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MICHAEL ABRAMS/Stars and Stripes

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth walks with Gen. Michael Langley, commander of U.S. Africa Command, following a town hall meeting at AFRICOM headquarters in Stuttgart, Germany, on Tuesday.

Hegseth praises AFRICOM mission

Pentagon chief meets with rank-and-file troops, 2 combatant commanders in Germany

BY JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth started his day here Tuesday lifting weights with Green Berets and ended it by giving special recognition to a U.S. Africa Command team that assisted with a recent airstrike on Islamic militants in Somalia.

The Pentagon chief, on his first international trip in his new job, met with rank-and-file troops and two combatant commanders for high-level briefings on threats ranging from militants in Africa to Russia's war in Ukraine.

"No offense, general," Hegseth told AFRICOM's Gen. Michael Langley during a news conference. "I probably connect more with those guys (young troops) than I do with four-star generals."

Hegseth's stop in Stuttgart, home to AFRICOM and U.S. European Command headquarters, came ahead of meetings with NATO allies in Brussels, where Hegseth said he will deliver President Donald Trump's message that allies need to step up defense spending.

In Europe, there is uncertainty about the America's future troop commitment on the Continent. At the end of Trump's first term, he sought to pull 12,000 troops out of Germany in frustration over Berlin's low levels of military spending.

Concerns over China have raised the prospect of shifting more Pentagon capabilities to the Pacific.

However, Hegseth said Tues-

SEE HEGSETH ON PAGE 4

Fort Liberty base name restored to Fort Bragg

BY JOSEPH DITZLER
Stars and Stripes

Fort Liberty, the Army's largest post, is once again Fort Bragg but without the Confederate tie.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth ordered the base renamed Monday while en route to Stuttgart, Germany, from Joint Base Andrews, Md., aboard an Air Force C-17 Globemaster III, according to Pentagon chief spokesman John Ullyot.

"Bragg is back," Hegseth said after signing the order that changes the name to Fort Roland L. Bragg, according to a video on the Defense Visual Information Distribution Service.

The name change refers not to Confederate Gen. Braxton Bragg, for whom the base was named in 1918, but to Pfc. Roland L. Bragg, "a World War II hero who earned the Silver Star and Purple Heart for his exceptional courage during the Battle of the Bulge," Ullyot said in a news release.

"This change underscores the installation's legacy of recognizing those who have demonstrated extraordinary service and sacrifice for the nation," the release states.

Bragg, a building mover and sawmill operator from Sabbatus, Maine, was an Army paratrooper in Europe who "saw considerable

SEE NAME ON PAGE 4

RELATED
Transgender recruits stopped from joining ranks
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BUSINESS/WEATHER

Iran loosens import limits on foreign cars, iPhones

Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran — All architecture student Amirhossein Azizi wanted for his 19th birthday was the latest iPhone — and for Iran's cash-strapped theocracy, it was just the gift they needed as well.

Just buying a top-of-the-line iPhone 16 Pro Max in Iran's capital cost him on the day $1,880. An additional $530 is required for import fees and registration on government-managed mobile phone networks.

"I'm very happy to own one of the most expensive phones in the country," Azizi said. His father, Mohammad, laughed nearby and added: "Maybe if they had to earn the money themselves, they wouldn't be so quick to spend it."

The purchase is only possible after Iran lifted import bans on expensive goods like foreign cars and new iPhones, yielding to public demand for the products while also trying to mask the dire straits of its economy.

While being described as a way to boost Iran's much-vaunted "resistance economy," the decisions trapped Iranians into buying more affordable locally produced vehicles long derided as "death wagons" and boosted the prices of aging, second-hand iPhones.

They also provide Iran with much-needed tax revenues as its government struggles under international sanctions over its nuclear program. Uncertainty over how President Donald Trump will deal with Iran also put pressure on its rial currency, which sits at record lows against the dollar.

EXCHANGE RATES

Military rates	
Euro costs (Feb. 12)	0.94
British pound (Feb. 12)	$1.21
Japanese yen (Feb. 12)	147.00
South Korean won (Feb. 12)	1417.00

Commercial rates	
Bahrain (Dinar)	0.3768
Britain (Pound)	1.2367
Canada (Dollar)	1.4320
China (Yuan)	7.3053
Denmark (Krone)	7.2179
Egypt (Pound)	50.4808
Euro	0.9679
Hong Kong (Dollar)	7.7931
Hungary (Forint)	390.17
Israel (Shekel)	3.5857
Japan (Yen)	152.31
Kuwait (Dinar)	0.3089
Norway (Krone)	11.2132
Philippines (Peso)	58.17
Poland (Zloty)	4.04
Saudi Arabia (Riyal)	3.7502
Singapore (Dollar)	1.3549
South Korea (Won)	1455.60
Switzerland (Franc)	0.9136
Thailand (Baht)	34.09
Turkey (NewLira)	36.0490

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

INTEREST RATES

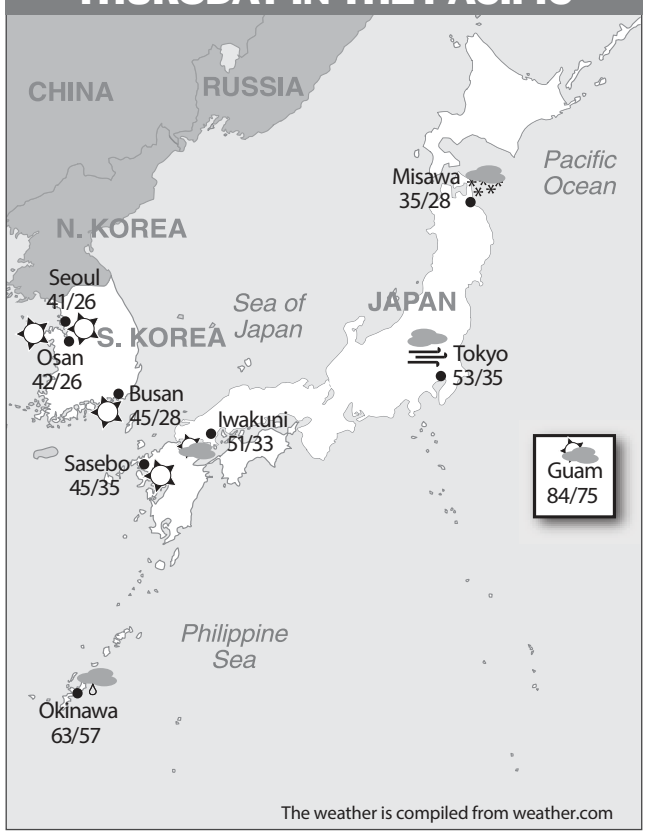
Prime rate	7.50
Interest Rates Discount rate	4.50
Federal funds market rate	4.33
3-month bill	4.34
30-year bond	4.71

WEATHER OUTLOOK

WEDNESDAY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

WEDNESDAY IN EUROPE

THURSDAY IN THE PACIFIC



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MILITARY

Transgender recruits halted from service

By Matthew Adams
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth has stopped new transgender recruits from joining the military and halted medical procedures for service members diagnosed with gender dysphoria, according to a new memorandum.

"Effective immediately, all new accessions for individuals with a history of gender dysphoria are paused," Hegseth wrote in the memo dated Friday and filed Monday with the U.S. District Court in Washington. "All unscheduled, scheduled or planned medical procedures associated with affirming or facilitating a gender transition for service members are paused."

Hegseth said individuals with gender dysphoria already in the military would be "treated with dignity and respect."

The move follows four executive orders signed Jan. 27 by President Donald Trump that directly impacted the U.S. military, including revising the Defense Department's transgender policy.

Trump's executive order does not ban transgender troops but requires the Defense Department to update medical standards "to establish high standards of readiness, lethality … and integrity." It will end the use of pronouns in the military "that inaccurately reflect an individual's sex" and prohibits men from "sharing sleeping, changing, or bathing in facilities" designated for women. The order also applies to women using facilities for men.

The executive order also directed the Pentagon to determine a policy for service members based on readiness within 30 days.

A U.S. judge last week asked lawyers for Trump's administration to ensure six troops who sued to stop the executive order targeting transgender troops are not removed from service before further court proceedings are held, Reuters reported.

Former President Joe Biden ended Trump's de facto ban on transgender service members and allowed individuals who meet military entrance qualifications to enlist, serve in their self-identified gender and access care deemed medically necessary for gender transition.

In July 2017, Trump issued a series of tweets announcing his intention to ban transgender men and women from serving "in any capacity." The Pentagon's de facto ban on transgender men and women enlisting in the military went into effect in April 2019, following nearly two years of legal battles launched after transgender service members and military hopefuls sought to halt its implementation.

The Pentagon long insisted its policy was not a blanket ban because of its protections for those transgender service members who came out after the 2016 policy, and a waiver process that could allow some transgender people to join the military.

But the policy barred nearly all people diagnosed with gender dysphoria — described by the American Psychiatric Association as "a conflict between a person's physical or assigned gender and the gender with which he/she/they identify." It did allow people to enlist with a diagnosis of gender dysphoria who had doctor certification that they had remained stable in their biological sex for 36 months. It disqualified all people who had medically transitioned their sex.

The Pentagon in March 2021, when the department unveiled the policy change to allow transgender troops, estimated the number of service members who identified as transgender ranged from 1,000 to 8,000. The Human Rights Campaign in November estimated a ban on transgender troops could impact about 15,000 service members.

A Gallup poll published Monday said 58% of Americans favored allowing openly transgender individuals serving in the military, down from 71% in 2019.

Military backs out of huge recruiting event as part of DEI purge

By Rose L. Thayer
Stars and Stripes

Military organizations have backed out of an engineering, science and technology conference set for this weekend as part of a new Pentagon policy that bans diversity-focused events.

The Becoming Everything You Are Conference — formerly known as the Black Engineer of the Year Award Conference — has a record of supporting and celebrating military employment as a civilian or service member and has consistently helped the Defense Department recruit hundreds of young professionals, said Tyrone Taborn, publisher, chairman and CEO of Career Communications Group, which is behind the nearly 40-year-old event.

The conference — held each February in Baltimore — is focused on careers and mentorship in science, technology, engineering and math. Last year, the Army recruited about 300 people, he said.

