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STARS AND STRIPES®

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UGUR YILDIRIM, DIA PHOTO/AP

People shoot in the air as they celebrate the fall of the Syrian government in Damascus, Syria, on Sunday.

Alaska base sees nearly 600 bears this year

By GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

Bear sightings at Alaska's largest military installation are nearing a battalion-sized count for 2024.

About 600 reports of black and grizzly bears in and around Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson near Anchorage this year have been filed with the Wildlife Conservation Law Enforcement Office.

"This is Alaska, and bears are very common," said Erin Eaton, the base chief public affairs officer. "The majority of these calls require little to no intervention and are just bears passing through the area."

The more than 30,000 soldiers, airmen and civilians at the base have learned to share the natural space surrounding the nearly 65,000-acre base with moose, elk, and other wildlife of central Alaska.

But the interlopers who get the most attention at Elmendorf-Richardson are the bears. The base is the headquarters of several commands, including the 11th Air Force and the Army's 11th Airborne Division.

SEE BEARS ON PAGE 5



U.S. Air Force

A bear rummages through items left out in a housing area of Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson in Alaska in 2014.

US trying to stabilize Syria

American forces launched dozens of strikes amid concerns over ISIS

By MICHAEL BIRNBAUM, CAT ZAKRZEWSKI AND MISSY RYAN
The Washington Post

The Biden administration raced to try to help stabilize Syria after the collapse of President Bashar Assad's regime, targeting the Islamic State with dozens of airstrikes and monitoring Syrian stockpiles of chemical weapons.

President Joe Biden announced Sunday that U.S. forces had hit ISIS camps and operatives in Syria and said the United States was working with its partners to address concerns that



Biden

Biden said. "We will not let that happen."

The rebel groups that toppled the autocrat had their own "grim record of terrorism," he said. "They're saying the right things now. But

extremist groups could capitalize on the power vacuum left by Assad's departure to Russia.

"We're clear-eyed about the fact that ISIS will try to take advantage of any vacuum to reestablish its capabilities to create a safe haven,"

as they take on greater responsibility, we will assess not just their words, but their actions."

The flurry of activity capped an astonishing turn of events in which rebel forces needed just days to upend a status quo that stretched across the administrations of three U.S. presidents, and as President-elect Donald Trump prepares to steer a very different foreign policy from that of his predecessor.

Biden said he has directed his administration to work to ensure that Syria remains as sta-

SEE STABILIZE ON PAGE 9

BUSINESS/WEATHER

Trump Organization leases brand in Saudi Arabia

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — The Trump Organization said Monday it has leased its brand to two new real estate projects in Saudi Arabia just weeks before President-elect Donald Trump returns to the White House.

It will partner with Dar Global, a London-based luxury real estate developer that will lease the Trump brand but fully own and develop the projects in the Saudi capital, Riyadh. The two have partnered on other projects in the

region, including the development of a golf resort in neighboring Oman.

“Following the remarkable success of Trump International Oman, as well as our most recent ventures in Dubai and Jeddah, we are thrilled to announce two additional projects in Riyadh,” Eric Trump, the president-elect’s son who oversees the company’s real estate interests, said in a statement.

Trump’s company struck many real estate licensing deals over-

seas before he entered the White House in 2017, including for hotels and residential towers in Canada, Dubai, Mexico, India and Turkey.

Trump’s close ties to Saudi Arabia’s crown prince and day-to-day ruler, Mohammed bin Salman, drew heavy criticism after the 2018 killing of Jamal Khashoggi.

Dar Global is the international arm of Dar Al Arkan, a large Saudi developer. It says it has \$7.5 billion worth of projects under development.

EXCHANGE RATES

| Military rates | | Commercial rates | |
|----------------------------|---------|----------------------|---------|
| Euro costs (Dec. 10) | 0.92 | Bahrain (Dinar) | 0.3770 |
| British pound (Dec. 10) | \$1.24 | Britain (Pound) | 1.2778 |
| Japanese yen (Dec. 10) | 146.00 | Canada (Dollar) | 1.4108 |
| South Korean won (Dec. 10) | 1393.00 | China (Yuan) | 7.2624 |
| | | Denmark (Krone) | 7.0500 |
| | | Egypt (Pound) | 50.5114 |
| | | Euro | 0.9454 |
| | | Hong Kong (Dollar) | 7.7736 |
| | | Hungary (Forint) | 389.56 |
| | | Israel (Shekel) | 3.5619 |
| | | Japan (Yen) | 150.94 |
| | | Kuwait (Dinar) | 0.3074 |
| | | Norway (Krone) | 11.0911 |
| | | Philippines (Peso) | 57.98 |
| | | Poland (Zloty) | 4.03 |
| | | Saudi Arabia (Riyal) | 3.7565 |
| | | Singapore (Dollar) | 1.3389 |
| | | South Korea (Won) | 1429.59 |
| Switzerland (Franc) | 0.8785 | | |
| Thailand (Baht) | 33.70 | | |
| Turkey (NewLira) | 34.8220 | | |

(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 | 7.75 |
| Interest Rates Discount rate | 4.75 |
| Federal funds market rate | 4.58 |
| 3-month bill | 4.42 |
| 30-year bond | 4.33 |

WEATHER OUTLOOK

TUESDAY IN THE MIDDLE EAST



TUESDAY IN EUROPE



WEDNESDAY IN THE PACIFIC



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

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MILITARY

Defense bill draft extends '5-year rule'

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

A congressional proposal designed to make it easier for government service employees of the military to stay in their overseas jobs past a five-year term limit was added to a defense bill expected to be voted on in the days ahead.

The agreement between the House and Senate calls for a two-year pilot program in which the Defense Department would assess whether allowing competitive service staffers to extend their tours beyond the so-called "five-year rule" would aid in recruitment and retention.

The plan gives the first colonel or

Plan eases process for DOD workers to stay overseas

Navy captain in a person's chain of command the authority to approve a one-time five-year tour extension, according to the final version of the 2025 National Defense Authorization Act, which was released Saturday. The provision would sunset two years after the passage of the bill.

Currently, Defense Department government service workers are limited to five-year tours overseas. While extensions are possible, they are expected to be used on a limited basis and only for special exceptions, such as when a person's skills

are deemed indispensable to a command.

Approvals also require extensive paperwork and justifications that are submitted to a general officer. Now, no analysis is required to justify extending a person's tour by an extra five years, the NDAA states.

The NDAA provision requires the secretary of defense to deliver a report by Dec. 31, 2025, and annually thereafter for five years. The reports would analyze the effects of longer tour opportunities on retention and recruitment.

The five-year rule has been a point of contention for many government service employees, who have complained over the years that the policy has been enforced unevenly, raising questions about fairness. The original aim of the policy was to prevent "homesteading" overseas and ensure ample opportunities abroad for the Defense Department's domestic workforce.

But the rule also created a situation in which personnel who enjoyed being overseas rotated back to the United States, only to return a couple of years later when they

were eligible again.

Government service employees also have complained that taking an overseas job can limit their options when it's time to return to the United States because counterparts working in the U.S. aren't subject to the same five-year rule.

The steady turnover of civilian personnel also has raised concerns about a lack of continuity and institutional knowledge at overseas commands.

That has resulted in a loss of expertise at U.S. Air Forces Europe and Africa and hindered its ability to sustain institutional knowledge, the Rand Corp. think tank said in September.

Potential health risks lead to call to leave Kadena housing units

By BRIAN McELHINEY
Stars and Stripes

KADENA AIR BASE, Okinawa — Residents of 27 recently renovated homes at this air base must find new housing by the end of February due to "potential health risks" from leaky air conditioning systems, according to a base spokeswoman.

Families living in Seville Manor units 5300 to 5354 received a memo recommending they relocate by Feb. 28 to address potential health risks, according to a statement posted Friday on the official Okinawa Military Family Housing Facebook page. The duplexes are on Kadena near Bob Hope Elementary School.

The issue is related to a flaw in the units' air conditioning systems, which causes moisture buildup inside the homes, 18th Wing spokeswoman Maj. Alli Stormer wrote in an email Friday.

The 718th Civil Engineer Squadron discovered the issue in September and planned "in-depth visual inspections and air sampling of poten-

tially impacted facilities," the wing said at the time.

"Originally, there were no concerns for people with no underlying health issues," Stormer said. "However, now that we understand the timelines better, we are concerned about long-term exposure, which is influencing our requirement for residents to move."

The wing said in September that no black mold had been discovered in the homes so far. Stormer did not elaborate on whether black mold had since been discovered.

The wing did not provide responses to questions on Monday.

Families were given the option to move on or off base at the government's expense and are "strongly encouraged" to move out by Feb. 28, Stormer said.

However, extensions until June 20 will be considered "on a case-by-case basis" contingent upon reviews of families' medical records by the 18th Medical Group "to determine if any member of the family is at in-



BRIAN McELHINEY/Stars and Stripes

Some residents of the recently renovated Seville Manor units at Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, received notices that recommend they relocate by the end of February.

creased risk due to existing conditions," Stormer wrote.

On March 27, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Japanese contractors completed renovations at Seville Manor on 50 duplexes, or 100 housing units, for junior enlisted airmen. Move-ins began in July and 27 homes are occupied. The renovation project took three years and cost \$53 million.

Since the issue was discovered in September, "no families have moved into or been offered the affected homes," Stormer said.

The wing is working with the Army Corps of Engineers on "solutions and timelines," with an expected

completion date between one and three years, Stormer said.

More than 43% of military family housing units on Okinawa "require major repair and or renovations to bring these units to current Air Force Standards," the wing said in an Oct. 29 news release. This has led to a housing shortage for military families on the island and caused wait periods for housing to "exceed the normal 10-day window for assignment," the release said.

Families relocating from Seville Manor will receive top priority from the Kadena Housing Office, according to Stormer.

Wing commander Brig. Gen. Ni-

colas Evans and Chief Master Sgt. Brandon Wolfgang will host a forum for families living in the affected homes at 6 p.m. Tuesday in the Morrell Room at the Rocker Enlisted Club. Civil engineers and medical experts will also attend, Stormer wrote.

Residents should call DSN 634-4663 or email kadenahousing.customerservice@us.af.mil for more information.

The Seville Manor units, built in the 1960s, were gutted down to their concrete shells for the renovation. They now feature modern flooring, countertops, tile, bathrooms and new appliances.

Test gives defense civilian employees access to 16 US commissaries

By JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

Defense Department civilian employees at more than a dozen locations in the United States can shop at their base commissary for about four months under a trial program that began last week.

Sixteen stores in seven states, from Alaska to Virginia, opened their doors starting Thursday to DOD appropriated-fund and non-appropriated-fund employees, the Defense Commissary Agency said in a statement the same day.

Family members of DOD civil-

ian employees and former or retired DOD civilian employees are not included in the trial, according to the statement.

During the 120-day trial, DOD civilian employees won't be able to purchase tobacco or alcohol or use the commissary Click2Go online ordering service.

The agency is testing the feasibility of expanding commissary access to DOD civilians at all stateside stores. The change is expected to increase sales and allow the agency to pass on more savings to patrons worldwide, DECA

said in the statement.

The Pentagon directed DECA to keep tabs on the effects of increased patronage and report those findings. Stores were selected based on several factors, including store size, capacity for more patrons and demographic range.

The pilot program locations are:

■ **Alaska:** Eielson Air Force Base.

■ **California:** Naval Air Weapons Station China Lake and Fort Irwin.

■ **Georgia:** Marine Corps Lo-

gistical Base Albany and Robins Air Force Base.

■ **Maryland:** Naval Air Station Patuxent River.

■ **Oklahoma:** Altus Air Force Base.

■ **Texas:** Laughlin Air Force Base.

■ **Virginia:** Naval Support Facility Dahlgren; Joint Base Langley-Eustis (Fort Eustis and Langley Air Force Base commissaries); Fort Gregg-Adams; Joint Expeditionary Base Little Creek-Fort Story (Little Creek Commissary); Naval Base Nor-

folk; Naval Air Station Oceana; and Norfolk Naval Shipyard (Portsmouth).

DECA operates 235 stores on military installations worldwide, serving about 8.3 million households in 13 countries and two U.S. territories, according to a report to Congress last month.

The agency strives to provide savings of over 25% compared with civilian marketplaces, even while tacking on a 5% surcharge to pay for modernizing and maintaining its facilities, according to the congressional report.

MILITARY

73rd Operation Christmas Drop pushes off

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

ANDERSEN AIR FORCE BASE, Guam — Massive military transport aircraft took to the skies over the weekend as the U.S. Air Force set in motion the Defense Department's longest-running humanitarian mission for the 73rd year.

The aircraft — predominantly C-130J Super Hercules from Yokota Air Base, Japan — took with them crates filled to the brim with food, camping gear, medical equipment, toys and other supplies to be dropped to remote islands as part of Operation Christmas Drop.

Sunday's drops, spread across six sorties, covered thousands of miles and delivered the packages to far flung islands, including Palau and Kapingamarangi, an atoll in the Federated States of Micronesia.

Additional sorties will continue until the operation concludes Dec. 16.

To celebrate the start, hundreds gathered Monday at Andersen's Hangar 2 for the annual Christmas Drop "push ceremony," which traditionally includes key speakers loading one of the crates onto an aircraft.

"We had a great set of drops;



ALEX WILSON/Stars and Stripes

Susumu Ueda, the consulate-general of Japan on Guam, left, and Bruce "Brother Bruce" Best, a telecommunications specialist, discuss Operation Christmas Drop at Andersen Air Force Base, Guam, on Monday. The operation began Sunday and concludes Dec. 16.

we did not crush the beach huts, and we had not lost boxes. That's a good day in our book," Bruce Best, a Guam-based telecommunications expert who has

assisted in the operation for decades, said during the ceremony.

Last year's Operation Christmas Drop saw 210 packages delivered to 60 remote islands in

the South Pacific. This year is bigger than ever with at least 220 packages set to be delivered to 60 islands, according to Col. Richard McElhaney, command-

er of Yokota's 374th Airlift Wing.

The operation also has at least four active partners — Australia, Canada, Japan and South Korea — and the Philippine air force may also join later in the operation, wing spokeswoman Capt. Emma Quirk said by email Monday.

The 374th is scheduled to fly 36 sorties, while partner nations will fly a combined 42 sorties.

An additional 14 observer nations are participating this year, Quirk said.

While the humanitarian side of the mission is by far the most important aspect of Christmas Drop, it also provides a unique training opportunity.

"The training challenges out here are the remote island destinations, and the things we do in the aircraft — we have to do some distribution planning and whatnot. That's a fantastic test for some of our younger aviators," McElhaney told reporters before Monday's ceremony.

It also builds relationships and fosters cooperation between the partner and observer nations.

"I think if we could reach more people, it's fantastic," McElhaney said. "I think the growth potential is great."

Marine Corps activates first East Coast F-35C squadron

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

The Marine Corps activated its first F-35C Lightning II stealth fighter squadron on the East Coast on Thursday, with the reactivation of the legendary Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 251 at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point near Camp Lejeune, N.C.

The return of VMFA 251 marked a significant moment in the Corps' efforts to modernize its fleet to fight a modern, large-scale war against an enemy with similar capabilities to the United States, officials said.

The squadron was inactivated in April 2020 at its prior base, Marine Corps Air Station Beaufort, S.C., after flying the F/A-18 Hornet fighter jet since 1986, including numerous operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The unit, nicknamed the Thunderbolts or T-Bolts, traces its lineage to World War II in which its pilots flew the F4F Wildcat, an aircraft carrier-based fighter. They flew the Wildcat in Pacific campaigns including the battles of Guadalcanal, the southern Solomons, Santa Cruz, Luzon and the southern Philippines, according to a Defense Department history of the squadron. The unit earned two Presidential Unit Citations "for extraordinary he-



ORLANYS DIAZ FIGUEROA/U.S. Marine Corps

The Marine Corps has activated its first F-35C Lightning II stealth fighter squadron on the East Coast with the legendary Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 251.

roism" for its efforts during World War II. VMFA 251 also fought in the Korean War and flew NATO no-fly zone enforcement sorties over Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s.

"The T-Bolts are humbled and honored for the privilege of carrying that proud legacy forward," Lt. Col. Evan Shockley, the squadron's commander, said in a statement. "Our immediate focus is working toward initial operational capability, which means that VMFA 251 has enough operation-

al F-35C Lightning II aircraft, trained pilots, maintainers and support equipment to self-sustain its mission essential tasks. Following that, we will turn our attention toward reaching full operational capability to ensure that, when called upon, the T-Bolts will stand ready to serve our great nation."

The squadron is expected to reach initial operating capability next year, said 1st Lt. Jacob Ballard, 2nd Marine Air Wing spokesman.

It's expected be fully operational no later than 2026, which would allow the squadron to deploy globally, Ballard said.

All Marine F-35 squadrons are planned to have 10 primary aircraft, according to a 2022 service aviation plan.

The unit's 2020 inactivation came shortly after it returned to MCAS Beaufort from the Middle East, where it was flying anti-Islamic State group operations in Iraq and Syria. Marine officials at the time said the inactivation

would be temporary as the Corps transitioned the unit to fly the F-35 from Cherry Point.

VMFA 251 received its first F-35C in September as it prepared to reactivate with the Corps' most advanced aircraft, service officials said.

The F-35C is the longest-range stealth fighter of the three variants of the aircraft, which is the most expensive weapons system in history. The C model, flown by the Navy and Marine Corps, is designed to fly from aircraft carriers and boasts a range of some 1,200 nautical miles, according to the Pentagon.

Marines last month used the F-35C for the first time in combat, flying the fighters from the USS Abraham Lincoln to strike Houthi targets in Yemen, military officials said.

Some Marine squadrons fly the F-35B, which is designed to take-off on short runways, including from amphibious assault ships, and land vertically, like a helicopter.

VMFA 251 is part of the 2nd Marine Aircraft Wing, the Corps' primary East Coast air unit, which is part of the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Force.

Stars and Stripes reporter Lydia Gordon contributed to this report.

MILITARY

14.5% raise set for junior enlisted troops

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Junior enlisted service members are set to receive a 14.5% pay raise next year alongside a 4.5% pay hike for all troops under a compromise defense policy bill expected to be voted on this week.

The final version of the National Defense Authorization Act, an annual must-pass bill that outlines priorities and spending for the Defense Department, includes a significant pay bump for E-1 to E-4 troops as part of a wide-ranging effort to improve housing, health care, child care and spousal support for service members and their families.

The quality-of-life improvements were spearheaded by House lawmakers to boost morale and improve recruitment and retention. Pay for junior enlisted troops was of particular concern because it had failed to keep pace with inflation and private-sector compensation, forcing some families to rely on food banks.

“Our service members deserve

better than food stamps,” Rep. Mike Garcia, R-Calif., a former Navy pilot, wrote Saturday on X. “This historic raise is how we fix it.”

The House had recommended a 19.5% pay raise for junior enlisted personnel earlier this year while the Senate had countered with a 5.5% raise — slightly above the 4.5% pay increase the White House had requested for all troops.

The White House opposed a large change to junior enlisted pay, warning it would be too costly and permanently alter military pay tables. Funding for the larger paychecks still needs to be negotiated by the appropriations committees in both chambers of Congress.

The defense policy bill unveiled Saturday night authorizes \$895 billion in national defense spending, including \$850 billion for the Pentagon.

Contained in that sum is a \$2 billion investment in new barracks and family housing, the construction of more Defense Department schools and child care centers, expanded bonuses to improve hiring of medical personnel, and higher

salaries for child care workers.

The legislation also makes it easier for military spouses to transfer professional licenses between states and gives service members direct access to specialty medical providers by waiving referral requirements.

Many of the divisive culture war issues pushed by Republicans in the House’s version of the defense bill were scrubbed from the final legislation. The provisions would have ended the Pentagon’s abortion travel policy, eliminated diversity, equity and inclusion offices, and barred Tricare health coverage of gender-transition procedures.

However, the final bill maintains a hiring freeze for diversity-related positions and includes a controversial provision that prohibits Tricare from providing gender dysphoria treatments for military dependents younger than 18 that could result in sterilization.

Rep. Adam Smith of Washington, the top-ranking Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee, on Sunday condemned the ban

on gender-affirming treatment for minors and called on House Speaker Mike Johnson to rescind it.

“Blanketly denying health care to people who clearly need it, just because of a biased notion against transgender people, is wrong,” Smith said in a statement. “This provision injected a level of partisanship not traditionally seen in defense bills.”

Johnson, R-La., told the conservative media company The Daily Wire on Saturday that the provision eliminated taxpayer funding for treatments that could permanently harm young people.

“In this year’s NDAA, we’re taking a critical and necessary step to protect the children of American service members from radical gender ideology and experimental drugs,” he said.

The final defense authorization bill also raised some concerns among Republicans. Sen. Roger Wicker of Mississippi, the top Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee, bristled at the omission of his proposal to raise the spending topline by \$25 billion.

“Many senior flag officers, defense strategists, and other experts continue to note that this is the most dangerous moment since World War II,” he said in a statement Monday. “Not only does this NDAA thwart the bipartisan will of the Senate, but it signifies a profound missed opportunity to strengthen President-elect [Donald] Trump’s hand when he takes office.”

