and the eggplant Parmesan Danish. Each of the pastries at Layers is made daily.

The babka selection rotates daily, with such flavors as feta and roasted peppers, garlic and cheese, cinnamon and pecan, and almond citrus.

There's also a za'atar croissant, an homage to Bahrain that features tangy za'atar seasoning sprinkled generously on top, adding a Middle Eastern twist to the French classic.

For beverages, you can't go wrong with a cup of Layers' brewed coffee or a creamy latte, which is offered in a matcha tea option or the popular Spanish

latte. It's a blend of espresso, milk and a touch of sweetness with condensed milk.

I had the fresh orange juice, with just the right amount of pulp.

Although Manama is worlds away from Paris, the experience at Layers succeeds in replicating a French ambience while tossing in a dash of local panache for good measure, ensuring that my croissant cravings in Bahrain will never go unsatisfied.

renfro.shannon@stripes.com
@ShannonStripes

WEEKEND: QUICK TRIPS



PHOTOS BY JONATHAN SNYDER/Stars and Stripes

The lift lines are usually tolerable at Megahira Ski Resort. The resort's 2,515-yard-long run from the top of the mountain to the bottom is now open, though conditions are icy.

Slippery slopes await day-trip skiers

Uncrowded pistes — and, soon, penguins — await at Megahira Ski Resort, a drive or bus ride from MCAS Iwakuni

BY JONATHAN SNYDER
Stars and Stripes

If you're familiar with ski resorts on the East Coast of the United States, you will feel right at home on the slopes in the Chugoku region of Japan, with its abundance of easy and intermediate pistes and icy conditions.

While there are many resorts to choose from, the closest and most accessible ski resort to Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni is Megahira Ski Resort, just over a 1½-hour drive depending on road conditions.

The resort has an impressive snowmaking operation. In early December, the resort opened a 2,515-yard-long run from the top of the mountain to the bottom and a beginners and family slope area.

The slopes were not crowded on opening weekend Dec. 14, and the wait for a chairlift was never more than a minute. The roomy pistes are wide enough to navigate around skiers who lag in the center.



A roomy cafeteria at Megahira Ski Resort near Hiroshima, Japan, allows skiers to warm up and get something hot to eat or drink.

The snow conditions reminded me of snowboarding in Pennsylvania and New York, on hard, compact snow and sheets of ice in spots. Falling in these conditions is like hitting concrete.

Not much snow has fallen since the resort opened, and the snow conditions on the mountain are still reported as hard compact and icy.

When the entire mountain is open, Megahira offers seven

different courses to ski, with a good balance of beginner and intermediate options and two advanced slopes. There are four pair lifts and one quad lift.

It's not a destination resort, but if you're stationed in southern Japan, the convenience and cost of the lift passes make it worth the day trip. Ticket prices range from about \$7 for a one-time run to about \$27 for a child and \$40 adult for an all-day lift ticket.

On the QT

Directions: 4301 Yoshiwa, Hatusukaichi, Hiroshima 738-0301, Japan; by car, take Route 186 north for about 90 minutes.

Times: Open 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Closed Tuesdays.

Costs: Adult three-hour lift ticket, \$32; full day, \$40; child three-hour ticket is \$21; full-day, \$27.

Food: On-site restaurant, food trucks and vending machines.
Information: Online: megahira.co.jp

Jonathan Snyder

Outdoor Recreation on the Marine base offers trips to the resort, but dates and space available are limited. The Single Marine Program has also scheduled trips to the resort for single Marines and sailors.

Outdoor Recreation also offers up to three days' free rental of skis, snowboards, boots, helmets and snowsuits for Marines, sailors, civilian employees and their families.

Hiroko Kanko Co. operates a ski bus that departs the Hiroshima bus station at the main train station. Reservations must be made five days ahead. A round-trip ticket with a lift pass is \$67 for adults and \$54 for children.

At the resort, a restaurant offers some wild boar and other Japanese dishes. Bring yen; the restaurant uses the ticket vending machines for ordering.

The resort issues a plastic card as a lift pass for the chairlifts. If you don't want to keep it as a souvenir, when you turn in the pass near the ticket window, you can play a casino-style slot machine for a chance to win a prize. I've played about a dozen times over the course of various trips to the resort, and on one play I won a one-day ski pass. Even if you don't match three items, it still dispenses a piece of candy, so I guess everyone is a winner.

Megahira plans on bringing penguins to the resort Jan 18 and 19 and again Feb. 22 and 23.

snyder.jonathan@stripes.com
@Jon_E_Snyder

WEEKEND: FOOD & DINING



PHOTOS BY ERIC MENDIOLA/Stars and Stripes

Cake Nara serves up sweet and savory baked goods in Pyeongtaek, South Korea.

A sweet bakery to savor

Cake Nara in Pyeongtaek well worth the short drive from local bases

By ERIC MENDIOLA
Stars and Stripes

The variety of sweet and savory goods at Cake Nara, a bakery in Pyeongtaek, makes the drive from Camp Humphreys and Osan Air Base worth the effort.

“Nara” is a Korean word for “country,” so the bakery sometimes is referred to as Cake Country. But whatever you choose to call this place, you might soon be calling it your favorite bakery in town.

Inside you’ll find long tables stocked with baked goods, with baskets and tongs ready nearby for you to gather your selection. Cakes are available in refrigerated display cases and on the opposite side of the room is a counter with goods for sale like juice, jams and home decorations.

As you browse through the rows, you’ll notice the staff consistently walking through the bakery keeping everything neat and restocking the items. You’ll also hear the sound of bakers opening ovens and carts laden with pastries being rolled around in the kitchen.

The names of the baked goods are in Korean, but I was able to use a translation app to identify the items. This wasn’t much of a hassle.

My first choice was a Korean-style vegetable croquette, a doughnut-shaped savory pastry with a vegetable filling.

The croquette was firm, not crumbly, and held its shape. The buttery, slightly sweet bread held a fresh filling with an oniony tang. It’s a flavorful treat, but not recommended if you don’t like onion.

Moving onto one of the sweeter options, I opted for an egg tart. The disc-shaped, crumbly pastry was wrapped in cellophane. The custard part was sweet and creamy. The crust lacked a distinctive flavor but added a nice crunch to the custard filling.

Other sweet options include doughnuts, croissants and, of course, cakes. Savory options include hot dogs, burgers and freshly baked garlic bread.

The bakery is close enough to the bases to make a morning run for a breakfast pastry a tempting choice.

mendiola.eric@stripes.com



Vegetable croquettes are savory pastries with a vegetable filling.



Cake Nara

Location: 755-8 Jisan-dong, Pyeongtaek, Gyeonggi-do, South Korea
Hours: Open daily, 10:45 a.m. to 8:30 p.m.

Prices: The vegetable croquette was 2,700 won, or about \$1.84. The egg tart was 2,000 won.

Dress: Casual

Directions: A short drive from Osan Air Base and Camp Humphreys.

Information: Phone: 031-666-7688

Eric Mendiola

International Hot and Spicy Food Day coming up Jan. 16

By KRISTEN WOOD
Associated Press

International Hot and Spicy Food Day is on Jan. 16, celebrating the bold flavors and fiery dishes that seem like they’re setting our taste buds aflame. Whether you like a mild heat or seek out the spiciest chiles, here are the best ways to turn up the flavor.

Spice and heat are an integral part of cuisines around the world. International Hot and Spicy Food Day celebrates both these traditional cuisines and those who love all things spicy.

The science of spice

The heat you experience in a spicy dish comes from capsaicin, a compound found in chili peppers. The capsaicin binds to the receptors on your tongue and sends signals to the brain, which interprets these signals as heat.

Different types of peppers have different concentrations of capsaicin, giving them different levels of spiciness. The Scoville scale measures this spiciness, or pungency, in Scoville Heat Units or SHU. Sweet peppers like bell peppers have no pungency at 0 SHU while the Carolina Reaper has a Scoville rating of up to 2.2 million SHU for a painfully spicy experience.

Other peppers fall in between this range. Jalapeño peppers are about 2,500 to 10,000 SHU. Serrano peppers are between 10,000 and 25,000 SHU. Habanero chiles and Scotch bonnet peppers are over 100,000 SHU. The ghost pepper is about 1 million SHU.

These peppers don’t just pack heat, however. Many cultivators develop unique flavor profiles in their chiles as well. For instance, jalapeños have a vegetal flavor while a Scotch bonnet brings fruitiness. Taking into account both the spiciness and flavor of a pepper can help you craft the perfect dish.

Global flavors with heat

Although peppers are native to what is now South America and Mexico, early explorers and traders quickly carried peppers around the world. Cultures everywhere incorporated chiles into their cuisine, bringing a spicy twist to local flavors.



iStock

Hot chili peppers are the base of many spicy meals.

Peppers feature in the dishes of many Asian cultures. Chiles grow well in Central Asia in a climate similar to that of their native South America. Additionally, chiles pair nicely with other spices commonly used in local cuisines.

Cooking with spice

With so many pepper types and heat levels, cooking with chilis offers plenty of room for exploration. Be sure to start small as you are exploring. You can always add more heat, but it’s difficult to rescue dishes with too much spice.

Whether you like a mild heat or fiery punch, the best pepper dishes bring out the flavors of the peppers, spices and other ingredients. In addition to choosing the right pepper for your dish, adding ingredients that will cut the heat will help bring forward a more layered flavor profile. Creamy ingredients like coconut milk, yogurt or avocado have a cooling effect. Sweet items like sugar or honey can also help.

Top it with hot sauce

Hot sauces are a great way to experiment with spice. They bring a wide variety of flavors and, if you’re cooking for multiple people, make it possible for everyone at the table to customize the spiciness of a dish to their preferred tolerance.

Most cuisines have hot sauces that complement their flavors well, such as garlicky sriracha from Thailand or Caribbean Scotch bonnet sauce with all-spice. A growing market of artisan hot sauces can also bring more unique flavors or extreme heat levels to your dishes.

NEW TO THE PACIFIC?

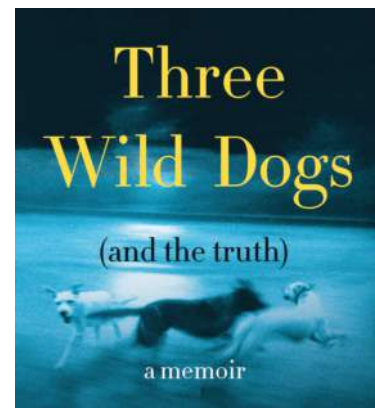
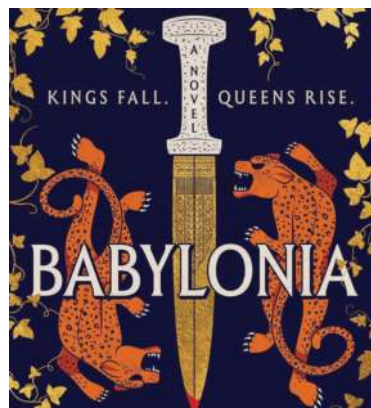
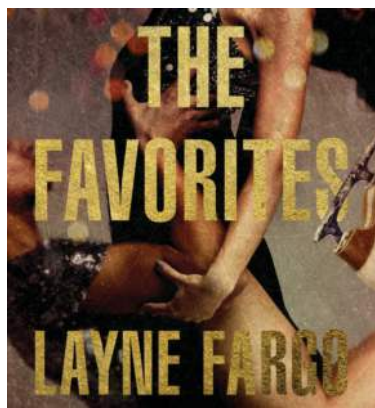
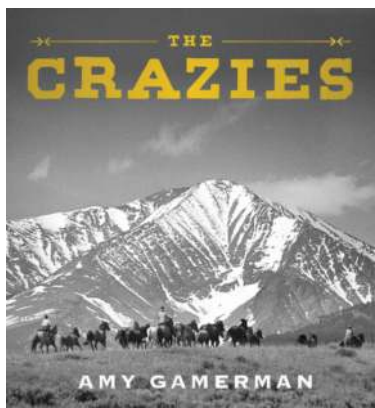
Contact CustomerHelp@stripes.com to get your free copy of Welcome to the Pacific magazine!

STARS AND STRIPES

Digital edition also available. Download online.



WEEKEND: BOOKS



10 noteworthy titles for January reading

BY BECKY MELOAN
The Washington Post

Shorter winter days are made for reading under the covers. Settle in with a booklight and a page-turning mystery, an engrossing fantasy or a real-life look at rescue dog ownership by a beloved author.

'The Heart of Winter'

by Jonathan Evison

Abe Winter's kids know that Ruth, his wife of 70 years, has always been the caretaker of the family, but after a frightening diagnosis, Abe realizes that his time to step up has arrived. As a couple, they have faced challenges from the moment their first blind date went horribly wrong, and through the tribulations of raising a family and aging, they have learned a thing or two about acceptance, patience and compromise. Evison's gentle love story is a tribute to the joys of a long, stable marriage. (Jan. 7)

'The Crazies: The Cattleman, the Wind Prospector, and a War Out West'

by Amy Gamerman

A legal battle gets the David-and-Goliath treatment in this narrative about colorful characters in Montana's Crazy Mountains. Local ranch owner Rick Jarrett knew that his land's biggest natural resource was the wind that came flying down his mountain. Leasing his property to a wind farming company seemed like a good way to make his living from the land, just as his pioneer ancestors had done. His next-door neighbor, a Texas billionaire, preferred unobstructed views, and when his offer to buy out Jarrett was rejected, the ensuing lawsuit kicked off a decadeslong battle involving regulators, Native inhabitants, conservationists and others with an interest in defining land ownership in the American West. (Jan. 7)

'The Favorites'

by Layne Fargo

Katrina Shaw dreamed of becoming an Olympic ice dancing champion alongside her devoted skating partner, Heath Rocha. Their traumatic pasts created a bond that seemed unbreakable, and the sizzling chemistry in their performances launched them on a path to stardom, but then a shocking turn of events severed their relationship. Years later, an unauthorized documentary reignites the public's fascination with Shaw and Rocha and offers them a chance to define their legacy. Fargo's wrenching romance channels the real-life story of Olympic ice dancing medalists Tessa Virtue and Scott Moir, whose careers raised questions about the demands of fame. (Jan. 14)

'Babylonia'

by Costanza Casati

Abandoned as an infant on the shore of the river where her mother, the goddess Derceto, drowned herself, headstrong Semiramis believes she is destined for greatness. Betraying the abusive villager who raised her, she seizes the opportunity to marry the king's right-hand man and journey to Assyria to seek her fortune. There, foreign armies are threatening invasion, while palace spies operate in the shadows, so Semiramis must use all her strength and ingenuity. Based on the ancient Middle Eastern legend of a warrior queen, Casati's sweeping epic reflects the era's brutality and cultural richness. (Jan. 14)

'Three Wild Dogs (and the Truth)'

by Markus Zusak

The author of "The Book Thief" pens a loving memoir about life with his three shelter dogs, Reuben, Archer and Frosty. As cat owners and parents to a 3-year-old, Zusak and his wife decided one night to "make the mistake" of adding their first dog to the mix. Rescuing dogs who were once on the street can challenge even experienced owners, and with each successive addition to their family, those challenges grew exponentially, as did the love they shared with their canine companions. (Jan. 21)

'The Inheritance'

by Trisha Sakhlecha

The Agarwal siblings have gathered on a private island off the coast of Scotland, ostensibly to celebrate their parents' 40th anniversary, but really to hear who will inherit the family's massive fortune. Each of the three believes they deserve the largest share of profits: Asem, who's currently working for his father but torn between loyalty to his family and his wife, Zoe; Myra, the high-achieving golden child who has recently stumbled financially; and Aisha, whose devil-may-care lifestyle rubs everyone the wrong way. A peek behind the velvet curtain of extreme wealth and privilege, Sakhlecha's glamorous thriller portrays a dysfunctional family doing despicable things in the name of love. (Jan. 21)

'Isaac's Song'

by Daniel Black

Black's 2022 novel "Don't Cry for Me" introduced Jacob, a terminally ill man writing letters to his estranged gay son, Isaac, in an attempt to contextualize corrosive choices that prompted their alienation. Now, Black brings Isaac to the forefront as he grapples with loss during a time of social and racial reckoning, leading him to seek

help from a therapist who encourages him to write his life story. Through writing, he comes to terms with the forces that shaped his family's past and present. (Jan. 28)

'The Oligarch's Daughter'

by Joseph Finder

Paul Brightman is living under an assumed name in a small New Hampshire town when a Russian operative tries to kill him. Six years earlier, despite warnings from well-meaning friends, he married a beautiful photographer whose Russian father had amassed a fortune through questionable business dealings. Although Paul planned to keep his father-in-law at arm's length, he became immersed in a dangerous world, with the FBI hounding him to become an informant against the family of the woman he loves. In the present day, forced into survival mode, he takes to the woods, racing to stay one step ahead of the ever-present threat of a million-dollar bounty on his head. (Jan. 28)

'Good Dirt'

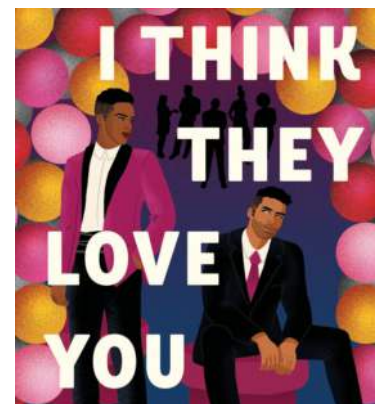
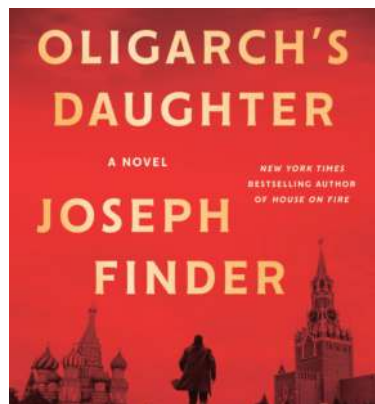
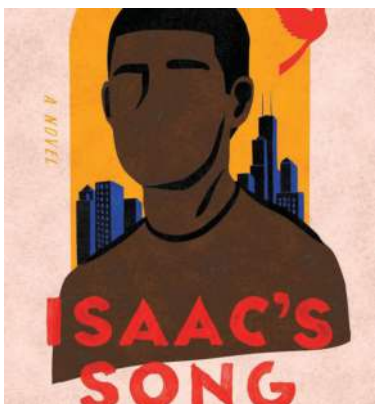
by Charmaine Wilkerson

The "Black Cake" author's moving second novel is a multigenerational tale about a family haunted by tragedy. A treasured family heirloom, a stoneware jar crafted by an enslaved ancestor, was shattered the day 10-year-old Ebby's brother Baz was killed during a home invasion. Years after the unsolved crime took place, Ebby's family just wants to avoid attention, but when Ebby is left at the altar, her humiliation is public and unbearable. A fresh start in France, where nobody knows her, seems like a path toward healing until her ex-fiancé and his new girlfriend appear, forcing her to face uncomfortable truths and inspiring her to investigate the history of the beloved jar that shaped her family for generations. (Jan. 28)

'I Think They Love You'

by Julian Winters

Competing with his type-A sister to succeed his father as CEO of the family business, Denzel "Denz" Carter wants to prove he's capable of handling commitment. So he tells a white lie: that he's in a serious relationship. In desperate straits after his family demands to meet his secret boyfriend, Denz turns to Braylon, an ex who has recently resurfaced, and who sees an opportunity to secure his own promotion. Although Bray and Denz reconnect strictly for business, acting the part of devoted partners is confusing when unresolved feelings keep getting in the way. Fun and frothy, Winters' second-chance romance is a celebration of family and love in all its messy glory. (Jan. 28)



WEEKEND: BOOKS

COMMENTARY

Magic or menace?

‘Mood Machine’ contends that Spotify’s veneer of legitimacy makes it more dangerous than the clearly compromised file-sharing services that spawned it

By FRANZ NICOLAY
The Washington Post

From the perspective of a music fan, streaming is, unfortunately, a spectacular product: the universal jukebox! If some have a twinge of discomfort about the ethical compromises that enable its convenience — as when they use Amazon, or Uber — the uneasiness can be ambient and unspecific enough to keep them from changing their usage: Are the alternatives really any more righteous? For musicians, though, Spotify has been a more existential threat than the file-sharing revolution that spawned it, because it has the veneer of legitimacy. Meanwhile, says Liz Pelly, the company leaches profits from working musicians while preparing the ground to replace those musicians with AI-generated neo-Muzak.

Since she first wrote about Spotify in 2017, Pelly has established herself as the most lucid and rigorous critic of the rot at the heart of an apparently magical service. Her new book, “Mood Machine,” promises to become a new standard text for tech-skeptic artists. It expands on essays that she published in the *Baffler* and elsewhere, and does to the company what Robert Caro did to Robert Moses’ public works (in about a thousand fewer pages than Caro took in “The Power Broker”): It identifies patterns of behavior behind the scenes of what can seem like an inevitable product of mass convenience and exposes their consequences.

The broad strokes of the indictment — the neo-payola promotional schemes; the minuscule royalties paid to artists, not to mention the royalty-free “ghost artists”; the designation of huge swaths of artists as royalty-ineligible “hobbyists”; the investments in podcasts, military technology and aural wallpaper repackaged for wellness culture — may be familiar to those interested in the issues confronting musicians in the 21st century. But it’s invaluable to have the brief for the prosecution in one place, narrated in plain language with a sense of righteous outrage.

Pelly builds her tendentious but convincing case on internal Slack transcripts, anonymous interviews with disenchanted current and former employees, the company’s changing narratives of itself, and some door-knocking in Stockholm, where Spotify is headquartered, to present a bruising portrait of the company that has become as synonymous with streaming music as Xerox is with copiers.