But given the push from President Donald Trump's administration to end all forms of diversity, equity and inclusion, or DEI, the Defense Department has ordered all its organizations cancel official participation in this weekend's event. The federal government had committed to spend about $1.5 million on the event, Taborn said.

Pentagon officials responded to the cancellations by pointing to a policy released Jan. 31 by Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth called "Identity Months Dead at DoD" that bars use of any official resources for celebrations, events or cultural awareness months. Service members and civilians can attend these events in an unofficial capacity outside of duty hours, according to the policy.

Taborn said he was shocked by the move. He said the conference has moved beyond affinity group affiliation to be one of the largest conferences in the country with up to 14,000 attendees each year. He said he poured over the conference sessions this year to ensure each was compliant with new Pentagon directives and adjusted or removed any legacy sessions of concern.

It has not helped as cancellations continued Monday, he said.

Military personnel can still attend the three-day event, which begins Thursday, in an unofficial capacity, according to statements from the Air Force, Navy and National Guard Bureau. Army Futures Command, which is listed on the conference website, did not respond to questions Monday.

No military services that planned to participate in the event would provide the amount of money that they've lost by canceling the conference. The BEYA website stated it does not provide refunds less than 30 days before the event.

"I'm just blown away. I don't understand," Taborn said.

Pentagon pressure on its contractors also led SpaceX, Booz Allen Hamilton and Naval Nuclear Laboratory to cancel, he said. He fears more will follow.

U.S. Army

Lance Davidson, a human resources representative for Military Surface Deployment and Distribution Command, speaks with a potential candidate at the 2023 BEYA Career Fair in National Harbor, Md.

The Defense Department did not respond Monday on whether it has pressured contractors.

"BEYA is the major recruiting activity for everybody, and they put all their money behind this. It's such an ecosystem," Taborn said. "We're not even DEI, unless you want to say there's too many Black people or too many Hispanic people coming to the event. … We just can't figure it out."

The military has struggled in recent years to meet its recruiting goals for troops and keep its civilian employment ranks filled. The Army last year hosted three large hiring fairs in professional sports arenas to attract potential candidates to fill thousands of vacancies.

A federal hiring freeze signed into policy by Trump on Jan. 20 excludes defense personnel.

The Army received 5,500 resumes and conducted more than 540 interviews at BEYA in 2023, according to a news release about its participation that year.

Army National Guard, Missile Defense Agency, the Air Force and Navy are listed as exhibitors in this year's conference. The Army's Aviation and Missile Command extended 37 tentative job offers at the 2024 event, according to another release. Of those, 30 people accepted jobs.

Army National Guard, Air Force and Navy are listed as Diamond Partners of this year's event, which costs about $50,000, according to the BEYA website. Army Futures Command is a Platinum Partner, valued at about $40,000, and Missile Defense Agency is Bronze at about $15,000. Packages include exhibitor space, participant passes, branding and advertisements.

Outside of personnel recruitment, the BEYA Conference hosts a mentorship program that pairs service members with high school students. The Stars and Stripes Dinner held during the conference highlights excellence in military service. The guest list this year has dropped from 1,100 to 600, Taborn said.

Each dinner puts a spotlight on a different military service branch and the Coast Guard was selected this year, according to Taborn and a Coast Guard letter sent to its personnel in November.

MILITARY

Service academies' board members ousted by Trump

President cites 'woke leftist' ideology as reason for firing

BY PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

Members of boards that provide oversight at the U.S. service academies are no longer in their posts, after President Donald Trump fired them for what he said was their promotion of "woke leftist" ideology.

In a message Monday on social media platform Truth Social, Trump said he had ordered the immediate dismissal of the boards of visitors at the U.S. Military Academy, the U.S. Naval Academy, the U.S. Air Force Academy and the U.S. Coast Guard Academy.

The 15-member boards provide oversight and advice on various aspects, including curriculum, teaching methods, financial matters, morale and discipline.

"Our Service Academies have been infiltrated by Woke Leftist Ideologues over the last four years," Trump wrote. "We will have the strongest Military in History, and that begins by appointing new individuals to these Boards. We must make the Military Academies GREAT AGAIN!"

It wasn't immediately clear whether Trump was dismissing the boards in their entirety or just members who were appointed by former President Joe Biden. He didn't name replacements.

Historically, the president appoints six members to each board for three-year terms, while the speaker of the House selects four, the vice president selects three and the House and Senate armed services committees choose one each.

In 2021, Biden dismissed 18 Trump-appointed members of the boards, six each at West Point, the Air Force Academy and the Naval Academy.

Biden's six appointees to the Air Force Academy's board of visitors included retired Air Force Maj. Gen. James C. Johnson, Jenna Ben-Yehuda and Eric Kenneth Fanning, all of whom were appointed in 2022.

Johnson was described in a White House statement at the time as "a highly qualified expert on the independent review commission on sexual assault in the military."

Fanning was secretary of the Army at the end of President Barack Obama's second term and became the first openly gay leader of any military branch.

Ben-Yehuda was removed as the vice chairwoman, according to The (Colorado Springs) Gazette. She is the executive vice president of the Atlantic Council think tank, and her online biography describes her as "a longtime advocate for gender equity in national security."

Sexual assault prevention was one of the issues the Air Force Academy board has been working on in recent years, according to the Gazette report, which noted that the board also had three Republican members.

On Tuesday, the Air Force Academy's website did not include a list of Biden appointees on the visitors board.

Biden's replacements at West Point included former Obama Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel and retired Army Surgeon General Lt. Gen. Nadja West, the first Black female three-star general in the service.

Retired Adm. Michelle Howard, the Navy's first female four-star admiral and the first Black woman to command a combatant ship, and Jack McCain, a Navy Reserve aviator and son of the late Republican Sen. John McCain, were appointed to the Naval Academy board in 2021.

As of Tuesday, both names were still listed among presidential appointees on the Naval Academy's website.

Two Biden appointees to the U.S. Coast Guard Academy Board of Visitors took the oath of office in May. Their terms weren't due to expire until 2027.

One was retired Army Brig. Gen. Maritza Saenz Ryan, the former head of the U.S. Military Academy's law department. She is the first woman and the first Hispanic graduate of West Point to serve as an academic department head there.

The other was retired Rear Adm. Joyce M. Johnson, the first female chief medical officer and surgeon general in U.S. Coast Guard history.

While campaigning and since taking office, Trump has increasingly targeted what he describes as "woke" policies in the military and other federal institutions

His administration has sought to reverse diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives introduced during Biden's term, arguing that they undermine military readiness and cohesion.

Trump has also criticized programs at military academies that address issues like systemic racism and gender equity, labeling them as politically motivated.

Earlier this month, he ordered the dissolution of a dozen cadet clubs at West Point that were primarily centered on ethnic and gender affiliation.

In addition, Trump signed executive orders aimed at curbing diversity training programs across federal agencies and reinstating policies that emphasize traditional military values.

He has said that rooting out such examples of "wokeness" is essential to restoring what he calls the "warrior ethos" of the U.S. armed forces.

Name: Confederate ties removed as base honors different Bragg who served military

FROM PAGE 1

action during World War II" and died in Nobleboro, Maine, at age 75 in 1999, according to his obituary on MaineMason.org.

Bragg, a Mason, was captured briefly during the war by a German soldier, also a Mason, who let Bragg escape, his daughter Linda French said in the online obituary.

"The guy said, 'hit me over the head and take off,' and he did and took off with an ambulance," French said in the obituary. Bragg drove the ambulance, with other prisoners on board, through enemy fire to safety.

The North Carolina base was renamed Fort Liberty in 2023 after a yearslong process mandated by Congress at the end of President-elect Donald Trump's first term to rid the military of ties to the Confederacy.

Trump promised on the campaign trail last year that he would reinstate Fort Bragg as the Army post's name and work to return Confederate-linked names to eight other Southern bases changed in 2023.

MICHAEL ABRAMS/Stars and Stripes

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth at a town hall at U.S. Africa Command in Stuttgart, Germany, on Tuesday.

Hegseth: DOD chief says no plans for troop cuts right now

FROM PAGE 1

day that it's too early to talk about pulling forces from Europe.

"There are no plans right now in the making to cut anything," Hegseth told reporters at the end of his stop in Stuttgart. "There is an understanding that we're going to review force posture across the world."

The same is the case for the AFRICOM mission in Somalia, Hegseth said. There are now several hundred U.S. special operations troops working with local forces in their long-running campaign against the al-Shabab group and other militants.

At the end of Trump's first term, he withdrew American forces from the country, but they were later sent back in by President Joe Biden. The rationale at the time was that militants were gaining ground without the constant U.S. presence.

"I want to listen to commanders on the ground first and foremost, as does the president," Hegseth said of the Somalia mission.

Hegseth said he would seek to carry out counterterrorism missions in the most effective way but also look to capitalize on remote intelligence capabilities to keep threats in check.

He cited the Feb. 1 airstrike against Islamic State fighters in Somalia, the first since Trump's return to office, as an example.

Trump has "been very clear that we're not trying to have American boots all over the globe where we can do counterterrorism effectively over the horizon," Hegseth said. "That's the preference. But we'll review the force posture (in Somalia.)"

Hegseth added that he considers AFRICOM's role critical.

"That's a mission very much worth resourcing," he said. "Africa is very much on the front lines of a fight from Islamists to Christian populations that are under siege in Africa and have been ignored for far too long."

Less than a month into the job, Hegseth has made quick changes to the Defense Department, many of them geared toward eliminating military programs on cultural issues such as diversity, equity and inclusion.

Other measures have involved the elimination of identity-related events, such as Black History Month. Hegseth has argued that such programs are divisive.

He echoed those views during a town hall meeting with troops in which he said his focus is on building a stronger "warrior ethos" in the military.

"And that means what unites us in our shared purpose is a lot more important than what might make us different. We all have the same uniform. We all bleed red," he said.

En route to Stuttgart on Monday, Hegseth also signed an order that turns Fort Liberty in North Carolina back into Fort Bragg, making a change that honors a World War II private first class who was awarded a Silver Star, rather than a Confederate general.

"It's about that legacy. It's about the connection to the community, to those who served," Hegseth said. "And we're not done. There are many other bases that have been renamed that erodes that very same legacy."