Members of both parties found common ground on spending for the Navy, authorizing a second Virginia-class attack submarine after the service had asked for one and approving a third Arleigh Burke-class destroyer after the Navy had asked for two.

Lawmakers also signed off on the Air Force’s request to shift space-focused Air National Guardsmen into the Space Force despite opposition to the plan from all state governors and many National Guard officials. The move will affect 578 personnel.

The House is expected to vote on the defense policy bill this week, followed by a vote in the Senate by the end of the month.

Bears: MRE thefts, Humvee break-ins blamed on animals

FROM PAGE 1

Bears have been photographed rummaging through soldiers’ curbside belongings, diving into dumpster trash and clawing at discarded home furnishings in the base’s suburban-like neighborhoods.

On Oct. 28, the base’s Wildlife Conservation Law Enforcement Office received reports of bears getting into a food storage area. By the time the officers arrived, the feasters had moved on, leaving just the cardboard and wrapper carnage of emptied field rations called MREs, or Meals Ready to Eat.

Base officials couldn’t ascertain which of the approximately two dozen MRE combinations the bears gorged on. Among MRE offerings listed on an Army website are Jalapeno Pepper Jack Beef Patty, Chicken Chunks, Spinach Mushrooms & Cream Sauce Fettuccine, Lemon Pepper Tuna and Maple Sausage.

Fittingly for Halloween, the most recognizable element in the photos supplied by the Army of the bear feast were empty bags of M&M chocolate candy.

Less than a week later, Eaton said, a report came in “a little after midnight” of bears sighted inside a motor pool building. The wildlife agents arrived to find what they say was a 1-year-old bear behind the driver’s wheel of a Humvee.

Army personnel took photos of the intruder, then opened exterior



Meal packets are scattered around a storage room that had been visited by a bear at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson.

doors and distracted the bear, allowing it to amble off undisturbed away from the compound.

The base encourages a “live and let live” approach to the bears, with specially trained wildlife officers responding to reports of sightings around populated areas.

“We strongly encouraged to report all bear sightings near parks, schools, housing and dumpsters,” Eaton said.

Colette Brandt, the Elmendorf-Richardson wildlife biologist with the 673rd Civil Engineer Squadron, briefs newcomers on how to keep wildlife away as a bear-related best practices for base residents.

Wildlife safety messages are also put up each spring when bears emerge from their dens. Residents are also reminded to remove outdoor bird feeders before bears be-



Photos by Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson Wildlife Conservation Law Enforcement Office

On Nov. 2, a bear was discovered inside one of the vehicles in a motor pool building, at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska.

gin actively seeking food.

Summer’s exceptionally long warm days — with sometimes about 20 hours of sunshine — are a favorite for humans to go hiking and bears to go strolling. If paths cross, a wide berth for the furry travelers is suggested.

James Wendland, the Elmendorf-Richardson wildlife conservation law enforcement officer with the 673d Civil Engineer Squadron, said bear interactions at the end of autumn are common as their usual sources of nourishment diminish with the onset of the prolonged Alaskan winter.

“When more natural food for bears like berries, crabapples and salmon become scarce, bears will

seek other sources,” he said. “Bears are opportunistic and will follow their noses looking for food, even if that’s in open buildings or unlocked vehicles.”

Recommendations to Elmendorf-Richardson residents include limiting the Halloween display of pumpkins or jack-o-lanterns, as they attract moose.

Winter comes early at the base, which is 2,200 miles north of Seattle.

The 1,200 service members who enjoyed an early Thanksgiving feast at the base commissary on Nov. 26 reported no bears sniffing around for festive foods.

It helped that the thermometer showed temperatures in the teens

and below on a day when the sun was up for less than seven hours.

“It’s turned sharply colder lately,” Eaton said. “Since the end of October, the bear reports at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson have steadily declined to zero.”

By Christmas Eve, the sun rises at 10:15 a.m. and sets just before 3:15 p.m. Temperatures overnight plunge below zero.

The grizzly and black bears that live in the forests around the base are likely snug in their dens, well into their long winter hibernation.

Eaton said everyone knows it’s a relatively short break, and bears will return with the longer days of spring.

“They’ll be back,” she said.

PACIFIC

S. Korean commander 'truly sorry' for role

BY DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

The South Korean commander whose special forces unit stormed the National Assembly building last week during an aborted attempt to impose martial law has urged the public to blame him, not his soldiers.

Col. Kim Hyun-tae, commander of the 707th Special Mission Group, assumed full responsibility for his unit's actions overnight Dec. 3-4. Speaking Monday at a news conference in Seoul, Kim said he was "truly sorry to the public" for the events and was "especially sorry to our special forces soldiers who were deployed for the operation."

Following President Yoon Suk Yeol's declaration of martial law

late Dec. 3., roughly 200 troops deployed to the National Assembly grounds by helicopter and bus. Kim said he was one of the first troops to arrive on the scene and gave the order to break windows and enter the building.

Some of the soldiers were seen in video footage breaking into the building and blocking lawmakers from entering.

"The members of the unit are not guilty," Kim said in an emotional speech. "If they are guilty, it is only that they followed the orders of an incompetent commander."

Assembly members voted within hours to demand Yoon withdraw his declaration. A move to censure Yoon on Saturday failed narrowly when the ruling People

Power Party legislators boycotted the vote.

Kim on Monday recalled receiving a call from the Special Warfare Command at about 10:30 p.m., a few minutes after Yoon's declaration.

The command ordered him to immediately deploy to the National Assembly and prevent parliament convening if it exceeded 150 lawmakers, Kim said.

The assembly needed at least 150 votes, half the assembly, to veto Yoon's declaration. All 190 members who managed to get inside the chamber that night voted against martial law.

Kim said he was not fully apprised of the situation at the time and did not know that lawmakers had the right to convene. Not

knowing the full details was "also my responsibility," he said.

Kim also described his unit as "unfortunate victims who were exploited" by former Minister of National Defense Kim Yong-hyun, who resigned Wednesday amid calls for his impeachment. He was arrested four days later and is being investigated by Seoul prosecutors for his role in the martial law declaration.

In his final statement to the South Korean military on Wednesday, Kim Yong-hyun said he felt responsible "for causing confusion and concern to the public."

"All soldiers who performed their duties ... followed the minister's instructions and all responsibility lies with me," said the for-

mer defense minister.

Kim Hyun-tae said the Ministry of National Defense's response following the incident and the scrutiny on his unit's actions prompted him to speak out, he told reporters.

Troops he talked to following the Dec. 3-4 events said "they were all OK," Kim said. "But they probably weren't. As time goes on, I think they'll have a hard time."

"The unit members are exploited victims," Kim said, with tears in his eyes. "They are the sons and daughters of [South Korea] ... who have devoted their youth solely for the country and the people. Hate them, resent them, but please do not ever throw away the 707th and its members."

System update hits Air Force families with bogus charges

BY BRIAN McELHINEY
Stars and Stripes

KADENA AIR BASE, Okinawa — Air Force families with children in youth programs throughout the service, including more than 60 within the 18th Wing, were shocked this month by mistaken bank charges for hundreds of dollars.

The error was traced to an Air Force Services Center contractor who pushed a scheduled, routine update patch to the Child and Youth Management System on Nov. 30, Deborah Aragon, spokeswoman for the Air Force Installation and Mission Support Center, said by email Thursday.

As a result, extra charges were deducted from the accounts of about 4,000 families enrolled in Air Force children and youth programs, she said.

At Kadena, the error affected 64 of the 588 families enrolled in Child Development Center and School Age Care programs with

monthly, bi-weekly and weekly automatic payments, Aragon wrote.

Those families on Dec. 1 were "inadvertently charged between \$300 and \$1,800 due to a system error," according to a post Tuesday evening on Kadena's official Facebook page.

The charges differed "based on a variety of care program situations," Aragon said.

Kadena's Child Development Center offers care for children ages 6 weeks to 5 years, according to the 18th Force Support Squadron website. The School Age Care program provides afterschool care to children ages 5 to 12 who attend Kadena elementary schools, and all-day care when school is not in session.

"Within 48 hours of notification, the [Air Force Services Center], working with installations and customers, had resolved about 95% of the erroneous fees and provided refunds to parents," she



MICAH ANTHONY/U.S. Air Force

Youth center children play nine square in the air at Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, in 2019.

wrote. "All refund actions for Pacific Air Forces families are complete."

The youth program charges are unrelated to complaints that have surfaced on Kadena about fraudulent charges made to customers' debit and credit cards after they shopped at on-base businesses, according to Kadena's Facebook

post.

Families who were erroneously charged are being contacted directly, and the money will be returned to their accounts within five business days. Anyone facing immediate financial concerns caused by these charges should call Youth and Family Programs at 315-632-7201 or 080-6489-8598,

the post states.

"We are committed to resolving the situation as quickly as possible," the post states.

The Air Force Services Center is working to also reimburse account overdraft fees that resulted from the charges, according to Aragon. However, none have been reported so far, she wrote.

Weekend motorcycle crash claims US soldier's life on Okinawa

BY BRIAN McELHINEY
AND KEISHI KOJA
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — A U.S. Army specialist was killed over the weekend in a motorcycle crash near this Marine Corps base, according to the Army and Japanese police.

Spc. Dejuan Cornish, 25, of 1st Battalion, 1st Artillery Regiment, 38th Air Defense Artillery Brigade at Kadena Air Base, died in

the single-vehicle accident at 2:23 p.m. Sunday, brigade spokesman Capt. Frank Spatt confirmed by email the following day.

Cornish, from Jacksonville, Fla., was a Patriot missile system launcher crew member.

He enlisted in the Army in January 2019 and arrived on Okinawa in January 2024, Army spokesman Staff Sgt. Connor Davis said Monday.

Cornish was pronounced dead

at Naval Hospital Okinawa around 3:20 p.m., a spokesman for Okinawa Prefectural Police said Monday.

He was riding east on Road 130 from the Chatan intersection toward the Zukeran intersection when he collided with the guard pipes on the left roadside, the police spokesman said.

Cornish "hit his whole body hard" and fell off the motorcycle near the pipes. The bike slid out

from under him into the opposite lane, the spokesman said.

The accident is under investigation, the spokesman said.

Cornish is the third U.S. service member reported killed aboard a motorcycle this year on Okinawa.

In November, Marine Lance Cpl. Avery Wayne Leverette, 21, assigned to a III Marine Expeditionary Force support battalion at Camp Hansen, died when his motorcycle collided with another Ma-

rine's bike on Route 329 in Kin town. The other Marine was injured.

Another Marine, Sgt. Hayden Steingold, 24, of Greenacres, Fla., died March 7 when his motorcycle collided with another vehicle on Route 58 in Ginowan city.

Hayden was assigned to Camp Foster with the 5th Air Naval Gunfire Liaison Company, 3rd Marine Expeditionary Force Information Group.

MILITARY

Okinawa ceremony honors Dodgers' manager

By KEISHI KOJA AND BRIAN McELHINEY
Stars and Stripes

NAHA, Okinawa — Dave Roberts, the son of a U.S. Marine father and Japanese mother, was recognized at his birthplace Thursday for his part in the Los Angeles Dodgers' World Series victory.

Roberts, the Dodgers' manager, skipped the team to its eighth World Series title and his second as team manager in October. The Dodgers took the title in five games over the New York Yankees.

"Winning the World Series for the Los Angeles Dodgers ... was incredible, an incredible challenge," he said during a ceremony at Naha City Hall. "But the final piece for me was to come to Naha to be with my people and celebrate with you guys, together."

Roberts received Naha's Special Honor Award in the city assembly room in a ceremony attended by the mayor, all 40 city assembly members, the media and observers in the upper gallery. Afterward, he greeted thousands of Okinawans on the lower level of city hall.

The award is given to people or organizations who contributed to Naha's standing in Japan, according to the city's website.

The Dodgers' win was doubly sweet for Japanese baseball fans thanks to the contributions of Ja-



KEISHI KOJA/Stars and Stripes

Dave Roberts, manager of the 2024 World Series champion Los Angeles Dodgers, receives the Special Honor Award from Naha city in Okinawa on Thursday.

panese players Shohei Ohtani, who became the first player to hit 50 home runs and steal 50 bases in a single season, and Yoshinobu Yamamoto.

Roberts was born in Naha, Okinawa's capital city, in 1972 to Waymon Roberts, a U.S. Marine, and his wife, the former Eiko Ikehara, a native of Okinawa. Roberts lived

the life of a military child, moving to his father's duty stations in California, North Carolina, Hawaii and a second stint on Okinawa, according to a 2015 interview with Yahoo News.

The elder Roberts retired as a gunnery sergeant in 1998, according to the interview. He died in March 2017, according to an obitu-

ary by the Associated Press.

Roberts' mother tossed out the first pitch at Japan Night at Dodger Stadium on July 13, 2018, according to ESPN. Her son was the catcher.

Roberts focused on his Okinawan heritage during Thursday's ceremony, which he attended with his son, Cole Roberts, sister Melis-

sa Parker and niece Mia Parker.

"Okinawan people are different than any people in the world," he said. "Family is everything. There is respect, there is love, and that's something, for me — that's part of who I am. And everything I do with my job — I take the Okinawan people with me."

Naha Mayor Satoru Chinen presented Roberts with the award certificate, and assembly chairman Yoshitaka Nohara presented him with Okinawan pottery.

"This achievement helped to let the country know about our city," Chinen said at the ceremony. Roberts' "flexible strategies, his personality and overall, his smile, which is like the sun of Okinawa, make our citizens proud."

Afterwards, Roberts met privately with Chinen and U.S. Consul General Andrew Ou.

Roberts played Major League baseball from 1999 to 2008 with a batting average of .266 before becoming the Dodgers' manager in 2016. He played for the Cleveland Indians, the Dodgers, Boston Red Sox, San Diego Padres and San Francisco Giants.

"The award I receive today from the city of Naha, I will hold it right next to my World Series trophy," he said. "This means just as much as winning the World Series to me. As a young boy growing up to a man, I never would have imagined standing here in front of you."

Marine Corps base day care faces child abuse charges

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

Negligence in hiring, training and supervising day care workers at a Marine Corps base in Arizona laid the groundwork for children to be abused physically by employees at the military facility, according to federal lawsuits filed by five families.

Children between 1 and 2 years old were forcefully placed in chairs and shoved into tables, forced to use their own hands to hit themselves, hit with toys, and carried by just an arm or a leg and then left alone when they cried in pain, according to the five separate lawsuits filed last month in U.S. District Court for the District

of Arizona. The families are each requesting damages that range between \$900,000 and \$5 million.

Each family had a toddler who attended the child development center at Marine Corps Air Station Yuma and was physically abused by up to three caregivers at the facility, according to the lawsuits.

"Had [day care] staff had proper precautions in place to identify, address and report the behavior to law enforcement and family members at an earlier time, A.H. likely would not have suffered the same level of trauma he and his family are now left to deal with," according to the lawsuit filed by Cpl. Caleb and Katelyn Hitch-

cock.

Their son, identified in the lawsuit as A.H., was physically abused at least 110 times within 90 days, according to the lawsuit. He has suffered permanent behavioral issues and delayed emotional and behavioral development from the experience.

Other parents who filed lawsuits were Master Sgt. Joseph and Hannah Lucero, Master Sgt. David and Brittany Crosby, Staff Sgt. Zackery and London Johnson, and Sgt. Mariah and Caleb Wilson.

Each family filed administrative complaints in February 2023 with the Navy, which were denied.

The federal lawsuits are bolstered by evidence collected in

criminal cases associated with the abuse. Two of the three caregivers identified by the Yuma Police Department were convicted last year in Yuma County court. Valerie McKinstry, 30, served a nearly two-week jail sentence and probation, and Katherine McCombs, 30, received probation. A third woman named in court documents, Maria Mendez, did not face criminal charges.

The physical abuse occurred between December 2020 and March 2021, according to court documents. If abuse occurred in the months prior to December 2020, it wasn't documented because the facility only kept video surveillance footage for 90 days.

In addition to video surveillance — a standard practice at Defense Department child development centers — the "Tiny Tots" classroom where the abuse occurred had windows open to the facility's management office and required more than one person always be in the room with the young children. However, supervisors and outside staff did not observe the abuse for months, according to the lawsuit.

By the time that the facility's director Laura Frank called police March 2, 2021, police used the 90 days of video footage to document hundreds of instances of abuse and 15 child victims, according to court documents and reports from police.

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STARS AND STRIPES

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MILITARY

Osprey flights paused again after more failures found

By TARA COPP
Associated Press

The Pentagon is temporarily pausing flights again of its V-22 Osprey fleet after weakened metals in a part inside one of the aircraft broke apart in flight in November, causing an engine failure and a near crash in New Mexico, based on an initial investigation of the incident.

The pause was recommended last week by Vice Adm. Carl Chebi, the head of Naval Air Systems Command, and went into effect Monday morning, Navy spokesman Cmdr. Tim Hawkins said.

Both the Navy and Air Force are adhering to the voluntary operational pause, which is indefinite as the services look at how the safety issue can be mitigated. The Marine Corps did not immediately return a request for comment as to whether its aircraft would also adhere to the operational pause.

It's the latest problem for the military's embattled Osprey aircraft. An in-depth investigation into the Osprey by The Associated Press last month found that safety issues have increased in the past five years, parts are wearing out faster than expected and that the design of the aircraft itself is directly contributing to many of the accidents.

Following that report, lawmakers sent a letter to Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin asking him to re-ground the Osprey fleet until solutions can be put in place to address safety and design issues identified by the AP.

The Air Force Special Operations Command is "in close coordination with the V-22 Joint Program Office and aware of their operational pause recommendation. In concurrence with their recommendation, Lt. Gen Michael Conley, AFSOC commander, has di-

rected a pause for all CV-22 flight training operations," Lt. Col. Becky Heyse, command spokeswoman, said in a statement.

"A pause in flight training operations allows time and space for us to understand what happened in the most recent event before we accept risk with unknown variables."

The Nov. 20 incident at Cannon Air Force Base in New Mexico had similarities to a crash off the coast of Japan in November of last year that killed eight Air Force Special Operations Command service members.

In the Japan crash, inclusions — or weakened spots — in the metal used for critical gears inside the Osprey's transmission failed, leading to the gears falling apart during flight and a cascading catastrophic failure of the aircraft. At the time, the crew did not realize the seriousness of the failure and



TARA COPP/AP

Two Air Force Special Operations Command CV-22B Ospreys fly low and fast in formation on the Hornet training range at Cannon Air Force Base, N.M., on Oct. 9.

did not immediately land.

Lessons from that fatal Japan crash may have saved lives here. While the investigation is not complete, in the Cannon flight the crew received similar warnings shortly after takeoff and lost an engine, but was able to quickly put the Osprey back on the ground and survive.

A subsequent review of the parts that broke apart has found

that similar metal weaknesses may have played a role, but in a different part than what failed in the Japan crash.

Since the military started flying the aircraft three decades ago, 64 personnel have been killed and 93 injured in crashes. Japan's military briefly grounded its fleet again in October after an Osprey tilted violently during takeoff and struck the ground.

Defense bill leaves out Bahrain school choice plan

By JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

A proposed pilot program that would have provided public funding for private school education to U.S. military families in Bahrain is gone in the final version of this year's defense bill.

The GOP-backed trial was removed during discussions between House and Senate members to finalize the 2025 National Defense Authorization Act.

Rep. Jim Banks, R-Ind., had sponsored the proposal as part of the House's version of the bill, which was passed in June.

"Because of the deep concern of parents at the Bahrain school, which has been struggling with poor teaching, flooding and even recently celebrated a notorious antisemite, we have developed a pilot program," Banks said during a House Armed Services Committee meeting in May.

The flooding that Banks alluded to occurred in mid-April and resulted

from torrential rainfall. Because of extensive damage, the school's 24-acre campus in Juffair was closed for almost three weeks, forcing students to shift to remote learning.

In April, a school social media post promoted Palestinian-American activist Linda Sarsour as someone who has campaigned for civil rights and social justice issues. Sarsour also backs a movement to boycott and divest from Israel and has faced accusations of antisemitism, something she has denied. The school post was later removed.

There are 574 students enrolled at Bahrain Elementary, Middle and High School, located at Naval Support Activity Bahrain. The small but densely populated island country is home to U.S. Naval Forces Central Command and 5th Fleet headquarters.

In a statement Monday, the Department of Defense Education Activity said it does not comment on pending legislation.

DODEA officials said in the

spring that standardized test scores at the Bahrain school are above national averages and pointed to a high-performing student body.

The National Education Association, on behalf of the Federal Education Association, blasted the school choice proposal, saying in a statement earlier this year that the "voucher-like program" would "rob schools of resources and students of First Amendment, due process and other constitutional and statutory rights."

The statement also expressed union members' concern that without accountability, diverting funds to non-U.S. schools or institutions could give rise to fraud and abuse.

In a joint statement over the weekend, lawmakers said the agreement between the House and Senate versions of the NDAA includes an amendment to strike the DODEA Bahrain school choice pilot program.