The roots of Spotify can be found in the antiglobalist protests of the early 2000s, when activists in Sweden — in the anti-capitalist, “copyleft” spirit of “information wants to be free” — set up what they called the Bureau of Piracy, which evolved into the Pirate Bay file-sharing behemoth and made Sweden a global hub

for copyright infringement.

As one of the bureau’s founders told Pelly: “I don’t mean gratis,” as in cost-free, but “more like libre. Actual free culture that is not based on financial incentive ... but on actual love for culture itself.”

In this context, Spotify CEO Daniel Ek reads like a millennial analog to the Jann Wenner portrayed in Joe Hagan’s 2017 biography of the Rolling Stone founder: both beneficiaries of a generational idealism vulnerable to blithe, opportunistic chancers.

Sweden and the United States present opposing visions of music as a core cultural good. Sweden has been historically distinguished by public support of musicians (Ek himself benefited from “robust local public music education programs”) and lackluster copyright protection; the United States is shorter on the public support and much more protective of copyrights. But both Stockholm and the Bay Area appear to share the slippery optimism of tech entrepreneurship (Pelly’s book, among other things, is a storehouse of the inadvertently self-parodic names of tech startups: Boomy, Suno, Songza, Udio, Lenddo, Acxiom and more). The Spotify portrayed here sees music the way Amazon initially saw books: as a Trojan horse to give it an exploitable foothold in customers’ lives, “more as a utility than an art form.”

The recipe for Spotify’s aural supremacy relies on increasingly specific, homogenous and automated playlists (the company’s term of art is “algotorial,” a combination of algorithmic suggestion and editorial hand). The idea isn’t new; Pelly situates the playlist in the lineage of both active and passive listening: the user-driven mixtape (abetted by the emergence of the cassette tape and the Walkman) and the top-down sameness of corporate commercial radio.

The Spotify portrayed here sees music the way Amazon initially saw books: as a Trojan horse to give it an exploitable foothold in customers’ lives, “more as a utility than an art form.”

Likewise, Spotify’s blockbuster “chill” playlists amount to a rebranding of the concept of “easy listening,” or a conceptually barren imitation of Erik Satie’s “furniture music” and Brian Eno’s “ambient” sound: artistic and intellectual developments, Pelly writes, now doomed to “going the way of punk and folk — traditions that started out rooted in philosophies of musical relationships, now flat-



tened to the point that many listeners hear them solely as aesthetics.” Spotify, Pelly writes, encourages the making of music “just inoffensive enough not to get shut off.”

The habits of both listeners and musicians are distorted by the gravitational pull of Spotify’s market dominance. Listeners encouraged to approach music as purely functional — for sleeping, studying

tention zones)” and pushing artists to stay within them as well, to avoid the dreaded skip button.

This customer-service model of creativity leads to aesthetic stagnation. Some producers and songwriters call the result the “Spotify sound”: “muted, midtempo, and melancholy” — “streambait pop” made by entrepreneurial “solo creative[s]” who are hyperattuned to listener metrics and willing to give up 30% of their royalties for preferential placement. Music journalists, too, may feel themselves sidelined by automated recommendation and curation, even aesthetic taxonomy: Former Spotify engineer Glenn McDonald took it upon himself to invent names for “data clusters” of listeners and stylistic tags that, he thought, indicated nascent microgenres.

“At what point does a recommendation system stop recommending songs and start recommending a whole idea of culture?” Pelly asks. She refers to the composer Pauline Oliveros’ distinction between passive hearing and active listening — Spotify prefers that you engage as passively and distractedly as possible. As in politics, panoptic superstructures work best when their subjects aren’t paying too much attention. As Ek once put it, “Our only competitor is silence.”

or wallpapering a public business — have no particular investment in individual, identifiable artists, which has allowed Spotify to populate playlists with inexpensive soundalikes.

Ironically, for a platform that markets its capacity to enable “discovery,” the company’s primary effect, Pelly writes, is “keeping users within their comfort zones (or as Spotify thought of it, customer re-

WEEKEND: MUSIC



AP

Kehlani performs at All Points East festival on Aug. 18, 2023, in London. The artist is nominated for three Grammy Awards in R&B and rap categories.

Trusting her instincts

Kehlani shares how taking risks earned Grammy noms while balancing mental health, activism

By JONATHAN LANDRUM JR.
Associated Press

While recording “Crash,” Kehlani faced a career-defining decision: Stick with the familiar R&B sound that helped build the singer’s name, or risk it all to showcase their full artistic range.

For Kehlani, who uses she/they pronouns, choosing the latter was a gamble, but trusting their instincts paid off in the long run. Their fourth studio album became a catalyst for earning Grammy nods, a massive world tour and proving that their versatility should never be in question.

“I was taking a risk, because I’m one of

those artists that have been around long enough for people to pigeonhole me into a sound,” said Kehlani, who first realized she was being cornered musically after releasing the single “Butterfly” from their 2019 mixtape “While We Wait.” Though she loved the track, calling it a “really pretty song,” she felt a growing need to break out of the box and evolve their sound.

Kehlani pushed genre boundaries on “Crash,” blending elements of R&B, rock, dance floor, rap and country. Their bold experimentation earned three Grammy nominations: best R&B progressive album for “Crash,” R&B song through the viral sensation track “After Hours” and best

melodic rap performance for “Kehlani.”

In a recent interview with The Associated Press, Kehlani discussed crediting the dance community for “After Hours” going viral, how their pro-Palestinian stance impacted them personally, their Christmas song with GloRilla, and how embracing a rock star persona for “Crash” challenged their health but unlocked a creative breakthrough for the album.

Exploring various musical reflections

Kehlani’s music mirrors their mental state. While recording “Crash,” she fully embraced a rock-star lifestyle, staying up all night and drinking alcohol. It certainly

wasn’t conducive for their health, but at times, this led to some intense, manic bursts of “expression and understanding,” which defined the album.

“That’s what I think had to come out of me in order for ‘Crash’ to come out of me in that way,” said Kehlani, who noted that all the “chaos” delivered on the album wasn’t always negative. She recorded songs in different Airbnb locations including from a house in San Diego, where she could surf every day; found their grunge sound while going out in Harlem; and exuded their confidence while she laid down tracks on vacation in the Do-

SEE INSTINCTS ON PAGE 29

WEEKEND: MUSIC

Khruangbin lets music speak for itself

By MARK KENNEDY
Associated Press

If you think your Spotify playlist is getting a little too long, consider the one shared by the members of Khruangbin. It's got 51 hours of songs.

"I'm trying to listen to as many different things as possible before they all start to sound kind of the same," says Mark Speer, the trio's guitarist and musical explorer, capturing interesting sounds from Thailand to the Middle East.

"We lose Mark sometimes for a small period of time because he's on an anthropological dig," says bassist Laura Lee. Drummer Donald "DJ" Johnson finishes her thought: "For the quintessential Chinese funk."

The mainly instrumental Khruangbin's sonic explorations have paid off of late with a warmly received 2024 album, "A La Sala," that reached the top 40 of the Billboard 200 and a Grammy Award nomination for best new artist. Not that any of that is going to their heads.

"I think we're just going to keep leaning in what we do and keep trying to be more the silhouette version of ourselves as much as we can and let the music speak for itself, because that's who we are. We don't like the spotlight in that way," says Lee.

The Texas trio makes music that's hard to describe, a mix of soul, surf rock, psychedelic and funk that creates a melodic, Afro-pop-inspired, reverb-heavy



Jackie Lee Young

Khruangbin — Donald "DJ" Johnson (left), Laura Lee and Mark Speer — received a Grammy nomination for best new artist.

sound with nods to other cultures. The band's name is appropriately travel-related — Khruangbin is the Thai word for airplane.

"Mark's storytelling feels like words, even though there are no words. And my storytelling feels like math even though there are no numbers necessarily. And DJ is the translator between my language and Mark somehow," says Lee.

They are highly collaborative, working in the studio and performing live with Leon Bridges on two EPs, Paul McCartney, Vieux Farka Touré, Wu-Tang Clan, Childish Gambino, Toro Y Moi, Men I Trust and more.

For "A La Sala," Khruangbin

focused on the trio, realizing that they didn't need anyone else in the studio. They say that was empowering.

"I think because we had just been through a process of collaborating quite a lot, it felt important for us to just huddle, just the three of us," says Lee. "When it's just the three of us, it's like a deep breath and a collective sigh."

Most of their music is instrumental, but vocals — either ghostly or a full-on lyric song — have been employed, like on "May Ninth" from the new album, with the lyrics "Memory burned and gone / A multicolored gray."

"The music comes first," says

Johnson. "And when we finish putting everything together, if we feel that it needs one more thing, something missing, or we just want a vocal texture, then usually we go down the path of adding that."

The trio, especially early on, faced pressure from record executives who liked the instrumentals but wished there was a vocal on top.

"I think it's just human nature. I don't think it comes from, like, any sort of bad place," says Lee. "But people just want to sing on top of it. And people are used to hearing a vocal. They're like, 'This sounds so good. Let's add a vocal.'"

"A La Sala" is the trio's fourth studio album, with Pitchfork saying "each member of the trio has several opportunities to shine while making each track sound individual, and it all comes together cohesively." The Guardian said Khruangbin make "their intricate music sound so gentle that it lulls the listener into a newly imaginative state."

Although they formed in 2010, the Grammy administrators chose Khruangbin as a best new artist nominee alongside Benson Boone, Sabrina Carpenter, Doechii, RAYE, Chappell Roan, Shaboozey and Teddy Swims. The rules of the category have changed over time and now offers inclusion for any act that has "attained a breakthrough or prominence."

The members of the band see

their albums like snapshots in time. If their third, "Mordechai," was the sound of energy and movement as the band toured relentlessly, then "A La Sala" is more sedate, born from the pandemic and with a title that means "To the Room."

It's a more chilled-out sound, even cozy. One song, "Three from Two," even celebrates the home birth of Lee's first child. "We needed some quiet, and it felt nice to put out something quiet in a world that's not so quiet anymore," she says.

The band has heard their music playing at the oddest places, like "Texas Sun" becoming a popular tune played on TikTok by people making out in Australia or "Two Fish and an Elephant" heard at yoga studios.

"I hope that our music is malleable enough to communicate to later generations in whatever way it works," says Speer. "That's how language happens. That's how music happens, that's how cultures happen. So, I'm super into it."

They don't know what direction their next album will take, but they have lots of ideas, like maybe the quintessential Chinese funk.

"We have an ever-expanding folder full of stuff that may or may not ever see the light of day," says Speer. "When it's time, it's time. And if it's not time for it, it's not time for it. Don't dig in your heels — move on to the next thing."

Instincts: Kehlani says activism took quiet toll on mental health

FROM PAGE 28

minican Republic.

"It was a rock-star album made in a very rock-star process," said Kehlani, whose approach was completely different than their 2022 release "Blue Water Road," where she was focused more on meditation, leaving them in a spiritually grounded space.

These days, Kehlani has found middle ground through isolation and a healthier lifestyle. She now works out like a "ninja warrior," hitting the gym multiple times a day, doing yoga and hiking up mountains and incorporating healthier eating habits.

That helped Kehlani create the mixtape "While We Wait 2," released a couple of months after "Crash." It took only two weeks to record their latest mixtape inside their backyard house while wearing pajamas.

"The music I make will always reflect exactly where I'm at in my mental health journey," she said.

Dance community contributes to viral song

Kehlani credits the massive success of "After Hours" to the dance community on

social media, thanks to Darius Hickman, who was behind the infectious dance challenge.

The singer said musicians owe gratitude to dancers like Hickman, whose video post in 2024 garnered more than 3.3 million views on TikTok. The post showed Hickman dancing to the intro of "After Hours."

"Dancers are like the new DJs," she said. "They are breaking songs."

Kehlani often shows their gratitude to the many who looped "After Hours" into their dance videos. She tagged Hickman on their own social media, accepting the dance challenge.

"It just feels good and it brings people together," she said. "So when I noticed that it was actually doing it in real time, I was like, 'OK, it's beyond me now.' I owe it to the dancers, really."

Kehlani and GloRilla bring holiday cheer with trap twist

Kehlani dabbled in Christmas music nearly a decade ago with a few low-key SoundCloud tracks. But this year, she gave the holidays a bold new twist by collaborating with rapper GloRilla on "Xmas Time," which flips the script on traditional

Christmas carols.

"I never imagined I'd be on a trap Christmas song," said Kehlani, who noted that she didn't think twice when GloRilla's team reached out about teaming up on the festive, bass-thumping track that was released Dec. 13.

"I'm such a fan of GloRilla in any shape, way or form," she said. "She could've said she was making an Easter song and I would've been like 'Fantastic. Girl, let's do it.'"

Managing mental health while being a Palestinian supporter

Despite warnings to protect their career, Kehlani used their music and platform to boldly support Palestinians, marching alongside thousands at a pro-Palestinian rally in Los Angeles last year.

The singer inspired followers to rally behind the cause, but the weight of activism took a quiet toll on their mental health and livelihood.

"The hardest part of it for me was I had to maintain my sanity," said Kehlani, who this year released the "Next 2 U" music video. (The video opens with a poem by a Palestinian American writer, and Kehlani

performs in front of a Palestinian flag.) Kehlani said she struggled with keeping tabs on the war in Gaza and watching friends struggle with depression because of them "bearing witness to a genocide."

"In a whole new scope of 'Wow, my safety, my livelihood, my career, how I take care of myself, how I take care of my family, how I feed my child,' All of this is endangered," she said. "For a while, I felt like I was alone. ... I had community leaders. I had activists. But I didn't have another person in my world that I could be like 'What happens when you get threatened at this rate?' Everything could crash and burn because you're just being a person."

Still, Kehlani stands firm in their beliefs, hoping to inspire others — including fellow artists and entertainers — to speak out fearlessly.

"If the Grammy nominations validate anything, I hope people see that we shouldn't be scared to speak about anything that (could be) threatening to our careers," she said. "I still went on a tour. ... post speaking up for Palestine. If all of us had stuck together, who knows what kind of further change could happen."

WEEKEND: TELEVISION



HBO

Morgana O'Reilly, Arnas Fedaravicius, Christian Friedel, Dom Hetrakul and Lalisa Manobal are part of the cast of Season 3 of "The White Lotus," which takes place in Thailand.

Here come the hottest shows of 2025

Several of the TV series on hiatus due to strikes finally making a return

Los Angeles Times

The wait is over. This year marks the return of several major series that were put on pause for a variety of factors, including the dual Hollywood strikes. Cliff-hangers are ready to be resolved, or new ones are about to emerge. Old characters are returning, and perhaps we'll meet some new ones too. But alongside new seasons of established series, a new slate of shows will also enter the fray, battling for your attention and a spot in your queue. To that end, our writers are here to help with a select number of new and returning series that you should take note of this year. Happy New Year and happy watching.

'The Pitt'

Max, Jan. 9

Noah Wyle as an emergency room doctor again? Say no more. Fifteen years after the end of "ER," NBC's long-running medical drama in which Wyle starred as Dr. John Carter, the actor is scrubbing back in. Each installment of the 15-episode drama will explore an hour in the 15-hour shift of Dr. Robby (Wyle), a chief attendant in the ER at Pittsburgh Trauma Medical Hospital, as it attempts to show the challenges health care workers face today. In addition to starring, Wyle serves as an executive producer on "The Pitt" — and it reunites him with "ER" producers John Wells and R. Scott Gemmill, its showrunner. The series made headlines in 2024 when the estate of Michael Crichton, creator of "ER," sued Warner Bros., producer of "The Pitt," saying it is a rebranded version of an unauthorized reboot of the medical drama. In response, Warner Bros.



Max

Krystel Mcneil, left, and Noah Wyle appear in the Pittsburgh-based new medical drama "The Pitt."

said, "The Pitt" is not a "derivative work" of "ER." I guess we'll see?

— Yvonne Villarreal

'Severance,' Season 2

Apple TV+, Jan. 17

When the new season of this psychological thriller series premieres, it will have been almost three years since we first became acquainted with the macrodata refinement team at Lumon, the mysterious corporation at the center of the show. The first season ended in a cliff-hanger with the team — Mark (Adam Scott), Helly (Britt Lower) and Irving (John Turturro) — experiencing life as their Outies for about 45 minutes thanks to Dylan's (Zach Cherry) ability to push two levers on opposite sides of a room at Lumon headquarters. What will happen to Dylan and the rest of the team now that the Lumon bosses know what they did — Mr. Milchick (Tramell Tillman) looked pretty upset. Will Ms. Cobel (Patricia Arquette) stick around as Mark's neighbor and boss? What really happened to Mark's wife? We need answers and I'm praying to Kier that we get them.

— Maira Garcia

'Star Trek: Section 31'

Paramount+, Jan. 24



Paramount+

Michelle Yeoh is a nightclub operator who joins a secret division of Starfleet on the made-for-TV film "Star Trek: Section 31."

Set between the Kirk and Picard eras and spun off from "Star Trek: Discovery," this TV movie — what a good old phrase — was originally conceived as a series, but it was elbowed out of the way by "Strange New Worlds." Michelle Yeoh, whose career stretches from martial arts films to "Wicked," stars as badass emperor-turned-nightclub operator Philippa Georgiou, who joins a secret division of Starfleet. Tasked with protecting the United Federation of Planets, she also must face the sins of her past. Sam Richardson, from "The Afterparty," "Ted Lasso" and elsewhere, plays Quasi, a shape-shifting Chameliod; it's not really "Trek" without a comedian on board.

— Robert Lloyd

'Watson'

CBS, Jan. 26

What do Nigel Bruce, Jude Law, Martin Freeman and John C. Reilly have in common? They have all portrayed Dr. John Watson, the inquisitive physician and sometimes befuddled companion to legendary detective Sherlock Holmes. CBS' new drama "Watson" gives top billing to the character who has traditionally operated in Holmes' shadow. Stepping into the title role is Morris Chestnut, who has already played a number of doctors on sev-

eral series ("The Resident," "Rosewood," "Nurse Jackie") since his breakthrough role in 1991's "Boyz n the Hood." The modern-day twist on the Holmes legacy finds Watson solving medical mysteries as the head of a clinic treating mysterious and rare illnesses. Executive producer Craig Sweeny, who is showrunner, was also behind another Sherlock Holmes update, CBS' "Elementary," which starred Jonny Lee Miller and Lucy Liu.

— Greg Braxton

'The White Lotus,' Season 3

HBO, Feb. 16

Other than being located at a lavish Thailand resort, it's impossible to tell from the early glimpses of the third season of "The White Lotus" what exactly is going on. But it's clear that creator-director Mike White has come up with more of the mischief and mayhem that made the previous two seasons of the HBO anthology series a totally unpredictable and outrageous delight, charming viewers and critics. The eclectic cast includes Walton Goggins, Carrie Coon, Parker Posey, Jason Isaacs and Scott Glenn. Joining the craziness is Natasha Rothwell, who played a Hawaiian resort spa manager in the first season. Goggins joked in an interview last year that he could not reveal any details of the season under penalty of death.

— Greg Braxton

'Zero Day'

Netflix, Feb. 20

Television is getting a chance to see the way Robert De Niro does things. In his first foray into prestige TV, the actor plays beloved former U.S. President George Mullen who is called in to help the current POTUS, played by Angela Bassett, after a catastrophic cyberattack threatens the nation. What better way to unwind from the anxieties of the real world? Mullen is

SEE 2025 ON PAGE 31

WEEKEND: TELEVISION

2025: Politics, medicine the subjects of multiple fresh dramas

FROM PAGE 30

tasked with heading the Zero Day Commission to find the perpetrators of the crippling attack — and confronts his own dark secrets in the process. Rounding out the cast of the political thriller are Jesse Plemons, Connie Britton — pause to appreciate the mini “Friday Night Lights” reunion — Dan Stevens and Lizzy Caplan. The six-episode series is cocreated by writers Eric Newman (“Narcos,” “Griselda”), former NBC News President Noah Oppenheim and New York Times investigative reporter Michael S. Schmidt, with Lesli Linka Glatter (“Homeland,” “The Morning Show”) directing all episodes.

— Yvonne Villarreal

‘Ludwig’

BritBox, March 20

British polymath David Mitchell, best known here for “Peep Show” and as a hilariously irascible team captain on “Would I Lie to You?,” stars as a crossword puzzle maker whose police detective twin brother disappears; he takes on his identity in order to crack the case — and other cases as the series continues on its episodic-within-a-long-arc path, with Anna Maxwell Martin as his sister-in-law and Derek Jacobi, Felicity Kendal and Ricky Gervais’ foil Karl Pilkington among the guest stars. An American remake, which will doubtless be less good, is being discussed.

— Robert Lloyd

‘The Residence’

Netflix, March 20

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there are a number of shows this year that center on a president or in proximity to a president, and this Shondaland series helmed by Paul William Davies (“For the People,” “Scandal”) is no exception. In fact, this one takes place at the White House during a state dinner with Australia, where a dead body has been found. The only person who can solve the mystery is Cordelia Cupp, a consulting detective for the Metropolitan Police Department, played by Uzo Aduba. She’s whip-smart, detail-oriented and witty to boot. She’s joined by FBI special agent Edwin Park (Randall Park), who is skeptical of her style but is along for the ride. The show features an all-star cast that includes Giancarlo Esposito, Susan Kelechi Watson, Ken Marino and Jason Lee, among many others.