PACIFIC

Japan tracks Russian spy ship near islands

Intelligence-gathering ship spent more than a week in area

By Brian McElhiney and Keishi Koja
Stars and Stripes

A Russian intelligence-gathering ship spent more than a week in waters near Japan's southern islands, including Okinawa and Kyushu, the country's military announced Monday.

The Vishnya-class vessel, number 535, was first spotted at 10 a.m. on Feb. 1, sailing south approximately 30 miles southeast of Okinawa's main island, Japan's Joint Staff said in a news release.

The ship traveled east to west from Feb. 1-2, entering the contiguous zone southeast of Okinawa before moving northeast into the contiguous zone southeast of Kikaijima, an island in Kagoshima prefecture, on Feb. 4, according to the release.

A contiguous zone is a 12-mile-wide band beyond a nation's 12-mile territorial limit, where limited enforcement rights apply under international law.

Between Friday and Saturday, the vessel was spotted sailing east to west in waters east of Miyazaki prefecture on Kyushu, including the contiguous zone. By Sunday, it was moving west through the Osumi Strait toward the East China Sea, the release said.

The same vessel previously sailed southwest through the Tsushima Strait before passing between Miyako Island and Okinawa's main island on Nov. 14, according to the Joint Staff.

Japan's Ministry of Defense and Maritime Self-Defense Force deployed ships and aircraft to monitor, the release said.

Russian military activity near Japan has increased in recent months.

On Nov. 11, a Yasen-class nuclear-powered submarine passed through the Soya Strait, which separates Japan's northernmost main island and Russia's Sakhalin Island.

The submarine, accompanied by a flotilla of Russian vessels, was the most advanced of its kind to be spotted near Japan, according to the Joint Staff.

Russian aircraft have also entered Japanese airspace or flown near its territory multiple times in recent months.

On Sept. 23, an IL-38 reconnaissance plane entered Japanese airspace three times, prompting Tokyo to scramble fighter jets, which fired flares to warn off the aircraft.

On Sept. 12, two Russian Tu-142 patrol planes circled Japan's four main islands for the first time in five years.

On Sept. 1, two Russian navy corvettes were seen 19 miles north of Cape Soya, heading west.

Japan's Joint Staff

The Russian navy Vishnya-class intelligence-gathering vessel, number 535, has been spotted off Japan's coast.

New cyber directorate goes online

By Wyatt Olson
Stars and Stripes

Pacific Air Forces has stood up a directorate consolidating the combatant command's approach to cyber operations and communications with the aim of modernizing infrastructure in an era of economic and military competition with China.

The Cyber Operations and Warfighting Communications Directorate came online Jan. 31.

The directorate's first order of business is upgrading and improving neglected and outdated cyber and communications infrastructure at Pacific Air Forces installations, Col. Eric Crowell, head of the new directorate, said by phone Friday.

"The intent of modernizing is to make sure that we remain competitive and that we can achieve the enhanced warfighting communications necessary as we address great power competition and how we are going to posture ourselves in that environment," he said.

In need of replacement with the newest fiber optics available are the old-style copper wiring and early-generation fiber cable currently in use.

Data centers, servers and routers also require upgrading, he said.

"The storage wasn't being maintained or upgraded fast enough to keep up with modern technologies that we're building out," he said.

Plans to speed up "sensor-to-shooter capabilities" have been at times stymied by networks unable to handle such technological upgrades, Crowell said.

"My first task is to build that infrastructure back up so it can handle those tools and the processes that are required for those tools to work across the network," he said.

The new directorate is part of the sweeping plan unveiled by the Air Force in early 2024 for "reshaping, refocusing, and reoptimizing the Air Force and Space Force" to maintain supremacy in the era of "great power competition" with China, the service states in online fact sheets.

Crowell said that Pacific network needs to be robust enough to support the tactical communications that are central to the Air Force's agile combat employment concept.

That model employs a hub-and-spoke system of established and remote air bases and prepositioned equipment that allows quick and unpredictable deployment of air assets.

That requires "upgraded equipment that we could rapidly move into bare-based locations" and "a network I can reach back into" at established installations, Crowell said.

The new directorate separates the communications and data network functions from air operations.

As such, the heads of the new cyber directorate and air operations will each directly advise Gen. Kevin Schneider, commander of Pacific Air Forces.

Roughly 15 years ago, the Air Force integrated those functions to enhance the burgeoning field of cyber defense and offense operations.

The Air Force last year began dividing those two functions, with the aim of elevating the importance of each in any future conflicts.

Previously, pilots in air operations spoke for both air and cyber operations in advising the combatant commander.

"So, most of the conversations would drive towards the daily fire of air operations and exercises and other events that were happening.

"There's only so much time at the table, so often the communication pieces would get tabled and get caught in an email at a later date or something like that," Crowell said.

The new directorate "allows me to directly address our issues and bring it up to General Schneider in a timely fashion," he said.

Jessica Kendziorek/U.S. Air Force

Air Force personnel and a contractor set up communications equipment on a Palau rooftop during the 2023 Rally in the Pacific exercise.

Airman held in Japan in possible DUI after crash

By Brian McElhiney and Keishi Koja
Stars and Stripes

A U.S. airman was arrested Monday on suspicion of driving under the influence and rear-ending another vehicle on the Okinawa Expressway, injuring the driver, according to Japanese police.

The 20-year-old airman, assigned to Kadena Air Base, was driving a passenger vehicle when he struck another vehicle from behind in the passing lane at 9:53 p.m. in Kitanakagusuku village an Okinawa Prefectural Police spokesman said Tuesday.

The spokesman did not know the direction the airman was traveling or his speed at the time of the crash.

The other driver was taken to a hospital with non-life-threatening injuries, the spokesman said.

A breath test measured the airman's blood-alcohol content at twice Japan's legal limit of 0.03%, the spokesman said. By comparison, the legal limit for driving under the influence in all 50 U.S. states is 0.08%.

The airman's case had not yet been forwarded to the Naha Public Prosecutors Office, the spokesman said. He declined to say where the airman was being held.

Stars and Stripes is withholding the airman's name until charges are filed.

The 18th Wing at Kadena did not immediately respond to questions emailed Tuesday.

MILITARY

Ukraine offers rare earth deal to Trump

By Samya Kullab
Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukraine has offered to strike a deal with U.S. President Donald Trump for continued American military aid in exchange for developing Ukraine's mineral industry, which could provide a valuable source of the rare earth elements that are essential for many kinds of technology.

Trump said that he wanted such a deal earlier this month, and it was initially proposed last fall by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy as part of his plan to strengthen Kyiv's hand in future negotiations with Moscow.

"We really have this big potential in the territory which we control," Andrii Yermak, chief of staff to the Ukrainian president, said in an exclusive interview with The Associated Press. "We are interested to work, to develop, with our partners, first of all, with the United States."

Rare earth elements are a set of 17 elements that are essential to many kinds of consumer technology, including cellphones, hard drives and electric and hybrid vehicles.

China, Trump's chief geopolitical adversary, is the world's largest producer of rare earth elements. Both the U.S and Europe have sought to reduce their dependence on Beijing.

For Ukraine, such a deal would ensure that its biggest and most consequential ally doesn't freeze military support. That would be devastating for the country, which has been at war for nearly three years after Russia's full-scale invasion on Feb. 24, 2022.

The idea also comes at a time when reliable and uninterrupted access to critical minerals is increasingly hard to come by globally.

Ukraine's rare earth elements are largely untapped because of the war and because of state policies regulating the mineral industry. The country also lacks good information to guide the development of rare earth mining.

Geological data is thin because mineral reserves are scattered across Ukraine, and existing studies are considered largely inadequate. The industry's true potential is clouded by insufficient research, according to businessmen and analysts.

In general, the outlook for Ukrainian natural resources is promising.

The country's reserves of titanium, a key component for the aerospace, medical and automotive industries, are believed to be among Europe's largest. Ukraine also holds some of Europe's largest known reserves of lithium, which is required to produce batteries, ceramics and glass.

An estimated 40% of Ukraine's metallic mineral resources are inaccessible because of Russian occupation, according to data from We Build Ukraine, a Kyiv-based think tank. Ukraine has argued that it's in Trump's interest to develop the remainder before Russian advances capture more.

Details of any deal will likely develop in meetings between U.S. and Ukrainian officials. Zelenskyy and Trump will probably discuss the subject when they meet.

Julia Demaree Nikhinson/AP

Ukraine has offered a deal to President Donald Trump, seeking U.S. military support in exchange for U.S. development of Ukraine's mineral industry. Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, left, is said to have suggested the deal to Trump last fall.

Trump wants more military money

By Laura Davison and Hadriana Lowenkron
Bloomberg News

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump said he wants to increase the amount of money for the U.S. military, a goal that runs counter to efforts from his top ally — Elon Musk — to slash trillions of dollars of federal spending.

"We want to raise defense spending. I think we have to have it," Trump said in an interview with Fox News' Bret Baier, taped last week and broadcast Monday.

Trump added that he might seek to pull back on military budgets in the future, saying that he plans to talk to Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin about curbing defense spending.

Military spending accounted for nearly half of the $1.8 trillion worth of U.S. discretionary spending in fiscal year 2024, making it the largest pool of federal money outside of mandatory spending on entitlement programs like Social Security, Medicare and other benefits. The U.S. spends more on defense than the next nine largest countries combined, according to data compiled by the Peter G. Peterson Foundation.

Trump's suggestion to boost military spending comes at an uncertain moment for federal agencies and the contractors that work with them.

The president said in an interview over the weekend that Musk's group of cost cutters, known as the Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE, would soon take a look at the Defense Department's financial records.

Musk, the world's richest man, has been critical of many Pentagon efforts, calling for some weapons programs to be "completely redone" and for "immediate and dramatic changes."

DOGE teams have fanned out across the federal bureaucracy to review payments, systems and employee communications. The Trump administration has moved quickly to curb spending at some of the first agencies that the DOGE campaign has singled out. At the most maximal levels, they've effectively halted all work at the U.S. Agency for International Development and the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, prompting lawsuits challenging the legality of those acts.

Musk's tactics have generated a series of practical, legal and political questions as to how DOGE — set up as an office in the White House — could accomplish such ambitious goals with only limited authority.

Musk, the chief executive officer of Tesla Inc. and SpaceX, has said he wants to cut as much as $2 trillion worth of federal spending, an amount that accounts for more than all U.S. discretionary spending in a single year.