The U.S. comptroller general was instead directed to submit a report

by Dec. 31, 2025 "on the administration of DODEA schools in Bahrain," according to the statement from leaders of the armed services committees in the two chambers of Congress.

The report must include the number of classes with long-term substitutes in the past three school years, by grade and subject matter; the number of Advanced Placement courses offered in person in the past three years; and a comparison of DODEA Bahrain's AP course offerings with those of other overseas DODEA schools.

Congressional leaders also want to hear about issues between the school administration and parents, as well as an assessment of the school's special education capabilities and requirements.

"We have heard complaints that the DODEA schools in Bahrain have had several reported problems with parent-teacher communication, long-term substitute teachers and dwindling academic offerings,"

the statement said.

The pilot program would have allowed up to 30 students to attend international schools in Bahrain using the same program accessed by State Department diplomats overseas.

Service members and Defense Department civilians would have been eligible to take part in the initiative.

The final negotiated language of the NDAA was released Saturday. Congress is expected to vote on the bill in the next few days.

Other House provisions removed from it include an amendment that would have provided teacher bonuses for difficult-to-fill overseas locations and another one that would have prohibited any offices or organizations promoting diversity, equity and inclusion in DODEA schools.

A separate provision calling for parents to be notified when a student does not score as grade-level proficient in reading or language arts at the end of third grade is included in the final NDAA.

Member of Little Rock Nine christens nuclear sub named for Arkansas

Associated Press

NEWPORT NEWS, Va. — The nuclear submarine USS Arkansas was christened Saturday, almost a decade in the making since the U.S. Navy announced that a Virginia-class submarine would bear the state's name.

Carlotta Walls LaNier, one the nine Black students who desegre-

gated Little Rock Central High School in 1957, launched a bottle of sparkling wine into the hull of the Virginia-class submarine at Newport News Shipbuilding in Virginia.

In 2018, then-Navy Secretary Ray Mabus named the six women of the Little Rock Nine as sponsors of the ship. Besides LaNier, Eliza-

beth Eckford and Gloria Ray Karlmark also attended the ceremony. All the sponsors had their initials welded into steel plates when the submarine's keel was laid in 2022.

"History is full of groups of collective people who come together to make something happen," the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette reported that LaNier said in a speech

before the crowd at the shipyard. "Many people are behind the submarine that we christened today. It's similar to the quote on our currency, E pluribus unum — 'Out of many, one.' We have SSN 800, but many participated in the reality of it being here today."

Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro called the ship "the very best of our

submarine force capabilities."

"She will always be propelled by the proud legacy of her namesake, represented here today by three of her courageous sponsors, who overcame tremendous adversity as members of the Little Rock Nine," Del Toro said.

The Arkansas is expected to launch in 2025.

MIDEAST

Stabilize: Kurilla says US will not allow ISIS to take advantage**FROM PAGE 1**

ble as possible, as many actors inside and outside the country seek to capitalize on the situation to grab power and advantage. With Israel seizing control of border areas of Syria and Turkish-backed forces skirmishing with Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces in the country's northeast, the situation remains deeply combustible.

Chief among the fears is that ISIS — which long held portions of Syrian territory under the fierce rule of its caliphate — could seize advantage of the situation to reestablish itself as a major force in the country.

Many parts of the U.S. government were caught off guard by Assad's collapse, including longtime advocates for Assad's ouster, according to one senior U.S. official, who, like others, spoke on the condition of anonymity to speak frankly about sensitive internal assessments. U.S. officials are far from confident that the rebels will govern in a humane or productive manner, the official said.

To beat back ISIS, forces from the U.S. Central Command, whose area of responsibility includes the Middle East, on Sunday struck over 75 ISIS targets using B-52, F-15 and A-10 warplanes, the command said in a statement.

"Battle damage assessments are underway, and there are no indications of civilian casualties," Central Command said.

"There should be no doubt — we will not allow ISIS to reconstitute and take advantage of the current situation in Syria," said Gen. Michael "Erik" Kurilla, who leads the command. "All organizations in Syria should know that we will hold them accountable if they partner with or support ISIS in any way."

Among numerous concerns is the fate of the remnants of Assad's chemical weapons program. The Syrian leader once had a major chemical weapons stockpile and used the banned weapons repeatedly against rebel forces, the Obama administration said in 2013.

After international condemnation, much of the stockpile was dismantled, but monitoring chemical weapons inside Syria remains a "primary focus" for the Biden administration, a senior administration official said while briefing



METIN YOKSU/AP

Syrian families arrive to cross into Syria from Turkey at the Cilvegözü border gate, near the town of Antakya, southern Turkey, on Monday.

reporters. The official said chemical weapons experts are "fairly confident" that the situation is under control, without elaborating.

The administration does not expect that the current chemical weapons threat will require "boots on the ground," the official said.

With a wide range of regional actors threatened by instability in Syria and seeing an opportunity to seize advantage, Biden administration officials have been reaching out extensively to countries that share borders with Syria. The country's central location makes it a hub for many regional dynamics and rivalries.

Iraq, Turkey, Israel, Lebanon and Jordan all have stakes in what happens in Syria. Russia and Iran — long Assad's chief backers — also stand to lose from the collapse of his regime.

U.S. officials said the Biden administration is working with Turkey in an attempt to set up a deconfliction mechanism for the northern city of Manbij, where the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces have clashed in recent days with Turkish-backed forces.

Israeli forces moved Sunday into buffer areas of the Golan Heights and limited areas on the Syrian side of its border, describing those as temporary moves as Israel seeks to determine who is in the area. The Israeli government

informed the Biden administration ahead of time, U.S. officials said.

"That is going to take an enormous effort from everybody. We think that should be the focus of those with an interest in building a better future Syria," the senior Biden administration official said. "Additional fronts opening up, not in anybody's interest."

U.S. officials are in contact with all the groups involved in fighting in Syria, including the main group that ousted Assad, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which was once affiliated with al-Qaida and remains on a U.S. terrorist list, the official said.

Asked whether the U.S. government would strip the group of its terrorist designation, which would enable deeper U.S. contacts and cooperation with it, the official would not rule it out.

"We have to be smart ... and also very mindful and pragmatic about the realities on the ground," the official said.

A third U.S. official said the administration is in the process of doing a "real-time assessment" about HTS and its level of independence from Turkey and Turkey's views on Syrian Kurds, and whether the group should be removed from the foreign terrorist organization list.

Syria has long been a danger hot spot for U.S. interests. The Biden

administration had been tracking ISIS targets that were hit in Sunday's strikes for some time, even before the events of the last few days, and took the moment to weaken the group's operational capacity, the official said.

The administration hopes the strikes will serve as an additional deterrent to aggression by the group, the official said.

Biden on Sunday sought to take credit for Assad's fall from power, saying it was the result of the actions his administration took to boost allies amid the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. Russia, Iran and Hezbollah were unable to aid the Assad regime like they had in the past because they are "weaker today than they were when I took office," he said.

Biden said he was sending administration officials to the region and offering assistance to Syria's neighbors, including Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq. He also promised humanitarian relief and announced his administration would coordinate with the United Nations to help Syrians build an independent and sovereign state.

For more than a decade, U.S. presidents have grappled with how to contain the brutal leadership of Assad without triggering a spiraling international conflict. The fall of the Assad regime fulfills a longtime U.S. foreign policy goal, after Russia and Iran sup-

ported Assad amid the Obama administration's efforts to oust him.

U.S. officials have also for years sought the release of Austin Tice, the American journalist who was kidnapped there in 2012. On Sunday, Biden was asked about Tice's whereabouts. "We believe he's alive. We think we can get him back," he said.

Trump, on Saturday, called for the U.S. to stand back in Syria, saying that Washington does not have a direct stake in the conflict.

On Sunday, Vice President-elect JD Vance echoed Trump's call for the U.S. not to intervene, but he appeared to share Biden's concerns about the future of the region. He tweeted that he was "nervous" about calls on social media to celebrate Assad fleeing the country.

"Many of 'the rebels' are a literal offshoot of ISIS," Vance wrote. "One can hope they've moderated. Time will tell."

Retired Gen. Frank McKenzie, who led the U.S. Central Command during part of Trump's first term, said he was concerned that ISIS' possible resurgence could have "profound negative implications" for the region.

He said Trump would have to take a "good hard look at" addressing Syria amid risks that it could become a foothold for extremist groups trying to plot attacks against the U.S. and its allies. He noted that 900 U.S. troops are present in Syria for counterterrorism efforts.

"As we know, ISIS launched a successful attack against Russia just a few months ago. That's why those troops are there," he said Sunday on ABC's "This Week." "So any decision to bring them out, we need to weigh that going forward."

On Sunday, Trump drew a line between Assad's collapse and Russia's war in Ukraine. He said that Russian President Vladimir Putin, long Assad's chief foreign backer, should abandon his years-long war in Ukraine.

"Russia and Iran are in a weakened state right now," Trump posted on his Truth Social platform. He called for an immediate ceasefire in Ukraine and continued, "I know Vladimir well. This is his time to act. ... The World is waiting!"

Israel says it struck chemical-weapons storage sites in Syria

Bloomberg News

Israel said it carried out strikes against chemical weapons and missile-storage sites in Syria, describing the move as a preventive measure to ensure the safety of citizens after the fall of President Bashar al-Assad.

Opposition groups led by Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, which captured

Damascus over the weekend, are people with "an extreme ideology of radical Islam," Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar said in a briefing on Monday. The Israel Defense Forces targeted weapons systems, including chemical, so "they will not fall in the hands of extremists," he said.

The toppling of Syria's longtime

ruler Assad, after a dramatic territorial advance by rebel forces, has sent shockwaves through the Middle East and made neighboring Israel particularly wary. While Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government was formally in a state of war with Assad, the emergence of a new Islamist power base in its immediate vicinity

adds an additional threat after more than a year fighting Iran-backed militant groups.

HTS is designated a terrorist organization by the U.S., Israel's closest ally.

Netanyahu said Sunday he ordered the Israeli military to take control of a buffer zone east of the border with Syria, an area the ar-

my says is about 155 square miles in size.

Science Minister Gila Gamliel, a member of Netanyahu's security cabinet, told Tel Aviv radio station 103 FM that all of the zone "and beyond" was now under Israeli control. Sa'ar disputed this, saying troops are positioned less than two miles from the border.

MIDEAST

Iran's 'axis of resistance' dealt major blow

By SUSANNAH GEORGE
AND MUSTAFA SALIM
The Washington Post

The rapid fall of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, coming hard on devastating losses suffered by Hezbollah, has dealt a serious blow to Iran's "axis of resistance," a central pillar of Tehran's foreign policy, forged over decades.

Through Syria's 13-year civil war, Iran devoted a great deal of blood and treasure to propping up the Assad regime, only to watch its investment fail in a matter of days as city after city fell to Syrian rebels. But Tehran hasn't only lost a client; it has seen its ability to project power, key to its own security, upended.

Hezbollah, the militant group whose power once rivaled that of regional armies, suffered a humiliating defeat to Israel last month and was counting on Iranian support to rebuild.

"The resistance front has had a really hard year," Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi acknowledged Sunday in an interview on Iranian state television. But he said they had outperformed expectations, and cited continued Hamas attacks on Israel. "Nobody could have predicted that the front could be so strong."

Others were skeptical.

"Without Syria, we could see the entire axis of resistance just unravel," said a Western diplomat who, like others, spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive policy.

Inside Iran, news of Assad's fall prompted sharp criticism of Tehran's policy. Even supporters questioned the decision to spend billions on a network that fell apart so quickly.

"Iranians can be happy," Heshmatollah Falahatpisheh, a former member of parliament, wrote on X. "No one has the right to spend the nation's dollars to maintain spiderwebs anymore."

After Hamas launched its attack on Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, the axis — a loose alliance of armed groups backed by Tehran from Yemen to Gaza — appeared to be ascendant.

In support of Hamas, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen and groups in



OMAR SANADIKI/AP

Syrian President Bashar Assad, right, speaks with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, left, in Damascus, Syria, in May 2023.

Iraq joined in attacking Israel and U.S. interests in the region.

But Israel has killed Hamas's and Hezbollah's leaders and worn down their forces in Gaza and Lebanon. Iran's direct attacks on Israel, rather than deter its foe, have only exposed greater weaknesses.

Iran fired about 200 ballistic missiles at Israel in October, the largest covert action in their decades-long shadow war. But the barrage, largely intercepted by Israeli, U.S. and allied defenses, inflicted little damage. Israel's retaliation took out some of Iran's most sophisticated military equipment: its air defenses.

"Iran needs to rethink its strategy of proxies," said Maria Luisa Fantappie, head of the Middle East program at the International Affairs Institute in Rome. "The proxies have become more of a liability than an asset."

As officials in Tehran spent money on far-flung militias, they told Iranians that the network provided a layer of protection: It allowed them to fight their adversaries abroad, rather than at home.

When the Hamas attack ignited a regional war, that reasoning was put to a test. In Fantappie's view, it failed.

"The axis is not an effective way to project power," she said. "On the contrary, it was projecting weakness."

In the hours after Assad was toppled Sunday, Iran's most senior officials were silent. When the Foreign Ministry issued a statement, it emphasized a long history of ties between Iran and Syria.

"The relations between the two nations of Iran and Syria have a long history and have always been friendly," the ministry said. "It is expected that these relations will continue with the wise and far-sighted approach of the two countries."

When Iran mobilized forces last week to protect Assad, it called on allies to protect the supply lines that link Tehran to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Days after the armed Islamist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham overran Aleppo, Araghchi, the foreign minister, visited Assad in Damascus. After their meeting at the presidential palace, Iranian media shared

images of the pair dining at a downtown restaurant with messages of solidarity.

But as the rebels continued to advance, Iran's concern soon turned to panic. "What was surprising was the inability of the Syrian army and the speed of developments in Syria," Araghchi said in the Iranian state television interview. Even Assad, he said, "was stunned by the state of his own army."

Araghchi traveled to Baghdad on Friday to rally support. But by then, regional officials and diplomats were reporting, Assad's forces had lost the city of Hama and were abandoning the Damascus suburbs.

Iraq refused to commit troops.

"The Iranian foreign minister left Iraq disappointed," said an Iraqi official with ties to the country's Shiite militias. Araghchi assumed Baghdad would support Tehran, as it had earlier in Syria's civil war, and was "surprised" to hear otherwise, the official said.

By the end of the day, a regional diplomat said, Iran had concluded Assad was "a lost cause" and ordered military personnel and embassy staff to evacuate. After four decades as allies, Tehran was cutting its losses.

Iranian commanders and diplomats scrambled to board flights out of the Damascus airport. Others tried their luck on overland routes to Lebanon and Iraq, according to the diplomat and an Iraqi official.

"The Syrian government, and Mr. Bashar Assad himself, did not have the will to stay in power anymore," Mohammad Ghaderi, an Iranian analyst, told the state-run Islamic Republic of Iran News Network on Sunday.

He dismissed claims that Iran abandoned its longtime ally. "Iran supported Syria up until the last moment," he said.

But criticism of Tehran was rampant.

Some called for Iran's leadership to learn from Assad's fall.

"The experience of dominoes falling in Syrian cities has an important lesson," Abdolreza Davari, who was an adviser to former Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, said on X.

"The main ally of every government is its people," he wrote, "and people's satisfaction is a necessary condition for its survival against external attacks."

Syrian prime minister says its government is still functioning

Associated Press

DAMASCUS, Syria — Syria's prime minister said Monday that most cabinet ministers are still working from offices in Damascus after rebels entered the capital over the weekend and overthrew President Bashar Assad. Streams of refugees crossed back into Syria from neighboring countries, hoping for a more peaceful future.

But there were already signs of the difficulties ahead for the rebel alliance now in control of much of the country, which is led by a former senior al-Qaida militant who severed ties with the extremist group years ago and has promised representative government and religious tolerance.

The rebel command said Monday they would not tell women how to dress.

"It is strictly forbidden to interfere with women's dress or impose any request related to their clothing or appearance, including requests for modesty," the General Command said in a statement on social media.

Meanwhile, some key government services had shut down as state workers ignored calls to return to their jobs, a U.N. official said, causing issues at airports and borders and slowing the flow of humanitarian aid.

Israel said it is carrying out airstrikes on suspected chemical weapons sites and long-range

rockets to keep them from falling into the hands of extremists. Israel has also seized a buffer zone inside Syria after Syrian troops withdrew.

In northern Syria, Turkey said allied opposition forces seized the town of Manbij from Kurdish-led forces backed by the United States, a reminder that even after Assad's departure to Russia the country remains split among armed groups that have fought in the past.

The Kremlin said Russia has granted political asylum to Assad, a decision made by President Vladimir Putin. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov declined to comment on Assad's specific



UGUR YILDIRIM/AP

Smoke billows as people arrive to celebrate the fall of the Syrian government, in Damascus, Syria, on Sunday.

whereabouts and said Putin was not planning to meet with him.

Damascus was quiet on Monday, with life slowly returning to

normal while most shops and public institutions were closed. In public squares, some people were still celebrating.

NATION

Trump's picks shine light on shake-up plan

BY CHRIS MEGERIAN
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — In the history of American politics, there's no shortage of presidents who promised to shake up Washington once they got to the White House. But Donald Trump may prove to be in a class of his own, and he appears more interested in beating the federal government into submission than recalibrating it.

In staffing his administration, Trump has shown an inclination to select people who distrust or even disdain the agencies that they've been chosen to lead, setting up a potential war of attrition between the incoming Republican president and American institutions.

"There's been nothing like what Trump is suggesting to do," said Doug Brinkley, a presidential historian. "We're talking about dismantling the federal government."

Trump's approach will become even clearer this week as Kash Patel, his choice for FBI director, heads to Capitol Hill for an initial round of meetings with senators who will decide whether to confirm him to the post.

A former national security official who has branded himself as an eager acolyte of Trump, Patel has talked about shutting down the agency's headquarters, splitting up its responsibilities and targeting Trump's perceived enemies.

Greg Brower, a former U.S. attorney who served as the FBI's top congressional affairs official, said Trump seems to want to make the nation's law enforcement institutions "part of his political operation run out of the White House."

"That's a major course change that I'm just not sure a majority of senators are willing to endorse," Brower said.

Republican senators are already considering whether to support Pete Hegseth, whom Trump wants to lead the Pentagon, despite allegations of sexual misconduct, excessive drinking and financial mismanagement. Heg-

seth is an Army veteran and former Fox News commentator who has described the military as flooded with "woke" liberal ideology. He also wants to remove women from combat roles.

Karoline Leavitt, a spokesperson for Trump's transition team and the incoming White House press secretary, said the next administration wants to "shatter the Deep State," a term for entrenched civil servants who have frustrated Trump and his allies.

"President Trump was re-elected by a resounding mandate from the American people to change the status quo in Washington," she said in a statement.

"[Trump's staff picks] each want to show that they've got a scalp to punish the so-called deep state, the legacy media or the Democratic Party."

Doug Brinkley
presidential historian

"That's why he has chosen brilliant and highly-respected outsiders to serve in his Administration, and he will continue to stand behind them as they fight against all those who seek to derail the MAGA Agenda."

Margaret Spelling, who

served as education secretary under President George W. Bush, said it is "probably not a good management style" to treat government employees as adversaries.

"If you're going to turn the tide or redirect the ship of state, you've got to have help doing it," she said. "And that's people who work there already."

Spelling's former department could be outright eliminated if Trump has his way. His choice of education secretary, Linda McMahon, has never worked in the field. She served for one year on the Connecticut Board of Education and is a member of the board of trustees at a private university. McMahon led the Small Business Administration during Trump's first term, and she made a name for herself by running World Wrestling Entertainment, a cultural juggernaut that features musclebound men beating each other up in elaborately scripted fights.

Trump's plans for the federal government blend conservative ideology, which has long viewed



HEATHER KHALIFA / AP

President-elect Donald Trump's spokesperson says the incoming administration wants to "shatter the Deep State."

Washington as too intrusive in Americans' daily lives, with his personal vendettas. After being plagued by investigations and contradicted by career officials during his first term, the returning president has no interest in a replay and he's more skeptical of insider views that clash with his own instincts.

Some of his personnel choices have alarmed political opponents, but Trump's approach could prove appealing to voters whose faith in government has sunk to record lows in recent years.

Only about 2 in 10 Americans trust the government to do the right thing always or most of the time, according to the Pew Research Center, down from around 4 in 10 who said this in 2000 — before the upheaval of a global financial crisis, an inconclusive war on terrorism and a worldwide pandemic.

Kay Schlozman, a Boston College political science professor, said Trump's nominees could be viewed as "an extension of his capacity to question the received wisdom and question the supposed elites who always run everything."

Some of the largest gaps between expertise and personnel have been evident in public health. Trump chose Robert F. Kennedy Jr. to lead the Department of Health and Human Services despite his reputation as one of the most prolific spreaders of unfounded theories about the supposed danger of vaccines.

Trump also picked Dr. Jay Bhattacharya, a critic of public health measures like lockdowns and vaccine mandates that were used during the coronavirus outbreak, to run the National Institutes of Health, the country's top medical research agency.