— Maira Garcia

‘Wolf Hall: The Mirror and the Light’

PBS, March 23

Nearly a decade after “Wolf Hall” reinvigorated the period piece on page and screen, the final chapter of Hilary Mantel’s galvanizing portrait of courtier Thomas Cromwell, “The Mirror and the Light,” is set to finally arrive stateside. This time, though, Cromwell (the sterling Mark Rylance), who was executed in 1540, ends up on the wrong side of his mercurial patron, King Henry VIII (Damian Lewis), which should only intensify the palace intrigue. Of all the cultural artifacts produced about Henry’s break with the Catholic Church, his relationship with his six wives and its effect on the course of English history, Mantel’s ruthless and ruth-



Netflix

Former President Mullen (Robert De Niro) and current President Mitchell (Angela Bassett) must work together after a catastrophic cyberattack in the U.S. in “Zero Day.”

lessly modern series of novels are the gold standard, and Peter Kosminsky and Peter Straughan’s TV adaptation captures the late author’s distinctive style with aplomb.

— Matt Brennan

‘The Studio’

Apple TV+, March 26

Like any self-respecting Hollywood scribe, I’m a sucker for a backstage satire. And since “Barry” and “The Other Two” ended in 2023, I have built up a particularly acute hankering for TV about how the sausage is made. Enter “The Franchise,” HBO’s recent send-up of superhero movies, and now “The Studio,” starring Seth Rogen as the put-upon head of Continental Studios, where movies trump “artsy fartsy films” — to the cinephile chief’s apparent chagrin. Sympathizing with top brass at a moment of astronomical executive pay and ongoing labor friction is risky business, but if the teaser trailer is any indication, Rogen’s Matt Remick will be the target of enough abuse from luminaries like Martin Scorsese, Kathryn Hahn, Zac Efron, Charlize Theron and Anthony Mackie for “The Studio” to feel like it’s punching up.

— Matt Brennan

‘Your Friends and Neighbors’

Apple TV+, April 11

What do you do when the life you thought you’d have crumbles? It’s a question that seems to gnaw at Andrew “Coop” Cooper, a depressed, divorced New York City hedge fund manager, who loses his job suddenly but still has to pay for alimony, private school for his two kids, two houses — the list goes on. He resorts to stealing from his wealthy friends and neighbors, but you get the feeling it isn’t going to go very smoothly. It is a return to form for Jon Hamm, the star of the series (and executive producer), as his character’s personal life and finances get more and more tangled (like in “Mad Men,” he’s a ladies’ man). Also starring Amanda Peet and Olivia Munn. If you love watching rich people do bad things, this one’s for you — plus, it’s already been renewed for a second season.

— Maira Garcia

‘Andor,’ Season 2

Disney+, April 22

It’s been more than two years since

“Andor’s” Season 1 finale showed the spark of rebellion ignite in one small corner of the galaxy far, far away, and I’ve been waiting for more episodes ever since. Starring Diego Luna as Cassian Andor, the Emmy-nominated “Star Wars” spy thriller has set itself apart from the franchise’s other recent installments as an overtly political, gritty, grounded look at how an ordinary, disaffected person transforms into a committed revolutionary. The second season will follow Andor through the years between the end of Season 1 to the days leading up to the events of “Rogue One” (2016), the “Star Wars” prequel film about how the Rebellion stole the plans to the Death Star. And while fans already know how Andor’s story ends, I am looking forward to seeing creator Tony Gilroy and crew’s take on how disparate groups and acts of resistance coalesce into the Rebel Alliance and any growing pains along the way.

— Tracy Brown

‘The Last of Us,’ Season 2

HBO, spring 2025

As we approach the second season of the first truly successful live-action adaptation of a video game, the question on everyone’s mind is: Will Pedro Pascal become the next Sean Bean? “The Last of Us” premiered in 2023 to immediate acclaim and record audiences, following fairly faithfully the 2013 game of the same name. And as with the game, viewers instantly fell in love with Joel (Pascal), a smuggler hardened by the death of his daughter during the early days of a worldwide pandemic, and the mysteriously immune Ellie (Bella Ramsey) whom he agrees to transport across the country.

When the game’s sequel, The Last of Us Part II, debuted, gamers were shocked by the almost immediate death of Joel, a brutal murder that sends Ellie on a journey of revenge. Series creators Craig Mazin and Neil Druckmann have been predictably coy about their version of Joel, saying that they want to remain faithful to the game but also that they have to make choices that are best for the show. HBO has never been squeamish about killing main characters — Bean, who was the star of “Game of Thrones,” did not make it to Season 2 — but are viewers ready for a show without Pascal?

— Mary McNamara

‘Long Story Short’

Netflix, fall 2025

This series has been touted as the reunion of the team behind the acclaimed “Bojack Horseman,” including creator Raphael Bob-Waksberg and “Tuca & Bertie’s” Lisa Hanawalt, who served as a production designer-producer on the series before launching her own. “Bojack” was Netflix’s first original adult animated series, breaking new ground with the depth of its themes and satire. Not much else has been revealed about “Long Story Short” beyond the logline that says it’s an animated comedy about “a family over time,” but as someone who understands the concept of family and time — and as a fan of “Bojack” and “Tuca & Bertie” — I’m looking forward to finding out what that means.

— Tracy Brown

‘Riot Women’

BritBox, fall 2025

Sally Wainwright is one of the most quietly radical auteurs working in television — British or otherwise. Known for female-centered shows set in the north of England, including the dramedy “Tango in Halifax,” the dark crime drama “Happy Valley” and the period piece “Gentleman Jack,” Wainwright moves with ease between genres but always retains a distinctive point of view. Next up for the ever-evolving writer-creator is “Riot Women,” a six-episode drama, set in Yorkshire, about five women who form a makeshift punk rock band to perform in a local talent show, unexpectedly triggering change in their lives and giving voice to their many frustrations. The cast includes Joanna Scanlan, Rosalie Craig, Tamsin Greig, Lorraine Ashbourne and Amelia Bullmore. The series features music by ARXX and is billed as a “testament to the power of friendship.” Though additional plot details are scarce, this is a Wainwright project, which means you can expect to see ordinary but resilient women confronting the challenges of everyday life with honesty and humor.

— Meredith Blake

‘Pee-wee as Himself’

HBO, 2025

This two-part documentary will tell the story of Paul Reubens, the comedian and actor better known as Pee-wee Herman, the beloved, childlike character he played in the retro-flavored kids’ show “Pee-wee’s Playhouse” and the hit movie “Pee-wee’s Big Adventure” — both ’80s classics. A performer who rarely appeared out of character and revealed little about his private life, Reubens was thrust into an unwelcome glare in 1991, when he was arrested for indecent exposure. Before his death in 2023 at 70, Reubens spoke with director Matt Wolf in what has been described as a contentious conversation in which the actor was determined to control the narrative about his life and career. Reubens also reportedly did not tell Wolf he had cancer, adding a layer of complexity to the relationship between filmmaker and subject. “Pee-wee as Himself” will premiere at Sundance in January and air on HBO later in the year, where it’s bound to bring Pee-wee — and Reubens — back into the limelight once again.

— Meredith Blake

WEEKEND: HEALTH & FITNESS



iStock

Fartleks, an informal version of interval training, using objects like trees, mailboxes or other landmarks as interval markers, improves fitness and keeps it interesting.

Serious fitness boost, silly name

Form of interval training called a fartlek, which means ‘speed play’ in Swedish, is a simple, science-backed trick

BY GRETCHEN REYNOLDS
The Washington Post

If you’ve resolved to get more fit in 2025, you’re in luck, because almost any exercise will steer you toward that goal. But of all your exercise options, few will be as effective, simple, adaptable and enjoyably impertinent to brag about as fartleks.

Fartleks are an informal version of interval training. To start fartlek training, head outside, warm up for a few minutes at whatever activity you most enjoy — whether it’s walking, running, biking, unicycling or snowshoeing — and then pick a landmark a short distance ahead. It could be a tree, a colorful mailbox or an unusual rock formation.

Pick up your pace until you reach it. Then, drop back to your original pace, let your heart rate and breathing slow, and look for another landmark. Vary the distance between these goals, and aim for perhaps 30 minutes of fartleks once a week to start.

Fartleks are one of the most unthreatening ways to sprinkle intensity into our activities, and a growing body of science indicates intensity, even in small amounts, can make workouts more beneficial — not only for our strength and endurance, but our health and longevity, too.

“Fartlek training is quite a good way to improve fitness,” said Ulrik Wisloff, the head of the cardiac exercise research group at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim, who has studied exercise and health for decades. “I do it and I recommend it to people who say they don’t like exercise, because it’s never boring.”

What’s the meaning of ‘fartlek’?

For generations, competitive athletes used highly structured, intense interval training, usually on a track or treadmill, to increase their speed and endurance. This kind of training is potent. It will make you faster. But it’s also grueling, demands expertise and planning and is rarely anyone’s idea of a rollicking good time.

Which is where fartleks come in. Fartlek translates as something like “speed play” in Swedish. The term is usually attributed to the Swedish Olympic decathlete and running coach Gosta Holman, who reputedly developed the concept in the 1930s, after the Swedish cross-country team repeatedly was trounced by its neighbors, the Finns, during international competitions.

Link between intense exercise, longevity

Fartlek training is more than entertaining, though. It’s also one of the easiest ways to amplify the intensity of your favorite exercise, making it even better for you.

So why would you want to make your exercise more intense?

“You’ll see greater increases in VO2 max” with relatively intense exercise, Wisloff said. VO2 max, a measure of our bodies’ ability to deliver oxygen to cells, is strongly associated with longevity, he said. The lower someone’s VO2 max, the likelier they are to die young and vice versa.

The importance of intensity for lifespan was especially evident in a large-scale 2024 study, during which 7,500 middle-aged and older adult men and women wore a high-tech activity tracker for at least a week. Researchers then computed the intensity of their physical activities and followed them for about seven years, tracking deaths.

The overall intensity of people’s daily activities proved to be a better predictor of their longevity than how much they moved around. The most sedentary

men and women were about 14% more likely to have died in the intervening years than those who moved around even a little more often. But if people’s physical activities were almost always of low intensity, their risk for death was about 37% higher compared to those whose exercise intensity was even a little greater.

Intense exercise doesn’t have to be hard

Of course, the idea of making your exercise more intense can seem intimidating.

But don’t worry, said Martin Gibala, an exercise scientist at McMaster University in Ontario, Canada, who studies interval training. Exercise intensity is a spectrum, ranging from light intensity exertions to the kinds of all-out intervals Olympians grunt through.

Simply increasing the intensity of some of your exercise from light strolls to faster walks “can be enough” to boost your health and fitness substantially, Gibala said.

The greatest gains come, he said, if you occasionally up the intensity of at least some of your exercise from “green to yellow” on a green-yellow-red gradient of effort.

Or use the talk test, Wisloff said. To find the sweet spot for intensity and health improvement, you should be able to talk during intervals but not sing, because singing demands most of your respiratory resources.

As for me, I fartlek a few times a week to add oomph, diversion and a little glee to my normal workout routine. I like the word. I like the workout. I enjoy feeling a bit fatigued at the end. Fartleks, always varied, never pall.

A couple of weeks ago, on Christmas Eve, my route happened to be unusually crammed with people on holiday walking their dogs. I made every canine a marker and introduced myself. My intervals may have been brief, but our shared joy was contagious. It was my happiest workout of 2024.

“Fartlek training is quite a good way to improve fitness. I do it and I recommend it to people who say they don’t like exercise, because it’s never boring.”

Ulrik Wisloff

head of the cardiac exercise research group at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim

WEEKEND: FAMILY



Uses for yesterday's tech

Sick of screens, some parents are giving kids old Walkmans, MP3 players

By **HEATHER KELLY**
The Washington Post

During her time as a high school teacher, Alison Pappavaselio says she saw firsthand the negative impacts of unfettered technology access. When the 35-year-old's own children, now 4 and 6, showed an interest in music, she decided to do things differently.

Instead of a tablet, smartphone or even a smart speaker, Pappavaselio handed her older child a used Walkman she purchased on eBay and a handful of cassette tapes.

"I went a little bit more into the technology that I grew up with because it felt safe to me," said Pappavaselio, who lives in Somerville, Mass. "But you do have to teach them not to rip the tape out."

Some modern parents are trying to give their children access to music without the temptations of a screen and internet access. Facing a lack of stand-alone options, they're digging into their pasts and dusting off Walkmans, portable CD players and record players, along with their own dated album collections. Some are experimenting with voice-activated speakers such as Amazon's Echo and Google Home, while others are relearning how to rip MP3s.

While some adults are just nostalgic for their own childhood experiences with music, others want to protect their children's attention spans or minimize screen access before the teen years. According to Pew Research, the vast majority of teens are online every day, with 96% saying they check it daily. Almost half say they're online constantly.

Even the way children discover music has changed. They still hear hits on the radio during car rides and get recommendations from friends, but they're also picking up artists and songs from video games such as Fortnite or the algorithms in their music apps. A broad affection for '80s music, however, has made their parents' old collections cool again.

The consolidation of technology into smartphones and tablets has made screens nearly impossible to avoid. They have become so powerful, they've made a number of stand-alone devices practically obsolete: home phones, alarm clocks, point-and-shoot cameras and voice recorders. And, of course, the dedicated portable music player. Apple discontinued traditional iPods in 2017, and most online music consumption has migrated from buying music files to streaming subscriptions — something Apple also sells.

The old devices still have some loyal users, but they take a little work to get running. More recent iPods can usually be fired up to work with iTunes, assuming you have all the relevant cables and ports on your computer. Some might need battery replacements, which you can get from a third party like iFixIt. There are also third-party apps for giving them a second life like Rockbox.

When Eileen Keribar Isvan's 8-year-old daughter wanted a way to listen to music on the bus to school, she knew just where to look. Isvan's mother had an old iRiver MP3 player that was up and running with a pair of fresh batteries.

"Part of the charm for me was giving her something that takes a little bit more effort," said Isvan, a Montessori preschool teacher who lives in Istanbul. "And it's a very sensorial experience, music. It's better when you can isolate it from any distractions."

Stores still sell some new digital music players, often for less than \$50.

Where do kids get MP3s in a post-Napster world? You can still buy them, but at 50 cents to a dollar apiece, that can add up quickly. Multiple parents we spoke to use free tools that turn YouTube music videos into MP3s, or burn their own old CDs. Local libraries also have free options for downloading music files; all you need is your library card.

Even the companies trying to fill the gap left by the iPod are embracing old ways. The Yoto (\$100) and Yoto Mini (\$70) are simple music devices aimed at younger listeners. The devices are designed to look like retro toy radios. Children pop in small cards for the music they want, which you purchase separately — just like the old days. It also has a tiny screen that shows different images as the music plays, for a splash of screen time.

Another fresh option is the \$125 Mighty, a digital music player that kids like because they load it up with a handpicked Spotify or Amazon Music playlist instead of listening to their parents' favorites from the 1900s. It can hold more than 1,000 songs and looks like an iPod Shuffle.

"To give your kids access to find their own taste in music is so important and was such a rite of passage," says Rachel Childers, a musician with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. "Learning about yourself and what you're drawn to is one of the cool things about growing up."

THE MEAT AND POTATOES OF LIFE

Lisa Smith Molinari



Hitting the dieter's wall while at the commissary

About two weeks into my diet, I realized I was starving, and no low-cal protein snack would stave off my hunger pangs. Although pork products sounded mouthwateringly delicious in my weakened state, I eventually determined that the diet was a bunch of baloney.

No matter how many times a rich television celebrity — who probably ate diet meals prepared by her personal chef and exercised with a trainer in her home gym — told me "the pounds just melt away," I doubted that any diet would work for me.

The first few days of my diet had seemed like fun. The same way raking leaves seemed fun for the first 15 minutes until I realized it was going to take five hours and I'd have to do it every weekend. Or the way cooking dinner seemed like fun when I was first married, but then 20 years later, I'd have rather chewed my own arm off than prepare another meal. Or the way running seemed like fun until two blocks in, when it felt as if my heart might explode.

By the second week of most diets, I want someone to hit me in the head with a frying pan — preferably one that has just fried up crisp slices of bacon — to put me out of my misery.

I hit that dieter's wall recently while driving to the commissary. The protein shake I'd guzzled that morning had worn off, and I was beginning to feel that familiar grumbling in the pit of my stomach. I was definitely getting hungry.

I rushed from my car across the blustery parking lot and into the commissary. In the produce section, I followed my grocery list to a tee, including the bagged Lite Caesar Salad kit I decided would make a satisfying diet lunch.

The burning in my innards was tolerable at first, but it slowly built as I weaved through the grocery aisles. I made it through the canned goods, baking supplies and cereal without incident, but as my hunger mounted, things began to unravel in the snack food aisle. With each step, the burning in my gut seared deeper, until I was ready to grab a cheese ball out of the dairy case and eat it like an apple, cellophane and all. I resisted my urges, but soon, I felt as if I might implode like the collapsing core of a supernova, transforming the entire commissary into a giant black hole and destroying civilization as we know it.

That's when it happened. Lying there, on the shelf beside the display of Pringles, I saw it. Some coupon clipper had generously left me a lifeline. "One dollar off five cans," it read. It was such a fantastic deal, it seemed almost compulsory. Saliva dripped from my lower lip as I loaded the Pringles into my cart.

By the time I approached the checkout area, I had grabbed Oreos, frozen pizza, apple turnovers and a one-pound block of cheddar cheese. Blinded by desperation, I caught the tantalizing aroma of roasted chicken.

Two chickens soon joined the mountain of forbidden foods heaped onto the cashier's conveyor belt. While the bagger loaded my groceries into the back of my car, I fantasized about sneaking food into the front seat for the drive home.

Not a new ploy, and not only fantasy. During past hunger-fueled commissary runs, I'd instructed baggers to "put the rotisserie chicken up in the front seat to keep it warm," knowing I planned to sneak a piece on the way home. I'd pull into my driveway with my face and steering wheel slick with grease and a drumstick clenched between my teeth.

But on this particular day, the miracle of convenience foods helped me to stick to my diet. I managed to make it home from the commissary, where I frantically dug through the grocery bags in the trunk of my minivan to find that salad kit. I stumbled into the house without unloading my groceries, faint with hunger, and devoured the salad out of a Tupperware bowl while standing at the kitchen counter.

Hail, Caesar.

Read more at themeatandpotatoesoflife.com and in Lisa's book, "The Meat and Potatoes of Life: My True Lit Com." Email: meatandpotatoesoflife@gmail.com

WEEKEND: CROSSWORD AND COMICS

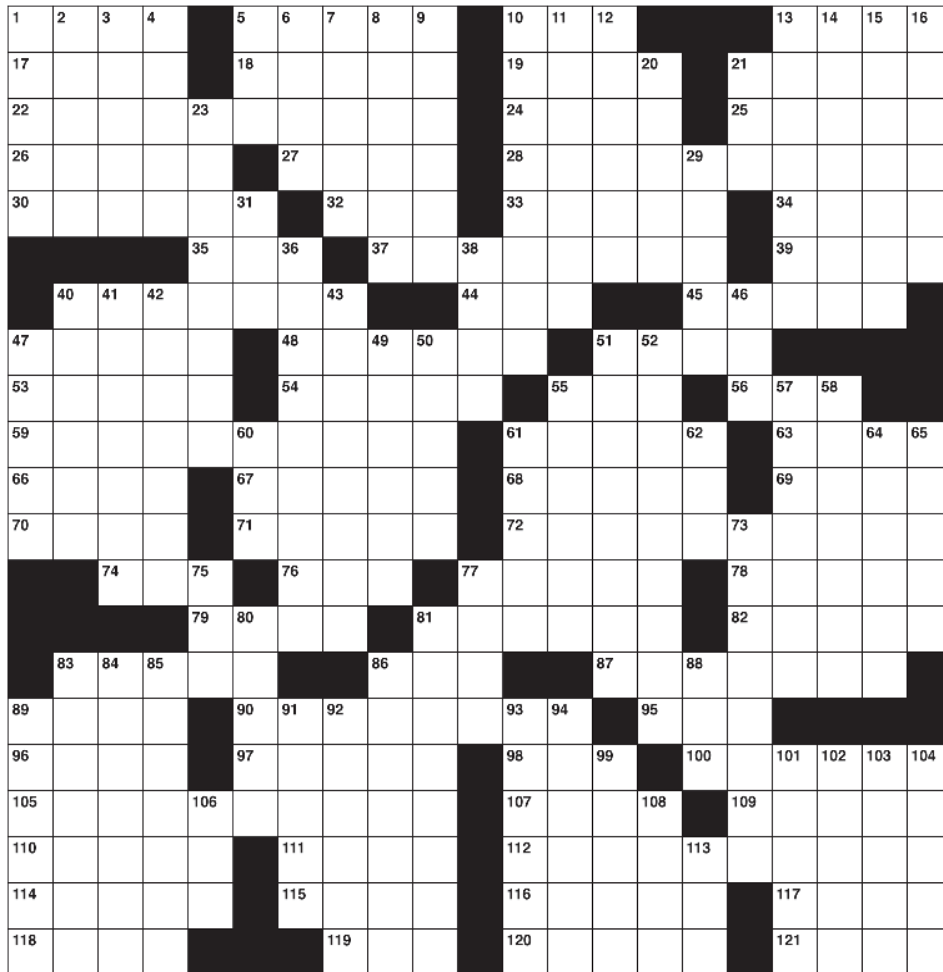
NEW YORK TIMES CROSSWORD

MULTI-HYPHENATES

BY HARRY ZHENG / EDITED BY JOEL FAGLIANO

Harry Zheng, of Carmel, Ind., is a second-year student at Purdue University majoring in computer science, math and physics. This is his second crossword for The Times. During high school, when Harry started submitting puzzles to the paper, his economics teacher said that if Harry got one in, he would frame it and hang it in the classroom. The teacher made good on his promise.