His role in auditing the Pentagon's expenses has also raised conflicts of interest questions. SpaceX has received billions of dollars in federal contracts, including at the Department of Defense in recent years.

Any attempt to slash defense programs and other spending is likely to touch off a fierce debate in Congress. The U.S. Constitution gives Congress the power to direct federal spending, limiting the White House's ability to act unilaterally.

Republicans hold narrow majorities in both the House and Senate. They've struggled in recent years to pass spending bills, needing Democrats' assistance to do so. Given broad Democratic opposition to many of the cuts Musk's DOGE effort has steered so far, Republicans must unify in order to enact Trump's agenda.

Raising — or cutting — defense spending could prove a complication. While a faction of Republicans have called for steep spending cuts overall and don't see a way to reach their fiscal goals without trimming defense spending, many others share Trump's objectives of raising defense spending even further.

What's more, the defense budget is broadly spread across the U.S.

Military bases, other facilities and programs are located in so many states and districts that historically any suggestion of cutbacks prompts members of Congress to defend their own parochial interests.

Trump has said he won't agree to any changes to Social Security and Medicare, the biggest buckets of federal spending, and among the most popular. And by calling for more — not less — defense spending, he's giving Musk and Congress little wiggle room to trim government costs.

Fox News' Baier pressed Trump about how he would finance all those programs, in addition to a large-scale tax cut Republicans are planning for later this year.

Trump reiterated he would raise "tremendous amounts of money on tariffs."

While estimates show that Trump's most expansive tariff plans could raise several hundred billion dollars a year, that would still fall short of the money needed to offset the tax cuts.

Army ending EagleCash card program

By Zade Vadnais
Stars and Stripes

The Army is discontinuing a cash card program that once processed billions of dollars in on-post transactions throughout the world but which the service says is no longer cost-effective.

The EagleCash stored-value card will end by Sept. 30, saving the service $1.7 million annually, according to an Army statement Tuesday.

The Army introduced EagleCash in 1997 as an alternative to cash, debit cards and credit cards. At its high point in 2010, it processed $1.9 billion in transactions annually, mostly at Army and Air Force Exchange Service and concessionaire-run stores. Since then, use of the reloadable payment card has fallen by 92.6%.

The payment system, which links a user's bank or credit union account to the card, has remained largely unchanged since the mid-2010s, while alternatives have become cheaper and more technologically advanced.

The Army will transition all functions using EagleCash to commercial payment methods and expects the changes to have minimal impact.

MILITARY

N. Korea calls US sub docking in South 'threat'

By David Choi
Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — North Korea's state-run media lashed out at the United States on Tuesday over the arrival of a fast-attack submarine in South Korea's largest port, calling it an "undeniable threat" and an effort to escalate tensions on the peninsula.

The nuclear-powered USS Alexandria, a Los Angeles-class vessel based in San Diego, docked Monday at Busan, about 200 miles southeast of Seoul, U.S. Naval Forces Korea spokesman Lt. j.g. Tony Curtis said by email Tuesday. No additional details were immediately available, he said.

The U.S. is "openly ignoring the security concern of [North Korea]," the Korean Central News Agency reported, adding that Pyongyang will "make clearer our … mode of counteraction against our rivals."

South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff "has no particular opinion" on the North's remarks, spokesman Nam Ki-soo told reporters at a news conference Tuesday.

Commissioned in 1991, the Alexandria is designed to track and engage enemy vessels. The 6,900-ton submarine is more than 360 feet long and has a crew of 143, according to the U.S. Navy's website.

American fast-attack submarines carry conventional, rather than nuclear, weapons.

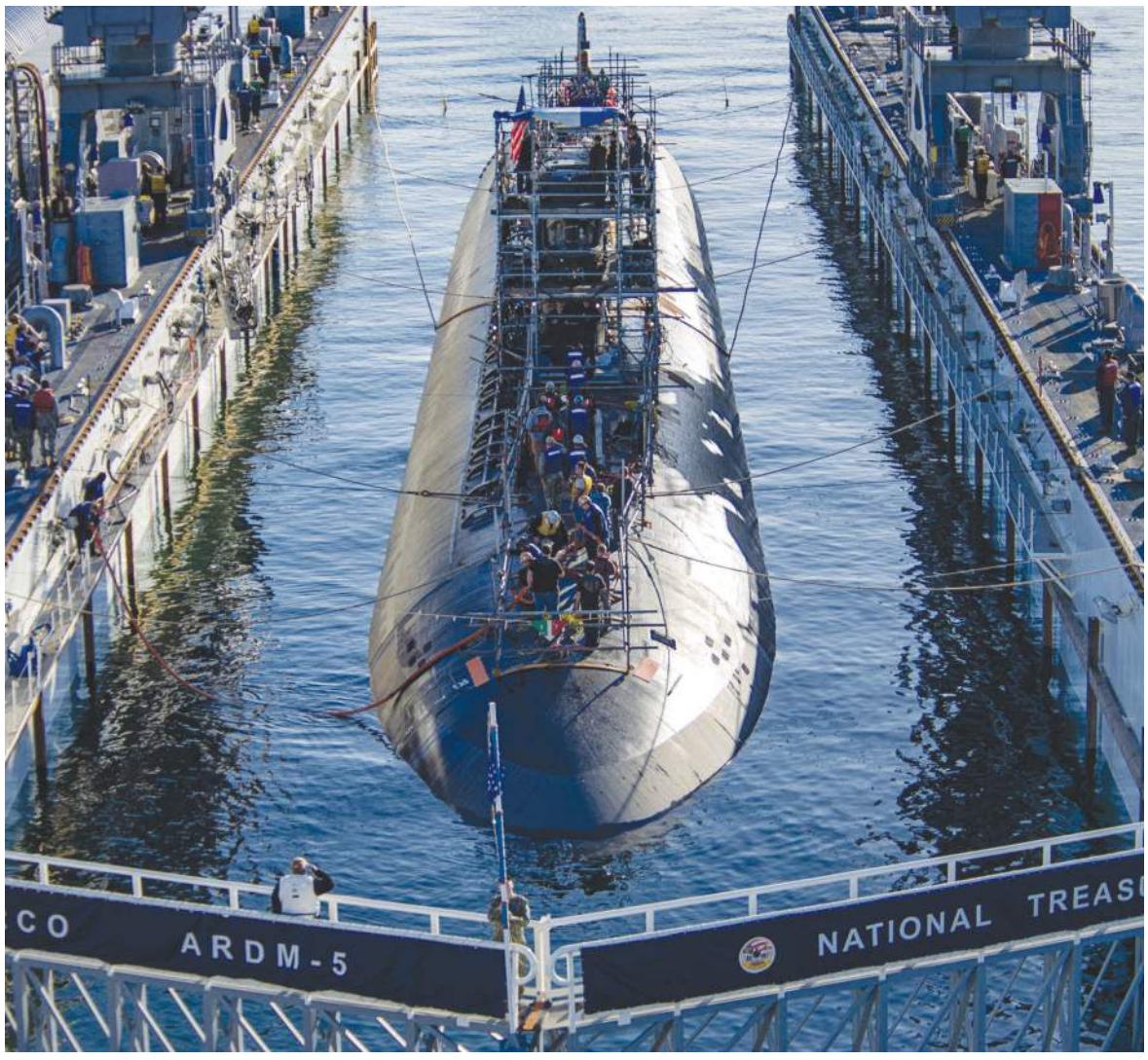
The last U.S. submarine to visit Busan was the Virginia-class USS Vermont, based at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Hawaii. It arrived on Sept. 23 in a visit that Submarine Group 7 said reflected America's "commitment to the region and complements the many exercises … and other military cooperation activities."

The U.S. military does not disclose how long its warships remain in South Korea, citing operational security concerns.

North Korea at the time described the Vermont's visit as a "frantic military and strategic attempt … on intentionally demonstrating the 'superiority of strength' before the world," according to KCNA.

In July, then-Presidents Joe Biden and Yoon Suk Yeol of South Korea reaffirmed their commitment to Seoul's defense and agreed that any nuclear attack by Pyongyang "will be met with a swift, overwhelming and decisive response," according to a joint statement.

North Korea has test-fired at least three ballistic missiles this year, according to the South Korean military. The communist regime last launched several short-range ballistic missiles off its eastern coast on Jan. 14. The missiles flew approximately 155 miles before splashing down in the Sea of Japan, also known as the East Sea.



Thomas Gooley/U.S. Navy

The fast-attack submarine USS Alexandria prepares to depart Naval Base Point Loma in San Diego in 2023. The submarine arrived in South Korea on Tuesday, drawing North Korea's ire.

Former soldier sentenced for sexually abusing child at JBLM

By Gary Warner
Stars and Stripes

TACOMA, Wash. — A former soldier who served at Joint Base Lewis-McChord was sentenced to more than seven years in federal prison for abusive sexual contact with a child who he had locked in a closet in 2012 at the Army-Air Force base in Washington.

Former Staff Sgt. Cameron James Taylor, 49, of Seattle was sentenced to 87 months in jail by Chief U.S. District Judge David Estudillo on Feb. 4. Estudillo also required Taylor be supervised for 10 years when he is released and register as a sex offender.

Taylor pleaded guilty to the charge in May 2024 and had been held in pre-trial confinement for the past nine months, according to court records.

"Taylor's crimes reveal a man who lacks empathy and who prioritized his own pleasure over others' pain," the prosecutors wrote in a sentencing request to the judge. "Taylor is also no stranger to the justice system. This is his third criminal sex offense. The government hopes that a 96-month sentence, coupled with lifetime supervised release, will prevent Taylor from offending again."

Estudillo ordered the 96-month sentence, minus the nine months that Taylor was held since pleading guilty.

The case arose from investigations into earlier assaults by Taylor by the Army Criminal Investigation Division, the King County Sheriff's Office, and the FBI.

Taylor was dismissed from the Army in 2016 with an other-than-honorable discharge after he was investigated for sexual assault of an unconscious female in Germany and for assaulting soldiers sent to arrest him, according to the U.S. Attorney's Office in Seattle. He was allowed to resign from the Army in lieu of a court-martial, according to federal prosecutors.