In other areas of government, loyalty has often been prized over expertise. Lee Zeldin, a former New York congressman, never served on any committees dealing

with the environment during nearly a decade on Capitol Hill. Now he's on deck to lead the Environmental Protection Agency.

Brinkley said it's not uncommon to have presidents attempt to change how Washington works. Richard Nixon tried to circumvent government agencies by centralizing decision-making in the White House, and Warren Harding stocked his Cabinet with business leaders.

But Brinkley said Trump's approach is more venomous, and he seems to be setting up his staff to compete to be the most zealous.

"It's got a gladiator feel," he said.

"They each want to show that they've got a scalp to punish the so-called deep state, the legacy media or the Democratic Party."

Another way that Trump is taking on Washington is the Department of Government Efficiency, an independent advisory organization that will be run by Elon Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy.

Musk, the world's richest man, and Ramaswamy, an entrepreneur, plan to provide ideas on dramatically reducing federal spending and cutting the government workforce. They also said Trump should sidestep Congress whenever possible, setting up a potential constitutional clash.

Theda Skocpol, a Harvard University professor of government and sociology, agreed that Americans are often doubtful about Washington's effectiveness.

"But it doesn't mean there's going to be an easy path to eliminating entire departments or functions of government because people will realize they have the stakes in those things," she said.

However, Skocpol said, chaos might be the actual goal.

"Parts of American conservatism have been trying to make government a mess when they control it, and then use it as an argument for less government," she said.

Lara Trump to quit RNC, looks ahead

Associated Press

Lara Trump will step down as co-chair of the Republican National Committee as she considers a number of potential options with her father-in-law, President-elect Donald Trump, set to return to the White House.

Among those possibilities is replacing Florida Sen. Marco Rubio, whom Trump tapped to be the next secretary of state. If Rubio is confirmed, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis will choose who takes the seat through the remainder of Rubio's term, which expires in 2026.

"It is something I would seriously consider," she told The Associated Press in an interview. "If I'm being completely transparent, I don't know exactly what that would look like. And I certainly want to get all of the information possible if that is something that's real for me. But yeah, I would 100% consider it."

Elected as RNC co-chair in March, Lara Trump was a key player in the Republicans retaking the White House and control of the Senate while maintaining a narrow House majority. What she does next could shape Republican politics, given her elevated political profile and her ties to the incoming president.

TikTok seeks stay on ban

Associated Press

TikTok asked a federal appeals court on Monday to bar the Biden administration from enforcing a law that could lead to a ban on the popular platform until the Supreme Court reviews its challenge to the statute.

The legal filing was made after a panel of three judges on the same court sided with the government last week and ruled that the law, which requires TikTok to divest from its China-based parent company or face a ban as soon as next month, was constitutional.

If the law is not overturned, both TikTok and its parent ByteDance, which is also a plaintiff in the case, have claimed that the popular app will shut down by Jan. 19, 2025. TikTok has more than 170 million American users.

It's not clear if the Supreme Court will take up the case.

President-elect Donald Trump, who tried to ban TikTok the last time he was in the White House, has said he is now against such action.



Trump

NATION

Veteran acquitted in subway death

By JENNIFER PELTZ
Associated Press

NEW YORK — A Marine veteran who used a chokehold on an agitated subway rider was acquitted on Monday in a death that became a prism for differing views about public safety, valor and vigilantism.

A Manhattan jury delivered the verdict, clearing Daniel Penny of criminally negligent homicide in Jordan Neely's death last year. A more serious manslaughter charge was dismissed earlier in deliberations because the jury deadlocked on that count.

Both charges were felonies and carried the possibility of prison time.

Penny, 26, gripped Jordan Neely around the neck for about six minutes in a chokehold that other subway passengers partially captured on video.

Penny's lawyers said he was protecting himself and other subway passengers from a volatile, mentally ill man who was making alarming remarks and gestures. The defense also disputed a city medical examiner's finding that the chokehold killed Neely.

Prosecutors said Penny reacted far too forcefully to someone he perceived as a peril, not a person.

The case amplified many Amer-



STEFAN JEREMIAH / AP

Daniel Penny, center, arrives at criminal court Monday in New York.

ican fault lines, among them race, politics, crime, urban life, mental illness and homelessness. Neely was Black. Penny is white.

The verdict capped a trial that took a tumultuous turn last Friday, when jurors said they couldn't reach a unanimous verdict on the manslaughter charge. The judge then dismissed it at prosecutors' request — a rare one for prosecutors to make in the thick of a trial.

Penny served four years in the Marines and went on to study architecture.

Neely, 30, was a sometime subway performer with a tragic life story: His mother was killed and stuffed in a suitcase when he was a teenager.

As a younger man, Neely did Michael Jackson tributes — complete with moonwalks — on the city's streets and subways, building a reputation among the artist's fans and impersonators. But Neely also struggled with mental illness after

losing his mother, whose boyfriend was convicted of murdering her.

Hospitalized for depression at age 14, Neely later was diagnosed with schizophrenia that at times made him hallucinate and become paranoid, according to medical records seen at the trial. Neely also used the synthetic cannabinoid K2 and realized it negatively affected his thinking and behavior, according to a 2019 hospital record. The drug was in his system when he died.

On May 1, 2023, he boarded a subway under Manhattan, hurled his jacket onto the floor, and declared that he was hungry and thirsty and didn't care if he died or went to jail, witnesses said.

Penny, who was on his way from a college class to the gym, came up behind Neely, grabbed his neck, took him to the floor and "put him out," as he told police at the scene.

While the criminal trial played out, Neely's father filed a wrongful death suit against Penny.

Scammer who lied about Delta Force past sentenced to 40 years

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

AUSTIN, Texas — A Texas man will spend 40 years in prison after falsely claiming service in the Army's elite Delta Force as part of a scheme to convince his victims to hand over hundreds of thousands of dollars in return for protecting their children from being abducted by Mexican drug cartels.

Saint Jovite Youngblood, aka Kota Youngblood, 52, was convicted in April by a federal jury in Austin of four counts of wire fraud and one count of money laundering, according to the Justice Department.

He defrauded 32 victims for more than \$12 million, which he spent on trips to gamble in Las Vegas.

In addition to the prison sentence, Youngblood was ordered to pay full restitution.

"This fraudster developed close relationships with dozens of individuals, building an immense amount of trust seemingly just to destroy their lives financially through elaborate, deceitful misrepresentations," said U.S. Attorney Jaime Esparza for the Western District of Texas.

Youngblood told the people, who are not named in court documents, that he was able to provide protection for them against drug cartels because of his past military experience and the contacts he had within the National Security Agency.

He also claimed he "freelanced for the Department of Defense" to solve problems throughout the country.

Youngblood, who lived in Manor, a town about 15 miles north-east of Austin, claimed to have served 22 years in the Army's 82nd Airborne Division and Delta Force, which is primarily devoted to counterterrorism operations, such as capturing and killing a high-value target, breaking up terrorist cells or conducting hostage rescues.

Yet FBI investigators found no military service records for him.

With one of Youngblood's victims, he would post negative reviews online that claimed criminal behavior about the victim's businesses.

Youngblood told the victim that it was the cartel's way of threatening him and payments would make the online harassment stop.

Youngblood had his victims pay with checks through a business associate he described as an antique dealer who commonly deposited large checks, according to court records.

The payments to protect their families would double as business investments and give returns, Youngblood told them.

"Many of Youngblood's victims were terrorized thinking their families were in danger, others lost their livelihoods to his schemes," said Special Agent in Charge Aaron Tapp for the FBI's San Antonio Field Office.

STARS AND STRIPES

SERVICE DIRECTORY

The Daily Guide to Navigating The Military Business Market




Transportation 944

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WORLD

Zelenskyy open to Western troops providing security for end to war



EFREM LUKATSKY / AP

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy requested details of timing for Ukraine to join NATO and the European Union.

Associated Press
KYIV, Ukraine — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Monday that he's open to the potential deployment of Western troops in Ukraine to guarantee the country's security as part of a broad effort to end the almost three-year war with Russia.

diplomatic path amid international efforts to find a way of ending Europe's biggest conflict since World War II at a time when Russia has gained an upper hand in the fighting.

comments to the New York Post published Sunday. "He wants to make peace. We didn't talk about the details."

Putin's forces are taking heavy losses in Ukraine, Trump noted.

The deployment would be a step toward Ukraine joining NATO, Zelenskyy said in a post on his Telegram channel.

President-elect Donald Trump is seeking to bring about a ceasefire and met with Zelenskyy in Paris on Saturday. But Zelenskyy said Monday that he would approach outgoing President Joe Biden about Ukraine's possible NATO membership because he's still in office, while Trump doesn't yet have "legal rights" to decide on the matter.

"I'm formulating a concept of how to end that ridiculous war," he said.

The possibilities of Ukraine joining the 32-nation NATO military alliance and of Western troops being stationed on its soil have been deeply divisive and contentious issues since Russia's full-scale invasion began on Feb. 24, 2022.

"But before that, we must have a clear understanding of when Ukraine will be in the European Union and when Ukraine will be in NATO," Zelenskyy said.

"He wants to have a ceasefire," Trump said of Zelenskyy in

At their summit in Washington in July, NATO declared Ukraine

on an "irreversible" path to membership, but stopped short of inviting the country in.

The United States and Germany have balked at Ukraine joining NATO while at war with Russia.

that Ukraine's borders would need to be clearly demarcated before it could join so that there can be no mistaking where the alliance's pact of mutual defense would come into effect. Russia's invading army occupies about one-fifth of Ukraine.

One obstacle has been the view

Taiwan: Chinese navy ships in nearby waters ahead of expected drills

Associated Press
BEIJING — China's military appears to be preparing for widely anticipated drills in response to a recent visit by Taiwan's president to Hawaii and Guam.

naval and coast guard ships entering the Taiwan Strait and the western Pacific and that China had restricted airspace along its southeast coast through Wednesday.

Trump said he would not commit to defending Taiwan if China were to invade during his presidency.

President Lai Ching-te made stops in Hawaii and Guam during a weeklong tour of the Pacific that ended Friday.

Taiwan's defense ministry said it has set up an emergency response center and launched combat readiness exercises in response to Chinese activity in the Taiwan Strait.

Taiwan's defense ministry said Monday that it detected Chinese

There was no immediate confirmation from the Chinese side.

China says Taiwan is part of its territory and opposes American support and military sales to the self-governing island. Taiwanese

China maintains that Taiwan is a province that should not have its own president or foreign relations.

It did not say what those exercises entailed.

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DECEMBER 31

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Influencer faces charge over porch confrontation

IL BERWYN — Far-right influencer Nick Fuentes is due in court after a woman accused him of pepper-spraying her when she showed up at his suburban Chicago home following his “Your body, my choice” post on X. According to court documents, the 57-year-old woman approached Fuentes’ home in Berwyn shortly after his address was leaked following his post, the Chicago Tribune reported.

The woman told the newspaper in an interview that her friends encouraged her to go to Fuentes’ home to see if rumors were true that he had been receiving prank deliveries after his post on X. She said she made a video of herself on the sidewalk in front of Fuentes’ home. Another woman pulled up in her car and told her to ring the doorbell.

She alleged that Fuentes opened the door before she could ring the bell, pepper-sprayed her, screamed an expletive and took her phone.

Fuentes, 26, faces a battery charge in connection with the incident, the newspaper reported.

Iconic ‘The Wizard of Oz’ slippers sold for \$28M

MN MINNEAPOLIS — A pair of iconic ruby slippers that were worn by Judy Garland in “The Wizard of Oz” and stolen from a museum nearly two decades ago sold for a winning bid of \$28 million at auction.

Heritage Auctions had estimated that they would fetch \$3 million or more, but the fast-paced bidding far outpaced that amount within seconds and tripled it within minutes. A few bidders making offers by phone volleyed back and forth for 15 minutes as the price climbed to the final, eye-popping sum.

Including the Dallas-based auction house’s fee, the unknown buyer will ultimately pay \$32.5 million.

The sparkly red heels were on display at the Judy Garland Museum in her hometown of Grand Rapids, Minn., in 2005 when Terry Jon Martin used a hammer to smash the glass of the museum’s door and display case.

Their whereabouts remained a mystery until the FBI recovered them in 2018.

High school choir belts tunes from Christmas tree

MI MUSKEGON — A western Michigan community is celebrating the 40th anniversary of its beloved singing Christmas tree.

The Mona Shores Singing Christmas Tree, which features a 180-student high school choir and stands 15 rows tall, belted out 19 holiday tunes at a Muskegon theater and was set to perform two more shows. The 67-foot-tall tree



GREG EANS, THE (OWENSBORO, Ky.) MESSENGER-INQUIRER/AP

You know Dasher

Quintin Jordan with Ridgetop Reindeer Ranch, left, sits with “Dasher” the reindeer as Drew Morton looks on with his children, Oliver, 1, and Jack, 13, during the Owensboro Museum of Science & History’s annual “Reindeer Experience,” on Saturday, in Owensboro, Ky.

is adorned with 25,000 LED lights and loads of greenery.

“The Singing Christmas Tree is 100% a spectacle,” said Shawn Lawton, who has directed the Mona Shores High School Choir and overseen the annual show for three decades.

The towering tree-shaped structure has a hierarchy, with freshmen near the bottom, sophomores and juniors in the middle and seniors above them.

The very top, just underneath the star, typically is reserved for the “tree angel,” a student chosen by Lawton who “is not your top singer” but has “all the heart.”

This year’s pick is senior Mackenzie Aney, who uses a wheelchair and performs at the base of the tree, close to the front of the stage.

Studio executive dies in small plane crash

GA ATLANTA — The president of Atlanta-based Tyler Perry Studios died when the small plane he was piloting crashed on Florida’s Gulf Coast.

The studio confirmed Steve Mensch, its 62-year-old president and general manager, had died.

“We are incredibly saddened by the passing of our dear friend Steve Mensch,” the studio said in a statement. “Steve was a cherished member of our team for more than eight years and well-beloved in

the community of Atlanta. It’s hard to imagine not seeing him smiling throughout the halls. We will miss him dearly. Our heart goes out to his family as we all send them our prayers.”

The crash happened in Homosassa, about 60 miles north of Tampa. Photos from the scene showed the plane having come to rest upside down on a road. The Federal Aviation Administration and the National Transportation Safety Board are investigating.

Deal offers nearly \$9M to nursing home residents

LA NEW ORLEANS — Some of the elderly residents of seven Louisiana nursing homes who were sent in 2021 to ride out Hurricane Ida in a crowded, ill-equipped warehouse are being offered shares of a nearly \$9 million settlement after they sued.

Retired state judge William “Rusty” Knight told The Times-Picayune of New Orleans that all the 427 former residents who filed legal claims are being sent letters outlining the proposed settlement. Knight said amounts differ based on patients’ individual circumstances.

People who don’t contest the amount offered can expect to receive money within a few weeks. A hearing for those who want to fight the settlement will be held in January.

“It’s been a longer road getting

here than we wanted it to be,” Knight said. “Nobody’s getting what they should, quite frankly, because there’s not enough money.”

Last month, nursing home owner Bob Dean Jr., 70, agreed to pay \$8.2 million to the federal government to settle allegations that he misused assets and income from four nursing homes whose loans were insured by the Federal Housing Administration. Prosecutors said he funneled nursing home money to his personal bank accounts, using the money to buy antiques, guns and cars.

Clintons urge voters to remain in public service

AK LITTLE ROCK — Voters dejected by the presidential election results need to find a way to give back and remain involved, Bill and Hillary Rodham Clinton said as they celebrated the 20th anniversary of the Clinton presidential library.

The former president urged audience members in a packed theater to remain engaged and find ways to communicate with those they disagree with despite a divisive political time.

The two spoke about a month after former President Donald Trump’s win over Vice President Kamala Harris in the presidential election.

“We’re just passing through, and we all need to just calm down

and do something that builds people up instead of tears them down,” Bill Clinton said.

Hillary Clinton, the former secretary of state who was defeated by Trump in the 2016 election, said she understands the next couple of years are going to be challenging for voters who don’t agree with the decisions being made.

“In addition to staying involved and staying aware, it’s important to find something that makes you feel good about the day because if you’re in a constant state of agitation about our political situation, it is really going to shorten your life,” she said.

6 killed in wrong-way car crash on highway

MS JACKSON — Six people died after a pickup truck traveling the wrong way on a Mississippi highway collided with a car, authorities said.

The crash happened shortly before 3 a.m. on Interstate 55 in Jackson, police said. The Chevy Silverado pickup was heading south in the northbound lane when it collided with a Hyundai Sonata traveling north, police said. Killed in the crash were the driver of the pickup truck, the driver of the car and four passengers in the car.

Jackson police said they’re continuing to investigate the crash.

FACES

‘Emilia Pérez’ lands 10 Globe nominations

‘The Brutalist,’ ‘Conclave,’ ‘Anora’ also get multiple nods

By JAKE COYLE
Associated Press

Jacques Audiard’s audacious musical “Emilia Pérez,” about a Mexican drug lord who undergoes surgery to become a woman, led nominations for the 82nd Golden Globes on Monday, scoring 10 nods to lead it over contenders such as the musical smash “Wicked,” the papal thriller “Conclave” and the postwar epic “The Brutalist.”

The nominations for Globes were announced on Monday morning by Mindy Kaling and Morris Chestnut.

Zendaya, Timothée Chalamet, Angelina Jolie, Daniel Craig, Denzel Washington, Ariana Grande, Glen Powell and Selena Gomez all scored nominations.

Sebastian Stan secured two acting nominations, as the young Donald Trump in the drama “The Apprentice,” and for the dark comedy “A Different Man.”

Following “Emilia Pérez,” Brady Corbet’s “The Brutalist” landed seven nominations, including best picture, drama, and acting nods for Adrian Brody and Guy Pearce. The soon-to-be-released film, from A24, is uncommonly ambitious, with a runtime of 3½ hours, including an intermission.

Close behind it was Edward Berger’s “Conclave,” starring Ralph Fiennes as a cardinal tasked with leading the conclave to elect a new pope. It landed six nominations, including best picture, drama, and acting nods for Fiennes and Isabella Rossellini.

Sean Baker’s Palme d’Or-winning “Anora,” starring Mikey Madison as a Brooklyn sex worker who marries the son of a Russian oligarch, was nominated for five awards.

The Golden Globes will be hosted on Jan. 5 by comedian Nikki Glaser. The Globes will air live on CBS and stream on Paramount+.



NETFLIX/AP

Karla Sofía Gascón stars in “Emilia Pérez,” which earned 10 Golden Globe nominations on Monday.

Kennedy Center honors Coppola, Grateful Dead, Raitt and others

By ASHRAF KHALIL
AND WILL WEISSERT
Associated Press

“Not Fade Away” closed out the Kennedy Center Honors at this year’s ceremony, just as honorees The Grateful Dead had used Buddy Holly’s ode to enduring love to close out hundreds of concerts over the years.

The packed house Sunday night danced in the aisles to the bouncy beat after a night of honoring the Dead and other recipients of the lifetime achievement award for artistic accomplishment: director Francis Ford Coppola, jazz trumpeter Arturo Sandoval and singer-songwriter Bonnie Raitt. The venerable Harlem theater The Apollo, which has launched generations of Black artists, also was recognized.

Longtime Deadheads, including actors Miles Teller and Chloe Sevigny and talk show host David Letterman, paid tribute to the band’s blend of musical experimentation, longevity and community-building. “Their music fills the universe,” Letterman proclaimed.

The choice to honor The Apollo was the first time the Kennedy Center has honored a specific performance venue. The tribute to The Apollo highlighted the sheer diversity of art forms showcased at the 90-year-old theater. Savion Glover did a spirited tap dance routine; husband and wife duo The War and Treaty performed a medley of hits by Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell; and comedian Dave Chappelle recounted his first Apollo performance at age 15.

The annual gala at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts always features personalized tributes with performances and testimonials from fellow artists. Medallions were presented during the traditional Saturday night ceremony at the State Department.

In the first of the night’s tributes, Emmylou Harris and Dave Matthews performed a cover of Raitt’s duet with the late John Prine, “Angel from Montgomery.”

Music star Sheryl Crow paid tribute to Raitt’s trailblazing career as not just a singer or songwriter but as a widely respected blues guitarist in a male-dominated field.

Coppola received a tribute filled with previous Kennedy Center honorees, including Robert De Niro, Martin Scorsese, Al Pacino and George Lucas. All described an iconoclastic and driven auteur who loved to nurture and support younger filmmakers.

Sandoval’s tribute featured performances from an all-star band featuring Trombone Shorty and pianist Chucho Valdez from Sandoval’s original band, plus a flamenco dance performance by Timo Nunez.

The awards show will air on CBS on Dec. 22.



Coppola



Raitt



Sandoval

Partial list of Golden Globe nominations

Best motion picture, comedy or musical: “Wicked”; “Anora”; “Emilia Pérez”; “Challengers”; “A Real Pain”; “The Substance.”