- ACROSS**
- 1 "The Soul _____ Itself" (Emily Dickinson poem)
 - 5 Conceal
 - 10 Gamer's annoyance
 - 13 Wail, blubber, etc.
 - 17 One of six in garden croquet
 - 18 Emmy-winning drama series set in the Midwest
 - 19 Disney C.E.O. Bob
 - 21 Early phase of software development
 - 22 Electrician who might put in overtime after a bad storm
 - 24 Politico Buttigieg
 - 25 Partner of dreams
 - 26 Anesthetized
 - 27 Have a banquet
 - 28 Graphics that show trends
 - 30 Like cobras and some jackets
 - 32 Doc that ensures secrecy
 - 33 Rapscaillon
 - 34 Dog with "small black eyes that twinkled merrily on either side of his funny, wee nose"
 - 35 Prepared
 - 37 Lion's prey
 - 39 Preceding times
 - 40 Loud whistlers
 - 44 Unnecessarily lengthen, as an essay
 - 45 Brought aboard
 - 47 Language from which "curry" comes
 - 48 Increased suddenly
 - 51 "No time to lose!"
 - 53 Without help
 - 54 Step (on)
 - 55 Dien Bien _____, 1954 battle site in Vietnam
 - 56 Dough dispenser
 - 59 Hard hits off the bat
 - 61 McEvoy of cosmetics
 - 63 Dish of chopped meat, potatoes and onions
 - 66 Portrayer of Grindelwald in "Fantastic Beasts: The Crimes of Grindelwald"
 - 67 Author Zola
 - 68 Large Starbucks size
 - 69 Fascinated by
 - 70 Potatoes, on an Indian menu
 - 71 Nb3, Bxh7, Ra4, etc.
 - 72 The Macarena and Cha Cha Slide, for two
 - 74 Education support grp.
 - 76 "The Simpsons" character who says "I've done everything the Bible says! Even the stuff that contradicts the other stuff!"
 - 77 Love affair
 - 78 Corrupt
 - 79 Snack brand with "Classic" and "Wavy" varieties
 - 81 Iced coffee drink
 - 82 Colorings
 - 83 Jamie who pitched on eight major-league teams over his 25-year career
 - 86 Weigh (down)
 - 87 Wild tours
 - 89 Grave
 - 90 They might make you jump
 - 95 Winter mo.
 - 96 Praiseful poems
 - 97 Attack from all sides
 - 98 Solar wind particle
 - 100 Places to dock
 - 105 Defensive position
 - 107 Catch
 - 109 Man's name meaning "strong" in Hebrew
 - 110 Director Sam
 - 111 Exude, as charm
 - 112 Indication of where to cut ... or something written five times in this puzzle?
 - 114 Gave support
 - 115 Seeks compensation, maybe
 - 116 Relative of a badger
 - 117 Starter with chips?
 - 118 "_____ Turismo" (2023 film)
 - 119 Certain fantasy football stats
 - 120 Part of MGM
 - 121 Rise dramatically
 - 6 Product of rendering
 - 7 Big name in pest control
 - 8 Plan for the day
 - 9 Like bibimbap
 - 10 Watch one's language?
 - 11 From time immemorial
 - 12 Very start
 - 13 Full of unnecessary costs, as a budget
 - 14 Sign off on
 - 15 Sharpened
 - 16 Loops around a rodeo
 - 20 Sign on again
 - 21 "That feels good"
 - 23 Fought in a ring
 - 29 Green with the bowdlerized hit "Forget You"
 - 31 Home state of the senator Lisa Blunt Rochester: Abbr.
 - 36 It's heard in a hearing
 - 38 Pulled a classic prank on, for short
 - 40 Superman's birth name
 - 41 Genre for Fall Out Boy
 - 42 Descriptor for a dictator
 - 43 Stays alive
 - 46 Santa _____
 - 47 Magic word?
 - 49 Lurched
 - 50 What Boyle's law pertains to
 - 51 Bar exercises
 - 52 Highly recommended story
 - 55 Awaiting surgery, informally
 - 57 Vanishing point?
 - 58 Henry who composed the theme for "The Pink Panther"
 - 60 Sleep stage
 - 61 Rating that signifies lewdness or violence
 - 62 Concealed
 - 64 Medical inserts
 - 65 Parasites' needs
 - 73 Quite fond of, with "to"
 - 75 Hefeweizen, e.g.
 - 77 Jason's ship
 - 80 Vacation destination in the Caribbean
 - 81 Stronghold
 - 83 Place to hover
 - 84 Big name in frozen food
 - 85 Obsequious types
 - 86 Sauntered (in)
 - 88 Meager
 - 89 Closefitting headwear, in a variant spelling
 - 91 _____ Bill, folk hero who is said to have ridden a tornado like a bucking bronco
 - 92 Invite on a date
 - 93 "Honesty is the first chapter in the book of _____": Thomas Jefferson
 - 94 Piece of classical music
 - 99 Repulsive
 - 101 Strongman of myth
 - 102 "I Know a _____" (rhyming children's book)
 - 103 Soda with strawberry and pineapple flavors
 - 104 Derisive expression
 - 106 Auction action
 - 108 Clarified butter
 - 113 Botch things



GUNSTON STREET



"Gunston Street" is drawn by Basil Zaviski. Email him at gunstonstreet@yahoo.com, and online at gunstonstreet.com.

RESULTS FOR ABOVE PUZZLE



STARS AND STRIPES 15 YEARS IN AFGHANISTAN



The story of the U.S. military's role in Afghanistan, as seen through the eyes of Stars and Stripes journalists covering America's longest war.

Only **\$14.99** with Free Shipping



ORDER NOW at www.stripesstore.com

FACES

Warm, fuzzy life lessons

'Sesame Street' features musicians SZA, Chris Stapleton, Reneé Rapp, more in beloved show's 55th season

By MARIA SHERMAN
Associated Press

Appearing on "Sesame Street"? That's the best idea.

The 55th season of the acclaimed family program features a star-studded lineup of musicians that would be the envy of any summer festival: SZA, Chris Stapleton, Noah Kahan, Reneé Rapp and Samara Joy.

The upcoming season will focus on lessons in emotional well-being. It debuts Jan. 16 on MAX with new episodes releasing every Thursday. "Sesame Street" will also be available on PBS stations and to stream on PBS Kids in the fall.

No one is more excited than Elmo himself.

"There's a lot to learn from music — yeah, timing and harmonies and melody and different styles and different cultures," the 3½-year-old monster told The Associated Press. "It's really cool! We've got a lot of wonderful people come and do some music with us on 'Sesame Street,' like Miss Reneé Rapp and SZA! Chris Stapleton, Noah Kahan, Samara Joy — lots of great people!"

Songs double as life lessons on "Sesame Street," from an alt-R&B-pop track about gratitude with SZA to an acoustic number about feelings with Rapp.

"SZA is really cool — really talented. And 'gratitude' was a new word for Elmo, too. So, Elmo learned all about gratitude with SZA," he said.

"Elmo was feeling really, really happy after his playdate with Miss Reneé. It was a really beautiful song. She's got a great voice and Elmo hopes she comes back soon."

As for the secret to a great "Sesame Street" song? According to Tony- and Grammy-winning composer, producer and "Sesame Street" music director Bill Sherman, it's "earworms on earworms."

"If the verse is an earworm, so is the chorus. Mostly in pop music, the chorus is the earworm, and the verses are just a bunch of jumble." The difference, he explained, is that pop songs are about 3½ minutes long. Children's music is about a minute and a half. "You only have a very finite amount of time to do what you got to do."

Usually, writers on the show provide Sherman and his team of songwriters with a script and lyrics detailing the lesson of each episode, as well as the name of the musical guest. Then they get to work, composing music true to the genre and spirit of each artist.



SESAME WORKSHOP/AP photos

Singer-songwriter Chris Stapleton, shown with Elmo, wrote his own song for his "Sesame Street" episode.



Singer Noah Kahan teaches Elmo about music and feelings, performing a foot-stomping folk song.

Those musical guests take different levels of involvement, but the result is always awe-inspiring.

Other highlights from this season include Kahan performing a foot-stomping folk song about music and feelings, Joy using jazz improvisation to teach a lesson in taking turns and a country ode to music and friends courtesy of Stapleton.

"Chris Stapleton really wanted to write his own song," Sherman said, and so the pair hopped on a Zoom and wrote a song together, Stapleton with his guitar in tow, ideas flowing. "It was really one of the most surreal two-hour Zooms that I really ever had in my life."

Joy took a different approach. "Samara Joy insisted on singing live," Sherman said. "It very rarely happens on 'Sesame Street.' I can only count, like, a few times. So, there was like Stevie Wonder back in the day, which is a classic. And there's Billy Joel, there's John Legend, there's a couple people that actually sing live. But Samara insisted on it."

"She said, 'Well, this whole episode is about improvisation and thinking on your toes. And so, if it's prerecorded, that's the opposite of what we're trying to teach.'"



Singer SZA appears with Oscar the Grouch on the set of "Sesame Street." SZA performs an alt-R&B-pop song on her episode that teaches young viewers about gratitude.



Actor-singer Reneé Rapp sings about feelings in her episode with Cookie Monster, left, and Elmo.

If there is a theme that connects all these performances to one another, it's a spirit of connection. At least, that's Elmo's theory: "Elmo thinks that music brings people together, you know? And some people who like some things and some people who like other things can kind of come together because they like the same kind of music. And that's kind of cool!"

"Sesame Street," designed by education professionals and child psychologists, is shown in more than 150 countries, has won more than 200 Emmys, 11 Grammys and two Peabody Awards and has received a Kennedy Center Honor for lifetime artistic achievement, the first time a television program got the award.

There has been no shortage of great musical guests across the show's five-decade run. So, who would the cast like to see pay a visit in the future?

"Miss Taylor Swift! Maybe she could revisit her 'Red' era?" chimes in Elmo. That's his favorite of her albums.

"But also, Elmo would love to sing with Miss Beyoncé. Destiny's Child was on 'Sesame Street,' so Elmo would love to have her back."

Scarlett Johansson to guest co-host 'Today' as Hoda Kotb leaves

From news reports

Scarlett Johansson is making a pivot to hosting daytime TV, at least for the time being, as she temporarily co-hosts the "Today" show after Hoda Kotb's departure.

The 40-year-old two-time Oscar nominee will guest co-host "Today with Jenna & Friends" for a week later this month, Jenna Bush Hager told People. The Marvel superstar's gig will kick off Jan. 20.

"Scarlett Johansson is the queen! ... We have so much in common," the 43-year-old daytime show host said of the "wild dream."

The pair's similarities include both being "big reader[s], which will be so much fun," as well as the fact that both are fraternal twins — Bush Hager with sister Barbara and Johansson with brother Hunter. Both



Johansson

are also moms to young daughters.

Bush Hager is mom to 11-year-old Mila. The "Lost in Translation" star, 40, shares daughter Rose, 10, with ex-husband Roman Dauriac.

Johansson's guest stint, while exciting for Bush Hager, is among many "bittersweet" changes coming to NBC's legacy morning show amid her fourth hour co-anchor's departure.

"I adore Hoda. She's the best partner. She's been the most generous partner, and we are truly really great friends, so the thought of her not being here is almost too much to bear," Bush Hager told People.

Kotb announced in late September that, after five years of co-anchoring "Today," she would be leaving. Kotb spent 20 years at the show.

As of Friday, Craig Melvin will replace Kotb to co-anchor the 7 a.m. to 9 a.m. slot of "Today" with Savannah Guthrie. Melvin, who has been at NBC News for over a decade, currently co-anchors the 9 a.m. hour.

Oscar nominations delayed, voting extended due to LA fires

The wildfires that have torn through the Los Angeles area this week have led to many closures, cancellations and postponements, including the Oscar nominations.

Originally scheduled for Jan. 17, the announcement of nominees for the 97th Acad-

emy Awards has been delayed to Jan. 19, with nominations voting extended by two days to Jan. 14, film academy Chief Executive Bill Kramer wrote Wednesday in a letter to members.

"We want to offer our deepest condolences to those who have been impacted by the devastating fires across Southern California," the letter said. "So many of our members and industry colleagues live and work in the Los Angeles area, and we are thinking of you."

A number of Oscar precursor events, including the British Academy of Film and TV Arts Tea Party, the AFI Awards luncheon and the Critics Choice Awards, were postponed or canceled because of the fires. The Oscars are set to take place March 2.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Dems keep control of Statehouse after election

VA RICHMOND — Virginia Democrats preserved their Statehouse majority on Tuesday in the first test of voters' energy since President-elect Donald Trump's win in November, which left many party members reckoning with their losses.

Democrats now have a narrow 21-19 edge in the state Senate and a 51-49 lead in the House of Delegates, preserving their majorities in both chambers during Republican Gov. Glenn Youngkin's last year in office.

The results could limit Youngkin's conservative agenda for the state, requiring the governor to gain bipartisan support for his legislative vision. Democrats' wins also give the party a small boost days before Trump is set to take office after a decisive victory that included sweeping the swing states and leaving many liberals demoralized.

Biden establishes 2 new national monuments

DC WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden on Tuesday established two new national monuments in California, the latest in a flurry of major environmental initiatives affecting the Golden State as his presidency comes to a close.

Biden designated the Chuckwalla National Monument in Southern California and the Sattitla Highlands National Monument in Northern California.

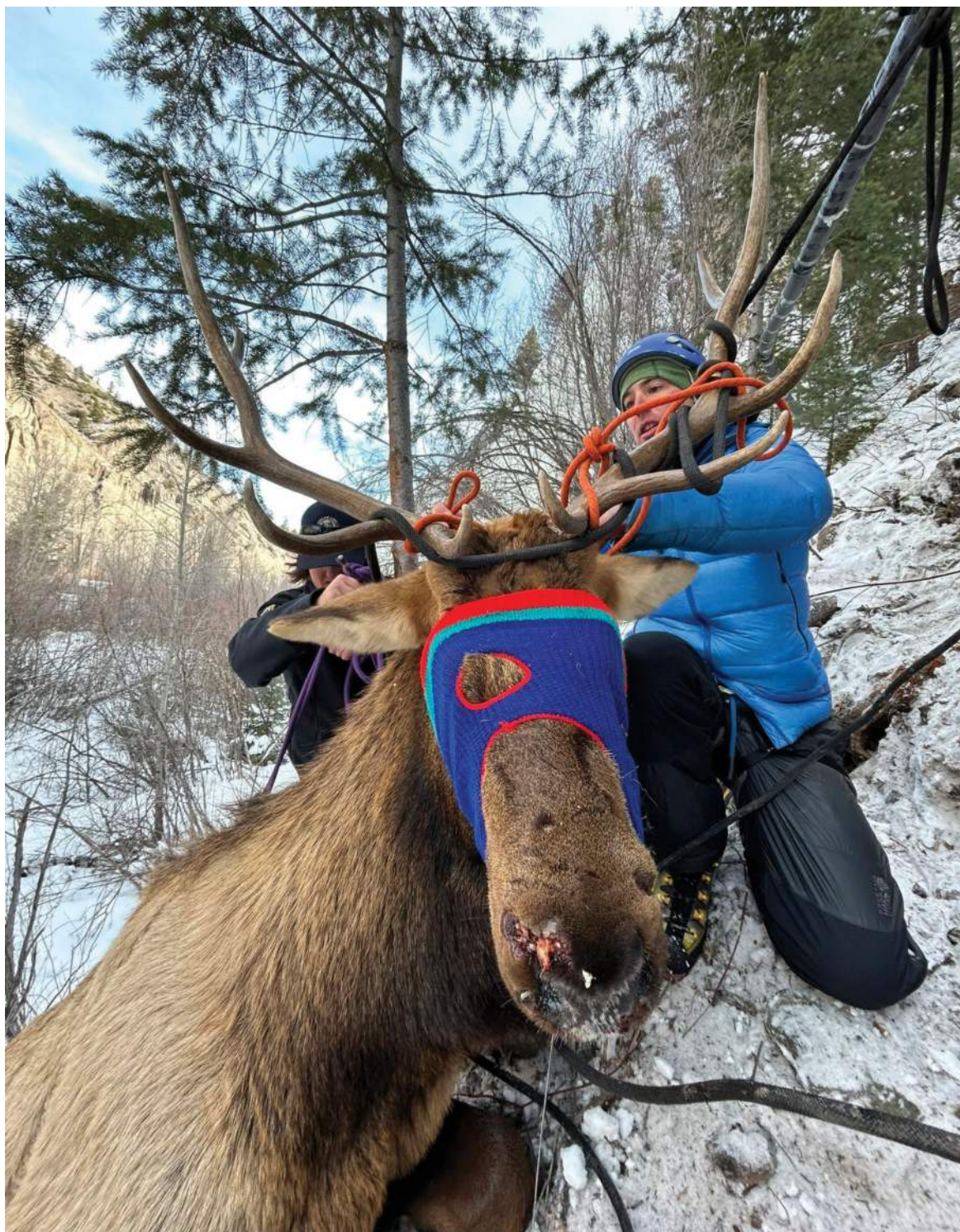
Chuckwalla is 624,000 acres of federal land, mostly overseen by the Bureau of Land Management, where the Colorado and Mojave Deserts come together in a mix of scenic mountains and canyons that is home to bighorn sheep, desert tortoises and chuckwalla lizards. Sattitla is 224,000 acres of national forest land in the remote landscapes of Siskiyou and Modoc counties, a landscape rich with bald eagles, black bears and salmon. Together, the two areas are larger than Yosemite National Park.

Both places are sacred to native tribes, who pushed for monument status, which limits logging, mining and other extractive uses, such as energy development.

No more S'mores for Girl Scouts cookies fans

GA SAVANNAH — In a bittersweet statement issued on Tuesday, the Girl Scouts of the USA revealed two fan-favorite treats, the S'mores and Toast-Yay!, will be discontinued at the end of 2025. That means cookie-lovers have just one year left to stock up before the sweet snacks are sealed into the Girl Scouts' vault of retired flavors.

Whether the advance notice is part of a bid to curb the black market-like resale of the treats — like when Raspberry Rally was dis-



COLORADO PARKS AND WILDLIFE/AP

Elk rescue

Wildlife officials and climbers rescue a bull elk after it became entangled in a rope at an ice climbing area in Lake City, Colo., last week. A group of ice climbers in Lake City encountered the distressed elk Friday, and a Colorado Parks and Wildlife biologist darted the 700-pound animal with a tranquilizer. The team then cut the rope away from the elk's antlers and rigged a system to lower it to the base of the route.

continued in 2023 — is not clear. Boxes of the fruity cookie, filled with a crispy, raspberry-flavored center and coated in chocolate, sold online for as much as five times the usual price, which ranges from \$4 to \$7.

The S'mores cookie, inspired by the campfire favorite, made its debut in 2017 while Toast-Yay!, made to taste like tiny French toast treats, hit the shelves in 2021.

Jan. 6 defendant going to Trump inauguration

KS TOPEKA — A federal judge approved a Kansas Jan. 6 defendant's request to attend president-elect Donald Trump's inauguration, the first person charged with a felony to receive such permission.

William Pope of Topeka filed a motion with the court on Dec. 28 asking for approval to go to the

Jan. 20 event. His request was granted by U.S. District Judge Rudolph Contreras in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia.

In his brief order, Contreras — a President Barack Obama appointee — said he took into consideration that Pope "is not charged with assault or vandalism-related charges."

Legislation targets transgender athletes

CA SACRAMENTO — A new bill introduced Monday aims to prevent transgender students in California from participating in female sports, part of a broader wave of opposition as schools and classrooms across the state enact policies protecting transgender students and athletes.

The Protect Girls' Sports Act, in-

troduced by Orange County Republican Assemblymember Kate Sanchez, would require organizations overseeing high school sports, including the California Interscholastic Federation, to only allow individuals who were assigned female at birth to participate in female sports.

Sanchez, a former high school athlete, said women's sports are increasingly becoming "unfair, disheartening and dangerous."

Passenger opens door as flight taxis for takeoff

MA BOSTON — A person on board a plane at Boston Logan International Airport that was taxiing for takeoff suddenly opened an exit door and was quickly restrained by other passengers, authorities said.

The JetBlue passenger, Angel Luis Torres Morales, of Puerto Ri-

co, was arraigned Wednesday on charges of interfering with operations of an aircraft, according to The Boston Globe.

The door was opened about 7:30 p.m. "suddenly and without warning," Massachusetts State Police spokesperson TimMcGuirk said in a statement.

The opening of the overwing exit door caused an emergency slide to deploy aboard JetBlue flight 161 from Boston to San Juan, the airline said in a statement.

Passenger Fred Wynn told WCVB-TV the passenger was seated behind him and was arguing with his girlfriend over a cellphone, then "the guy got up and ran down the aisle" toward the door.

Cops seek staff, money for fireworks crackdown

HI HONOLULU — Hawaii authorities on Tuesday asked lawmakers for \$5.2 million to hire eight people and expand a forensic lab to crack down on the persistent rampant smuggling of illegal fireworks like those that killed four people and injured about 20 more at a Honolulu home on New Year's Eve.

Jordan Lowe, the director of the state Department of Law Enforcement, outlined the funding request during hearings before House and Senate committees at the state Legislature. Last week's deadly explosion highlighted the immense risks posed by illegal fireworks in Hawaii and put a spotlight on the department's efforts to address contraband explosives.

The state already has an Illegal Fireworks Task Force that the department formed in 2023 together with other state, city and federal agencies. Lowe told lawmakers his department's contribution to the task force consists of two officers whose main job is handling narcotics enforcement. Whenever an operation is planned, the task force must pull personnel from the Honolulu Police Department, attorney general's office and other agencies.

US will keep protecting Rocky Mountain grizzlies

MT BILLINGS — The Biden administration will continue protecting about 2,000 grizzly bears in four Rocky Mountain states despite objections from GOP-led states, U.S. wildlife officials said Wednesday.

Federal officials also said they will reclassify the grizzly's status so that ranchers would be able to shoot bears that are killing livestock. Officials will end protections for the animals in states where they're no longer found, including California, Colorado, New Mexico and Oregon.

The bruins have been protected as a threatened species across the lower 48 states since 1975.