Taylor returned to the Seattle area after leaving the Army, where he was convicted in 2019 for sexually assaulting a 5-year-old child who lived near his home. He received 18 months in prison, according to records from King County Superior Court.

While investigating the King County case, investigators interviewed other children who had been in contact with Taylor. A child disclosed to a relative that in 2012, while stationed on Lewis-McChord, Taylor locked the then 5- or 6-year-old in a closet and sexually assaulted the child. Taylor had coached the child about hiding the sexual abuse, prosecutors said.

Estudillo praised the unnamed victim, now a teenager, who testified against Taylor, for showing the "courage to move on."

U.S. Attorney Tessa Gorman said in a statement that investigating child sexual assaults at military bases in the region was a major area of focus for her office.

"This horrific conduct cannot go unpunished," Gorman said. "Our work to protect children on our military bases is a priority in the Western District of Washington."

Guardsman sentenced for sexually harassing subordinate in Djibouti

By Rebecca Holland
Stars and Stripes

VICENZA, Italy — A Utah National Guard officer deployed to Djibouti recently received a six-month jail sentence after pleading guilty to sexual harassment during a court-martial at Caserma Ederle in Vicenza.

Maj. Kenton Francis, 52, a behavioral health officer deployed to Combined Joint Task Force—Horn of Africa at Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti, harassed a non-commissioned officer in his unit, the Army's Office of Special Trial Counsel said in a statement Monday.

A military judge on Jan. 30 also sentenced Francis to dismissal from the Army.

In August 2024, Francis attempted to record the soldier three times with a hidden phone, prosecutors said. The woman, who was changing in an office, noticed the phone propped on a wall locker and obscured by a piece of cardboard.

She reported him to her chain of command, which notified the Army's Criminal Investigation Division.

During the investigation, several of Francis' co-workers provided statements that said he had admitted to the recording, the Army statement said. Forensic analysis of his phone corroborated the crime.

"Maj. Francis' selfish actions in sexually harassing his subordinate enlisted soldier betrayed not only her trust, but also the trust the Army placed in him as the deployed behavioral health officer-in-charge" for the task force, Army prosecutor Maj. Zach Ray in a statement.

Francis is being held at the Army confinement facility in Sembach, Germany. He will eventually be transferred stateside to serve the remainder of his sentence, the statement said.

NATION

Judge: White House didn't fully follow order

Ruling directed Trump administration to unfreeze federal spending

By Lindsay Whitehurst
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A federal judge found Monday that the Trump administration hasn't fully followed his order to unfreeze federal spending and told the White House to release billions of dollars in funding. The Trump administration quickly appealed the ruling.

U.S. District Court Judge John McConnell became the first judge to find that the administration had disobeyed a court order. Federal money for things like early childhood education, pollution reduction and HIV prevention research has remained tied up even after his Jan. 31 order blocking a planned halt on federal spending, he found.

McConnell ordered the Trump administration to "immediately take every step necessary" to follow his temporary restraining order halting plans for a sweeping freeze of federal funding.

McConnell's temporary restraining order issued Monday also blocks the administration from cutting billions of dollars in grant funding from the National Institutes of Health.

"These pauses in funding violate the plain text of the (temporary restraining order)," McConnell wrote. "The broad categorical and sweeping freeze of federal funds is, as the Court found, likely unconstitutional and has caused and continues to cause irreparable harm to a vast portion of this country."

The ruling comes after top Trump administration officials over the weekend openly questioned the judiciary's authority to serve as a check on executive power as his wide-ranging agenda draws pushback from the courts.

Judges have also blocked, at least temporarily, Trump's push to end birthright citizenship for anyone born in the U.S., access to Treasury Department records by billionaire Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency and a mass deferred resignation plan for federal workers.

The White House did not immediately respond to a message seeking comment.

The Justice Department appealed the ruling to the 1st Circuit Court of Appeals.

The administration has said it was making good-faith efforts to comply with the judge's ruling in a lawsuit filed by nearly two dozen states. But the Justice Department also argued that his ruling only applied to a sweeping spending freeze outlined in a late January memo that has since been rescinded.

The ruling doesn't apply to other spending pauses outlined in different memos, including funds that were part of President Joe Biden's signature climate, health care and tax package.

But McConnell, who is based in Rhode Island and was nominated by President Barack Obama, said his order blocked the administration from a wide range of funding cuts.

Judge reinstates head of whistleblower agency during fight over firing

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A U.S. judge on Monday ordered the fired head of the federal agency dedicated to protecting whistleblowers to be reinstated while a court fight continues over his removal by President Donald Trump.

U.S. District Judge Amy Berman Jackson's order came hours after Hampton Dellinger sued the Republican president over his removal as the leader of the Office of Special Counsel, which is responsible for guarding the federal workforce from illegal personnel actions, such as retaliation for whistleblowing.

The judge said Dellinger must be allowed to serve as special counsel through midnight on Thursday while she considers his request for a temporary restraining order to keep him in the job. She said the Trump administration cannot "deny him access to the resources or materials of that office or recognize the authority of any other person as Special Counsel."

"I am grateful to have the opportunity to continue leading the Office of Special Counsel and I am resuming my work tonight," Dellinger in an email after the ruling.

The Trump administration swiftly filed court papers saying it was appealing the judge's order.

His firing was the latest move in Trump's sweeping effort to shrink and reshape the federal government, testing the limits of well-established civil service protections by moving to dismantle federal agencies and push out staffers.

Also on Monday, the U.S. Office of Government Ethics posted on its website that Trump had removed its director, David Huitema, who like Dellinger was confirmed by the Senate last year to a five-year term.

The White House had said before the judge's ruling reinstating Dellinger that recently confirmed Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Doug Collins has been named the acting leader of both agencies.

Huitema said in an interview that he was notified over the weekend of his removal in an email that provided no explanation. Huitema said he was "extremely disappointed," adding that he was committed to the mission of the office and its staff, "who represent the best of public service."

Dellinger was fired in a Friday evening email from the White House personnel director. Dellinger noted in his lawsuit, filed in Washington federal court, that special counsels can be removed by the president "only for inefficiency, neglect of duty, or malfeasance in office."

"The effort to remove me has no factual nor legal basis — none — which means it is illegal," Dellinger said in an email.

The Office of Special Counsel investigates whistleblower claims of reprisal, can pursue disciplinary action against employees who punish whistleblowers and provides a channel for employees to disclose government wrongdoing.

In his lawsuit, Dellinger said the office's "ability to protect the civil service and investigate alleged misconduct is needed now more than ever," noting the "unprecedented" number of firings without cause of federal employees with civil service protections in recent weeks.

Stephen Kohn, chairman of the board of National Whistleblower Center, called Dellinger's firing "irresponsible and dangerous."

Craig Hudson/For the Washington Post

Federal workers depart their jobs in Washington, D.C., on Jan. 29.

Judge keeps president's plan to push out federal workers on hold

By Michael Casey and Chris Megerian
Associated Press

BOSTON — President Donald Trump's plan to downsize the federal workforce remains on hold after a courtroom hearing on Monday afternoon.

It's the latest example of how the Republican president's ambitious plans have become ensnared in the judicial system.

U.S. District Judge George O'Toole Jr. had paused the deferred resignation program, commonly described as a buyout, last week.

On Monday, he said the stay would remain in place until he issues a ruling. It's unclear when that could happen.

Trump wants to use financial incentives to encourage government employees to quit. According to the White House, 65,000 workers had taken the government up on its offer as of Friday.

He criticized people who want to keep working remotely while talking with reporters in the Oval Office on Monday.

"Nobody is gonna work from home," Trump said. "They are gonna be going out, they're gonna play tennis, they're gonna play golf, they're gonna do a lot of things. They're not working."

The deferred resignation program has been spearheaded by Elon Musk, who is serving as Trump's top adviser for reducing federal spending. Under the plan, employees can stop working and get paid until Sept. 30.

But labor unions said the plan is illegal. They asked for O'Toole to keep it on hold and prevent the Office of Personnel Management, or OPM, from soliciting more workers to sign up.

Elena Goldstein, speaking for the workers, said there were "serious questions" about the plan's rationale and legality.

"OPM seems to be making this up as they are going along," she said.

She said the program was an "unprecedented action" on an "unprecedented timeline," and she described it as a pretext to remove workers and replace them with people aligned with the administration.

Eric Hamilton, a Justice Department lawyer, called the plan a "humane off ramp" for federal employees who may have structured their lives around working remotely and have been ordered to return to government buildings.

NATION

Trump bans federal use of paper straws

By Matthew Daly
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump said Monday he is banning federal use of paper straws, saying they "don't work" and don't last very long. Instead he wants the government to exclusively move to plastic.

"It's a ridiculous situation. We're going back to plastic straws," Trump said as he signed an executive order to reverse federal purchasing policies that encourage paper straws and restrict plastic ones. The order directs federal agencies to stop buying paper straws "and otherwise ensure that paper straws are no longer provided within agency buildings."

The move by Trump — who has long railed against paper straws, and whose 2019 reelection campaign sold Trump-branded reusable plastic straws for $15 per pack of 10 — targets a Biden administration policy to phase out federal purchases of single-use plastics, including straws, from food service operations, events and packaging by 2027 and from all federal operations by 2035.

While plastic straws have been blamed for polluting oceans and harming marine life, Trump said Monday that he thinks "it's OK" to continue using them. "I don't think that plastic is going to affect the shark very much as they're eating, as they're munching their way through the ocean," he said at a White House announcement.

Several U.S. states and cities have banned plastic straws, and some restaurants no longer automatically give them to customers. But plastic straws are only a small part of the problem. The environment is littered with single-use plastic food and beverage containers — water bottles, takeout containers, coffee lids, shopping bags and more.

Around the world, the equivalent of one garbage truck of plastic enters the ocean every minute from a range of sources, including plastic bags, toothbrushes, bottles, food packaging and more, experts say. As those materials break down in the environment, microplastics are turning up in the stomachs of fish, birds and other animals, as well as in human blood and tissue.

And plastic manufacturing releases planet-warming greenhouse gases and other dangerous pollutants. More than 90% of plastic products are derived from fossil fuels such as oil and natural gas, and millions of tons of plastic waste enter the world's oceans every year.

Many multinational companies have moved away from plastic straws and have made reducing plastic use across their operations central to their sustainability goals, making Trump's decision an outlier in the business world.