Best motion picture, drama: “The Brutalist”; “A Complete Unknown”; “Conclave”; “Dune: Part Two”; “Nickel Boys”; “September 5.”

Best television drama: “Shogun”; “The Diplomat”; “Slow Horses”; “Mr. and Mrs. Smith”; “The Day of the Jackal”; “Squid Game.”

Best television series, comedy or musical: “Abbott Elementary”; “The Bear”; “Hacks”; “Nobody Wants This”; “Only Murders in the Building”; “The Gentlemen.”

Best performance by a male actor in a television series, drama: Donald Glover, “Mr. and Mrs. Smith”; Jake Gyllenhaal, “Presumed Innocent”; Gary Oldman, “Slow Horses”; Eddie Redmayne, “The Day of the Jackal”; Hiroyuki Sanada, “Shogun”; Billy Bob Thornton, “Landman.”

Best television limited series, anthology series or motion picture made for television: “Baby Reindeer”; “Disclaimer”; “Monsters: The Lyle and Erik Menendez Story”; “The Penguin”; “Ripley”; “True Detective: Night Country.”

Best original score: Volker Bertelmann, “Conclave”; Daniel Blumberg, “The Brutalist”; Kris Bowers, “The Wild Robot”; Clement Ducol, “Emilia Pérez”; Trent Reznor, Atticus Ross, “Challengers”; Hans Zimmer, “Dune: Part Two.”

Best performance by a male actor in a motion picture, musical or comedy: Jesse Eisenberg, “A Real Pain”; Hugh Grant, “Heretic”; Gabriel Byrne, “Saturday Night”; Jesse Plemons, “Kinds of

Kindness”; Glen Powell, “Hitman”; Sebastian Stan, “A Different Man.”

Best performance by a female actor in a motion picture, musical or comedy: Amy Adams, “Nightbitch”; Cynthia Erivo, “Wicked”; Karla Sofía Gascón, “Emilia Pérez”; Mikey Madison “Anora”; Demi Moore, “The Substance”; Zendaya, “Challengers.”

Best motion picture, non-English: “All We Imagine as Light”; “Emilia Pérez”; “The Girl With the Needle”; “I’m Still Here”; “The Seed of the Sacred Fig”; “Vermiglio.”

Best animated film: “Flow”; “Inside Out 2”; “Memento of a Snail”; “Moana 2”; “Wallace and Gromit: Vengeance Most Fowl”; “The Wild Robot.”

Best performance by a female actor in a television series-musical or comedy: Kristen Bell, “Nobody Wants This”; Quinta Brunson, “Abbott Elementary”; Ayo Edebiri, “The Bear”; Selena Gomez, “Only Murders in the Building”; Kathryn Hahn, “Agatha All Along”; Jean Smart, “Hacks.”

Best performance by a male actor in a television series-musical or comedy: Adam Brody, “Nobody Wants This”; Ted Danson, “A Man on the Inside”; Steve Martin, “Only Murders in the Building”; Jason Segel, “Shrinking”; Martin Short, “Only Murders in the Building”; Jeremy Allen White, “The Bear.”

Best performance by a female actor in a television series-drama: Kathy Bates, “Matlock”; Emma D’Arcy, “House of the Dragon”; Maya Erskine, “Mr. & Mrs. Smith”; Keira Knightley, “Black Doves”; Keira Knightley, “The Diplomat”; Anna Sawai, “Shogun.”

Best performance by a female actor in a motion picture, drama: Pamela Anderson, “The Last Showgirl”; Angelina Jolie, “Maria”; Nicole Kidman, “Babygirl”; Tilda Swinton, “The Room Next Door”; Fernanda Torres, “I’m Still Here”; Kate Winslet, “Lee.”

Best performance by a male actor in a motion picture, drama: Adrien Brody, “The Brutalist”; Timothée Chalamet, “A Complete Unknown”; Colman Domingo, “Sing Sing”; Ralph Fiennes, “Conclave”; Sebastian Stan, “The Apprentice.”

Best performance by a female actor in a supporting role in any motion picture: Selena Gomez, “Emilia Pérez”; Ariana Grande, “Wicked”; Felicity Jones, “The Brutalist”; Margaret Qualley, “The Substance”; Isabella Rossellini, “Conclave”; Zoe Saldana, “Emilia Pérez.”

Best performance by a male actor in a supporting role in any motion picture: Yura Borisov, “Anora”; Kieran Culkin, “A Real Pain”; Edward Norton, “A Complete Unknown”; Guy Pearce, “The Brutalist”; Jeremy Strong, “The Apprentice”; Denzel Washington, “Gladiator II.”

Best director: Jacques Audiard, “Emilia Pérez”; Sean Baker, “Anora”; Edward Berger, “Conclave”; Brady Corbet, “The Brutalist”; Coralie Fargeat, “The Substance”; Payal Kapadia, “All We Imagine As Light.”

Best screenplay: Jacques Audiard, “Emilia Pérez”; Sean Baker, “Anora”; Brady Corbet, Mona Fastvold, “The Brutalist”; Jesse Eisenberg, “A Real Pain”; Coralie Fargeat, “The Substance”; Peter Straughan, “Conclave.”

‘Moana 2’ cruises to \$600M globally after 2nd weekend

Associated Press

The Walt Disney Co.’s animated film “Moana 2” remained at the top of the box office in its second weekend in theaters as it brought in another record haul.

The film added \$52 million, according to studio estimates Sunday. That brings its domestic total to \$300 million, surpassing the original, and its global tally to a staggering \$600 million.

The amount set a record gross for a movie

on the weekend following Thanksgiving weekend, unseating “Frozen II,” which earned \$35.2 million in the same time frame in 2019. The numbers are not adjusted for inflation. Originally conceived as a Disney+ series, “Moana 2” has already broken into the top five highest grossing releases of the year. Its performance means Disney has three films in this year’s top five, including “Inside Out 2” and “Deadpool & Wolverine.”

Second place at the box office was occupied by “Wicked,” which added \$34.9 million, bringing its domestic total to \$320.5 million in three weeks. Globally, the musical adaptation released by Universal is at \$455.6 million. “Gladiator II” followed in third place with \$12.5 million, while “Red One” came in fourth with \$7 million.

The Indian action pic “Pushpa: The Rule – Part 2” was the top newcomer, earning \$4.9 million in its first weekend.

STARS AND STRIPES

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Promise, risk and uncertainty after Assad

BY DAVID IGNATIUS

The Washington Post

With the sudden collapse of the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad, Iran's proxy empire in the Middle East has been devastated — in Gaza, Lebanon and now Syria. But filling the resulting power vacuum across the Middle East with stable governance will be an urgent and complex challenge.

The worm turns: Just 14 months ago, Israel was terrorized and reeling after Hamas fighters surged across the Gaza fence. Now, Israel's enemies across the region are dead or in flight. It has been a convulsive process, rich with promise but perhaps carrying a toxin of regional instability and turmoil.

Assad fled Damascus for Moscow on Sunday, leaving his capital to the control of a Turkish-backed jihadi insurgency called Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS. Arab sources told me Sunday that HTS was securing Syria's intelligence headquarters and trying to contain violence in the capital. But with thousands of Syrians suddenly freed from years in Assad's torture prisons, there will be a yearning for revenge.

Arab regional powers are attempting to steady the transition. Led by the United Arab Emirates, they had been trying to persuade Assad for months to break from Iran and rejoin the Arab fold. Assad hesitated too long and was ultimately abandoned by his erstwhile allies. "In the end, the Syrian military didn't fight, and Iran and Russia didn't show up," noted a former CIA officer with extensive experience in the region.

"At long last, the Assad regime has fallen," President Joe Biden said Sunday. For the United States, the ouster of a despot backed by Moscow and Tehran is "a huge strategic move of the needle in the right direction," as one administration official said.

The chaos in Damascus on Sunday was eased by HTS's decision to allow the current Syrian prime minister to operate an interim government, with HTS protection, a senior Biden administration official told

me. The group has said it intends to maintain current government administrative institutions, including the army. That would certainly ease the transition.

Qatar, which has long been a covert backer of HTS, appeared to be leading the Arab effort to create a transitional government under United Nations sponsorship. A Qatari statement Sunday underscored "the necessity of preserving national institutions and the unity of the state to prevent it from descending into chaos."

The Qataris urged implementation of years-old U.N. Security Council resolutions calling for a new Syrian government that would include members of the regime and the opposition. But for the moment, Syria is a violent mosaic, with Turkish-backed groups controlling western Syria all the way to Damascus, a U.S.-backed Kurdish militia controlling the northeast and Jordanian-supported militias dominant in the south.

The United States and Russia will doubtless play a diplomatic role in shaping a future Syria, but it's the regional players that will be decisive. "There was a time when great powers would sort out what happens next. No more. For better or worse, this is now up to Israel, Turkey, the Saudis, the UAE and Jordan," noted the former CIA official.

President-elect Donald Trump underlined his lack of interest in an American role in Syria in a social media post Saturday, which stressed: "THIS IS NOT OUR FIGHT. ... DO NOT GET INVOLVED!" In a post Sunday, Trump suggested that after abandoning Assad, Russian President Vladimir Putin should negotiate an end to the carnage in Ukraine. Trump wrote: "I know Vladimir well. This is his time to act. China can help. The World is waiting!"

The 10-day transformation in Syria has echoes of three other events, each carrying its own lesson. First, the speed of Assad's demise recalls the collapse of the U.S.-backed government in Afghanistan. The fall of Kabul happened just nine days after

the loss of the first provincial capital to the Taliban. When an army feels abandoned and demoralized — by the United States in Afghanistan and Russia and Iran in Syria — it slides into a free fall.

A second analogy is to Hamas's rapid thrust across the Gaza fence and its success storming nearby Israeli kibbutzim and military bases on Oct. 7, 2023. Like Hamas, HTS was well-trained and well-equipped, with rapid-assault capabilities that defenders never imagined. Turkey obviously played a big role in Syria, as did Qatar with its long-standing ties to HTS leadership.

A third parallel is Iraq, which shows the chaos that can follow regime change. When the United States toppled Saddam Hussein in Baghdad in 2003, it set off rumbles of ethnic and regional conflict that continue to this day. Similarly, Israel has crushed the military power of Hamas in Gaza. But that enclave is now a lawless region of bandits and gangs, without a hint of stable governance.

One ominous fact is that since the Syrian uprising began in 2011, jihadi groups have been the strongest military faction. I learned their power in the opposition firsthand in October 2012, when I smuggled myself into Syria to report on the early days of the uprising that finally triumphed Sunday.

A nominally pro-Western opposition militia was battling Assad's army the day I reached Aleppo. With shells raining down a few hundreds yards away, I asked one of the secular leaders whether the potent al-Qaida offshoot known as the al-Nusra Front was fighting alongside his forces. Of course, he said, pointing to their headquarters a block away. "They're the best fighters."

HTS, leading the battle that just toppled Assad, is a descendant of the group I glimpsed 12 years ago. As a senior administration official told me Sunday, along with the White House's exhilaration over Assad's demise, there's a recognition that "we have a counterterrorism problem."

In the Middle East, there is no silver lining that does not have a cloud.

Proof there are no righteous political parties

BY NOLAN FINLEY

The Detroit News

For all their moral superiority, it turns out Democrats are every bit as willing to sacrifice democracy to their personal interests as are Republicans.

President Joe Biden stood on high ground for the past year as his son, Hunter, moved his way through the courts on felony gun and tax evasion charges. Asked repeatedly whether he'd pardon his son to spare him from prison, the president was adamant.

He wouldn't do it, he pledged. His allegiance was to the rule of law, he said, and the idea that no one is above it. He respected the legal process and would let the courts do their jobs he vowed.

But as the hour approached for Hunter to be sentenced and packed off to a prison cell, Biden changed his tune.

Hunter is a victim of politics, he declared, prosecuted at the behest of the president's political enemies. Hunter is a good guy, he claimed, who did bad things because of his past addiction to drugs.

And so, Biden did what he promised not to do and signed a sweeping pardon sparing

Hunter the legal consequences of his crimes.

In putting his name on his son's pardon, Biden laid waste to the foundational principle of our democracy that all Americans are equal under the law. Try to get the mother of a son rotting in prison because his love of crack led him astray to believe the justice her boy received was equal to that meted out to Hunter.

The pardon is the final smackdown to Democrats' puffed-up claim to be all that stands between democracy and tyranny. That's never been true, and certainly wasn't in 2024, a year in which the Democratic Party abandoned democracy wholesale in its quest to hold onto power.

Ironically, Biden was one of the main victims. Having won the primary votes necessary to claim the party's nomination, the president was ousted from his reelection race in an intra-party coup orchestrated by the Democratic elite.

The party politburo then abandoned the democratic nominating process and bestowed its nomination on Vice President Kamala Harris, who didn't win a single primary vote.

When it comes to assaults on democracy, however, that usurping of the electoral process pales in comparison to what Democrats did to the centrist No Labels movement. In a year in which a majority of Americans were unhappy with the major party ballot choices, No Labels sought to offer a third choice selected from the political middle. Democrats declared war. Documents recently unsealed in a No Labels lawsuit against Democratic operatives reveal the length to which the party went to deny voters that option.

Allegations raised in the lawsuit accuse party strategists of deploying an all-fronts offensive to intimidate both donors and potential candidates. They launched a false website that presented itself as the official No Labels site, espousing all sorts of extreme positions. Democrats also attempted to use the courts to block ballot access for No Labels and other third-party campaigns.

Democrats will fight like hell for your right to vote, as long as you vote for them.

So, spare us the smug Democratic claim to being the defenders of democracy. It's a lie. But this is true: There are no righteous political parties.

Bizarro

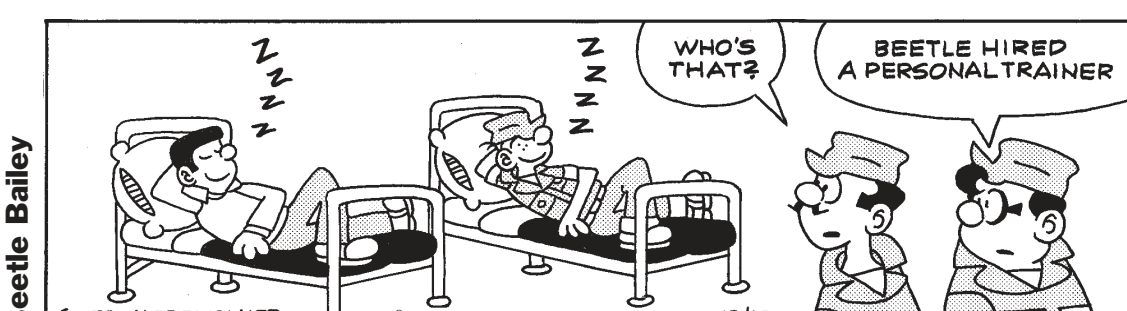
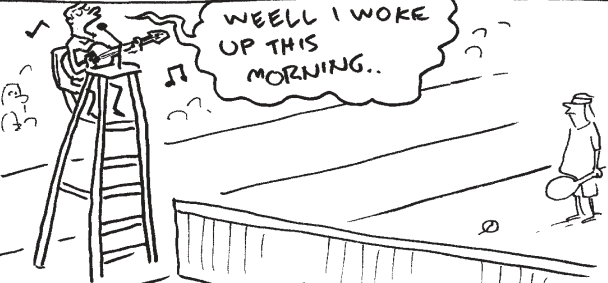
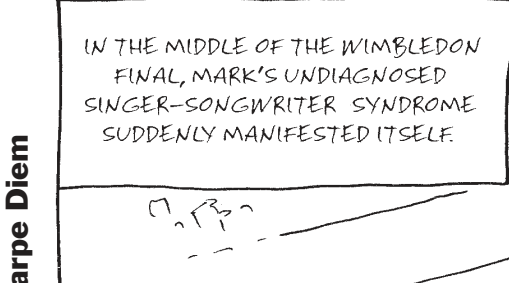
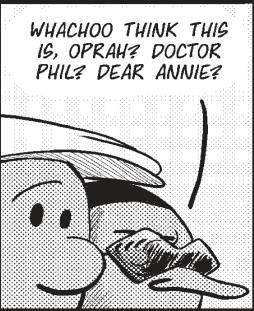
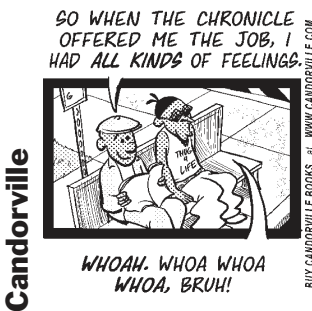
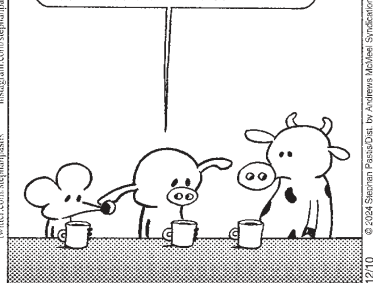
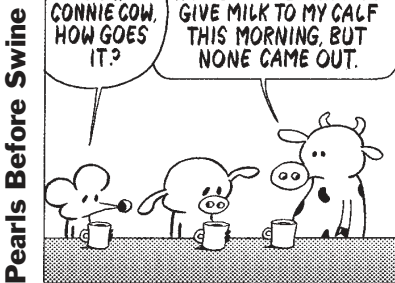


Loose Parts



Eugene Sheffer Crossword

Grid for Eugene Sheffer Crossword with numbered squares.



ACROSS

- 1 iPhone downloads
5 Pen name
8 Distort
12 Spruced up
13 Spanish gold
14 Opera set in Egypt
15 Strategy
17 Bridal accessory
18 Dig in
19 Whine
21 Quotidian
24 Author Uris
25 Charitable gifts
26 Scrabble, for one
30 Cagers' gp.
31 Push rudely
32 Victory
33 When a match starts
35 Hawked
36 Nov. honorees
37 Country store?
38 Party snack
41 Swelled head
42 Picked up the tab
43 Yankee Stadium event, to a Yankee
48 "Alfred" composer
49 Resistance unit
50 Footnote abbr.
51 Burn somewhat
52 Playpen item
53 Jacob's brother

DOWN

- 1 "Life of Pi" director Lee
2 Soup legume
3 Shriver of tennis
4 Braces (oneself)
5 Piece of hardware
6 Nest egg letters
7 Be frugal with
8 Socking away
9 Chicken —
10 Actress Falco
11 Humpty's perch
16 Salary
20 Central point
21 "Phooey!"
22 Jessica of "Dark Angel"
23 Mosque leader
24 Weavers' machines

- 26 Glowing from intense heat
27 Missing
28 "— 18" (Uris novel)
29 Goals
31 Dance move
34 Tax cheat
35 Inexpensive cigar
37 Census stat
38 Bookkeepers (Abbr.)
39 Swiss river
40 Jazz singer Simone
41 TV trophy
44 Discoverer's call
45 Sit-up targets
46 Ms. Farrow
47 College URL ender

Answer to Previous Puzzle

Grid with crossword answers: ABE, RIFFS, SSE, AOK, OLLIE, TAD, SWEETLOVE, INA, DUE, EMBLEM, UNSUNG, SELL, MOA, DAD, DOLES, PALL, LAM, TIRE, SHEAF, LAP, FIR, MOOR, NOVENA, HASSLE, AKA, ORL, STAGELEFT, EGO, ORSER, WAD, DOT, MYERS, ERS

12-10

CRYPTOQUIP

BWN UMJC ODMFN O HWRI
DOJT EHOZWJC ON O TOJYI
EOXNZ NOPWJC EHOYI WJ O
NORIXJ: "OHIBMFUI XMYP."
Yesterday's Cryptoquip: IF A DESERT MAMMAL WEARS GARB COLORED TO BLEND IN WITH ITS SURROUNDINGS, IS THAT CAMEL-FLAGE?
Today's Cryptoquip Clue: C equals G

SCOREBOARD/COLLEGE BASKETBALL

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

The AP Top 25

The Top 25 teams in The Associated Press college football poll, with first-place votes in parentheses, records through Dec. 7, total points based on 25 points for a first-place vote through one point for a 25th-place vote, and previous ranking:

| | Record | Pts | Prv |
|--------------------|--------|------|-----|
| 1. Oregon (62) | 13-0 | 1550 | 1 |
| 2. Georgia | 11-2 | 1474 | 5 |
| 3. Notre Dame | 11-1 | 1398 | 4 |
| 4. Texas | 11-2 | 1346 | 2 |
| 5. Penn St. | 11-2 | 1258 | 3 |
| 6. Ohio St. | 10-2 | 1233 | 7 |
| 7. Tennessee | 10-2 | 1224 | 6 |
| 8. Boise St. | 12-1 | 1108 | 10 |
| 9. Indiana | 11-1 | 1052 | 9 |
| 10. Arizona St. | 11-2 | 1001 | 12 |
| 11. Alabama | 9-3 | 838 | 11 |
| 12. SMU | 11-2 | 837 | 8 |
| 13. Clemson | 10-3 | 827 | 18 |
| 14. South Carolina | 9-3 | 770 | 13 |
| 15. Miami | 10-2 | 697 | 14 |
| 16. Mississippi | 9-3 | 680 | 15 |
| 17. BYU | 10-2 | 531 | 17 |
| 18. Iowa St. | 10-3 | 401 | 16 |
| 19. Army | 11-1 | 363 | 24 |
| 20. Colorado | 9-3 | 329 | 20 |
| 21. Illinois | 9-3 | 317 | 21 |
| 22. Syracuse | 9-3 | 234 | 23 |
| 23. Missouri | 9-3 | 228 | 22 |
| 24. UNLV | 10-3 | 144 | 19 |
| 25. Memphis | 10-2 | 132 | 25 |

Others receiving votes: Texas A&M 75, Louisville 37, Duke 29, Kansas St. 9, Marshall 8, LSU 8, Florida 5, Ohio 2, Tulane 2, Baylor 2, Louisiana-Lafayette 1.