EXCHANGE

WHERE HEROES SHOP

All honorably discharged Veterans and Department of Defense civilians with CAC can shop tax free at ShopMyExchange.com. In addition, the Department of Defense expanded in-store military exchange and commissary shopping privileges as well as MWR resale facility use to all Veterans with service-connected disabilities.



LEARN MORE ABOUT THESE BENEFITS
SHOPMYEXCHANGE.COM/VETS

The Exchange is a Department of Defense Organization



Bizarro

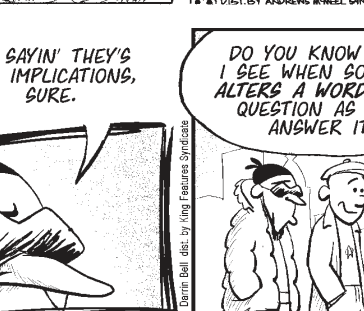
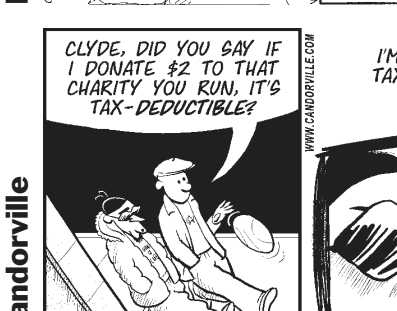
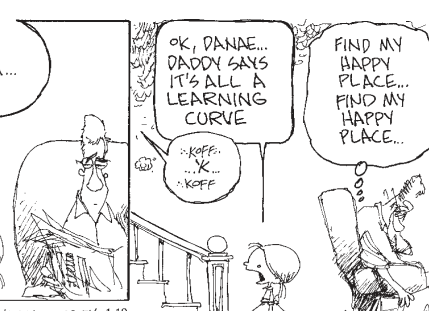
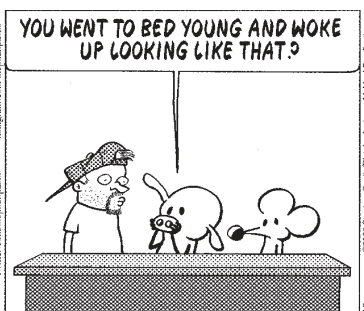
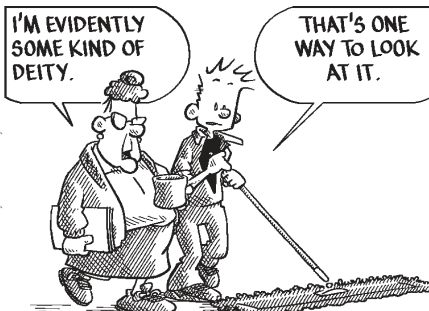
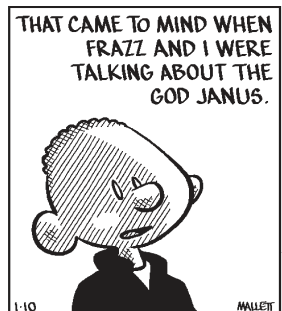


Loose Parts



Eugene Sheffer Crossword

1	2	3	4	5		6	7	8		9	10	11
12						13				14		
15						16				17		
		18				19				20		
21	22			23				24				
25			26		27		28					
29				30			31			32	33	34
			35				36			37		
38	39	40				41		42		43		
44						45				46		
47				48				49			50	51
52				53				54				
55				56				57				



ACROSS

- 1 Purse part
- 6 Tatter
- 9 Fr. holy woman
- 12 Borders on
- 13 In the past
- 14 Allow
- 15 Trattoria offering
- 16 Wild hurry, as on Black Friday
- 18 Divides in two
- 20 Greek mountain
- 21 Rule in India
- 23 Goat's plaint
- 24 City on the Yangtze River
- 25 Broadway failure
- 27 Zaps in a microwave
- 29 Argue
- 31 Portugal's place
- 35 Fix a lawn
- 37 Bath bubbles
- 38 Long-legged shorebird
- 41 Hwys.
- 43 Scale note
- 44 Spanish "but"
- 45 Rob Roy spirit
- 47 Pressed for time
- 49 Garlicky mayo
- 52 Dijon denial
- 53 Blackbird
- 54 "What's in — me?"
- 55 — Lanka

DOWN

- 1 Enervate
- 2 TV schedule abbr.
- 3 Work that's done ASAP
- 4 "— boy!"
- 5 Sacred song
- 6 French Baroque composer
- 7 Turkish officials
- 8 Deity
- 9 Melting snow
- 10 "Selma" actress Thompson
- 11 Patriot Allen
- 17 Awakens
- 19 Wind indicators
- 21 "Mayberry —"
- 22 Hearty brew
- 24 Spider's home
- 26 Sitting room
- 28 Youngster
- 30 Hanoi holiday
- 32 Exit in haste
- 33 Altar promise
- 34 Visual communication syst.
- 36 Corsage flower
- 38 Whirls
- 39 Choir member
- 40 Resident of Tabriz
- 42 Composed
- 45 Taxpayer IDs
- 46 Refer to "Friendly skies" co.
- 50 Brit's restroom
- 51 Fury

Answer to Previous Puzzle

J	U	T	S	S	B	A	R	S	V	P		
E	C	H	O	P	E	C	O	P	I	E		
E	L	A	L	R	A	T	O	R	A	L		
P	A	N	A	M	A	S	I	M	I	L	E	
			C	A	W		N	I	N			
B	A	S	E	L	A	S	V	E	G	A	S	
T	S	P		E	S	P		E	M	I		
S	H	R	E	D	D	E	R	E	R	O	S	
			U	N	I		O	H	O			
S	U	C	C	O	R		C	A	L	M	E	R
A	R	I	A		A	R	K		I	A	G	O
S	S	N	S		R	O	E		T	R	A	M
S	A	G	E		E	D	T		H	A	L	E

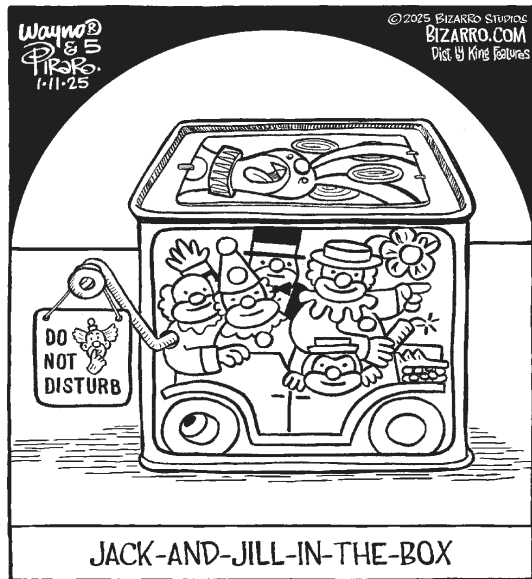
1-10

CRYPTOQUIP

ZW RGJO F QBTPBGHFIB RW
 VXFH ORK'TB EFOZGI ZE
 PXBBNO, XRV FTB ORK EQBFNZGI?
 QFTHJO QBTHJO.

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: IT'S NO SURPRISE THAT MOUNTAINS WILL ALWAYS MAKE ME CRACK UP LAUGHING. THEY ARE HILL-AREAS.
 Today's Cryptoquip Clue: O equals Y

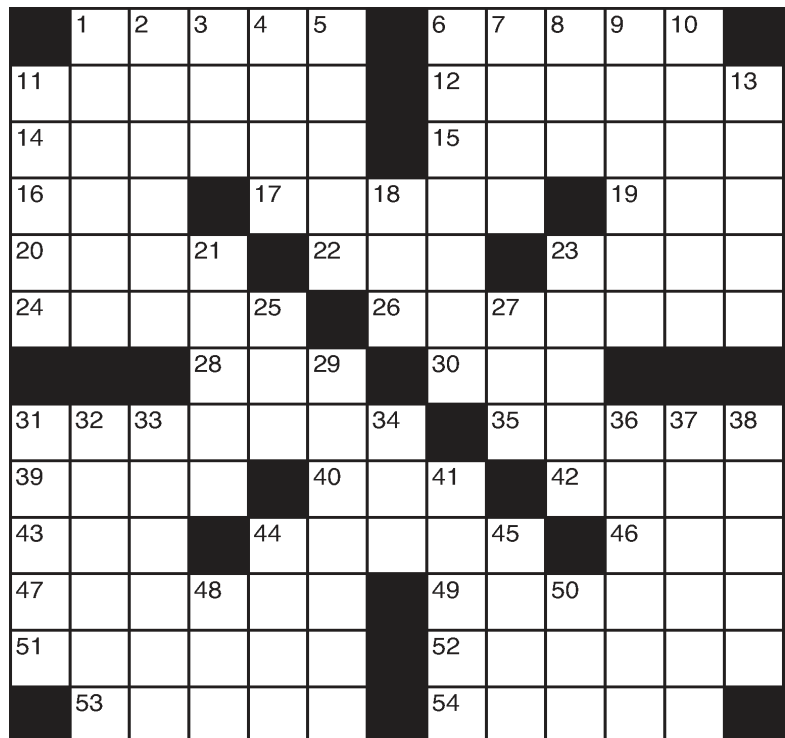
Bizarro



Loose Parts



Eugene Sheffer Crossword



ACROSS

- 1 — Ark
- 6 Con games
- 11 French novelist
- 12 Heckler's weapon
- 14 "Delta Wedding" author Welty
- 15 Defeated in a footrace
- 16 Govt. stipend
- 17 Roly-poly
- 19 Roast VIPs
- 20 Golf pegs
- 22 Docs' org.
- 23 Lap dog, for short
- 24 Former First Daughter
- 26 Most sore
- 28 401(k) alternative
- 30 Med. plan
- 31 Popeye's veggie
- 35 Muslim legal expert
- 39 Centers
- 40 Possesses
- 42 Uttered
- 43 Before
- 44 "Graceland" singer Paul
- 46 The Browns, on scoreboards
- 47 Chew out

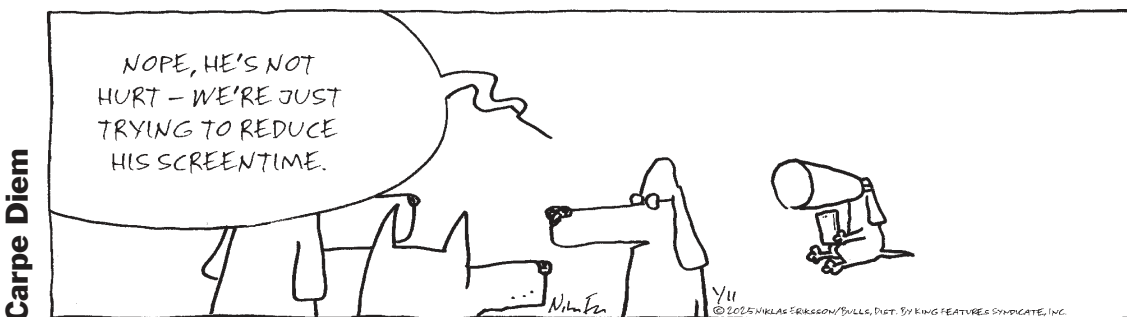
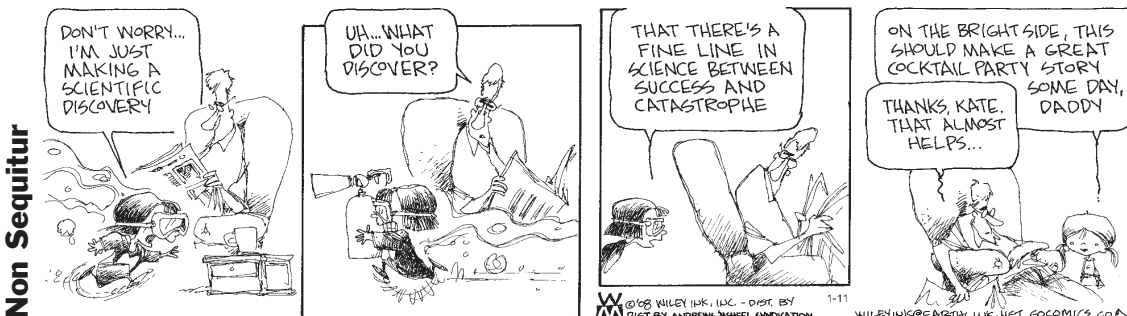
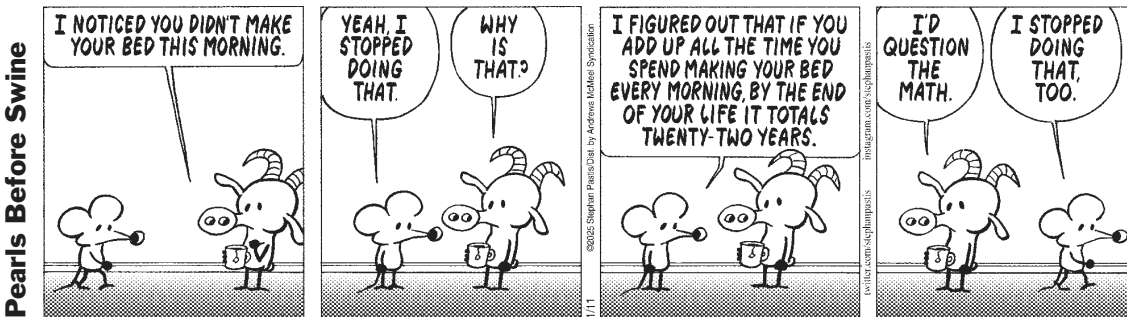
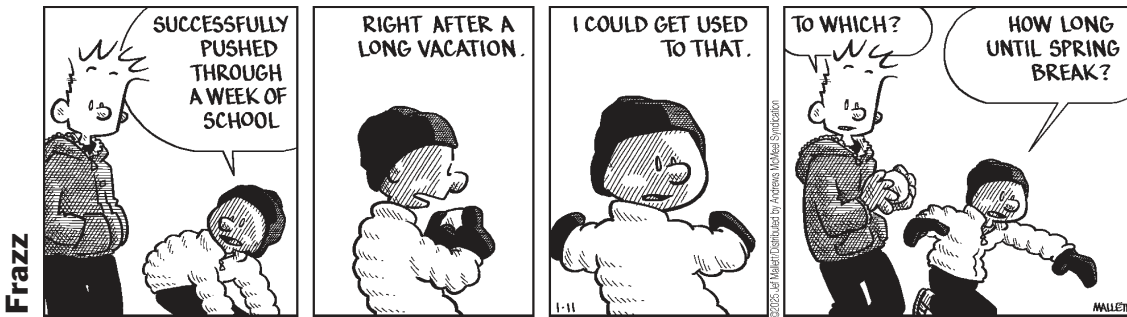
- 49 Tex-Mex treat
- 51 "I, Robot" author
- 52 Leg joints
- 53 Hosiery shade
- 54 Repaired shoes

- 18 Hollywood's Thurman
- 21 Tibia settings
- 23 Reverent
- 25 Altar in the sky
- 27 "Let me think ..."
- 29 Reach
- 31 Biblical realm
- 32 Least spoiled
- 33 Portugal's place
- 34 Sandwich meat
- 36 Glib
- 37 Inclined
- 38 Concepts
- 41 Remote locations?
- 44 Halt
- 45 iPod model
- 48 Asia's — Darya river
- 50 Keypad trio

DOWN

- 1 Mal de mer
- 2 "Golden" tunes
- 3 Dye type
- 4 Angelic instrument
- 5 Milan's La —
- 6 Tolerate
- 7 Brilliant stroke
- 8 Invoice fig.
- 9 "Little Women" matriarch
- 10 Pancake towers
- 11 Defeats
- 13 Start

Answer to Previous Puzzle



1-11

CRYPTOQUIP

QZONAQDY IMAOK WGZW HAUAWU
JABU ZOB LZKANZYIC LZJMU
WGML IMNPLM LPFM GPOMUW:
WGM WFDWG QZAF C.

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: IF ONLY A PERCENTAGE OF WHAT YOU'RE SAYING IS CHEEKY, HOW ARE YOU SPEAKING? PARTLY PERTLY.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: G equals H

STARS AND STRIPES.

Laura Law, Chief Operating Officer

Lt. Col. Katie R. Fidler, Europe commander

John Rodriguez, Europe chief of staff

Lt. Col. Marci Hoffman, Pacific commander

EDITORIAL

Robert H. Reid, Editor in Chief
reid.robert@stripes.comSean Moores, Managing Editor for Presentation
moores.sean@stripes.comAnn Pinson, Digital Managing Editor
pinson.ann@stripes.com

BUREAU STAFF

Europe/Mideast

Erik Slavín, Europe & Mideast Bureau Chief
slavin.erik@stripes.com

+49(0)631.3615.9350; DSN (314)583.9350

Pacific

Aaron Kidd, Pacific Bureau Chief
kidd.aaron@stripes.com

+81.42.552.2511 ext. 88380; DSN (315)227.7380

Washington

Joseph Cacchioli, Washington Bureau Chief
cacchioli.joseph@stripes.com

(+1)(202)886-0033

Brian Bowers, Assistant Managing Editor, News
bowers.brian@stripes.com

CIRCULATION

Mideast

David Schultz, District Manager
schultz.david@stripes.com

xsscirculation@stripes.com

+49(0)152.5672.5036; DSN (314)583-9111

Europe

Carlo Aquino, Circulation Manager
aquino.carlo@stripes.com

memberservices@stripes.com

+49(0)631.3615.9136; DSN (314)583.9136

Pacific

Mari Mori, customerhelp@stripes.com

+81-3 6385.3171; DSN (315)227.7333

CONTACT US

Washington

tel: (+1)202.886.0003

633 3rd St. NW, Suite 500, Washington, DC 20001-3050

Reader letters

letters@stripes.com

Additional contacts

stripes.com/contactus

OMBUDSMAN

Jacqueline Smith

The Stars and Stripes ombudsman protects the free flow of news and information, reporting any attempts by the military or other authorities to undermine the newspaper's independence. The ombudsman also responds to concerns and questions from readers, and monitors coverage for fairness, accuracy, timeliness and balance. The ombudsman welcomes comments from readers, and can be contacted by email at ombudsman@stripes.com, or by phone at 202.886.0003.

Stars and Stripes (USPS 0417900) published daily (except Saturday, Sunday, 25 December and 1 January) for 50 cents (Monday through Thursday) and one dollar on Friday by Stars and Stripes Pacific, OPC 706 BOX 7, APO AP 96301-9001. Periodicals postage paid at San Francisco, CA Postmaster: Send address changes to Pacific Stars and Stripes, OPC 706 BOX 7, AP 96301-9001.

The Stars and Stripes newspaper is authorized by the Department of Defense (DoD) for the overseas U.S. military community. As an authorized newspaper, Stars and Stripes publications may be distributed through official channels and use appropriated funds for distribution to remote locations where overseas DoD personnel are located. The content printed in this newspaper is not classified as command information and is neither endorsed by nor represents the official views of the U.S. government.

The appearance of advertising in this publication does not constitute endorsement by the Department of Defense, Stars and Stripes, and or services advertised. Products or services advertised shall be made available for purchase, use or patronage without regard to race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, marital status, physical handicap, political affiliation or any other nonmerit factor of the purchaser, user or patron.

© Stars and Stripes 2025

stripes.com

OPINION

Biden's specious concerns on TikTok, U.S. Steel

BY GEORGE F. WILL

The Washington Post

When, on Friday, the Supreme Court hears the Biden administration defend the law that bans TikTok, the justices should remember what the administration said the previous Friday: "National security" justifies the president's blocking the sale of U.S. Steel to Nippon Steel of Japan. Formulaic uses of that phrase give a patina of respectability to government's abuses — concentration camps in the past, control of the internet in the future.

Oscar Wilde was said to have remarked that anyone who could read Charles Dickens on the death of Little Nell (in "The Old Curiosity Shop") without laughing "must have a heart of stone." Anyone who can read with a straight face Joe Biden on his "solemn responsibility" to protect U.S. "security" from a privately held corporation, almost a quarter owned by non-Japanese, must be incapable of laughter.

More than 2,000 U.S. corporations have market capitalizations larger than U.S. Steel, which has fewer employees (21,800) than Krispy Kreme, which manufactures doughnuts. The U.S. military requires a minuscule portion (in 2017, 3%) of domestic steel production. Japan is a steadfast ally that, while Nippon's \$14.9 billion purchase is being blocked, is purchasing vital U.S. weapons systems. Biden is as allergic to such facts, as is his successor, who also opposes the sale even though:

Nippon has promised to pay \$5 billion more than the company's market capitalization. And to keep U.S. Steel's headquarters in Pittsburgh. And to give \$5,000 bonuses to the company's steelworkers. And to abide by all union contracts. And to let the U.S. government reject any reductions in U.S. Steel's production capacity. And to spend \$2.7 billion modernizing what Biden delusionally calls "this vital

American company," which has withered by becoming dependent on U.S. government tariffs, subsidies and "Buy American" rules.

TikTok, the Chinese-owned video-sharing app, has approximately 170 million American users. Granted, TikTok is inescapably beholden to an adversary nation's sinister government. But in 1965, a unanimous Supreme Court overturned a law that burdened Americans' "right to receive" propaganda from such a nation: the Soviet Union.

Sixty years and many technological developments later, it is increasingly urgent not to acquiesce in the U.S. government's insinuating itself even deeper than it already is into the sinister business of superintending Americans' access to information and ideas. The government is preemptively banning TikTok. There has been no precipitating event, not even a measurable change wrought by TikTok in U.S. public opinion regarding China. (Not that controlling public opinion is Congress' job.)

We have been here before. During World War II, the Army general who justified the "evacuation" of West Coast Japanese saw something "ominous" in seeing nothing: "The very fact that no sabotage has taken place to date is a disturbing and confirming indication that such action will be taken." The national security threat's absence confirmed its imminence.