More than 390 million straws are used every day in the United States, mostly for 30 minutes or less, according to advocacy group Straws Turtle Island Restoration Network.

Straws take at least 200 years to decompose and pose a threat to turtles and other wildlife as they degrade into microplastics, the group says.

Every year, the world produces more than 400 million tons of new plastic. About 40% of all plastics are used in packaging, according to the United Nations.

Globally, nations are creating a treaty to address plastic pollution. Leaders met in South Korea last year but didn't reach an agreement. Talks resume this year as more than 100 countries pursue a pact that limits plastic production.

27 religious groups sue Trump administration

By David Crary
Associated Press

More than two-dozen Christian and Jewish groups representing millions of Americans — ranging from the Episcopal Church and the Union for Reform Judaism to the Mennonites and Unitarian Universalists — filed a federal court lawsuit Tuesday challenging a Trump administration move giving immigration agents more leeway to make arrests at houses of worship.

The lawsuit, filed in U.S. District Court in Washington, contends that the new policy is spreading fear of raids, thus lowering attendance at worship services and other valuable church programs. The result, says the suit, infringes on the groups' religious freedom — namely their ability to minister to migrants, including those in the United States illegally.

"We have immigrants, refugees, people who are documented and undocumented," said the Most Rev. Sean Rowe, the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church.

"We cannot worship freely if some of us are living in fear," he told The Associated Press. "By joining this lawsuit, we're seeking the ability to gather and fully practice our faith, to follow Jesus' command to love our neighbors as ourselves."

Luis Andres Henao/AP

Jean-Michel Gisnel cries out while praying with other congregants at the First Haitian Evangelical Church of Springfield last month in Springfield, Ohio.

The new lawsuit echoes and expands on some of the arguments made in a similar lawsuit filed Jan. 27 by five Quaker congregations and later joined by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and a Sikh temple. It is currently pending in U.S. District Court.

There was no immediate Trump administration response to the new lawsuit, which names the Department of Homeland Security and its immigration enforcement agencies as defendants. However, a memorandum filed Friday by the Department of Justice, opposing the thrust of the Quaker lawsuit, outlined arguments that may also apply to the new lawsuit.

In essence, the memo contended that the plaintiffs' request to block the new enforcement policy is based on speculation of hypothetical future harm — and thus is insufficient grounds for issuing an injunction.

The memo said that immigration enforcement affecting houses of worship had been permitted for decades, and the new policy announced in January simply said that field agents could now conduct such operations without preapproval from a supervisor.

One part of that memo might not apply to the new lawsuit, as it argued the Quakers and their fellow plaintiffs have no basis for seeking a nationwide injunction against the revised enforcement policy.

The plaintiffs in the new lawsuit represent a vastly larger swath of American worshippers — including more than 1 million followers of Reform Judaism, the estimated 1.5 million Episcopalians in 6,700 congregations nationwide, nearly 1.1 million members of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and the estimated 1.5 million active members of the African Methodist Episcopal Church — the country's oldest predominantly Black denomination and more.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, which leads the nation's largest denomination, did not joint the lawsuit, though it has criticized Trump's migration crackdown.

Trump considering tariff exemptions on Australian steel

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — President Donald Trump said he agreed to consider a tariff exemption on Australian steel and aluminum imports after a telephone call on Tuesday with Australia's prime minister.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese argued for an exemption during the call, which was scheduled before Trump announced tariffs on steel and aluminum imports Monday.

Trump said the United States trade surplus with Australia was one of the reasons he was considering an exemption from the tariffs.

Trump spoke after he removed exceptions and exemptions from his 2018 tariffs on steel, meaning that all steel imports will be taxed at a minimum of 25%. Trump also hiked his 2018 aluminum tariffs to 25% from 10%.

Australia had an exemption from such tariffs during Trump's first administration.

Australia's arguments include that the country has run a trade deficit with the U.S. since the mid-20th century and Australian steelmaker BlueScope employs thousands of workers in the U.S. Australia has only a minor share of the U.S. markets.

Albanese on Tuesday also raised the AUKUS agreement with the U.S. and Britain, struck with former President Joe Biden's administration, in which Australia will acquire a fleet of submarines powered by U.S. nuclear technology.

Australia announced over the weekend it had made the first of six $500 million payments to the U.S. under AUKUS to boost U.S. submarine building capacity.

NATION

Experts: DOGE's access to data at Treasury risky

By Fatima Hussein and David Klepper
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Department of Government Efficiency's embed into the federal government has raised a host of concerns, transforming a debate over how to cut government waste into a confrontation over privacy rights and the nation's financial standing in the world.

DOGE, spearheaded by Elon Musk, has rapidly burrowed deep into federal agencies and taken drastic actions to cut spending. This includes trying to get rid of thousands of federal workers, shuttering the U.S. Agency for International Development and accessing the Treasury Department's enormous payment systems.

Advocacy groups and labor unions have filed lawsuits in an attempt to save agencies and federal worker jobs, and five former treasury secretaries are sounding the alarm on the risks associated with Musk's DOGE accessing sensitive Treasury Department payment systems and potentially stopping congressionally authorized payments.

"Any hint of the selective suspension of congressionally authorized payments will be a breach of trust and ultimately, a form of default. And our credibility, once lost, will prove difficult to regain," said former treasury secretaries Robert Rubin, Larry Summers, Timothy Geithner, Jacob Lew and Janet Yellen in an op-ed in The New York Times on Monday.

They warn about the risks of "arbitrary and capricious political control of federal payments, which would be unlawful and corrosive to our democracy."

Musk said on X on Monday that "we need to stop government spending like a drunken sailor on fraud & waste or America is gonna go bankrupt. That does mean a lot of grifters will lose their grift and complain loudly about it. Too bad. Deal with it."

Experts in the financial and digital privacy worlds warn that the U.S. financial system is delicate and complicated and could be harmed by unilateral moves. They also say that Americans' personal information could be compromised by the unsafe handling of sensitive data.

Andrew Metrick, director of the Yale Program on Financial Stability, says DOGE's actions as a "go fast and break things group" pose a danger to the U.S. financial system and the U.S. dollar's standing as the world's reserve currency.

On the issue of cutting government programs or potentially undermining U.S. democratic norms, DOGE is "not going to care, but they should care about harming the dollar and harming the safety of U.S. government debt," Metrick said.

Crossing the Rubicon of danger would be something perceived as a default event on bonds, Metrick said, especially as the U.S. runs very close to its statutory debt limit.

"We maintain a complicated financial system — a few wrong actions and the world loses confidence in our ability to manage that system."

Trump told Fox News on Sunday that Musk is "not gaining anything" from his role in DOGE. "We're going to find billions, hundreds of billions, of dollars of fraud and abuse and, you know, the people elected me on that," Trump said.

Ariana Cubillos/AP

Venezuelan migrants deported from the United States arrive at Simon Bolivar International Airport in Maiquetia, Venezuela, on Monday.

Venezuela sends 2 planes to return migrants in potential relations boost

By Valerie Gonzalez
Associated Press

McALLEN, Texas — Two Venezuelan planes returned home Monday with about 190 Venezuelans deported from the United States, signaling a possible thaw in relations between two longtime diplomatic adversaries and a victory for President Donald Trump in his efforts to get more countries to take their people back.

Deportation flights from the U.S. to Venezuela have been halted for years except for a brief period in October 2023 during the Biden administration. Venezuelans began showing up at the U.S. border with Mexico in large numbers in 2021 and are currently one of the largest nationalities entering illegally, making Venezuela's refusal to take them back a major challenge for the U.S.

The breakthrough came after Trump envoy Richard Grennell visited Caracas earlier this month.

"Flights of Illegal Aliens to Venezuela Resume," the White House said Monday in a post on X, saying they were overseen by Grennell.

Venezuelan television and radio triumphantly covered the arrival of the Conviasa flights in Caracas from Fort Bliss, a U.S. Army base in El Paso, Texas.

"This is the world we want, a world of peace, understanding, dialogue and cooperation," said Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro

The Venezuelan government confirmed the flights earlier in a statement that took issue with an "ill-intentioned" and "false" narrative around the presence of members of the Tren de Aragua gang in the U.S. It said most Venezuelan immigrants are decent, hard-working people and that U.S. officials sought to stigmatize the South American country.

Monday's flights came days after the first flights of immigrants to a U.S. military base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and after U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio struck agreements with El Salvador and Guatemala for those countries to take people who were not their citizens.

A federal judge in New Mexico on Sunday preemptively blocked the transfer of three Venezuelan men to Guantanamo Bay. In their request for a temporary halt, lawyers for the men said their clients "fit the profile of those the administration has prioritized for detention in Guantanamo, i.e. Venezuelan men detained in the El Paso area with (false) charges of connections with the Tren de Aragua gang."

Trump wrote after Grennell's visit that the Maduro government had agreed to receive "all Venezuela illegal aliens who were encamped in the U.S., including gang members of Tren de Aragua," and pay for their transportation. Six Americans held in Venezuela were released at the time.

In its statement Monday, the Venezuelan government didn't comment on any future flights.

IG: Unspent aid lacks oversight as Trump dismantles USAID

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Agency for International Development has lost almost all ability to track $8.2 billion in unspent humanitarian aid following the Trump administration's foreign funding freeze and idling of staffers, a government watchdog warned Monday.

The administration's fast-moving dismantling of the agency has left oversight of the aid "largely nonoperational," USAID's inspector general's office said. That includes a greatly reduced ability to ensure that no assistance falls into the hands of violent extremist groups or goes astray in unstable regions or conflict zones, the watchdog said.

The Trump administration's actions have "significantly impacted USAID's capacity to disburse and safeguard its humanitarian assistance programming," it said, also citing the risk of hundreds of millions of dollars in commodities rotting after staff was barred from delivering it.

The inspector general, however, also noted that it has "longstanding concerns about existing USAID oversight mechanisms."

Meanwhile, the administration and billionaire ally Elon Musk continued their unraveling of the aid agency. The General Services Administration, which manages government buildings, told The Associated Press that it had stripped USAID from the lease on its Washington headquarters.

Staffers — some dressed in USAID sweatshirts or T-shirts — were blocked from going upstairs to their offices Monday. Guards, federal officers and officials stopped some from retrieving their belongings.