USA Today Coaches Poll

The US LBM Coaches Poll Top 25 with team's records THROUGH SATURDAY in parentheses, total points based on 25 for first place through one point for 25th, ranking in last week's poll and first-place votes received.

| | Pts | Prv | 1st |
|-------------------------|-------|-----|-----|
| 1 Oregon (12-0) | 1,325 | 1 | 53 |
| 2 Georgia (11-2) | 1,281 | 5 | 0 |
| 3 Notre Dame (11-1) | 1,214 | 4 | 0 |
| 4 Texas (11-2) | 1,178 | 2 | 0 |
| 5 Penn State (11-2) | 1,080 | 3 | 0 |
| 6 Tennessee (10-2) | 1,069 | 6 | 0 |
| 7 Ohio State (10-2) | 1,037 | 8 | 0 |
| 8 Boise State (12-1) | 929 | 10 | 0 |
| 9 Indiana (11-1) | 925 | 9 | 0 |
| 10 Arizona State (11-2) | 856 | 13 | 0 |
| 11 Alabama (9-3) | 749 | 11 | 0 |
| 12 SMU (11-2) | 741 | 7 | 0 |
| 13 Clemson (10-3) | 707 | 17 | 0 |
| 14 South Carolina (9-3) | 668 | 12 | 0 |
| 15 Mississippi (9-3) | 631 | 15 | 0 |
| 16 Miami (Fla.) (10-2) | 611 | 14 | 0 |
| 17 BYU (10-2) | 423 | 18 | 0 |
| 18 Army (11-1) | 361 | 23 | 0 |
| 19 Iowa State (10-3) | 355 | 16 | 0 |
| 20 Missouri (9-3) | 282 | 20 | 0 |
| 21 Illinois (9-3) | 275 | 21 | 0 |
| 22 Colorado (9-3) | 228 | 22 | 0 |
| 23 Memphis (10-2) | 166 | 24 | 0 |
| 24 UNLV (10-3) | 140 | 19 | 0 |
| 25 Syracuse (9-3) | 129 | 25 | 0 |

Others receiving votes: Texas A&M (8-4) 50; Duke (9-3) 40; Louisville (8-4) 17; Kansas State (8-4) 16; Marshall (10-3) 14; Ohio (10-3) 8; Louisiana-Lafayette (10-3) 6; Tulane (9-4) 6; Georgia Tech (7-5) 3; Jacksonville State (9-4) 3; Iowa (8-4) 1; LSU (8-4) 1.

Bowl glance

| | |
|---|--|
| Dec. 14 Celebration Bowl | Jackson State vs. South Carolina State |
| IS4S Salute to Veterans Bowl | South Alabama vs. Western Michigan |
| Dec. 17 Frisco Bowl | Memphis vs. West Virginia |
| Dec. 18 Boca Raton Bowl | Western Kentucky vs. James Madison |
| LA Bowl | Cal vs. UNLV |
| Dec. 19 New Orleans Bowl | Georgia Southern vs. Sam Houston |
| Dec. 20 Cure Bowl | Ohio vs. Jacksonville State |
| Gasparilla Bowl | Florida vs. Tulane |
| College Football Playoff First Round Dec. 20 | No. 10 Indiana at No. 7 Notre Dame |

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Sunday's men's scores

EAST

Bryant 122, Northern Vermont 63
Cornell 103, Army 84
Fordham 87, Maine 72
Harvard 72, New Hampshire 62
Iona 72, St. Peter's 63
Marist 82, Manhattan 75
Merrimack 80, Niagara 62
Mount St. Mary's 101, Fairfield 94
Northeastern 78, Colgate 75
Oklahoma St. 85, Seton Hall 76
Quinnipiac 83, Sacred Heart 73
Siena 66, Canisius 53
Wagner 63, Md.-Eastern Shore 61

SOUTH

Arkansas St. 85, Memphis 72
Auburn 98, Richmond 54
Duke 76, Louisville 65
LSU 80, Florida Gulf Coast 71
Longwood 97, Mary Baldwin 40
La. Tech 69, La.-Lafayette 58
Mercer 89, Stetson 83, OT
Mississippi St. 91, Prairie View 84
Murray St. 73, SE Missouri 53
Radford 74, Bucknell 70, OT
Samford 72, Austin Peay 47
South Alabama 76, Jacksonville St. 74
UCF 66, Tarleton St. 51

MIDWEST

Cincinnati 84, Howard 67
Fort Wayne 82, Robert Morris 77
Ill.-Chicago 69, Dartmouth 68, OT
Iowa St. 100, Jackson St. 58
Missouri 76, Kansas 67
Purdue 83, Maryland 78
SIU-Edwardsville 82, Ball St. 69
Saint Louis 85, Chicago St. 62

SOUTHWEST

Texas A&M 72, Texas Tech 67
Texas St. 75, Rice 66
UConn 76, Texas 65
Vanderbilt 83, TCU 74

FAR WEST

UCLA 73, Oregon 71

Sunday's women's scores

EAST

Duquesne 98, Carnegie Mellon 58
Fairfield 74, Villanova 71
Fairleigh Dickinson 62, Rider 54
Fordham 62, LIU Brooklyn 43
Hofstra 55, Howard 52
Holy Cross 73, Stony Brook 56
Lafayette 74, Wagner 45
Lehigh 73, Cornell 51
Notre Dame 93, Syracuse 62
Pittsburgh 59, St. Peter's 51
Richmond 85, Columbia 76
St. John's 63, Wake Forest 45
UMBC 61, St. Francis (Pa.) 45
UMass 67, Dartmouth 56

SOUTH

Auburn 69, UAB 62
Bellarmine 76, Morehead St. 70
Boston College 72, Virginia 57
Clemson 74, Radford 48
Duke 81, Virginia Tech 59
ETSU 72, Virginia-Wise 42
East Carolina 60, Elon 43
Florida 82, Marshall 63
Florida Gulf Coast 82, Ave Maria 43
Florida St. 93, SMU 85
Furman 58, Charleston Southern 42
Georgia St. 107, Sewanee 49
Georgia Tech 78, Mercer 42
Kennesaw St. 64, Chattanooga 42
LSU 100, Grambling St. 54
Longwood 81, McNeese St. 54
Miami 81, Bethune-Cookman 63
Mississippi 85, Tennessee St. 38
NC State 86, Old Dominion 55
Nicholls 67, MVSU 56
North Carolina 72, Coppin St. 46
Samford 82, Miles 41
Southern Miss. 82, Memphis 69
Texas 93, James Madison 62
W. Carolina 81, West Georgia 76, OT
William & Mary 70, SC State 65

MIDWEST

Butler 69, Ohio 60
Detroit 81, Cougars 55
Evansville 87, SIU-Edwardsville 74
Ill. Chicago 113, North Central College 53
Iowa St. 82, Cent. Michigan 56
Marquette 78, Illinois St. 57
Michigan 60, Northwestern 54
Michigan St. 89, DePaul 61
Mississippi St. 102, Chicago St. 42
Nebraska 84, Minnesota 65
Ohio St. 83, Illinois 74
Wichita St. 64, W. Kentucky 59
Wisconsin 66, Rutgers 64

SOUTHWEST

Arkansas 84, SE Missouri 45
Baylor 71, UNLV 64
Houston 70, SE Louisiana 65
Kansas St. 89, Texas A&M 50
Oklahoma 110, Alabama St. 46
South Carolina 85, TCU 52
Texas St. 88, North Texas at Dallas 42

FAR WEST

Boise St. 76, San Diego 59
Colorado St. 74, Gonzaga 72, OT
Grand Canyon 76, Utah St. 62
Long Beach St. 73, Hawaii 69, OT
New Mexico St. 68, New Mexico 60
Portland 83, UTEP 67
UCLA 73, Washington 62
Utah 79, Princeton 76

COLLEGE SOCCER

NCAA D-I men's tournament

Semifinals
Friday, Dec. 13

Wake Forest vs. Marshall
Denver vs. Vermont

Championship
Monday, Dec. 16

Semifinals winners

TOP 25 ROUNDUP

Bates, Mizzou stun top-ranked Kansas

Associated Press

COLUMBIA, Mo. — Tamar Bates had 29 points and five steals to help Missouri beat Hunter Dickinson and No. 1 Kansas 76-67 on Sunday.

Mark Mitchell scored 17 points in Missouri's first win over Kansas since a 74-71 victory on Feb. 4, 2012. Anthony Robinson II had 11 points and five steals for the Tigers (8-1), and Josh Gray grabbed a team-leading 10 rebounds.

Dickinson had 19 points and 14 rebounds, but he also committed seven turnovers. The Jayhawks (7-2) have lost two straight on the road after falling 76-63 against Creighton on Wednesday night.

Missouri opened a 57-33 lead with 14:15 remaining on a jump shot from Tony Perkins. But the Jayhawks outscored the Tigers 30-8 over the next 11:55.

Bates scored 18 to help Missouri to a 39-25 lead at the break. The Tigers then opened the second half with a 16-6 run.

No. 2 Auburn 98, Richmond 54: Miles Kelly and Tahaad Pettiford each scored 15 points as the host Tigers beat the Spiders.

Bouncing back nicely after a loss at Duke, Auburn (8-1) had six players score in double figures. Chad Baker-Mazara had 13 points, six rebounds and five assists. Denver Jones made three 3-pointers and finished with 11 points.

No. 6 Iowa St. 100, Jackson St. 58: Curtis Jones scored 19 points off the bench, Milan Momcilovic had 18 and the host Cyclones routed Jackson State.

Dishon Jackson added a season-high 17 points to help Iowa State (7-1) reach 100 points for the first time this season. Keshon Gilbert scored 12 of his 16 points in the second half, and Joshua Jefferson had 10 points and 13 rebounds.

No. 8 Purdue 83, Maryland 78: Braden Smith had 24 points and 10 assists, and the host Boiler-makers held off the Terrapins.

Trey Kaufman-Renn scored 21 points for Purdue (8-2, 1-1 Big Ten).

Derik Queen led Maryland (8-2, 1-1) with 26 points on 11-of-18 shooting and grabbed a team-high 12 rebounds.

No. 9 Duke 76, Louisville 65: Cooper Flagg scored 13 of his 20 points in the second half and the visiting Blue Devils came back from a 14-point first-half deficit to beat the Cardinals in the Atlantic Coast Conference opener for both teams.

Duke (9-2, 1-0) trailed 30-16 midway through the first half but



L.G. PATTERSON/AP

Missouri's Tamar Bates celebrates during the final seconds of the second half of an upset over Kansas on Sunday.

eventually wore down Louisville (5-4, 0-1), which lost its third straight.

UCLA 73, No. 12 Oregon 71: Dylan Andrews banked in a 3-pointer with 0.4 seconds remaining to give the visiting Bruins a victory over the Ducks.

Andrews answered for UCLA (8-1, 2-0 Big Ten) after Oregon (9-1, 1-1) took a 71-70 lead on Jackson Shelstad's 3-pointer with 9.8 seconds remaining.

No. 14 Cincinnati 84, Howard 67: Simas Lukosius scored 18 points, Aziz Bandaogo added 17 and Dillon Mitchell 14 to lead the host Bearcats to a victory over the Bison.

Cincinnati (7-1) led by four points after one half and came out firing in the second, hitting three straight baskets to extend its lead to 10 points.

Arkansas St. 85, No. 16 Memphis 72: Joseph Pinion had 22 points and eight rebounds, Dyondre Dominguez added 19 points and the visiting Red Wolves built a double-digit first-half lead to beat the Tigers.

Pinion was 7-for-13 from the floor and 5-for-11 from outside the arc, giving Arkansas State its first over a ranked team since 1991.

No. 22 Texas A&M 72, Texas Tech 67: Wade Taylor IV scored 19 points, Zhuric Phelps hit a go-ahead 3-pointer during an 11-0 run and finished with 12 points, and the visiting Aggies won the first meeting of the former conference rivals since 2012.

No. 25 UConn 76, Texas 65: Alex Karaban returned to the lineup after missing two games with a concussion, had 21 points and 11 rebounds and led the visiting Huskies past the Longhorns.

Solo Ball scored 16 points and made four 3s as UConn (7-3) won its first true road game of the season.

NBA

Scoreboard

ROUNDUP

Embiid scores 31 in return, 76ers win

| Eastern Conference | | | | |
|--------------------|----|----|------|-----|
| Atlantic Division | | | | |
| | W | L | Pct | GB |
| Boston | 19 | 5 | .792 | — |
| New York | 14 | 9 | .609 | 4½ |
| Brooklyn | 10 | 14 | .417 | 9 |
| Philadelphia | 7 | 15 | .318 | 11 |
| Toronto | 7 | 17 | .292 | 12 |
| Southeast Division | | | | |
| | W | L | Pct | GB |
| Orlando | 17 | 9 | .654 | — |
| Miami | 12 | 10 | .545 | 3 |
| Atlanta | 13 | 12 | .520 | 3½ |
| Charlotte | 7 | 17 | .292 | 9 |
| Washington | 3 | 19 | .136 | 12 |
| Central Division | | | | |
| | W | L | Pct | GB |
| Cleveland | 21 | 4 | .840 | — |
| Milwaukee | 12 | 11 | .522 | 8 |
| Indiana | 10 | 15 | .400 | 11 |
| Chicago | 10 | 15 | .400 | 11 |
| Detroit | 10 | 15 | .400 | 11 |
| Western Conference | | | | |
| Southwest Division | | | | |
| | W | L | Pct | GB |
| Memphis | 17 | 8 | .680 | — |
| Houston | 16 | 8 | .667 | ½ |
| Dallas | 16 | 8 | .667 | ½ |
| San Antonio | 12 | 12 | .500 | 4½ |
| New Orleans | 5 | 20 | .200 | 12 |
| Northwest Division | | | | |
| | W | L | Pct | GB |
| Oklahoma City | 18 | 5 | .783 | — |
| Denver | 12 | 10 | .545 | 5½ |
| Minnesota | 12 | 11 | .522 | 6 |
| Portland | 8 | 16 | .333 | 10½ |
| Utah | 5 | 18 | .217 | 13 |
| Pacific Division | | | | |
| | W | L | Pct | GB |
| Golden State | 14 | 9 | .609 | — |
| L.A. Clippers | 14 | 11 | .560 | 1 |
| L.A. Lakers | 13 | 11 | .542 | 1½ |
| Phoenix | 12 | 11 | .522 | 2 |
| Sacramento | 12 | 13 | .480 | 3 |

| Saturday's games | | | | | |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|------|
| Cleveland 116, Charlotte 102 | Oklahoma City 119, New Orleans 109 | Washington 122, Denver 113 | Dallas 125, Toronto 118 | Detroit 120, New York 111 | |
| Miami 121, Phoenix 111 | Memphis 127, Boston 121 | Sunday's games | | | |
| Philadelphia 108, Chicago 100 | Milwaukee 118, Brooklyn 113 | Charlotte 113, Indiana 109 | Denver 141, Atlanta 111 | Orlando 115, Phoenix 110 | |
| Memphis 140, Washington 112 | San Antonio 121, New Orleans 116 | Golden State 114, Minnesota 106 | Sacramento 141, Utah 97 | Houston 117, L.A. Clippers 106 | |
| Miami 122, Cleveland 113 | L.A. Lakers 107, Portland 98 | Monday's game | | | |
| New York at Toronto | | | | | |
| Tuesday's games | | | | | |
| Orlando at Milwaukee | Dallas at Oklahoma City | Scoring leaders | | | |
| Through Sunday | | | | | |
| | G | FG | FT | PTS | AVG |
| Antetokoun., MIL | 21 | 269 | 142 | 683 | 32.5 |
| Jokic, DEN | 19 | 233 | 105 | 613 | 32.3 |
| Ball, CHA | 18 | 193 | 89 | 559 | 31.1 |
| Gil.-Alexander, OKC | 23 | 240 | 160 | 686 | 29.8 |
| Doncic, DAL | 18 | 180 | 94 | 517 | 28.7 |
| Tatum, BOS | 23 | 210 | 140 | 648 | 28.2 |
| Davis, LAL | 23 | 227 | 162 | 632 | 27.5 |
| Fox, SAC | 25 | 245 | 118 | 660 | 26.4 |
| Edwards, MIN | 23 | 211 | 82 | 607 | 26.4 |
| Lillard, MIL | 20 | 158 | 128 | 513 | 25.7 |
| Rebounding leaders | | | | | |
| | G | OFF | DEF | TOT | AVG |
| Jokic, DEN | 19 | 77 | 181 | 258 | 13.6 |
| Towns, NY | 21 | 61 | 217 | 278 | 13.2 |
| Sabonis, SAC | 23 | 75 | 218 | 293 | 12.7 |
| Zubac, LAC | 25 | 99 | 205 | 304 | 12.2 |
| Antetokoun., MIL | 21 | 44 | 199 | 243 | 11.6 |
| Poeltl, TOR | 23 | 93 | 173 | 266 | 11.6 |
| Davis, LAL | 23 | 57 | 201 | 258 | 11.2 |
| Kessler, UTA | 17 | 68 | 120 | 188 | 11.1 |
| Gobert, MIN | 23 | 75 | 178 | 253 | 11.0 |
| Sengun, HOU | 24 | 82 | 172 | 254 | 10.6 |

Associated Press
 CHICAGO — Joel Embiid had 31 points and 12 rebounds in his return, Tyrese Maxey got his first career triple-double and the Philadelphia 76ers held on to beat the Chicago Bulls 108-100 on Sunday.

Maxey finished with 25 points, 14 assists and 11 rebounds. Paul George and Kelly Oubre Jr. each scored 12 as the Sixers won for the fourth time in five games.

Zach LaVine led Chicago with 30 points, and Nikola Vucevic and Coby White each had 13 in the Bulls' second straight loss.

Playing in just his fifth game this season, the 7-foot-0 Embiid started slowly, missing his first seven shots. The two-time NBA scoring champion then connected on eight of his next 10 in the second quarter for his first 19 points, powering Philadelphia to a 62-50 halftime lead.

Embiid has missed the last seven games because of knee injuries and a three-game suspension for pushing a sports columnist.

The 76ers opened a 19-point lead in third quarter before Chicago narrowed it on a 13-1 run. The Bulls closed to within four points twice in the fourth.

Bucks 118, Nets 113: Giannis Antetokounmpo had 34 points, 11 rebounds and four assists, and visiting Milwaukee snapped a two-game skid with a win over Brooklyn.

Damien Lillard had 15 points and 11 assists and Bobby Portis added 23 points and five rebounds off the bench. The Bucks won for the 10th time in 13 games.

Dennis Schroder had 34 points and 10 assists, Cam Johnson scored 26 points and Nic Claxton added 21 points and nine rebounds as the Nets lost for the fourth time in five games, falling to 4-13 against Eastern Conference foes.

Hornets 113, Pacers 109: Brandon Miller hit two free throws in the final seconds and finished with 26 points as visiting Charlotte snapped an eight-game losing streak with a win over Indiana.

Vasa Micic added 18 points and nine assists as the Hornets overcame 24 turnovers by shooting 51% from the field. Cody Martin finished with 14 points and six rebounds and Nick Richards had nine points and 14 rebounds.

T.J. McConnell scored a career-high 30 points and had six assists for the Pacers, who have lost five of their last six games. Jarace Walker added 15 points.

Nuggets 141, Hawks 111: Nikola Jokic scored 48 points and visiting Denver never trailed in its win over Atlanta.

Jokic kept up his hot shooting against the Hawks and added 14 rebounds and eight assists. Mi-



NAM Y. HUH/AP

Philadelphia 76ers center Joel Embiid drives to the basket against Chicago Bulls guard Josh Giddey and center Nikola Vucevic during the first half in Chicago on Sunday. The Sixers won 108-100.

chael Porter Jr. matched his season high with 26 points.

De'Andre Hunter led Atlanta with 20 points. Hunter was escorted to the locker room midway through the third quarter after he was hit on his head on a blocked shot by Aaron Gordon, who was not called for a foul, but returned.

Heat 122, Cavaliers 113: Tyler Herro scored 34 points, Duncan Robinson had 23 and host Miami stayed hot by beating Cleveland.

Jimmy Butler scored 18 and Bam Adebayo had 16 points, 13 rebounds and six assists for the Heat. Terry Rozier added 14 for Miami.