In 1952, during the Korean War, the Supreme Court disallowed President Harry S. Truman's national security executive order seizing steel plants to ensure production during a labor dispute. This came eight years after the court, in one of its worst decisions, upheld President Franklin D. Roosevelt's national security ("military necessity") rationale for removing 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry, two-thirds of them American citizens, to con-

centration camps.

In the steel seizure case, the court deemed Truman's national security rationale insufficient, absent congressional authorization. Regarding today's two controversies:

Granted, Congress created the process that culminated in Biden's decision against Nippon and U.S. Steel. And Congress has recklessly delegated to presidents its constitutionally enumerated power "to regulate commerce with foreign nations." And Congress passed the law to ban TikTok. Those considerations should not, however, immunize either the Nippon or the TikTok decisions from judicial scrutiny.

The nation needs a due process challenge to the facially corrupt maneuvering that produced the decision against Nippon, a decision opposed by 98% of U.S. Steel shareholders, and probably most of the company's workers. The decision should be called an unconstitutional taking of property without just compensation. And a gross abridgment of the First Amendment guarantee of robust expression free from government supervision.

Around the world, not least in the European Union, governments are eager to curate the internet for their purposes of social control. U.S. government censorship comes clad in mincing insincerities about "content moderation" to protect the gullible masses from "misinformation," "disinformation" or "malinformation."

During the pandemic, Biden said insufficient censorship by social media companies was "killing people." His administration pressured all-too-compliant companies to suppress content, much of it true.

The pandemic has gone. Other excuses for censorship (racism, hate, climate change, disrespect for "science," a public health crisis, etc.) are coming.

Biden has more veterans to pardon before leaving

BY SUZANNE GORDON

AND STEVE EARLY

Progressive Perspectives

In mid-December, on the same day that he granted clemency to 1,500 Americans, President Joe Biden issued pardons to 15 of the nation's military veterans. These pardon recipients were mainly former officers and non-commissioned officers, aged 46 to 79, with honorable discharges and military decorations. Before or after leaving the armed forces, they had committed non-violent offenses, often at a young age.

Biden's action, although welcome, fell far short of doing what justice demands for our men and women in uniform. Before he leaves office on Jan. 20, the president should wipe the slate clean for the 300,000 other former soldiers who deserve a second chance. This much larger ex-military cohort served at home and abroad after 9/11 but received less than honorable discharges because of performance problems or rules infractions while in uniform.

As a result, depending on their exact discharge status, these veterans are not eligible either for educational benefits under the GI Bill or for disability payments and health care treatment from the Department of Veterans Affairs for their service-related injuries and illnesses. These former soldiers also don't get the same preferential treatment in hiring given to other veterans.

Being drummed out of the military in this fashion, without a court-martial, has lasting

consequences. As civilians, former soldiers with "bad paper" aren't eligible for preferential treatment when applying for public sector jobs. The American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and Disabled American Veterans won't even allow them to join. And individual veterans who seek to change their discharge status face a long, frustrating legal fight.

According to Swords to Plowshares, a San Francisco-based advocacy group, veterans who leave the military with less than honorable discharges are 1.6 times more likely to have untreated mental health issues and twice as likely to commit suicide. That's why Swords, Minority Veterans of America and Black Veterans Project are urging Biden to issue a blanket pardon for men and women living with the stigma of "bad paper," so they can get help needed to succeed in civilian life.

These advocates cite a 2023 Syracuse University study that found that minorities and women were disproportionately represented among such veterans due to "racial inequities in the military's criminal justice system" and the number of women suffering trauma from military sexual assaults.

As other reports have documented, their discharge decisions were often made in the absence of uniform disciplinary standards applied across military branches or even by individual commanders within the same branch. Their "bad paper" is not the result of court-martial and, instead, reflects the Defense Department's desire to save money and maintain "force readiness" by quickly shedding sol-

diers with service-related physical or mental health problems that would otherwise require costly treatment and rehabilitation.

Not surprisingly, a Government Accountability Office investigation found that, within two years of leaving the service, 62% of all service members separated from the military for misconduct between 2011 and 2015 were diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health issues, traumatic brain injuries, or drug and alcohol dependence.

President-elect Donald Trump has announced plans to pardon his 1,500 supporters — including both veterans and active duty military personnel — who were charged with crimes when they stormed the Capitol in an attempt to overturn the 2020 election results. So it would be a grave injustice for Biden to overlook this opportunity to pardon veterans who served but committed no similar offenses before being denied an honorable discharge.

As vet groups have reminded the president, only he can prevent past "administrative separations and resulting denial of critical veterans' benefits" from becoming "a life sentence," that has already left too many ex-soldiers at higher risk of substance abuse, joblessness, homelessness, incarceration and self-harm.

Steve Early and Suzanne Gordon are the co-authors of "Our Veterans: Winners, Losers, Friends and Enemies on the New Terrain of Veterans Affairs." Gordon is also a co-founder of the Veterans Healthcare Policy Institute and two previous books on veterans' issues. This column was produced for Progressive Perspectives, a project of The Progressive magazine, and distributed by Tribune News Service.

SCOREBOARD

DEALS

Wednesday's transactions

BASEBALL
Major League Baseball American League

ATHLETICS — Agreed to terms with OF/DH Brent Rooker on a five-year contract.

CHICAGO WHITE SOX — Agreed to terms with IF Josh Rojas on a one-year contract. Designated SS Jacob Amaya for assignment. Sent OF Corey Julks outright to Charlotte (IL).

HOUSTON ASTROS — Acquired RHP Matthew Linskey from the Arizona Diamondbacks in exchange for IF Grae Kessinger. Agreed to terms with RHP Luis Garcia on a one-year contract.

KANSAS CITY ROYALS — Agreed to terms with RHP Michael Lorenzen. Claimed INF Braden Shewmake off waivers from the Chicago White Sox.

SEATTLE MARINERS — Claimed RHP Hagen Danner off waivers from the Toronto Blue Jays.

National League

SAN FRANCISCO GIANTS — Claimed C Sam Huff off waivers from the Texas Rangers. Designated RHP Austin Warren for assignment.

WASHINGTON NATIONALS — Agreed to terms with IF Amed Rosario on a one-year contract. Designated RHP Joan Adon for assignment. Activated 1B Andres Chaparro.

FOOTBALL

National Football League

ARIZONA CARDINALS — Signed RB Zonovan Knight and OL Sincere Haynesworth to a reserve/future contract.

BUFFALO BILLS — Signed DL Eli Ankou and LB Tyreek Maddox-Williams to the practice squad.

CLEVELAND BROWNS — Hired Mike Bloomgren as offensive line coach.

INDIANAPOLIS COLTS — Signed OT Jack Wilson to a reserve/future contract.

LOS ANGELES CHARGERS — Designated DB Eli Apple to return from injured reserve.

PHILADELPHIA EAGLES — Signed DB Lewis Cine to the active roster. Designated DL Byron Young to return from injured reserve.

SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS — Designated DL Javon Hargrave as a post June 1 release. Released WR Ronnie Bell from the practice squad. Signed OT Isaac Alarcon to a reserve/future contract.

TAMPA BAY BUCCANERS — Designated DB Troy Hill to return from injured reserve. Signed DL Adam Gotsis to the practice squad.

WASHINGTON COMMANDERS — Signed TE Lawrence Cager, OL Anim Dankwah, and RB Demetric Felton to reserve/future contracts. Designated RB Colson Yankoff to return from injured reserve. Placed DT Haggai Chisom Ndubuisi on the practice squad injured list. Signed OT Max Pircher to their practice squad.

HOCKEY

National Hockey League

ANAHEIM DUCKS — Called up RW Sam Colangelo from San Diego (AHL).

BUFFALO SABRES — Recalled C Tyson Kozak from Rochester (AHL). Reassigned Cs Konsta Helenius and Anton Wahlberg to Rochester. Placed C Jiri Kulich on injured reserve.

COLUMBUS BLUE JACKETS — Called up C Luca Del Bel Belluz from Cleveland (AHL).

DETROIT RED WINGS — Recalled G Ville Husso from Grand Rapids (AHL) under emergency conditions. Placed D Jeff Petry on injured reserve.

MINNESOTA WILD — Recalled D David Jiricek from Iowa (AHL). Reassigned F Devin Shore to Iowa. Transferred C Jakob Lauko from long-term injured reserve to injured reserve.

SEATTLE KRACEN — Placed RW Daniel Sprong on waivers.

VANCOUVER CANUCKS — Reassigned D Filip Hronek to Abbotsford (AHL).

SOCCER

Major League Soccer

ATLANTA UNITED — Signed F Cayman Togashi on a free transfer through the 2025 MLS season with an option for 2026.

COLUMBUS CREW — Signed MF Lassi Lappalainen for the 2025 season with a Club option for 2026.

D.C. UNITED — Signed 2025 MLS Super-Draft selection F Hakim Karamoko.

NASHVILLE SC — Signed MF Bryan Acosta through the 2025 season with an option for 2026. Waived M Randall Leal and G Elliot Panico.

NEW ENGLAND REVOLUTION — Signed MF Allan Oyirwoth to the club's supplemental roster.

SEATTLE SOUNDERS FC — Acquired F Jesus Ferreira from FC Dallas in exchange for MF Léo Chú. \$1,000,000 in 2025 General Allocation Money (GAM), \$500,000 of 2026 GAM and up to \$800,000 in additional GAM if certain performance metrics are met, as well as a 2025 International Roster Slot.

SPORTING KC — Transferred F Alan Pulido to Chivas Guadalajara (LIGA MX) for an undisclosed fee.

TENNIS

WTA Adelaide International 1

Thursday
At Memorial Drive Tennis Centre
Adelaide, Australia
Purse: \$1,064,510
Surface: Hardcourt outdoor
Seedings in parentheses
Women's Singles
Quarterfinals

Liudmila Samsonova, Russia, def. Emma Navarro (2), United States, 6-4, 6-4.
Jessica Pegula (1), United States, def. Ashlyn Krueger, United States, 6-4, 2-0, ret.
Madison Keys, United States, def. Daria Kasatkina (3), Russia, 6-1, 6-3.
Yulia Putintseva, Kazakhstan, def. Diana Shnaider (6), Russia, 7-6 (3), 6-7 (9), 6-4.

Women's Doubles
Semifinals

Alexandra Panova, Russia, and Hanyu Guo, China, def. Katerina Siniakova, Czechia, and Ellen Perez (2), Australia, 4-6, 6-3, 11-9.
Laura Siegemund, Germany, and Beatriz Haddad Maia, Brazil, def. Irina Khromacheva, Russia, and Anna Danilina, Kazakhstan, 6-2, 5-7, 10-7.

ATP World Tour Adelaide International 1

Thursday
At Memorial Drive Tennis Centre
Adelaide, Australia
Purse: \$680,140
Surface: Hardcourt outdoor
Seedings in parentheses
Men's Singles
Quarterfinals

Tommy Paul (1), United States, def. Rin-ky Hijikata, Australia, 6-3, 6-4.
Felix Auger-Aliassime (5), Canada, def. Marcos Giron, United States, 7-6 (3), 6-3.
Miomir Kecmanovic, Serbia, def. Benjamin Bonzi, France, 6-2, 6-3.
Sebastian Korda (2), United States, def. Thanasi Kokkinakis, Australia, walkover.

Men's Doubles
Quarterfinals

Harri Heliövaara, Finland, and Henry Patten (4), Britain, def. Ivan Dodig, Croatia, and Skander Mansouri, Tunisia, 6-3, 6-1.
Kevin Krawietz and Tim Putz (2), Germany, def. Patrik Rikl and Petr Nouza, Czechia, 7-6 (2), 6-4.
Simone Bolelli and Andrea Vavassori (3), Italy, def. Matthew Ebden, Australia, and Joran Vliegen (6), Belgium, 7-6 (5), 7-6 (5).

ATP World Tour ASB Classic

Thursday
At ASB Tennis Arena
Auckland, New Zealand
Surface: Hardcourt outdoor
Seedings in parentheses
Men's Singles
Quarterfinals

Nishesh Basavareddy, United States, def. Alex Michelsen (8), United States, 2-6, 6-2, 6-4.
Gael Monfils, France, def. Facundo Diaz Acosta, Argentina, 6-3, 6-1.
Zizou Bergs, Belgium, def. Roberto Carballes Baena, Spain, 1-6, 6-2, 6-3.
Nuno Borges (7), Portugal, def. Jakub Mensik, Czechia, 6-7 (4), 6-2, 7-6 (4).

Men's Doubles
Quarterfinals

Rajeev Ram and Christian Harrison, United States, def. Fabien Reboul and Sadio Doumbia (4), France, 7-5, 6-7 (4), 10-5.
Yuki Bhambhani, India, and Albano Olivetti, France, def. Lloyd Glasspool and Julian Cash (3), Britain, 3-6, 6-4, 12-10.
Michael Venus, New Zealand, and Nikola Mektić (1), Croatia, def. Pablo Carreno Busta and Sergio Martos Gornes, Spain, 6-4, 4-6, 10-5.

WTA Hobart International

Thursday
At Hobart International Tennis Centre
Hobart, Australia
Purse: \$275,094
Surface: Hardcourt outdoor
Seedings in parentheses
Women's Singles
Quarterfinals

Elina Avanesyan (6), Russia, def. Amanda Anisimova (3), United States, walkover.
McCartney Kessler, United States, def. Dayana Yastremska (1), Ukraine, 7-5, 6-4.
Maya Joint, Australia, def. Sofia Kenin, United States, 6-3, 6-1.
Elise Mertens (2), Belgium, def. Veronika Kudermetova, Russia, 6-1, 0-6, 6-2.

Women's Doubles
Quarterfinals

Monica Niculescu, Romania, and Fanny Stollar, Hungary, def. Ulrikke Eikeri, Norway, and Makoto Ninomiya (2), Japan, 6-1, 7-6 (9).
Xinyu Jiang, China, and Fang-Hsien Wu (4), Taiwan, def. Talia Gibson and Maya Joint, Australia, 6-4, 6-2.

PRO HOCKEY

NHL

Eastern Conference Atlantic Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Toronto	42	27	13	2	56	132	115
Florida	42	25	15	2	52	140	128
Boston	43	20	18	5	45	111	135
Tampa Bay	38	21	15	2	44	140	107
Ottawa	39	19	17	3	41	114	114
Montreal	40	19	18	3	41	122	136
Detroit	40	18	18	4	40	110	128
Buffalo	41	15	21	5	35	126	140

Metropolitan Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Washington	41	27	10	4	58	150	109
New Jersey	43	25	15	3	53	137	109
Carolina	41	24	15	2	50	137	117
Columbus	41	18	17	6	42	141	148
Pittsburgh	42	17	17	8	42	128	156
Philadelphia	41	17	19	5	39	125	147
N.Y. Rangers	40	18	20	2	38	117	128
N.Y. Islanders	40	15	18	7	37	108	128

Western Conference Central Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Winnipeg	42	28	12	2	58	152	106
Minnesota	41	26	11	4	56	127	111
Dallas	39	25	13	1	51	128	99
Colorado	42	25	16	1	51	141	134
St. Louis	42	19	19	4	42	118	129
Utah	40	17	16	7	41	114	122
Nashville	41	13	21	7	33	100	128
Chicago	41	14	25	2	30	105	138

Pacific Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Vegas	40	28	9	3	59	143	107
Edmonton	40	25	12	3	53	132	109
Los Angeles	38	23	10	5	51	118	96
Vancouver	40	18	12	10	46	121	128
Calgary	40	19	14	7	45	108	122
Anaheim	40	17	18	5	39	103	121
Seattle	41	17	21	3	37	118	130
San Jose	43	13	24	6	32	112	153

Note: Two points for a win, one point for overtime loss. Top three teams in each division and two wild cards per conference advance to playoffs.

Tuesday's games

Edmonton 4, Boston 0
Dallas 5, N.Y. Rangers 4, OT
Detroit 3, Ottawa 2, OT
Columbus 4, Pittsburgh 3, SO
Tampa Bay 3, Carolina 2
Toronto 3, Philadelphia 2
Minnesota 6, St. Louis 4
Winnipeg 5, Nashville 2
Calgary 3, Anaheim 2, OT
Vegas 4, San Jose 2

Wednesday's games

Chicago 3, Colorado 1
Washington 2, Vancouver 1, OT
Florida 4, Utah 1
Calgary at Los Angeles, ppd

Thursday's games

Boston at Tampa Bay
Buffalo at Ottawa
Dallas at Philadelphia
Edmonton at Pittsburgh
New Jersey at N.Y. Rangers
Seattle at Columbus
Toronto at Carolina
Anaheim at St. Louis
Colorado at Minnesota
N.Y. Islanders at Vegas

Friday's games

Chicago at Detroit
Montreal at Washington
Vancouver at Carolina
Los Angeles at Winnipeg
San Jose at Utah

Saturday's games

Boston at Florida
Ottawa at Pittsburgh
Seattle at Buffalo
Anaheim at Philadelphia
Colorado at Winnipeg
Columbus at St. Louis
Dallas at Montreal
Edmonton at Chicago
Tampa Bay at New Jersey
Vancouver at Toronto
Washington at Nashville
N.Y. Islanders at Utah
Los Angeles at Calgary
Minnesota at San Jose
N.Y. Rangers at Vegas

Sunday's games

Seattle at Detroit
Anaheim at Carolina
Dallas at Ottawa
Tampa Bay at Pittsburgh
Minnesota at Vegas

Monday's games

Carolina at Philadelphia
Calgary at Chicago
Sacramento at Edmonton

PRO BASKETBALL

NBA

Eastern Conference Atlantic Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Boston	27	10	.730	—
New York	25	13	.658	2½
Philadelphia	15	20	.429	11
Brooklyn	13	24	.351	14
Toronto	8	29	.216	19

Southeast Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Orlando	22	16	.579	—
Miami	18	17	.514	2½
Atlanta	19	18	.514	2½
Charlotte	8	27	.229	12½
Washington	6	29	.171	14½

Central Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Cleveland	32	4	.889	—
Milwaukee	19	16	.543	12½
Indiana	20	18	.526	13
Detroit	19	18	.514	13½
Chicago	17	20	.459	15½

Western Conference Southwest Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Houston	24	12	.667	—
Memphis	24	13	.649	½
Dallas	21	16	.568	3½
San Antonio	18	19	.486	6½
New Orleans	7	31	.184	18

Northwest Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Oklahoma City	30	6	.833	—
Denver	21	15	.583	9
Minnesota	19	17	.528	11
Portland	13	23	.361	17
Utah	9	26	.257	20½

Pacific Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
L.A. Lakers	20	16	.556	—
L.A. Clippers	20	17	.541	½
Golden State	18	18	.500	2
Sacramento	18	19	.486	2½
Phoenix	16	19	.457	3½

Tuesday's games

Houston 135, Washington 112
Charlotte 115, Phoenix 104
Dallas 118, L.A. Lakers 97
Minnesota 104, New Orleans 97
Atlanta 124, Utah 121
Miami 114, Golden State 98
Boston 118, Denver 106

Wednesday's games

Indiana 129, Chicago 113
Philadelphia 109, Washington 103
Cleveland 129, Oklahoma City 122
Detroit 113, Brooklyn 98
New York 112, Toronto 98
Portland 119, New Orleans 100
Denver 126, L.A. Clippers 103
Milwaukee 121, San Antonio 105

Thursday's games

Golden State at Detroit
Minnesota at Orlando
Toronto at Cleveland
Houston at Memphis
Portland at Dallas
Atlanta at Phoenix
Miami at Utah
Charlotte at L.A. Lakers

Friday's games

Golden State at Indiana
Milwaukee at Orlando
New Orleans at Philadelphia
Oklahoma City at New York
Sacramento at Boston
Washington at Chicago
Brooklyn at Denver

Saturday's games

Houston at Atlanta
Utah at Phoenix
Toronto at Detroit
Memphis at Minnesota
Miami at Portland
Charlotte at L.A. Clippers
San Antonio at L.A. Lakers

Sunday's games

Denver at Dallas
Milwaukee at New York
Sacramento at Chicago
Indiana at Cleveland
New Orleans at Boston
Oklahoma City at Washington
Philadelphia at Orlando
Brooklyn at Utah
Charlotte at Phoenix

Monday's games

Minnesota at Washington
Detroit at New York
Golden State at Toronto
Memphis at Houston
San Antonio at L.A. Lakers
Miami at L.A. Clippers

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Wednesday's men's scores

EAST

Army 74, Loyola (Md.) 72
Boston U. 60, American 54
Bucknell 65, Lafayette 62, OT
Cleveland St. 80, Robert Morris 69
Colgate 67, Lehigh 62
Duquesne 85, Saint Joseph's 81, OT
George Washington 75, Rhode Island 67
Holy Cross 70, Navy 59
Loyola Chicago 79, La Salle 68
Providence 84, Butler 65
Seton Hall 85, DePaul 80, OT
UMass 76, Dayton 72
Villanova 68, UConn 66

SOUTH

Alabama 88, South Carolina 68
Appalachian St. 74, Coastal Carolina 51
Belmont 90, S. Illinois 86
ETSU 70, Mercer 68
East Carolina 80, Temple 79
FAU 75, Charlotte 64
Florida St. 80, Miami 65
Furman 67, The Citadel 63, OT
Gardner-Webb 89, Winthrop 83
George Mason 64, Richmond 58
Georgia St. 82, Georgia Southern 78, OT
High Point 93, Charleston Southern 79
Longwood 85, UNC-Asheville 76
NC State 66, Notre Dame 65
SC-Upstate 77, Presbyterian 67
UCF 75, Colorado 74
VCU 73, Fordham 61
Wofford 77, W. Carolina 69

MIDWEST

Drake 64, Bradley 57
Evansville 69, Illinois St. 51
Fort Wayne 78, Milwaukee 73
Illinois 91, Penn St. 52
Indiana 82, Southern Cal 69
Kansas 74, Arizona St. 55
Murray St. 71, N. Iowa 68
Omaha 77, UMKC 58
Saint Louis 73, St. Bonaventure 68
St. Thomas (MN) 73, S. Dakota St. 72
Valparaiso 98, Indiana St. 95, OT
Youngstown St. 72, N. Kentucky 61

SOUTHWEST

Mississippi 73, Arkansas 66
North Texas 81, Rice 59
Texas A&M 80, Oklahoma 78

FAR WEST

California 75, Virginia 61
Gonzaga 93, San Diego 80
San Diego St. 67, Air Force 38
Stanford 70, Virginia Tech 59

Wednesday's women's scores

EAST

Army 70, Loyola (Md.) 55
Boston U. 70, American 67
Bucknell 64, Lafayette 48
Colgate 70, Lehigh 66
Duquesne 67, Saint Joseph's 64
Fordham 61, George Washington 53
Navy 67, Holy Cross 56
Southern Cal 79, Maryland 74
St. Bonaventure 68, Saint Louis 66
UConn 81, Xavier 27
Villanova 77, Georgetown 62

SOUTH

Austin Peay 75, North Alabama 57
Bellarmine 71, Queens (NC) 67
Coastal Carolina 80, Old Dominion 77
Davidson 65, Rhode Island 55
Georgia Southern 82, Georgia St. 57
High Point 78, Charleston Southern 51
Longwood 95, UNC-Asheville 51
N. Kentucky 72, Robert Morris 58
Presbyterian 59, SC-Upstate 58
Richmond 88, George Mason 86
Temple 75, FAU 69, OT
Tulane 65, North Texas 62
UAB 73, Memphis 56
West Georgia 71, E. Kentucky 64
Winthrop 63, Gardner-Webb 49

MIDWEST

Akron 73, N. Illinois 71
Ball St. 101, E. Michigan 69
Buffalo 70, Bowling Green 60
Butler 57, Providence 47
Cent. Michigan 47, Miami (Ohio) 46
Creighton 71, Marquette 68
Dayton 67, UMass 64
IUPUI 79, Oakland 73
Indiana 68, Northwestern 64
Minnesota 76, Rutgers 50
Nebraska 85, Michigan St. 80
Ohio St. 84, Michigan 77
Oklahoma St. 64, Cincinnati 48
South Florida 72, Wichita St. 46
TCU 80, Kansas 73
Toledo 70, Kent St. 59
VCU 62, Loyola Chicago 44
W. Michigan 66, Ohio 49
Wright St. 67, Detroit 64

SOUTHWEST

Arkansas St. 66, Texas St. 50
Cent. Arkansas 86, Lipscomb 75
Tulsa 76, Charlotte 70
UTSA 67, Rice 58
West Virginia 89, Texas Tech 53

FAR WEST

BYU 89, Houston 75
Baylor 81, Arizona 76,

AUSTRALIAN OPEN

Sinner could only face Djokovic in final; tough opener for Sabalenka

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Defending champion Jannik Sinner and 10-time Australian Open winner Novak Djokovic have landed in opposite sides of the draw for the season's first major, ruling out a replay of last year's semifinal match.