"Go home," a man who identified himself as a USAID official told staffers. "Why are you here?"

The eviction from the building, which USAID had occupied for decades, follows a court late Friday temporarily blocking a Trump administration order that would have pulled all but a fraction of workers off the job worldwide.

Two workers' groups that sued over the targeting of USAID asked the court on Monday to find the Trump administration in violation of the judge's order, after some workers were still locked out of USAID's systems.

The government's steps suggest it "intends to continue taking potentially irreversible steps to dismantle the agency" before the court can issue a final ruling in the case, the employee associations said. Another hearing is scheduled for Wednesday.

NATION

Mace accuses ex of assault in House speech

By Meg Kinnard
Associated Press

CHAPIN, S.C. — Rep. Nancy Mace of South Carolina on Monday used a nearly hourlong speech on the U.S. House floor to accuse her ex-fiancé of physically abusing her, recording sex acts with her and others without their consent, and conspiring with business associates in acts of rape and sexual misconduct.

Mace said she was speaking out because her home state's top prosecutor didn't take action even after she alerted investigators. That same prosecutor is likely to be Mace's opponent if she runs for governor of South Carolina in 2026, which she is considering.

Saying she was going "scorched earth," Mace detailed how, in November 2023, she says she "accidentally uncovered some of the most heinous crimes against women imaginable. We're talking about rape, non-consensual photos, non-consensual videos of women and underage girls, and the premeditated, calculated exploitation of women and girls in my district."

J. Scott Applewhite/AP

Rep. Nancy Mace, R-S.C. — shown addressing the Republican National Convention in July in Milwaukee — on the U.S. House floor Monday accused her ex-fiancé of physically abusing her and conspiring with associates in acts of rape and sexual misconduct.

Mace mentioned four men as being involved, including Charleston-area businessman Patrick Bryant, who was her fiancé until 2023 and went door-to-door stumping for her during her 2022 reelection campaign.

The AP wasn't able to independently verify Mace's claims. Bryant told AP: "I categorically deny these allegations. I take this matter seriously and will cooperate fully with any necessary legal processes to clear my name."

Mace accused South Carolina Attorney General Alan Wilson of slow-walking any investigation of Bryant and the other men after she brought the photos and video to state authorities.

"Did South Carolina's attorney general have any of these predators indicted after being provided clear cut-and-dry evidence including video, photos and witnesses?" Mace asked, noting that her office had set up a tip line for anyone with information on the allegations.

In a statement after Mace's speech, Wilson's office called her comments regarding the prosecutor's conduct "categorically false" and said the office "has not received any reports or requests for assistance from any law enforcement or prosecution agencies regarding these matters."

Mace, a former South Carolina state House member, was the first woman to graduate from The Citadel, the state's military college, where her father then served as commandant of cadets. Briefly serving in the state House, in 2020 she became the first Republican woman elected to represent South Carolina in Congress, flipping the 1st District after a single term with a Democratic representative.

Her decision to air the allegations in a floor speech was unusual. In a release, Mace stressed that members' statements on the House floor "are quintessential 'legislative acts' " and thereby protected by the "speech or debate" clause, which generally protects lawmakers from being sued for what they say.

"This isn't a story about bitter ex-girlfriends or consensual sex tapes — there are plenty of those. I don't care what two consenting adults agree to do," Mace said. She mentioned a dozen bills on which she had worked in the House.

In 2019, Mace spoke publicly for the first time about a sexual assault she said had occurred more than two decades earlier, addressing South Carolina legislative colleagues in advocating for adding a rape and incest exception to a state House ban on all abortions after detection of a fetal heartbeat.

On Monday, Mace said she was joined in the House gallery by several women she said had been victimized by Bryant and the other men. Among the Republican lawmakers who sat behind Mace during her speech to show their support were Reps. Lauren Boebert, R-Colo., and Anna Paulina Luna, R-Fla.

Mace, 47, won a third U.S. House term in November and has said that she is "seriously considering" a 2026 run for South Carolina governor. If she enters that race, she will likely face Wilson — in his fourth term and also the son of Rep. Joe Wilson — in the Republican primary.

US official orders charges dropped against NYC mayor

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The Justice Department on Monday ordered federal prosecutors to drop corruption charges against New York City Mayor Eric Adams, arguing in a remarkable departure from long-standing norms that the case was interfering with the mayor's ability to aid the president's crackdown on illegal immigration.

In a two-page memo obtained by The Associated Press, acting Deputy Attorney General Emil Bove told prosecutors in New York that they were "directed to dismiss" the bribery charges against Adams immediately.

Bove said the order was not based on the strength of evidence in the case, but rather because it had been brought too close to Adams' reelection campaign and was distracting from the mayor's efforts to assist in the Trump administration's law-and-order priorities.

Adams

"The pending prosecution has unduly restricted Mayor Adams' ability to devote full attention and resources to the illegal immigration and violent crime," Bove wrote.

The memo also ordered prosecutors in New York not to take "additional investigative steps" against the Democrat until after November's mayoral election, though it left open the possibility that charges could be refiled after that following a review.

The intervention and reasoning — that a powerful defendant could be too occupied with official duties to face accountability for alleged crimes — marked an extraordinary deviation from long-standing Justice Department norms.

Public officials at the highest level of government are routinely investigated by the Justice Department, including President Donald Trump during his first term, without prosecutors advancing a claim that they should be let off the hook to attend to government service.

An attorney for Adams, Alex Spiro, said the Justice Department's order had vindicated the mayor's claim of innocence. "Now, thankfully, the mayor and New York can put this unfortunate and misguided prosecution behind them," said Spiro, who has also represented Elon Musk.

A spokesperson for the acting U.S. attorney for the Southern District of New York, Danielle Sassoon, declined to comment.

The memo follows months of speculation that Trump would take steps to end the case against Adams, who was charged in September with accepting bribes of free or discounted travel and illegal campaign contributions from foreign nationals seeking to buy his influence.

Adams has moved noticeably right following his indictment, rankling some within his own party. Rather than restricting cooperation with Immigration and Customs Enforcement, as Adams once promised, he has expressed a willingness to roll back the city's so-called sanctuary policies and pledged not to publicly criticize a president whose policies he once described as "abusive."

Trump pardons Blagojevich 5 years after commuting his sentence

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump on Monday pardoned former Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich, whose 14-year sentence for political corruption charges he commuted during his first term.

The Republican president called the Democratic former governor, who once appeared on Trump's reality TV show "Celebrity Apprentice," "a very fine person" and said the conviction and prison sentence "shouldn't have happened."

"I've watched him. He was set up by a lot of bad people, some of the same people I had to deal with," Trump said at the White House as he signed the pardon.

Blagojevich was convicted in 2011 on charges that included seeking to sell an appointment to then-President Barack Obama's old Senate seat and trying to shake down a children's hospital. Blagojevich served eight years in prison before Trump cut short his term in 2020.

Blagojevich told reporters gathered outside his Chicago home on Monday that he was thankful.

"I'll always be profoundly grateful to President Trump for everything he's done for me and my family," Blagojevich said. "It's everlasting gratitude. He's a great guy."

At the time that Trump announced Blagojevich's commutation in 2020, Trump had been investigated for his ties to Russia and its attempts to interfere in the 2016 election.

Blagojevich

The president made clear that he saw similarities between efforts to investigate his own conduct and those that took down Blagojevich.

"It was a prosecution by the same people — Comey, Fitzpatrick, the same group," Trump told reporters. He was referring to Patrick Fitzgerald, the former U.S. attorney who prosecuted Blagojevich and later represented former FBI Director James Comey, whom Trump fired from the agency in May 2017. Comey was working in the private sector during the Blagojevich investigation and indictment.

Former special counsel Robert Mueller, who oversaw the investigation into ties between between Russia and Trump's 2016 campaign, was FBI director during the investigation into Blagojevich.

Already this term, Trump has granted clemency to more than 1,500 people, all of whom were charged in connection with the Jan. 6, 2021, riot at the U.S. Capitol. The clemency, announced on Trump's first day back in office, paved the way for the release from prison of people found guilty of violent attacks on police as well as leaders of far-right extremist groups convicted of failed plots to keep Trump in power after he lost the 2020 presidential election to Democrat Joe Biden.

NATION

OpenAI rejects $97.4B offer from Musk-led group

Associated Press

A group of investors led by Elon Musk is offering about $97.4 billion to buy OpenAI, escalating a legal dispute with the artificial intelligence company that Musk helped found.

Musk and his own AI startup, xAI, and a consortium of investment firms want to take control of the ChatGPT maker and revert it to its original charitable mission as a nonprofit research lab, according to Musk's attorney Marc Toberoff.

OpenAI CEO Sam Altman quickly rejected the deal on Musk's social platform X, saying, "no thank you but we will buy Twitter for $9.74 billion if you want."

Musk bought Twitter, now called X, for $44 billion in 2022.

Musk and Altman, who together helped start OpenAI in 2015 and later competed over who should be the one to lead it, have been locked in a long-running feud over the direction of the startup since Musk resigned from its board in 2018.

Musk, an early OpenAI investor and board member, sued the company last year, first in a California state court and later in federal court, alleging it had betrayed its founding aims as a nonprofit research lab benefiting the public good.

Musk had invested about $45 million in the startup from its founding until 2018, Toberoff has said.

Musk and OpenAI lawyers faced off in a California federal court last week as a judge weighed Musk's request for a court order that would block the ChatGPT maker from converting itself to a for-profit company.

U.S. District Judge Yvonne Gonzalez Rogers hasn't yet ruled on Musk's request but in the courtroom said it was a "stretch" for Musk to claim he will be irreparably harmed if she doesn't intervene to stop OpenAI from moving forward with its planned for-profit transition.

But the judge also raised concerns about OpenAI and its relationship with business partner Microsoft and said she wouldn't stop the case from moving to trial as soon as next year so a jury can decide.

Bannon pleads guilty, avoids jail time in border wall fraud case

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Steve Bannon pleaded guilty on Tuesday to a fraud charge related to duping donors who gave money to a private effort to build a wall along the U.S. southern border — a case the conservative strategist has decried as a "political persecution."

Bannon, a longtime ally of President Donald Trump, pleaded guilty to one scheme to defraud count as part of a plea agreement that spares him from jail time in the "We Build the Wall" scheme. He received a three-year conditional discharge, which requires that he stay out of trouble to avoid additional punishment.