Darius Garland scored 23 for the Cavaliers, who fell to 21-4 — still matching the best 25-game start in team history. Georges Niang scored 15 for Cleveland, which lost Evan Mobley in the first half to a sprained ankle.

Magic 115, Suns 110: Jalen Suggs scored 14 of his 26 points in the fourth quarter, and host Orlando beat Phoenix to remain the NBA's only team unbeaten at home this season.

Magic center Goga Bitadze had 21 points and a career-high 16 rebounds, including a game-clinching tip-in with 13.1 seconds left.

Devin Booker led the Suns with 25 points and seven assists. Tyus Jones added 21 points and Bradley Beal scored 18 before fouling out with 1:05 remaining.

Grizzlies 140, Wizards 112: Jaren Jackson Jr. scored 21 points, Scotty Pippen Jr. had 14 points and 12 assists and short-handed Memphis romped to a victory over host Washington.

Santi Aldama added 19 for the Grizzlies, who played without two-time All-Star Ja Morant (back soreness) and swing man Brandon Clarke (toe soreness) after both started in Saturday night's win at Boston.

Memphis shot 52.1% from the floor and 39.5% from 3-point range to win its third straight and ninth out of 10.

Spurs 121, Pelicans 116: Chris Paul moved into second place on the NBA's career assists list, Victor Wembanyama came back from an injury scare to score 25 points and host San Antonio held on to beat New Orleans.

Paul had 10 assists, giving him 12,099 for his career and moving him past former Phoenix and Dallas star Jason Kidd (12,091).

Stephon Castle added 22 points for San Antonio, which snapped a three-game skid.

Warriors 114, Timberwolves 106: Stephen Curry sunk a 39-foot jumper from nearly halfcourt to beat the third-quarter buzzer and finished with 30 points and eight assists, leading host Golden State past Minnesota in the teams' second meeting over three days.

Curry found Jonathan Kuminga for a go-ahead dunk with 2:55 to play and hit Buddy Hield for a clutch 3-pointer at the 58-second mark.

Hield scored 27 points, including consecutive 3-pointers midway through the third that tied the game at 69 and another that put the Warriors ahead. Hield had seven 3s and finished one shy of becoming the 17th player in NBA history to reach 2,000.

Rockets 117, Clippers 106: Jalen Green scored 31 points, Amen Thompson added 22 and visiting Houston defeated Los Angeles.

The Rockets ended a two-game skid without starter Fred VanVleet, who missed his first game of the season because of a right knee contusion.

Bones Hyland led the Clippers with 22 points off the bench, making a team-best five 3-pointers, and Ivica Zubac added 21 points and 12 rebounds. Kevin Porter Jr. had 19 points in his first career start for the team.

Kings 141, Jazz 97: Kevin Huerter had 26 points, including six 3-pointers, and host Sacramento beat Utah.

The Kings, who have won three of their last four games, are an on offensive tear after scoring 140 points in Friday's win over the Spurs.

The Jazz, who have lost six of their last seven, were led by Keyonte George with 25 points, and John Collins with 19.

Lakers 107, Trail Blazers 98: Anthony Davis scored 30 points and had 11 rebounds, D'Angelo Russell added 28 points with 14 assists and host Los Angeles beat Portland without LeBron James.

With James missing his first game of the season because of a left foot contusion, Max Christie started his second game for the Lakers and scored four points with four rebounds.

Deandre Ayton scored 14 points with 19 rebounds for the Trail Blazers, who lost their fourth consecutive game and have dropped six of their last seven.

NHL/MLB

NHL ROUNDUP

Kraken hold off reeling Rangers

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Oliver Bjorkstrand had two goals and two assists to help Philipp Grubauer and the Seattle Kraken beat the New York Rangers 7-5 on Sunday.

Eeli Tolvanen had a goal and two assists for Seattle, which trailed 3-1 early in the second period. Brandon Tanev, Vince Dunn, Shane Wright and Yannick Gourde also scored, and Grubauer made 32 saves.

K'Andre Miller and Vincent Trocheck each had a goal and an assist for New York, which lost for the seventh time in nine games. Reilly Smith, Filip Chytil and Alexis Lafreniere also scored.

Jonathan Quick made 15 saves for New York while subbing for Igor Shesterkin, who was away from the team because his wife went into labor with their second child. Shesterkin's eight-year contract extension was announced Saturday.

Wright's seventh goal of the season gave Seattle a 6-3 lead 11:13 into the third period. But New York pulled within one on goals by Miller and Lafreniere.

Gourde's empty-netter at 18:14 helped close it out for the Kraken.

Lightning 4, Canucks 2: Brayden Point scored twice and added two assists as Tampa Bay edged host Vancouver.

Nikita Kucherov had a goal and two assists for the Lightning, and Jake Guentzel scored on a power play late in the third period.

Captain Quinn Hughes and Kiefer Sherwood scored for the Canucks.

Tampa Bay's Andrei Vasilevskiy stopped 22 of the 24 shots he faced and Kevin Lankinen made 28 saves for Vancouver.

Islanders 4, Senators 2: Ilya Sorokin made 29 saves for New York against host Ottawa, one day after stopping 28 in a win over the Carolina Hurricanes.

Both teams were playing the back half of back-to-backs.

With the game tied 2-2, Kyle Palmieri gave the Islanders the lead at 13:46 of the third with New York's second power-play goal of the game.



RICH SCHULTZ/AP

Seattle's Oliver Bjorkstrand (22) scores past New York Rangers goaltender Jonathan Quick on Sunday in New York. Bjorkstrand had two goals and two assists in the Kraken's 7-5 victory.

Ottawa pressed hard for the equalizer but Sorokin rose to the occasion and Bo Horvat added an empty-net goal to secure the win.

Blue Jackets 4, Jets 1: Kent Johnson scored a pair of third-period goals to help visiting Columbus snap a three-game losing skid with a victory over Winnipeg.

Dmitri Voronkov and Sean Kuraly, into an empty net, also scored for Columbus. James van Riemsdyk had two assists.

Elvis Merzlikins made 24 saves for the Blue Jackets.

Kyle Connor scored for the Jets. Eric Comrie stopped 24 shots for Winnipeg.

The Jets didn't get their first shot on goal until a power play five minutes into the game, and were outshot 12-6 in the first period.

Connor scored his team-leading 15th goal of the season on Winnipeg's fourth power play of the game.

Avalanche 4, Devils 0: Scott Wedgewood stopped 25 shots for his seventh career shutout, leading Colorado to a victory at New Jersey.

Ross Colton, Logan O'Connor, Artturi Lehkonen and Parker Kelly scored for the Avalanche (16-13-0). Casey Mittelstadt and Calvin de Haan recorded two assists apiece.

Jake Allen had 19 saves for the Devils (18-10-2).

Lehkonen scored for the third time in Colorado's last four games.

Colorado earned its fourth shutout of the season. The Devils were blanked for the fifth time this season.

Utah 4, Flyers 2: Logan Cooley broke a tie on power play late in the second period and had an assist to help Utah beat host Philadelphia.

Cooley took a no-look pass from Dylan Guenther and made a slick forehand-to-backhand move in front of the net to beat goalie Sam Ersson.

Cooley also assisted on Juuso Valimaki's first goal of the season. Valimaki's shot hit Philadelphia captain Sean Couturier's stick and went past Ersson.

Jaxson Stauber stopped 20 shots for Utah. Ersson made 21

saves in his first start after missing a month because of a lower-body injury.

Philadelphia has lost three straight.

Stars 6, Flames 2: Roope Hintz scored the first in a four-goal third-period for host Dallas, including two from Thomas Harley, in a victory over Calgary.

Hintz tipped the puck just past Dustin Wolf's right skate on a give-and-go with Esa Lindell at 5:13 of the period.

Jason Robertson had a goal and an assist while Wyatt Johnston and Sam Steel also scored for Dallas, which began a season-long six-game homestand.

Jake Oettinger made 29 saves to remain perfect in 10 games this season at American Airlines Center for his 14th overall win, second among NHL goaltenders.

Calgary received goals from Jonathan Huberdeau, who scored one minute in, and Connor Zary.

Wolf stopped 22 shots. The rookie has three consecutive regulation losses after earning points in six straight (5-0-1

NHL scoreboard

Eastern Conference

| Atlantic Division | | | | | | | |
|-------------------|----|----|----|----|-----|-----|----|
| | GP | W | L | OT | Pts | GF | GA |
| Florida | 28 | 17 | 9 | 2 | 36 | 106 | 91 |
| Toronto | 27 | 16 | 9 | 2 | 34 | 80 | 71 |
| Boston | 29 | 15 | 11 | 3 | 33 | 75 | 87 |
| Tampa Bay | 25 | 14 | 9 | 2 | 30 | 98 | 76 |
| Ottawa | 27 | 12 | 13 | 2 | 26 | 82 | 86 |
| Buffalo | 27 | 11 | 13 | 3 | 25 | 80 | 86 |
| Detroit | 27 | 10 | 13 | 4 | 24 | 67 | 83 |
| Montreal | 27 | 10 | 14 | 3 | 23 | 75 | 98 |

Metropolitan Division

| | GP | W | L | OT | Pts | GF | GA |
|----------------|----|----|----|----|-----|-----|-----|
| Washington | 27 | 19 | 6 | 2 | 40 | 109 | 74 |
| New Jersey | 30 | 18 | 10 | 2 | 38 | 102 | 82 |
| Carolina | 27 | 17 | 9 | 1 | 35 | 101 | 81 |
| N.Y. Rangers | 26 | 14 | 11 | 1 | 29 | 85 | 79 |
| N.Y. Islanders | 29 | 11 | 11 | 7 | 29 | 77 | 87 |
| Philadelphia | 28 | 12 | 12 | 4 | 28 | 83 | 98 |
| Pittsburgh | 29 | 12 | 13 | 4 | 28 | 84 | 110 |
| Columbus | 27 | 12 | 12 | 3 | 27 | 93 | 96 |

Western Conference

| Central Division | | | | | | | |
|------------------|----|----|----|----|-----|-----|-----|
| | GP | W | L | OT | Pts | GF | GA |
| Minnesota | 27 | 18 | 5 | 4 | 40 | 86 | 65 |
| Winnipeg | 29 | 20 | 9 | 0 | 40 | 103 | 75 |
| Dallas | 27 | 17 | 10 | 0 | 34 | 92 | 69 |
| Colorado | 29 | 16 | 13 | 0 | 32 | 95 | 103 |
| Utah | 27 | 12 | 11 | 4 | 28 | 79 | 79 |
| St. Louis | 28 | 13 | 13 | 2 | 28 | 73 | 87 |
| Nashville | 28 | 7 | 15 | 6 | 20 | 61 | 88 |
| Chicago | 27 | 8 | 17 | 2 | 18 | 66 | 86 |

Pacific Division

| | GP | W | L | OT | Pts | GF | GA |
|-------------|----|----|----|----|-----|----|-----|
| Vegas | 28 | 18 | 7 | 3 | 39 | 99 | 82 |
| Los Angeles | 27 | 16 | 8 | 3 | 35 | 83 | 71 |
| Vancouver | 26 | 14 | 8 | 4 | 32 | 85 | 83 |
| Edmonton | 27 | 15 | 10 | 2 | 32 | 82 | 79 |
| Calgary | 28 | 13 | 10 | 5 | 31 | 74 | 84 |
| Seattle | 29 | 14 | 14 | 1 | 29 | 89 | 88 |
| San Jose | 30 | 10 | 15 | 5 | 25 | 82 | 108 |
| Anaheim | 25 | 10 | 12 | 3 | 23 | 62 | 76 |

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.

Saturday's games

Utah 5, Buffalo 2
Boston 4, Philadelphia 3, OT
Winnipeg 4, Chicago 2
N.Y. Islanders 4, Carolina 3
Florida 3, San Jose 1
Colorado 2, Detroit 1
Pittsburgh 5, Toronto 2
Washington 4, Montreal 2
Ottawa 3, Nashville 1
Los Angeles 4, Minnesota 1
Edmonton 4, St. Louis 2

Sunday's games

Seattle 7, N.Y. Rangers 5
Tampa Bay 4, Vancouver 2
N.Y. Islanders 4, Ottawa 2
Columbus 4, Winnipeg 1
Colorado 4, New Jersey 0
Utah 4, Philadelphia 2
Dallas 6, Calgary 2

Monday's games

Chicago at N.Y. Rangers
Detroit at Buffalo
Anaheim at Montreal

Tuesday's games

Colorado at Pittsburgh
Philadelphia at Columbus
San Jose at Carolina
Toronto at New Jersey
Los Angeles at N.Y. Islanders
Boston at Winnipeg
Calgary at Nashville
Tampa Bay at Edmonton
Minnesota at Utah
Florida at Seattle
St. Louis at Vancouver

Wednesday's games

N.Y. Rangers at Buffalo
Anaheim at Ottawa

Megadeal: Soto turned down Nationals' 15-year, \$440M offer in 2022

FROM PAGE 24

average annual value at \$51 million. Its length tops Fernando Tatis Jr.'s \$340 million, 14-year contract with San Diego that runs through 2034.

The Yankees' final offer to Soto was for \$760 million over 16 years, a second person familiar with the talks said, also on condition of ano-

nymity because that detail was not announced. That offer had a \$47.5 million average annual value.

A four-time All-Star at 26, Soto is the most accomplished free agent at that age since shortstop Alex Rodriguez agreed to a record \$252 million, 10-year deal with Texas in December 2000 at age 25.

Soto was 19 when he made his

major league debut with Washington in 2018 and helped the Nationals win the World Series the following year, when he hit .282 with 34 homers and 110 RBIs.

He turned down Washington's \$440 million, 15-year offer in 2022 and was traded that August to San Diego. Following the death of Padres owner Peter Seidler, Soto

was dealt to the Yankees in December 2023 and helped New York reach the World Series for the first time since 2009.

Soto batted .288 with 41 homers, 109 RBIs and 129 walks, hitting second in the batting order ahead of Aaron Judge to power an offense that led the major leagues with 237 homers. He hit a go-

ahead homer in the AL Championship Series opener against Cleveland and a tiebreaking, three-run homer in the 10th inning that won the pennant against the Guardians in Game 5.

Soto has a career .285 batting average with 201 homers, 592 RBIs and 769 walks in his seven major league seasons.

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

ANALYSIS

Is the CFP bracket fair? A few potential changes

BY EDDIE PELLIS
Associated Press

The committee that chose the 12 contenders for college football's national championship was only worried about one thing — ranking the teams.

Where those teams landed in the College Football Playoff bracket was based on a formula created by conference commissioners. That jumbled the pairings — there are big gaps, for instance, between where a team is seeded and where it's ranked — and made a strong case for tinkering in the future.

"I think the process to rank the best 25 teams is a great process," said selection committee chairman Warde Manuel. "I've heard debates and discussions about how the seeding of the tournament should go. I will leave that up to the commissioners."

Among the choices the commissioners made months ago that set the template for the bracket released Sunday:

- Favoring conference champions by giving four of them byes and one more an automatic spot in the field, no matter where they were ranked in the CFP's top 25.

- Not reseeding after the first round, a move that could have given the best teams more favorable early matchups.

- Making no attempt to avoid regular-season rematches early in the playoffs.

There was also the issue of the 12-team bracket, which could very well be expanded in the next year or two.

Those choices created a field full of possibilities, but one containing head-scratching matchups. The choices could, in some eyes, undermine the CFP's main mission, which is (making more money while) providing more "access" — in other words, a fair shake to more than four deserving teams.

For instance, top-seeded and undefeated Oregon could play its first game against Big

Ten foe Ohio State, which was ranked No. 2 for much of the season and lost to the Ducks by a point earlier this year.

And Boise State, from the non-power Mountain West Conference, is the third seed, even though the committee ranked the Broncos ninth.

Here is how things might have looked if certain rules that could come into play in the future were already in place:

What if the committee gave no preference to conference champions?

First things first — there's not a single tweak that would've placed Oregon at anything other than the No. 1 seed. The Ducks are the only undefeated team in major college football and winning a title this year would leave them a jaw-dropping 16-0.

Had the rules called for simply slotting in the top 12 teams, though, Alabama would be in the bracket and Oregon's path would be wildly different. A look at the coulda-been matchups:

- **No. 12 Arizona State at No. 5 Notre Dame:** The Big 12 champs would've made it because they rose three spots after that big victory over Iowa State.

- **No. 11 Alabama at No. 6 Ohio State:** Without automatic berths for conference champions, the Crimson Tide would have been in, not at the ReliaQuest Bowl against Michigan.

- **No. 10 SMU at No. 7 Tennessee:** The Mustangs could've slept soundly despite that heartbreaking loss to Clemson. And the Vols would have had a home game instead of a trip to Ohio State.

- **No. 9 Boise State at No. 8 Indiana:** The Hoosiers would've gotten the home game their coach thought they deserved, with the winner facing the Ducks.

The third and fourth byes would have gone to Texas and Penn State, both losers in their conference title games — a turn that would have furthered questions as to



AJ MAST/AP

Oregon RB Jordan James carries the ball against Penn State in the Big Ten title game on Saturday in Indianapolis. Because the CFP doesn't reseed teams after the first round, unbeaten Oregon could end up with a tougher quarterfinal than it might have otherwise.

whether those games have outlived their usefulness.

What if the committee believed in reseeding or in avoiding early rematches?

As things stand, Oregon will face Ohio State or Tennessee at the Rose Bowl in the quarterfinals. Reseeding or avoiding regular-season matchups in the early rounds would likely have given the Ducks an easier game to start.

Under a reseeding scenario, the Ohio State matchup could only happen if every home team — Texas, Penn State, Notre Dame and the Buckeyes — were to win its first-round game.

This tweak also would prevent this year's possibility of Clemson vs. Arizona State in the quarterfinals — two teams that weren't in the top 12 a week ago. Or the prospect of two bye teams — ASU and Boise State — being big underdogs against teams, think Texas or Penn State, that have to win a

game to play them.

What if the committee had gone to 14 teams instead of 12?

This one is a loaded question, because when the playoffs expand they will do so with different rules.

One formula that has been kicking around involves giving three automatic spots to the Big Ten and SEC, two to the ACC and Big 12, one to the best-ranked champion of a Group of Five conference and three at-large spots.

This, too, would cause problems and shuffling and teams getting passed over. Where it really breaks down is that 18th-ranked Iowa State of the Big 12 would land in this bracket as the 14 seed despite losing to Arizona State by 26.

Hard to see that going over well at Miami, or Ole Miss, or Colorado.

Then again, nobody ever said this was going to be fair.

Question of rust vs. rest poses dilemma for playoff coaches

BY PETE IACOBELLI
Associated Press

CLEMSON, S.C. — The expanded College Football Playoff brings something new for coaches who are used to planning for one game, maybe two: Rust vs. rest.

The 12-team bracket released Sunday features four teams (Oregon, Georgia, Boise State and Arizona State) with first-round byes, whose games will take place Dec. 31 and Jan. 1.

First-round games — Clemson at Texas, SMU at Penn State, Indiana at Notre Dame and Tennessee at Ohio State — all take place on Dec. 20-21.

The CFP committee intentionally or otherwise, gave first-round opponents an equal amount of rest. Clemson, Texas, SMU and Penn State played in championship games Saturday. Indiana, Notre Dame, Ohio State and Tennessee last played on Nov. 30.

It's in the quarterfinals when college football might find out if plenty of rest leads to some rust.

The four top seeds get a long, welcome break from a grueling season. Georgia coach Kirby Smart made it clear accepting the trophy at the SEC championship game: "It means rest for a team that (SEC Commissioner) Greg Sankey and his staff sent on the road all year long. We get to take a little bit of a break and get ready for the College Football Playoff. This team needs some rest mentally, needs a little time off."

But they will face an opponent filled with momentum that's already tasted playoff success.

"You don't stay the same during a bye week," said Pete Shinnick, Towson football coach. "Your team changes. You just hope it gets you better."

Few know better than Shinnick. He was coach at Division II West Florida in 2019 when he and his Argonauts defeated regional top seed Valdosta State, coming off a bye week, and kicked off a surprise run to the national title.

"We were a team of destiny, no doubt

about it," Shinnick recalled.

Shinnick said he thinks teams like Clemson, Georgia and Ohio State that have played in the four-team CFP championship chase know how to keep their teams on point because they've done it before after lengthy layoffs. Newcomers like Boise State and Arizona State?

"It will be an adjustment," he said.

Some head coaches don't see the debate, focused instead on championship goals.

"Are you asking me if I want to win a conference championship?" said Clemson coach Dabo Swinney two weeks ago before his Tigers secured their seventh CFP berth with a 34-31 win over SMU in the ACC championship game.

While byes are a CFP first, other NCAA divisions have long had uneven bracketing in their playoffs.

The Championship Subdivision has had a tournament since 1978. It had a 12-team field in 1982, set up like this year's CFP. The grouping, then classified as Division I-AA,

expanded to 16 playoff teams in 1986, 20 in 2010 and its current number of 24 in 2013.