Sinner upset Djokovic in the semifinals last year before coming back to beat Daniil Medvedev in the final 3-6, 3-6, 6-4, 6-4, 6-3 for his first Grand Slam singles title.

Top-ranked Sinner has a first-round match against Nicolas Jarry and also has Taylor Fritz, Ben Shelton and Medvedev in his quarter of the draw. Fritz will open against fellow American Jenson Brooksby.

Djokovic and No. 3 Carlos Alcaraz could meet in the quarterfinals, with a possible semifinal against No. 2 Alexander Zverev.

At the draw Thursday to set the brackets for the singles fields, defending champions Sinner and Aryna Sabalenka walked into the official ceremony on the steps of Margaret Court Arena holding their trophies.

Sabalenka won her second consecutive title at Melbourne Park in 2024 by defeating Zheng Qinwen 6-3, 6-2. Sabalenka will be attempting to win a third consecutive women's singles title at Melbourne Park, something last accomplished by Martina Hingis from 1997 to 1999.

Sabalenka drew a tough opening match against 2017 U.S. Open champion Sloane Stephens and has 17-year-old Mirra Andreeva and Zheng in her section.

"I have a lot of great memories and to be back here ... as a two-time Australian Open champion, it's definitely something special," Sa-

balenka, who won the Brisbane International title last week, said at the draw ceremony. "I hope that I can keep doing what I'm doing here in Australia."

Third-seeded Coco Gauff is a potential semifinal rival for Sabalenka. Gauff has a challenging first-round match against former Australian Open champion Sofia Kenin and is in the same section of the draw as four-time major winner Naomi Osaka and seventh-seeded Jessica Pegula.

No. 2 Iga Swiatek and 2022 Wimbledon champion Elena Rybakina are on the other half of the draw.

The Australian Open starts Sunday morning in Melbourne (Saturday night EST in the United States) and will run for 15 days.

Doping and the cases involving Sinner — which is still not fully resolved — and Swiatek was a topic that shadowed tennis in 2024 and is still a talking point in Melbourne.

There's plenty else for fans to talk about.

Djokovic will be playing in his first event alongside new coach Andy Murray, his former on-court rival and a three-time major champion. Nobody has won the men's title at Melbourne Park more often than Djokovic, although he said he still feels trauma from 2022 when he wasn't allowed to play due to not revealing his COVID-19 vaccination status.

Nick Kyrgios, the 2022 Wimbledon runner-up who withdrew from an exhibition against Djokovic this week because of an abdominal strain, will face Jacob Fearnley in the first round if the mercurial Australian is fit enough to contest his first major since the 2022 U.S. Open. Kyrgios is in the same section as Zverev.



AURELIEN MORISSARD/AP

No. 2 Iga Swiatek is coming off a one-month suspension late last year, which was triggered by her taking melatonin contaminated by a banned heart medication known as TMZ.

Doping clouds tennis talk with cases facing scrutiny

BY HOWARD FENDRICH

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — It is a topic that shadowed tennis in 2024 and is still a talking point as the 2025 Grand Slam season opens at the Australian Open on Sunday: doping and the cases involving Jannik Sinner — which is still not resolved — and Iga Swiatek.

Both spent much of last year at No. 1, and Sinner still will hold that spot in the ATP rankings when he steps on court at Melbourne Park to begin the defense of his championship, one of two major trophies he won last year.

Swiatek, a five-time Slam champ and the woman leading the WTA rankings most of the past three seasons, is No. 2 behind Aryna Sabalenka, who will be chasing her third consecutive title in Australia.

"Obviously, there are going to be some negative comments," Swiatek said. "You're not going to avoid that."

Most players prefer to remain silent when asked about the cases. But there are those who have been happy to weigh in, including 24-time major champion Novak Djokovic, raising questions about whether Sinner and Swiatek were treated the same as other players facing similar circumstances and why their situations were kept under wraps for months.

"I sit and wonder, 'Why such a big difference in treatment and judgment?'" was two-time major champion Simona Halep's reac-

tion to Swiatek's punishment. "I can't find, and I don't think there can be, a logical answer."

Halep was initially banned for four years after testing positive for the banned drug Roxadustat at the 2022 U.S. Open, then had that penalty reduced to nine months on appeal — although she had already been off the tour longer than that. She was supposed to compete at Melbourne Park for the first time in three years, but withdrew from qualifying because of knee and shoulder pain.

No one has been louder about the subject lately than Nick Kyrgios, the 2022 Wimbledon runner-up who missed nearly all of the past two seasons because of injuries. He has been commenting regularly, in real life and online, even taking a jab (that he said was in jest) at Cruz Hewitt after the 16-year-old son of Australian Davis Cup captain Lleyton posted a photo with Sinner from a practice session.

"It's been handled horrifically in our sport. Two world No. 1s, both getting done for doping, is disgusting for our sport," Kyrgios said at the Brisbane International, the first event of his comeback. "It's a horrible look."

Sinner was the dominant player in men's tennis last year, and there's little reason to think that won't continue. In 2024, he went 73-6 with eight titles, including at the U.S. Open, and led Italy to the Davis Cup. He heads into the Australian Open on a 14-match win-

ning streak.

Hanging over it all is this: Two positive tests for a trace amount of an anabolic steroid in March were made public in August; the International Tennis Integrity Agency (ITIA) determined he shouldn't be suspended because the exposure to Clostebol was considered accidental — the result of a massage from a trainer who used the substance after cutting his own finger.

The World Anti-Doping Agency was not entirely convinced about the exoneration and thinks a ban of one to two years would be appropriate. Its appeal, lodged in September, is still pending, and a final determination is expected after the Australian Open ends.

"It's in (my) head a little bit," Sinner said, adding that he is confident everything will go his way.

Swiatek accepted a one-month suspension in late November after testing positive for a banned heart medication known as TMZ. She failed an out-of-competition test in August, and the ITIA accepted her explanation that it was caused by the contamination of a nonprescription medication, melatonin, that Swiatek was taking for jet lag and sleeping issues.

She missed three tournaments — although the real reason wasn't revealed at the time — and finished serving her punishment after the season was done.

"This whole process was pretty abstract sometimes and hard to understand," Swiatek said, surely speaking for many observers.



ANDY WONG/AP

Ten-time Australian Open winner Novak Djokovic, left, and defending champion Jannik Sinner are in opposite sides of the draw for this year's tournament, ensuring that a rematch can only happen in the final round.

COLLEGE BASKETBALL/NHL

Ready for takeoff

Highlight-reel dunk another look at Flagg's potential

By AARON BEARD
Associated Press

DURHAM, N.C.—Cooper Flagg was still simmering, angry at himself, for picking up his third foul so early in the second half before knocking away an entry pass to force a turnover.

He collected the ball and raced across halfcourt, his momentum building with every step as he hurtled toward the paint with a taller defender trying to get back. And there was no way Duke's star 18-year-old was going to stop.

"As soon as I jumped, my mind kind of went blank and it just all happened really fast," Flagg said.

"It" was the 6-foot-9 Flagg soaring in to throw down a jaw-dropping one-handed dunk through a foul from Pittsburgh 7-footer Guillermo Diaz Graham in the second half of the fourth-ranked Blue Devils' 76-47 win Tuesday night. The coast-to-coast sequence blew the roof off Cameron Indoor Stadium, along with offering another glimpse of the tantalizing potential of a player viewed as a potential No. 1 overall NBA draft pick long before he ever stepped on campus.

"Coop does special stuff all the time, we've come to expect it," teammate Sion James said. "But that showed us something, that he can still surprise us."

The preseason Associated Press All-American had 19 points, 10 rebounds, five assists, one steal and one block in nearly 33 minutes of work as Duke locked down defensively in a matchup of teams unbeaten in Atlantic Coast Conference play.

Yet it was a single sequence that stood out as a signature moment.

Four seconds.

Three dribbles.

And one more highlight in what is likely a one-year college stopover before the NBA,

good enough that it had Duke coach Jon Scheyer thinking of another one-and-done Blue Devils star.

"Look, it reminded me of a Zion kind of play," Scheyer said of Zion Williamson, the dunking marvel who became AP national player of the year and the top NBA draft pick in 2019.

"That's what it reminded me of, because of how it sparked Cameron. Not me myself, but we've had a few guys through the years to make a couple of plays that just spark everybody in the building. And that was one of those moments tonight."

Boy, did it.

Flagg picked up his third foul at the 17:43 mark when he tried to knock away an inbounds pass, though Scheyer didn't pull him. Instead, Flagg was lurking behind Pitt's Cameron Corhen as Jaland Lowe bounced an entry pass for Corhen, only to see Flagg break on the ball from Corhen's left side to deflect it.

He collected the ball and raced past Lowe as he crossed halfcourt, only a few steps from Scheyer on the Duke sideline. He was already signaling his intent to go to the rim as he turned toward the left elbow with Diaz Graham closing from the other side of the court.

Sion James
Flagg's teammate

"I knew he was going to try to dunk it," James said, "but once I saw (Diaz Graham) step up, I was like 'Oh, well of course he's going to lay it up now because that's what any sane person would do.'"

Instead, Flagg kept charging and launched off his left foot from the left edge of the paint. He extended his right arm, the ball high in his hand, as he elevated and Diaz Graham went up to contest at the last moment.

"Everything from that was just, like a flash," Flagg said, snapping his fingers.

Flagg threw the ball down down forcefully as the whistle blew, then landed to stand chest-to-chest with Diaz Graham.



BEN McKEOWN/AP

Duke's Cooper Flagg dunks over Pittsburgh's Guillermo Diaz Graham on Tuesday. The play stood out as a signature moment for the possible No. 1 overall NBA draft pick.

The crazies kicked into a heightened roar. Teammate Khaman Maluach delivered an excited chest bump to Flagg. James stood out beyond the 3-point arc, his mouth agape and his hands on his head in disbelief.

And that vibe didn't stop after the game, either. Duke's players even took a moment to gather around Tyrese Proctor's cellphone in the locker room and watch a replay before talking to reporters.

"I mean, that's the best in-game dunk I've ever seen," Proctor said.

And Flagg wasn't done, following by going off the dribble for a two-handed dunk on the next possession, still seemingly fuming about foul No. 3. He never picked up his

fourth and finished with 14 second-half points, capping a performance that Scheyer said highlights how he brings the best out of the Blue Devils with his all-around floor game.

And there's plenty of room to grow for a player that turned 18 less than three weeks ago.

"He doesn't hunt numbers," Scheyer said. "He just puts up numbers because the game comes to him. He plays the game the right way. I think we need to make sure we're talking about him that way."

"He's proving it to me. He's got to continue to prove it. But for me, when we step on the floor, we have the best player in the country. And that's a big deal."

League will have outdoor games in Florida next season

By TIM REYNOLDS
Associated Press

MIAMI—Hockey. Outdoors. In Florida.

Next season, the NHL is making it happen — twice.

The NHL announced Wednesday that the Stanley Cup champion Florida Panthers will play host to the New York Rangers at loanDepot Park in Miami — home of baseball's Marlins — on Jan. 2, 2026, in the Winter Classic, with the Tampa Bay Lightning playing host to the Boston Bruins at Raymond James Stadium on Feb. 1, 2026, in a Stadium Series game.

"Stanley Cups, strings of sellouts and the exponential growth

of youth and high school hockey throughout the state have demonstrated that Florida is a hockey hotbed," NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman said. "Outdoor NHL games in the Sunshine State? Never let it be said that our league isn't willing to accept a challenge."

It's a long time coming, but the Panthers and Lightning have represented the Eastern Conference in each of the last five Stanley Cup Finals and they've built heavily engaged fan bases. And both franchises have asked the NHL to bring an outdoor game — or two, in this case — to the Sunshine State for many years.

The league listened.

"To be able to celebrate these two franchises against great Original Six teams, I think, is phenomenal," Panthers President Matthew Caldwell said. "And I think our time has come. We deserve that outdoor game and we're fired up to have it right here locally."

The Marlins' ballpark, located about a 45-minute drive south of the Panthers' home arena in Sunrise, can hold about 37,000 fans. Raymond James Stadium — home of the NFL's Tampa Bay Buccaneers — can hold about 65,000 for most events, and capacity can be increased a bit if necessary.

"We couldn't be more excited for this landmark event to finally

arrive for Bolts Nation and the Tampa Bay community," Lightning CEO Steve Griggs said. "This moment has been a long time coming, and we're thrilled to see this dream become a reality."

These will not be ordinary outdoor games.

The high in Miami on Jan. 2 this year was 78. The high in Tampa last year on Feb. 1 was 66. Those temperatures aren't conducive to finding ice outside. And the high game-time temperature for any of the previous outdoor games in NHL history, the league said, was 65 for a game in Denver in 2016.

"We understand it's risky," said Steve Mayer, the NHL's president

of content and events. "I think we like it. And it's not a challenge. It's actually an opportunity for us."

The Marlins' loanDepot Park has a retractable roof and that will play a big role in getting that stadium ready for hockey. The air conditioning will be cranked up — way up — and the Panthers-Rangers game will be played at night with the roof open. For the Lightning-Bruins game inside the open-air stadium in Tampa, the NHL will build a temporary roof over the ice surface and remove it just a few hours before game time.

"We want to bring a little bit of a winter wonderland to Florida," Mayer said.

COLLEGE FOOTBALL PLAYOFF

Buckeyes rally around oft-criticized Day all the way to semifinals

By NOAH WEISKOPF
Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio — When Ohio State lost to archrival Michigan for the fourth straight year, calls came from seemingly everywhere for Buckeyes coach Ryan Day to be fired.

Fast-forward five weeks and Day has Ohio State on the cusp of a national championship game appearance and is garnering praise from Buckeye fans thanks to dominating wins against Tennessee and Oregon in the College Football Playoff.

“(There are the) same guys in the room as was there a month ago,” Day said after the win over the Ducks. “Nothing that’s happened in the past or the noise around the building has anything to do with our preparation and our focus and our process, and that’s what we’ve been diving into.”

Day knows dwelling on the past could hinder the team’s ability in the future, so he’s emphasized pushing forward: “Nothing that’s happened previously is going to have any effect on what’s going on other than learning from our experiences.”

A month ago, Day admitted he was “in shock” after losing at home to the Wolverines. A week later, athletic director Ross Bjork backed his sixth-year coach, who has a 66-10 record and consistently has Ohio State in the mix for Big Ten and national titles. Still, a 12-8 mark against top 10 teams and a 1-3 record in the CFP — and the skid against Michigan — have lingered over an otherwise incredible coaching résumé so far.

The two playoff wins have muted the critics. Hammering the Volunteers 42-17 and handling unbeaten Oregon 41-21 have made the Buckeyes the betting favorite

to win their first national title since 2014 on Jan. 20 against either Notre Dame or Penn State.

First comes Friday night’s Cotton Bowl semifinal against Texas. Day’s players have said they never lost faith in their coach.

“Coach Day is the best coach in the nation,” wide receiver Brandon Innis said. “We come in here and we see the work he puts in. He’s here all day every day. To have a guy like that, you want to play for him.”

Day’s role in 2024 has changed from his first five seasons at the helm. He handed play-calling duties to offensive coordinator Chip Kelly, allowing him to focus on the week-to-week game plan.

Jim Knowles has led the defense since arriving in 2022, but this season Day has focused on that side of the ball. Defensive tackle Tyleik Williams said Day’s influence can be seen in the Buckeyes’ dominance, which included eight sacks against the Ducks.

“He teaches a lot of technique,” Williams said.

Day’s pregame Rose Bowl speech, which went viral on social media, showed the fire he instilled in his team as he implored them, “We’ve been working our whole lives for this moment, right here! Bring it! From the first snap all the way to the end!”

“When he’s like that, he makes me want to go out there and do great for him, for the guys around us,” Williams said.

After outscoring Tennessee and Oregon 83-38, Inniss said the team’s belief in Day goes beyond football and he hopes it leads them to a national championship.

“We’re a brotherhood, we’re a family and we are going to stand by him no matter what,” Inniss said.



JAY LAPRETE/AP

Despite four straight losses to archrival Michigan that resulted in calls for his firing, Ohio State head coach Ryan Day has garnered praise again by bringing the Buckeyes within two wins of a national title.



JOHN BAZEMORE/AP

After beating Arizona State in double overtime at the Peach Bowl on Jan. 1, Texas will face Ohio State in the semifinal Cotton Bowl on Friday for a chance to play for the national championship.

Texas, Ohio State arrive in Dallas for Cotton Bowl

By STEPHEN HAWKINS
Associated Press

GRAPEVINE, Texas — The games have been stacking up for Texas, which after playing in the Southeastern Conference championship had to win two extra games in this expanded College Football Playoff to get back to the same spot they were last season.

At least the Longhorns didn’t have to travel far Wednesday for this CFP semifinal, their 16th game this season. It was only about a 45-minute flight from their campus to North Texas, where they play the Buckeyes in the Cotton Bowl on Friday night.

“You can’t take it for granted. Most people don’t get opportunities to still be playing, and then to still be playing, I mean, down the road from Austin, that’s another blessing,” All-America cornerback Jahdae Barron said after the team’s arrival.

Texas (13-2) and Ohio State (12-2) got to the Dallas area as scheduled ahead of an expected winter storm that was forecast bring 2 to 4 inches of snow Thursday, along with sleet and rain.

With the game played inside at AT&T Stadium, the home of the NFL’s Dallas Cowboys, the weather won’t have direct impact on the game that determines which will advance to the national championship. Penn State and Notre Dame were to play the other semifinal Thursday at the Orange Bowl.

“They said there’s gonna be freezing up here,” cornerback Jordan Hancock said with a laugh after Ohio State arrived from Co-



Ohio State (12-2)
vs. Texas (13-2)

AFN-Sports

1:40 a.m. Saturday CET
9:40 a.m. Saturday JKT

lumbus, where the high temperature was 24 degrees. “We came up here and I’m like, ‘Dang, it’s pretty warm up here.’ So it’s definitely great to be down here.”

The Buckeyes are playing in the Cotton Bowl for the second year in a row, but there is so much more riding on the outcome of this one.

Last time, Ohio State was coming off a loss to Michigan in its regular-season finale, their first loss of the season knocking it out of the Big Ten title game and playoff contention. Starting quarterback Kyle McCord had transferred and two-time All-America receiver Marvin Harrison Jr. opted out of playing last season’s game in Arlington, a 14-3 loss to Missouri.

This game comes 10 years after the Buckeyes won the first national championship game of the four-team College Football Playoff era — also played at AT&T Stadium.

While Ohio State ended this regular season with another loss to Michigan, it got into the playoff as the eighth seed and beat Tennessee at home in the first round. The Buckeyes then avenged their oth-

er loss, beating then-undefeated and top-seeded Oregon in the Rose Bowl on New Year’s Day.

The fifth-seeded Longhorns are playing their second playoff game in the Lone Star State. They beat Clemson at home in the first round before a win over Big 12 champion Arizona State in the Peach Bowl.

Texas, before completing its long-awaited move into the SEC last summer, got into the playoff last season after winning the Big 12 championship at AT&T Stadium. Its 14th and final game was a 37-31 loss to Washington in the CFP semifinal at the Sugar Bowl.

“Wasn’t very fun, that’s for sure,” Longhorns quarterback Quinn Ewers said as he recalled the feeling after that game. “I knew this is exactly where I wanted to be ... back here right now.”

More than half of the Texas roster played in that Big 12 title game, and many Longhorns have also played in Texas state high school championship games that are held annually at AT&T Stadium.

“Yeah, I’m going to be real comfortable,” said linebacker Anthony Hill Jr., from nearby Denton. “It’s going to be real good playing in the stadium, being back home.”

Ewers lost a title game there his junior year with Southlake High, then skipped his senior prep season for a semester at Ohio State — where he took only two snaps in a game — before transferring to Texas. Now he’s facing Ohio State for a spot in the national title game January 20 in Atlanta.

“Full-circle moment for sure,” he said.

NFL PLAYOFFS

Bucs buoyed by talented rookie class

Irving, McMillan among players who helped Tampa Bay win 4th straight NFC South title

By FRED GOODALL
Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — Baker Mayfield had the best statistical year of his career, Mike Evans topped 1,000 yards receiving for a record-tying 11th consecutive season and the Tampa Bay Buccaneers are NFC South champions for a franchise-best fourth straight time.

It would be safe to say, though, that the Bucs (10-7) would not be in the playoffs for a NFC-high fifth year in a row without the contributions of a rookie class that has helped the team withstand key injuries and rebound from a four-game skid to go 6-1 in the final seven weeks of the regular season.

Fourth-round draft pick Bucky Irving and third-rounder Jalen McMillan have received most of the attention, with Irving becoming Tampa Bay's first 1,000-yard rusher since Doug Martin in 2015 and McMillan catching seven TD passes in the past five games.

But first-round selection Graham Barton has been the starter at center since Day 1 of training camp, solidifying an offensive line that has helped transform the NFL's worst rushing attack into one of the most productive in the league.

Safety Tykee Smith and reserve linebacker Chris Braswell — selected in the third and second rounds — helped a decimated defense stay afloat despite injuries that sidelined safeties Antoine Winfield Jr. and Jordan Whitehead as well as cornerback Jamel Dean for significant stretches.

While coach Todd Bowles is not one for drawing comparisons between his players and those on other teams, he's excited about the progress of this year's rookies and the prominent role they have



PETER JONELEIT/AP

Bucky Irving is the Buccaneers' first 1,000-yard rusher since Doug Martin in 2015.

played in Tampa Bay's success leading up to Sunday's first-round playoff game against the Washington Commanders.

"I mean, there are great players all over," Bowles said when asked whether he'd put the Bucs' 2024 draft class up against any other in the league.

"I like our draft class. I think they play very well. I liked the draft class last year. I think they played very well. (We) just have to keep getting better," the coach added. "I think longevity kind of defines a draft class, not one year, but they played well."

Despite making only three starts, Irving rushed for 1,122 yards and eight TDs while averaging 5.4 yards a carry. The Bucs had the fourth-most productive rushing attack in the league, averaging 149.2 yards per game after ranking last in 2022 and 2023.

McMillan blossomed after the Bucs' Week 11 bye, earning the trust of Mayfield and offsetting



JASON BEHNKEN/AP

Buccaneers wide receiver Jalen McMillan celebrates his touchdown reception against the New Orleans Saints on Jan. 5 in Tampa, Fla. McMillan has seven touchdown catches in the past five games.

the loss of injured receiver Chris Godwin, who was leading the NFL in receptions when he went down in October.

"The biggest thing for him, you look for in any rookie, is progression throughout the year, and that's what he's done," said Mayfield, who finished with career bests of 4,500 yards and 41 touchdowns passing.

"He's a very talented player. He understands the offense, he's very comfortable right now and playing with a lot of confidence," Bow-

les said of McMillan, who had 37 receptions for 461 yards and eight TDs.

McMillan enters the playoffs having caught at least one TD in five consecutive games. Irving's 11-yard scoring run ensured last week's NFC South-clinching victory over the New Orleans Saints.

Sunday night's wild-card round game against Jayden Daniels and the Commanders begins a new chapter.

Tampa Bay and Washington also met in Week 1 of the regular

season, with the Bucs winning 37-20. Watching film of that game reminded Barton of how far he's come since September.

"There was some good stuff, but obviously some sloppier stuff," the center said.

"It's fun to see, kind of, where I'm at now vs. where I was then. ... It's almost like we're playing them in a new season," Barton added. "They've evolved, as all teams have this time of year, so we've got to be ready for some new wrinkles and stuff like that."

Commanders: Players have confidence in first-year QB Daniels

FROM PAGE 48

second-round pick in 2022. "Everybody from the head down has been doing everything to just along that process of whatever it was going to take for us to turn this place around, and we did it."

This is Washington's first playoff game since the 2020 season under coach Ron Rivera, a loss to Tom Brady and the Bucs with no fans in the stands as Tampa Bay was on its way to winning the Super Bowl. It's just the second over the past decade, the previous one coming in the 2015 season with Kirk Cousins quarterbacking and Jay Gruden in charge, a home defeat to Green Bay.



JEROME MIRON/AP

Jayden Daniels has been a key cog in Washington's turnaround.

There is far more optimism this time around, thanks in large part to Daniels — nearly a lock to be AP

Offensive Rookie of the year — and new coach Dan Quinn.

"It's definitely been a different vibe — just the atmosphere, the culture is different," said veteran receiver Jamison Crowder, who along with Way are the only players on the Commanders' current roster who faced the Packers in January 2016. "A lot of that's a credit to DQ and what he's done to kind of restructure and revamp the energy in the building."

The revamping made by Quinn and first-year general manager Adam Peters included keeping select building-block players who have been to the playoffs before: top receiver Terry McLaurin and

defensive tackles Jonathan Allen and Daron Payne. That experience comes in handy.

"There's a lot of hard work that goes into getting past the regular season," Payne said Wednesday. "It just means a lot for all the hard work you've been putting in, grinding through training camp and finding a way to win during the season just to be in this position."

And there's an appreciation from those who have not been in this position, like wideout Dyami Brown, who was taken a round after Cosmi in 2021 and said the Commanders' success "shows a lot of character and a lot of growth."

"Whatever happened in the past was the past," Brown said. "We've kind of just focused on what was the task at hand and what we needed to do and we bought into a culture that was brought to us."

Culture and a game-changing QB. Washington goes to Tampa Bay as a 3-point underdog on BetMGM Sportsbook, but Daniels' presence has players dreaming of something more than a one and done.

"He's the guy that makes it go," Crowder said. "With him back there, yeah, he definitely gives you that belief that you can make a run."

NFL PLAYOFFS

Herbert looks to add playoff win to résumé

By JOE REEDY
Associated Press

EL SEGUNDO, Calif. — Justin Herbert has accomplished several personal milestones during his first five years in the league.

However, it hasn't resulted in playoff success for the Los Angeles Chargers.

Herbert can change that on Saturday when the Chargers travel to Houston for an AFC wild-card round game.

It will be Herbert's second post-season start. While he realizes the stakes involved with Saturday's game, he is trying to take the same approach as in any other week.

"It would mean everything for us (to get a win). It is the most important game this year because it's the next one," Herbert said.

Herbert and the Chargers raced out to a 27-0 first-half lead two years ago at Jacksonville in a wild-card round game, only to have the Jaguars rally for a 31-30 victory.

One thing Herbert is trying not to do is make sure what happened in that game doesn't impact what happens on Saturday.

"You never let a previous game affect the next one. There have been plenty of games we have won



**Los Angeles Chargers (11-6)
at Houston Texans (10-7)**
AFN-Sports
10:30 p.m. Saturday CET
6:30 a.m. Sunday JKT

or lost the past couple of years we haven't brought up," he said.

Despite helping lead the Chargers to 11 victories — their most since 2018 — it has been a mixed season statistically for Herbert. He averaged a career-low 227.6 passing yards per game, but has a career-best 101.7 passer rating.

Herbert also became the second player in league history to have at least 500 pass attempts and throw three or fewer interceptions in a season. Aaron Rodgers was the first in 2018. Despite having only two 300-yard games this season, Herbert still has the most completions (1,945) and passing yards (21,093) by a player in his first five seasons in NFL history.

Since being hired by the Chargers last January, coach Jim Harbaugh has been Herbert's biggest fan. Harbaugh has developed more of an appreciation of Herbert watching him in practice.

"He gives no keys. There's nothing with his eyes that tell a defender where the ball is going, nothing with his shoulder tilt or his posture," Harbaugh said. "The ball is released so quickly that it is by people. Defenders don't have the advantage of getting a set."

Herbert said the points of emphasis against the Texans will be the same they have been the entire season — executing on third down and in the red zone along with limiting turnovers.

Herbert and the Chargers will face a Texans defense that is ranked sixth against the pass, allowing 201 yards per game. Houston was second in the league in interceptions with 19.

"The most important thing is to trust yourself and know we didn't get here by chance or luck. We earned the spot, and nothing else is given. We have to survive, make plays and trust we know what we're doing and play the way we can," Herbert said.



JEFF LEWIS/AP

Los Angeles Chargers quarterback Justin Herbert (10) will make his second postseason start on Saturday at Houston.

Steelers QB Wilson trying to focus on present, not an uncertain future

By WILL GRAVES
Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — Russell Wilson isn't ready to zoom out.

Maybe because he's almost pathologically predisposed to focusing on the "moment."

How to prepare for it. How to enjoy it while not letting it define you one way or another.

The Pittsburgh Steelers quarterback used the word 16 times in 10 minutes Wednesday, leaning on it whenever he was asked about the stakes for his team and his future heading into Saturday's visit to Baltimore in the first round of the playoffs.

"I'm not really worried about ... down the road or anything like that," Wilson said, later adding "that always handles itself."

Maybe, but 10 months after the Steelers completely changed their quarterback room to take an inexpensive flyer on a nine-time Pro Bowler who quickly fell out of favor after two tumultuous years in Denver, Pittsburgh finds itself in a familiar spot: entering the post-season with long odds and as many questions as answers at the most



**Pittsburgh Steelers (10-7)
at Baltimore Ravens (12-5)**
AFN-Sports
2 a.m. Sunday CET
10 a.m. Sunday JKT

important position on the field.

The optimism after Wilson won six of his first seven starts has been blunted by a December fade against the league's elite. Pittsburgh's offense is averaging just 14 points during the four-game losing streak it will take to M&T Bank Stadium, and Wilson has often looked indecisive while playing behind an offensive line that has become increasingly leaky.

Still, the Steelers have themselves exactly where they wanted to be when they cut Mitch Trubisky, traded Kenny Pickett and didn't try to stop Mason Rudolph from leaving in free agency.

They're in the playoffs with a solid defense and a chance, even if they're the longest shot in the 14-team field to raise the Lombardi Trophy in New Orleans on the second Sunday in February.

Wilson, who won a Super Bowl ring with Seattle more than a decade ago, has made the playoffs eight times in his career. He has only been "one and done" twice.

"I've been fortunate, obviously, to hold the (Lombardi) Trophy and everything else and do some special things in the playoffs," he said.

Wilson wants to give some of his current teammates — such as perennial Pro Bowlers T.J. Watt and Minkah Fitzpatrick, whose next postseason win will be their first — "a taste" of that kind of success.

To do it, Wilson and offensive coordinator Arthur Smith will have to figure out a way to get back to the "Let Russ Cook" approach that reached a high point in a 44-38 win over Cincinnati on Dec. 1, when Wilson threw for 414 yards and three touchdowns and appeared to be every bit a longer-term option in Pittsburgh.



GENE J. PUSKAR/AP

Russell Wilson wants to give his Pittsburgh Steelers teammates a taste of playoff success.

Now, everything is back on the table. While Wilson's production has marked a significant uptick over what Pickett, Trubisky and Rudolph managed in 2022 and 2023, the Steelers are again starting the playoffs on the road as a massive underdog with an offense that isn't exactly striking much fear in anyone of late.

Leading the Steelers to their first playoff victory in eight years would go a long way toward proving he can still make a difference on the biggest stage. It's a lot to think about, which is maybe why Wilson makes it a point not to.

"This is a special moment for all of us," Wilson said.

Even if it could be his last. In this chapter of his career anyway.

NFL keeping an eye on LA wildfires

The NFL is monitoring the potential impact of massive wildfires burning across the greater Los Angeles area on the two playoff-bound LA teams' preparations and the Rams' wild-card game against the Minnesota Vikings scheduled for Monday night at SoFi Stadium in Inglewood, Calif.

The league said Wednesday evening if the game had to be moved, it would take place at State Farm Stadium in Glendale, Ariz., the home of the Arizona Cardinals.

In 2003, the league moved a Monday night regular-season game between the Miami Dolphins and San Diego Chargers to Sun Devil Stadium in Tempe, Ariz., due to wildfires.

Three major fires were burning in the Los Angeles metroplex on Wednesday following two days of extraordinary winds. At least 70,000 people are under evacuation orders, and more than 1,000 structures have been destroyed.

The Rams and the Chargers train in areas not threatened by fires, but both teams are monitoring the air quality and its potential impact on their workouts.

From The Associated Press

NFL PLAYOFFS

Allen overcomes doubters in leading Bills

By JOHN WAWROW
Associated Press

ORCHARD PARK, N.Y. — Josh Allen has a long list of doubters dating to his humble beginnings at central California's Reedley community college.

It's not often that the Buffalo Bills quarterback gets an opportunity to amusingly confront one of them during a celebrity golf tournament, like he did with Pro Football Hall of Famer and former Denver Broncos executive John Elway some 18 months ago.

"Whether it was two holes or two shots in on the driving range, I brought it up pretty quickly," Allen said Wednesday, recalling questioning Elway on why the then-Denver GM passed on selecting him at No. 5 in the 2018 draft — two picks before Buffalo traded up to choose the raw but athletic prospect out of Wyoming.

Allen declined to go into more detail, instead calling Elway an "awesome man," and adding, "I've got a lot of respect for him."

Elway still remembers the encounter with Allen, and what happened on draft day by referring to it as "probably my biggest mistake of my GM days," during an appearance on Barstool Sports' "Pardon My Take" podcast in July.

Though Elway has since acknowledged his remorse having dissipated with the arrival of rookie Bo Nix this season, his selection of defensive end Bradley Chubb over Allen remains timely.

On Sunday, Allen and the AFC East champion Bills (13-4) enter the wild-card playoff round host-



JEFFREY T. BARNES/AP

Quarterback Josh Allen has led the Buffalo Bills into the playoffs for the sixth consecutive season.

Scoreboard

Wild-card Saturday, Jan. 11
L.A. Chargers at Houston Pittsburgh at Baltimore
Sunday, Jan. 12
Denver at Buffalo Green Bay at Philadelphia Washington at Tampa Bay
Monday, Jan. 13
Minnesota at L.A. Rams

ing the seventh-seeded Broncos (10-7), who are in the postseason for the first time since winning the

Super Bowl in 2015.

Since 2018, Denver has had nine quarterbacks — from Case Keenum to Russell Wilson — start at least one game before Nix finally solidified the position.

Allen, 28, has Buffalo in the playoffs for a sixth straight year. He has progressively answered pre-draft questions regarding his accuracy and mechanics by setting most every franchise single-season passing and scoring record.

It has been quite a year for Allen,

who is among the front-runners for the NFL MVP award. He has overcome the loss of the Bills' top wide receivers in Stefon Diggs and Gabe Davis. He was also twice referred to as overrated, once by an anonymous NFL executive cited by ESPN in July, and again in August, when he was voted the NFL's most overrated quarterback in an ESPN poll of 103 anonymous players.

Allen, at the time, referred to the poll results as a term of endearment, while saying his only frustra-



Denver Broncos (10-7)
at Buffalo Bills (13-4)
AFN-Sports
7 p.m. Sunday CET
3 a.m. Monday JKT

tion is never being asked to vote. "There's two things I can control. It's my attitude and my effort," Allen said Wednesday about his detractors. "And what everybody else says, that's their own prerogative."

Allen's 76 career wins, 262 total touchdowns and 30,595 total yards are the most by an NFL player in his first seven seasons. Though he failed to top 4,000 yards passing for the first time since 2019, Allen combined to top 40 total touchdowns (28 passing, 12 rushing and one receiving) for a fifth straight season.

He oversaw an offense that was the league's first to score 30 TDs passing and rushing, while throwing just six interceptions, the fourth-fewest by an NFL starter, down from a career-worst 18 last year.

"He's as special as they come," offensive coordinator Joe Brady said. "The only thing he cares about is finding ways to win football games. I think our team kind of embodies that as well because of him."

Packers hope to fix passing game against Eagles defense

Associated Press

GREEN BAY, Wis. — The Green Bay Packers passing game has struggled of late, and there's nothing coach Matt LaFleur would like more than for his offense to find its groove again heading into Sunday's NFC wild-card game on the road against the Philadelphia Eagles.

Of course, it would help if the Packers' two quarterbacks — starter Jordan Love and backup Malik Willis — weren't both dealing with injuries that affected their ability to throw the ball during the team's loss to the Chicago Bears in last Sunday's regular-season finale.

Love, who had numbness in his right hand after banging his right elbow on the Lambeau Field turf during the second quarter, was limited in practice Wednesday because of the injury, although he said his hand was "pretty much feeling back to normal" by the next morning.

Still, Love said his elbow was still sore on Wednesday, when he did



MIKE ROEMER/AP

Green Bay quarterback Jordan Love has been dealing with numbness in his hand and a sore elbow ahead of the Packers' matchup with the Eagles.

some limited throwing and admitted feeling pain when he did so.

Asked if he is definitely playing on Sunday, Love replied, "We'll see. Yeah, I'm hopeful."

Meanwhile Willis, who injured the thumb on his right hand on a Bears defender's helmet during

the fourth quarter, was also limited in practice and his status is uncertain for Sunday.

"I mean, it doesn't feel normal, no," Willis said after practice. "I just did whatever they allowed me to do out there today and we'll see how it goes the rest of the week."



Green Bay Packers (11-6)
at Philadelphia Eagles (14-3)
AFN-Sports
11:30 pm. Sunday CET
7:30 a.m. Monday JKT

Asked if he thought he'd be ready if Love wasn't able to start against the Eagles or reinjures his elbow, Willis replied, "I'm not sure that I'm ready to think about that. I take it day by day."

The quarterback injuries are set against the backdrop of a Green Bay passing game that was on a roll for much of the second half of the regular season until the team's losses to Minnesota and Chicago the past two weeks.

The Packers finished the regular season eighth in scoring offense (27.1 points per game) and fifth in

total offense (370.8 yards per game).

In the passing game, they were 12th (223.9) because running back Josh Jacobs and the ground game became such a focal point and Love wasn't asked to carry the offense as much.

But against the Vikings and Bears, the Green Bay quarterbacks combined to complete 36 of 55 passes for 390 yards with one touchdown, no interceptions and six sacks.

Love, who in the prior five games had 1,054 yards with eight touchdowns and no interceptions, hit on just 61.9% of his passes in the final two games and threw just the one TD pass.

"It's everything," Love said when asked what needs to happen for his accuracy to improve and for the passing game to be more productive. "It's footwork, the timing of the play, being on the same page with receivers, obviously your fundamentals throwing the ball, making sure everything's on point."

SPORTS



Buckeyes back coach

Dominant wins quell calls for Day to be fired » College Football Playoff, Page 44



NFL PLAYOFFS

Washington Commanders guard Sam Cosmi greets fans after a 36-33 victory over the Philadelphia Eagles on Dec. 22 in Landover, Md. Cosmi is one of only 10 players drafted by the team from 2021-23 who is still on the roster. Nick Wass/AP

Out of the 'darkness'

Commanders players who went through rough times savor chance to play in postseason

By **STEPHEN WHYNO**
Associated Press

ASHBURN, Va. — Tress Way does not like using the word “darkness” to describe the losing he has endured over the past decade as Washington’s longest-tenured player because of the fun he has had along the way.

The two-time Pro Bowl punter even got to take part in a couple of playoff games, something that can’t be said by many of the teammates around him in the locker room who made it through wholesale roster changes. For them, the Commanders’ wild-card game at



Way

A big part of that something special is rookie quarterback Jayden Daniels, who is set to make his NFL playoff debut in the same Buccaneers stadium where he played his first profes-

sional game four months ago. It also will be the first in the postseason for Cosmi, one of just 10 players drafted by Washington from 2021-23 who made it through the rough times.

“We’ve been through the wringer, for sure,” offensive lineman Sam Cosmi said. “It’s nice to be on the other end of something special.”

“Anything is possible when you have the right mindset and you’re treating the process right,” said running back Brian Robinson Jr., a

The Commanders went 19-31-3 the past three seasons. Adding eight wins from 4-13 to 12-5 is the biggest year-to-year improvement in franchise history.

“Anything is possible when you have the right mindset and you’re treating the process right,” said running back Brian Robinson Jr., a

SEE COMMANDERS ON PAGE 45



Washington Commanders (12-5) at Tampa Bay Buccaneers (10-7)
AFN-Sports
2 a.m. Monday CET
10 a.m. Monday JKT

Talented rookies step up, help Tampa keep its playoff streak intact » **Page 45**

Chargers QB Hebert looks to add playoff win to list of accomplishments » **Page 46**