From 2013 through this season, minus the COVID-19 season of 2020, 18 of 88 non-seeded teams won against FCS top eight seeds that received an extra week of rest. None of those 18 winners advanced past the semifinals.

Montana State coach Brent Vigen, whose team beat UT-Martin 49-17 on Saturday as the FCS's top overall seed, was an assistant at North Dakota State for three national titles from 2011-13. He said the extra time off was essential to the Bison's championship run.

"It really allows you to reset in some ways, put the regular season behind you and certainly get healthier," Vigen said.

He concentrated on fundamentals during bye week workouts to avoid coming out flat in their playoff opener.

"We go good (players) on good," Vigen said. "If you were just stone cold taking these weeks off, I think you'd be in trouble."

NFL

ROUNDUP

Darnold's 5 TDs lead Vikings to 6th straight win

Associated Press
MINNEAPOLIS — Sam Darnold threw for 347 yards and five touchdowns, both career highs, and the Minnesota Vikings pulled away from Kirk Cousins and the Atlanta Falcons 42-21 on Sunday for their sixth straight victory.

Darnold added another highlight to his brilliant first season in Minnesota following the departure of Cousins in free agency to Atlanta with a 22-for-28 performance and no turnover-worthy plays despite heavy first-half pressure.

Darnold passed for 250 yards after halftime to help the Vikings (11-2) break a 21-all tie early in the fourth quarter and stay one game behind NFC North-leading Detroit with a final-week matchup looming with the Lions. Jordan Addison had eight catches for 133 yards and three scores and Justin Jefferson racked up seven receptions for 132 yards and two touchdowns after going the past six games without scoring.

Cousins threw two more interceptions without a touchdown in his return to Minnesota, where he was greeted by loud boos and left with Atlanta's fourth consecutive loss to tumble out of first place in the NFC South and fall one game behind Tampa Bay.

Eagles 22, Panthers 16: Saquon Barkley rushed for 124 yards to break the Eagles season record, Jalen Hurts threw two touchdown passes and ran for a score, and host Philadelphia won its ninth straight game over Carolina.

The Eagles (11-2) maintained their position as the No. 2 team in the NFC, behind Detroit (12-1), after a mostly lethargic effort against the Panthers (3-10).

Barkley added another milestone in his MVP push when he used a 9-yard run in the fourth quarter to surpass LeSean McCoy's Eagles record of 1,607 yards, set in 2013. Barkley has 1,623 yards with four games left.

Steelers 27, Browns 14: Russell Wilson threw for 158 yards and two touchdowns as host Pittsburgh pulled away from mistake-prone Cleveland.

The Steelers (10-3) beat Cleveland at home during the regular season for the 21st straight time, even with leading receiver George Pickens watching from the side-

line while missing the first game of his career due to a groin injury.

While it took Wilson a while to get going with the productive if volatile Pickens out of the mix, he found his footing in the second half by connecting on touchdown passes to Pat Freiermuth and Van Jefferson as the Steelers moved two games ahead of rival Baltimore for the AFC North lead with four weeks to go.

Buccaneers 28, Raiders 13: Baker Mayfield threw for 295 yards and three touchdowns, helping host Tampa Bay beat Las Vegas and take over sole possession of first place in the NFC South.

Mayfield tossed scoring passes of 15 yards and 29 yards to rookie Jalen McMillan. Rachaad White scored on a 5-yard reception and a 3-yard run as the Bucs (7-6) won for the third straight week against a last-place opponent to revive their hopes for a fourth consecutive division title.

The Raiders (2-11) lost quarterback Aidan O'Connell to a knee injury in addition to extending the NFL's longest losing streak to nine games.

O'Connell was carted off the field after being shoved to the ground by Bucs defensive lineman Calijah Kancey after throwing a pass late in the third quarter.

The quarterback, in his second game back after being sidelined nearly six weeks with a broken thumb, remained on the ground after an 8-yard, third-down completion to Jakobi Meyers. Kancey chased O'Connell out of the pocket toward the Bucs sideline and shoved him from behind after the ball was released.

Kancey was not penalized for a late hit.

Dolphins 32, Jets 26 (OT): Tua Tagovailoa threw a 10-yard touchdown pass to Jonnu Smith in overtime and host Miami overcame Aaron Rodgers' first 300-yard passing game in nearly three years to beat New York.

After Jason Sanders tied it with 7 seconds left in regulation with a 42-yard field goal, Tagovailoa quickly moved the Dolphins (6-7) down the field and they beat the Jets for the ninth straight time in Miami.

That came after Anders Carlson gave the struggling Jets (3-10) —



BRUCE KLUCKHOHN/AP

Minnesota Vikings wide receiver Jordan Addison catches a 6-yard touchdown pass against the Atlanta Falcons on Sunday in Minneapolis. Addison caught three of Sam Darnold's career-high five TD passes.

who were eliminated from post-season contention for the 14th straight year — the lead with a 42-yarder with 52 seconds remaining. But Malik Washington put the Dolphins in great position to help set up Sanders' field goal with a 45-yard kickoff return to Miami's 46-yard line.

Tagovailoa was 33-for-47 for 331 yards and two TDs. He had just one incompleting on Miami's eight-play, 70-yard scoring drive that was capped by Smith's fourth touchdown of the season.

Jaguars 10, Titans 6: Tank Bigsby ran for an 8-yard touchdown with 6:46 left as visiting Jacksonville snapped a five-game skid and ended Tennessee's slim playoff hopes.

Jacksonville (3-10) came in already eliminated with Trevor Lawrence out for the rest of this season. The Jaguars left with only their second victory in the past 11 trips to Music City and second in the past three.

The Titans (3-10) came in needing to win out to even have a chance of their first playoff berth since the 2021 season ended with a divisional loss on their home field. Tennessee has fired both a general manager and coach since then.

Saints 14, Giants 11: Bryan Bresee leaped over the Giants' line to block a potential tying field goal with 11 seconds left, and visiting New Orleans held on for a victory over New York after losing quarterback Derek Carr to an injury late in the fourth quarter.

The Giants lost their eighth straight, one shy of the team record.

Carr, who finished 20 of 31 for 219 yards, was hurt with just under four minutes to play when he dove for a first down near the Saints 40 and landed hard. He left the field shortly after the play and it almost cost the Saints (5-8).

New York got the ball back at its 27 with 1:21 to play and drove to the Saints 12, with Drew Lock

scrambling for 25 yards on fourth down and then finding Malik Nabers for 23 yards. The Giants tried twice to throw to the end zone for a winning touchdown before sending out Graham Gano to try to force overtime. Gano's kick was a little low and the Giants couldn't defend the jumping Bresee, who got a hand on the ball.

Seahawks 30, Cardinals 18: Zach Charbonnet ran for a career-high 134 yards and two touchdowns, Geno Smith threw for 233 yards and a score, and visiting Seattle beat Arizona to remain atop the NFC West.

The Seahawks (8-5) won their fourth straight and swept the season series from the Cardinals (6-7).

Seattle shook off an early deficit to take a 24-10 lead by halftime. Charbonnet broke a tackle at midfield and sprinted 51 yards for a touchdown with 2:36 left in the second quarter.

Charbonnet, 23, thrived in an increased role, taking over for injured starter Kenneth Walker III. The second-year player also caught seven passes for 59 yards. Smith completed 24 of 30 passes.

49ers 38, Bears 13: Brock Purdy threw for 325 yards and two touchdowns and host San Francisco bounced back from two blowout losses to beat Chicago and spoil interim coach Thomas Brown's debut.

The 49ers (6-7) had been outscored by 53 points the past two weeks in losses at Green Bay and Buffalo that left their playoff hopes teetering.

Purdy delivered his third 300-yard passing game of the season with two TDs to Jauan Jennings, fill-in back Isaac Guerendo gained 128 yards from scrimmage and scored on two TD runs and George Kittle had six catches for 151 yards. That helped deliver the highest-scoring game of the season for the 49ers.

Scoreboard

| American Conference | | | | | | |
|---------------------|----|----|---|------|-----|-----|
| East | | | | | | |
| | W | L | T | Pct | PF | PA |
| y-Buffalo | 10 | 3 | 0 | .769 | 397 | 268 |
| Miami | 6 | 7 | 0 | .462 | 264 | 292 |
| e-N.Y. Jets | 3 | 10 | 0 | .231 | 251 | 300 |
| e-New England | 3 | 10 | 0 | .231 | 221 | 307 |
| South | | | | | | |
| | W | L | T | Pct | PF | PA |
| Houston | 8 | 5 | 0 | .615 | 308 | 288 |
| Indianapolis | 6 | 7 | 0 | .462 | 267 | 298 |
| e-Jacksonville | 3 | 10 | 0 | .231 | 238 | 345 |
| e-Tennessee | 3 | 10 | 0 | .231 | 227 | 342 |
| North | | | | | | |
| | W | L | T | Pct | PF | PA |
| Pittsburgh | 10 | 3 | 0 | .769 | 323 | 238 |
| Baltimore | 8 | 5 | 0 | .615 | 383 | 318 |
| Cincinnati | 4 | 8 | 0 | .333 | 335 | 340 |
| e-Cleveland | 3 | 10 | 0 | .231 | 232 | 335 |
| West | | | | | | |
| | W | L | T | Pct | PF | PA |
| y-Kansas City | 12 | 1 | 0 | .923 | 308 | 252 |
| Denver | 8 | 5 | 0 | .615 | 305 | 234 |
| L.A. Chargers | 8 | 5 | 0 | .615 | 277 | 207 |
| e-Las Vegas | 2 | 11 | 0 | .154 | 236 | 361 |

| National Conference | | | | | | |
|---------------------|----|----|---|------|-----|-----|
| East | | | | | | |
| | W | L | T | Pct | PF | PA |
| x-Philadelphia | 11 | 2 | 0 | .846 | 342 | 234 |
| Washington | 8 | 5 | 0 | .615 | 376 | 296 |
| Dallas | 5 | 7 | 0 | .417 | 248 | 339 |
| e-N.Y. Giants | 2 | 11 | 0 | .154 | 194 | 293 |
| South | | | | | | |
| | W | L | T | Pct | PF | PA |
| Tampa Bay | 7 | 6 | 0 | .538 | 363 | 309 |
| Atlanta | 6 | 7 | 0 | .462 | 278 | 333 |
| New Orleans | 5 | 8 | 0 | .385 | 290 | 292 |
| Carolina | 3 | 10 | 0 | .231 | 233 | 388 |
| North | | | | | | |
| | W | L | T | Pct | PF | PA |
| x-Detroit | 12 | 1 | 0 | .923 | 417 | 234 |
| Minnesota | 11 | 2 | 0 | .846 | 339 | 240 |
| Green Bay | 9 | 4 | 0 | .692 | 349 | 274 |
| Chicago | 4 | 9 | 0 | .308 | 254 | 278 |
| West | | | | | | |
| | W | L | T | Pct | PF | PA |
| Seattle | 8 | 5 | 0 | .615 | 302 | 283 |
| L.A. Rams | 7 | 6 | 0 | .538 | 298 | 332 |
| Arizona | 6 | 7 | 0 | .462 | 284 | 289 |
| San Francisco | 6 | 7 | 0 | .462 | 308 | 308 |

e-Eliminated from playoffs
x-clinched playoff spot
y-clinched division

Thursday's game
Detroit 34, Green Bay 31

Sunday's games
Jacksonville 10, Tennessee 6
Miami 32, N.Y. Jets 26, OT
Minnesota 42, Atlanta 21
New Orleans 14, N.Y. Giants 11
Philadelphia 22, Carolina 16
Pittsburgh 27, Cleveland 14
Tampa Bay 28, Las Vegas 13
Seattle 30, Arizona 18
L.A. Rams 44, Buffalo 42
San Francisco 38, Chicago 13
Kansas City 19, L.A. Chargers 17

Monday's game
Cincinnati at Dallas

Open: Baltimore, Denver, Houston, Indianapolis, New England, Washington

Thursday, Dec. 12
L.A. Rams at San Francisco

Sunday, Dec. 15
Baltimore at N.Y. Giants
Cincinnati at Tennessee
Dallas at Carolina
Kansas City at Cleveland
Miami at Houston
N.Y. Jets at Jacksonville
Washington at New Orleans
Buffalo at Detroit
Indianapolis at Denver
New England at Arizona
Pittsburgh at Philadelphia
Tampa Bay at L.A. Chargers
Green Bay at Seattle

Monday, Dec. 16
Chicago at Minnesota
Atlanta at Las Vegas

Thursday, Dec. 19
Denver at L.A. Chargers

Saturday, Dec. 21
Houston at Kansas City
Pittsburgh at Baltimore

NFL



CHARLIE RIEDEL/AP

Chiefs kicker Matthew Wright watches his game-winning field goal as time expires against the Los Angeles Chargers on Sunday in Kansas City, Mo. The Chiefs clinched their ninth consecutive AFC West crown.

Chiefs top Chargers to win 9th straight AFC West title

By DAVID SMALE
Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Andy Reid doesn't need to schedule a stress test anytime soon. He seems to get one every week.

The Kansas City Chiefs coach saw his third-string kicker doink a 31-yard field goal off the left upright and through for a victory that secured Kansas City's ninth straight AFC West title.

It was the Chiefs' 15th straight win in a one-score game over the past two seasons.

Patrick Mahomes led the two-time defending Super Bowl champions (12-1) on a clock-killing 4½-minute drive to set up Matthew Wright's fourth field goal. The ball clanged off the upright in the latest narrow escape for Kansas City, which is 10-0 this season in one-score games.

The Chiefs have had three kickers make a winning field goal as time expired this season. No other team in NFL history has had more than one kicker do so in a season.

After securing a first down inside of the 2-minute warning, both Mahomes and Reid were content with running out the clock for the potential game winner, rather than trying to score a touchdown and leave time on the clock for Justin Herbert and the Los Angeles Chargers.

"I trusted Matthew, so I was good with where we were," Reid said. "Percentages are pretty

high. I know we won a game in that same situation on the opposite end, so I get it, but he's a solid gamer, so I wasn't too worried about it."

Wright said he wasn't thinking about the game situation, instead focusing on what he had to do if it came down to his right leg. As the ball headed toward the upright and started drifting left, Wright said his thought wasn't good.

"It's not a good one," he said. "I want it to just go right down the middle, obviously."

Kansas City's nine consecutive division titles are two short of the New England Patriots' NFL record of 11.

The Chiefs led 13-0 at halftime after the Chargers (8-5) punted on their first five possessions, but Los Angeles woke up in the second half, scoring on each of its three drives. Cameron Dicker's 37-yard field goal put the Chargers ahead 17-16 with 4:35 left.

"We just had to settle in," said Herbert, who was 21 of 30 for 213 yards and a TD. "We didn't make enough plays in the first half and we didn't execute the way we wanted to. Pass game, run game, we weren't moving the ball well. That's on us and I praise the guys for staying in there, staying patient and making plays in the second half."

Mahomes went to work, hitting Xavier Worthy for 14 yards on third-and-10 and scrambling for

another first down. After the two-minute warning, Mahomes scrambled, dodged a would-be tackler and lobbed a throw to a kneeling Travis Kelce that allowed Kansas City to run the clock down to zero.

"I went through my reads," Mahomes said. "As I was ready to run, I just saw 87 just sitting right there in the middle of the field, open. So I fired it to him."

Mahomes says he's not surprised that Kelce stepped up in the clutch.

"He means the world to me," he said. "Without getting like emotional, he's a guy that has really kind of made me who I am in my career. (He's a) true leader on the football field. He's someone that I can just go to at any moment, and he's going to make a big play happen, and as he's done throughout his career."

Mahomes was sacked three times and has taken 13 sacks over the past three games, the most of any three-game stretch in his career.

Los Angeles opened the second half with a 13-play, 79-yard drive that concluded with Gus Edwards' 3-yard touchdown run. Following a Chiefs punt, the Chargers then went 74 yards on four plays, aided by 39-yard pass interference penalty on Justin Reid, to take a 14-13 lead. Herbert found Quentin Johnson for a 4-yard touchdown, LA's first TD pass in 13 quarters.

Rams hold on to end Bills' win streak at 7

By GREG BEACHAM
Associated Press

INGLEWOOD, Calif. — Matthew Stafford and the Los Angeles Rams had to pile up a veritable mountain of points, yards and time-of-possession advantage early to give themselves even a chance against the Buffalo Bills' ferocious fourth-quarter rally and a historic six-touchdown performance by Josh Allen.

Los Angeles just barely had enough to hang on for a victory that might change its season.

Stafford passed for 320 yards and hit Puka Nacua for a 19-yard touchdown with 1:54 to play, and the Rams (7-6) overcame Allen's three TD passes and three TD runs to snap the Buffalo's seven-game winning streak with a 44-42 victory Sunday.

Allen passed for 342 yards and rushed for 82 yards for the Bills (10-3), who hadn't lost since Oct. 6 in Houston. He became the first player in NFL history with three passing TDs and three rushing TDs in a game during his league-record fifth career outing with at least two of each — but it wasn't enough to overcome Buffalo's 17-point deficit entering the fourth.

"Josh Allen is an alien," Rams coach Sean McVay said. "Some of the stuff that he can do and the things that he can create, we knew he was capable of that. He's shown that. That's why he's as well-respected and well-regarded in this league as he is."

"But our guys made just enough plays to be able to come out on top."

Allen capped his third long touchdown drive of the fourth quarter by scoring on a 1-yard dive with 1:00 left, but Ronnie Rivers recovered the onside kick and the Rams ran out the clock on their first win over the Bills since 2012 and first at home since 1983.

This game was monumental for

both teams: LA and Buffalo combined for 902 yards of offense without a turnover or a quarterback sack. The Rams had the ball for 17 more minutes and ran 18 more plays than the Bills — and they needed every bit of it.

Nacua, who had 12 catches for 162 yards and also scored his first career rushing TD, called it "fantastic being able to feel like, man, this is what it feels like when the Rams are moving and connecting on all cylinders."

Hunter Long returned a blocked punt 22 yards for a touchdown for Los Angeles, which has won six of eight to stay in the NFC West race. Kyren Williams rushed for 87 yards and two TDs as the Rams moved above .500 for the first time this season.

Allen and Buffalo ran out of time after they struggled through the first three quarters, which ended with LA leading 38-21 before the Bills stirred from their post-division title-clinching hangover.

"Hate losing," Allen said. "If you lose by two or lose by 100, it doesn't matter, you're still losing. Offensively, we have to find ways to score before and after the half. We didn't do our part."

Allen dismissed his historic six TDs: "I have to make one more play than they do. It was a total team loss in three phases. We didn't play up to our standards."

Ty Johnson and Khalil Shakir caught long TD passes for Buffalo, which became the first NFL team to score six touchdowns without a turnover in a loss. The Bills' 42 points were the most scored in defeat in franchise history.

"They did a great job controlling the line of scrimmage on both sides of the ball," Bills coach Sean McDermott said. "Defensively and special teams, neither were good enough to help us win this game."



GREGORY BULL/AP

Buffalo Bills QB Josh Allen is hit by Los Angeles Rams linebacker Jared Verse on Sunday in Inglewood, Calif. Allen became the first NFL player with three rushing TDs and three passing TDs in a game.

SPORTS



Chiefs bank another one

Field goal off upright gives Kansas City 9th straight AFC West title » **NFL, Page 23**

MLB



CHRIS SZAGOLA/AP

The New York Yankees' Juan Soto gets ready for an at-bat during a game against the Phillies on July 30 in Philadelphia. Soto, who has a .285 batting average with 201 homers, 592 RBIs and 769 walks in his seven major league seasons, has agreed to a contract with New York Mets that could be worth up to \$805 million.

Soto, Mets redefine megadeal

Source: Slugger agrees to record \$765 million, 15-year contract with no deferred money

By RONALD BLUM
Associated Press

DALLAS — Star outfielder Juan Soto and the New York Mets agreed Sunday to a record \$765 million, 15-year contract, a person familiar with the deal told The Associated Press, a deal that could escalate to \$805 million and is believed to be the largest pact in team sports history.

The person spoke on condition of anonymity because the agreement, first reported by the New York Post, was subject to a

\$51M

The average annual salary the New York Mets will pay outfielder Juan Soto under the terms of his 15-year contract with the team.

Associated Press

successful physical.

While there are no definitive records in sports beyond the United States, Soto's deal is thought to eclipse those in all other team

sports. The deal, spurning the New York Yankees' attempt to retain the star who helped them reach the World Series, was reached on the eve of the first full day of baseball's annual winter meetings.

He would have the right to opt out of the contract after the 2029 season if the Mets don't at that time increase the average annual value by \$4 million annually. Soto will get a \$75 million signing bonus, payable upon the deal's approval by the commissioner's office.

Soto's agreement is the largest and longest in Major League Baseball history, topping Shohei Ohtani's \$700 million, 10-year contract with the Los Angeles Dodgers, a deal signed last December. That agreement included \$680 million in deferred payments and is valued at just under \$46.1 million annually for baseball's luxury tax.

Soto's agreement does not include deferred money, the person said, leaving its

SEE MEGADEAL ON PAGE 20

Could the CFP bracket be made more fair? » Analysis, Page 21