Bannon spoke to reporters afterward and called on U.S. Attorney General Pam Bondi to begin an immediate criminal investigation into New York Attorney General Letitia James and Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg.

The district attorney's office said Bannon is barred from fundraising for or serving as "an officer, director, or in any other fiduciary position" for any charitable organization with assets in New York state, under the plea agreement.

Bannon

He's also barred from using, selling or possessing any data gathered from donors to the border wall scheme.

Bannon's deal comes just days after Bondi ordered the Justice Department to investigate what the president called the "weaponization of prosecutorial power."

Bannon, 71, was accused of falsely promising donors that all money given to the We Build the Wall campaign would go toward building a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border. Instead, prosecutors alleged the money was used to enrich Bannon and others involved in the project.

The campaign, launched in 2018 after Trump fired Bannon as his chief strategist, quickly raised over $20 million and privately built a few miles of fencing along the border.

It soon ran into trouble with the International Boundary and Water Commission, came under federal investigation and drew criticism from Trump, whose policy the charity was founded to support.

Two other men involved in the project, Brian Kolfage and Andrew Badolato, pleaded guilty to federal charges and were sentenced to prison. A third defendant, Timothy Shea, was convicted and also sentenced to prison.

As egg prices soar, grocers limit customer purchases

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Trader Joe's and other grocers are limiting the number of eggs customers can buy across the U.S., citing limited supply caused by the ongoing bird flu outbreak.

Trader Joe's is capping purchases to one carton per customer each day, the Monrovia, Calif.-based chain confirmed. That limit applies to all of Trader Joe's locations across the country.

"We hope these limits will help to ensure that as many of our customers who need eggs are able to purchase them when they visit Trader Joe's," the company said in a statement sent to The Associated Press Tuesday.

Photos of in-store notices about eggs purchase limits at retailers nationwide have swirled around online in recent weeks. In addition to Trader Joe's, consumers and several local media outlets have also reported varying limits seen at stores like Costco, Whole Foods, Kroger and Aldi locations.

When each limit went into effect is unclear, however. And not all are being implemented nationally.

Avian flu is forcing farmers to slaughter millions of chickens a month, pushing U.S. egg prices to more than double their cost in the summer of 2023.

The average price per dozen nationwide hit $4.15 in December — and it appears there may be no relief in sight, with the Agriculture Department predicting prices will soar another 20% this year. Retailers could notably feel added pressures with Easter demand fast approaching.

Beyond grocery stores limits, U.S. consumers are also facing more expensive eggs in some restaurants. Last week, Waffle House, for example, said it would be adding a 50-cent surcharge per egg on all of its menus.

Transportation 944

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MIDEAST

Netanyahu threatens to exit ceasefire, restart fighting

Move follows Hamas pledge to delay next release of hostages

Associated Press

JERUSALEM — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Tuesday threatened to withdraw from the ceasefire in the Gaza Strip and resume its fight against Hamas if the militant group does not go ahead with the next scheduled release of hostages on Saturday.

Hamas said Monday — and reiterated Tuesday — that it planned to delay the release of three more hostages after accusing Israel of failing to meet the terms of the ceasefire, including by not allowing enough tents and other aid into Gaza.

President Donald Trump has emboldened Israel to call for the release of even more remaining hostages on Saturday, but it wasn't immediately clear whether Netanyahu's threat referred to the release of all remaining hostages in Gaza, or just the three scheduled for release on Saturday.

Earlier Tuesday, an Israeli official said Netanyahu ordered the army to add more troops in and around the Gaza Strip. Netanyahu also ordered officials "to prepare for every scenario if Hamas doesn't release our hostages this Saturday," according to the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss a private meeting.

OHAD ZWIGENBERG/AP

Relatives and supporters of hostages held by Hamas in the Gaza Strip protest Tuesday outside the prime minister's office in Jerusalem after Hamas announced it would delay a planned hostage release.

Israel had signaled Monday it planned to reinforce defenses along the Gaza border. The all-scenario plan was announced during a four-hour meeting between Netanyahu and his Security Cabinet that focused on Hamas' threat, which risks jeopardizing the three-week-old ceasefire.

So far, Hamas has released 21 hostages in a series of exchanges for hundreds of Palestinian prisoners.

Trump has said Israel should cancel the entire ceasefire if all of the roughly 70 hostages aren't freed by Saturday. Hamas brushed off his threat on Tuesday, doubling down on its claim that Israel has violated the ceasefire and warned that it would only continue releasing hostages if all parties adhered to the ceasefire.

Trump is hosting Jordan's King Abdullah II at the White House on Tuesday as he escalates pressure on the Arab nation to take in refugees from Gaza — perhaps permanently — as part of his audacious plan to remake the Middle East.

Palestinians and the international community have seethed over Trump's recent comments that any Palestinians potentially expelled from Gaza would not have a right to return.

During the first six-week phase of the ceasefire, Hamas committed to freeing 33 hostages captured in its Oct. 7, 2023, attack on Israel, while Israel said it would release nearly 2,000 Palestinian prisoners. The sides have carried out five swaps since Jan. 19.

The war could resume in early March if no agreement is reached on the more complicated second phase of the ceasefire, which calls for the return of all remaining hostages and an indefinite extension of the truce.

But if Israel resumes the war, it will face a drastically different battlefield. After forcing hundreds of thousands of Palestinians to evacuate to southern Gaza in the early stages of the war, Israel allowed many of those displaced people to return to what is left of their homes, posing a new challenge to its ability to move ground troops through the territory.

Hamas said its plan to delay the next hostage release "until further notice" depended on whether Israel "abides by its obligations."

In an effort to improve relations with the Trump administration, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas on Monday ended a controversial system that paid stipends to the families of Palestinian prisoners, including those convicted in deadly attacks on Israel.

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WORLD

MICHEL EULER/AP

Vice President JD Vance addresses the audience at the Grand Palais during the Artificial Intelligence Action Summit in Paris, on Tuesday. He warned that "excessive regulation" could cripple the AI industry.

Vance rails against 'excessive regulation' of AI at summit

BY AAMER MADHANI AND THOMAS ADAMSON
Associated Press

PARIS — U.S. Vice President JD Vance on Tuesday warned global leaders and tech industry executives that "excessive regulation" could cripple the rapidly growing artificial intelligence industry in a rebuke to European efforts to curb AI's risks.

The speech underscored a widening, three-way rift over the future of the technology.

The United States, under President Donald Trump, champions a hands-off approach to fuel innovation, while Europe is tightening the reins with strict regulations to ensure safety and accountability. Meanwhile, China is rapidly expanding AI through state-backed tech giants, vying for dominance in the global race.

The U.S. was noticeably absent from an international document signed by more than 60 nations, including China, making the Trump administration the glaring outlier in a global pledge to promote responsible AI development.

At the summit, Vance made his first major policy speech since becoming vice president last month, framing AI as an economic turning point but cautioning that "at this moment, we face the extraordinary prospect of a new industrial revolution, one on par with the invention of the steam engine."

"But it will never come to pass if overregulation deters innovators from taking the risks necessary to advance the ball," Vance added.

The 40-year-old vice president, leveraging the AI summit and a security conference in Munich later this week, is seeking to project Trump's forceful new style of diplomacy.

The Trump administration will "ensure that AI systems developed in America are free from ideological bias," Vance said and pledged the U.S. would "never restrict our citizens' right to free speech."

The international document, signed by scores of countries, including European nations, pledged to "promote AI accessibility to reduce digital divides" and "ensure AI is open, inclusive, transparent, ethical, safe, secure, and trustworthy." It also called for "making AI sustainable for people and the planet" and protecting "human rights, gender equality, linguistic diversity, consumer rights, and intellectual property."

In a surprise move, China — long criticized for its human rights record — signed the declaration, further widening the distance between America and the rest in the tussle for AI supremacy.

The agreement comes as the EU enforces its AI Act, the world's first comprehensive AI law, which took effect in August 2024.

Vance also took aim at foreign governments for "tightening the screws" on U.S. tech firms, saying such moves were troubling. His remarks underscored the growing divide between Washington and its European allies on AI governance.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen stressed that, "AI needs the confidence of the people and has to be safe" and detailed EU guidelines intended to standardize the bloc's AI Act but acknowledged concerns over regulatory burden.

"At the same time, I know that we have to make it easier and we have to cut red tape and we will," she added.

She also announced that the "InvestAI" initiative had reached a total of 200 billion euros in AI investments across Europe, including 20 billion euros dedicated to AI gigafactories.

The summit laid bare competing global AI strategies — Europe pushing to regulate and invest, China expanding AI through state-backed giants, and the U.S. doubling down on an unregulated, free-market approach.

French President Emmanuel Macron positioned Europe as a "third way" in the AI race, one that avoids dependence on major powers like the U.S. and China.

"We want a fair and open access to these innovations for the whole planet," he said in his closing speech, arguing that the AI sector "needs rules" on a global scale to build public trust and urging greater "international governance."

Chinese Vice Premier Zhang Guoqing, special envoy of Xi Jinping, reinforced Beijing's intent to shape global AI standards.

Vance, a vocal critic of European content moderation policies, has suggested the U.S. should reconsider its NATO commitments if European governments impose restrictions on Elon Musk's social media platform, X.

Concerns over AI's potential dangers have loomed over the summit, particularly as nations grapple with how to regulate a technology that is increasingly entwined with defense and warfare.

"I think one day we will have to find ways to control AI or else we will lose control of everything," said Adm. Pierre Vandier, NATO's commander who oversees the alliance's modernization efforts.

EU will 'safeguard' its interests amid tariffs from US

BY RAF CASERT
Associated Press

BRUSSELS — U.S. tariffs on steel and aluminum "will not go unanswered," European Union chief Ursula von der Leyen vowed on Tuesday, adding that they will trigger tough countermeasures from the 27-nation bloc. It means iconic U.S. industries like bourbon, jeans and motorcycles should beware.

"The EU will act to safeguard its economic interests," von der Leyen said in a statement in reaction to President Donald Trump's imposition of tariffs on steel and aluminum the previous day.

"Tariffs are taxes — bad for business, worse for consumers," von der Leyen said. "Unjustified tariffs on the EU will not go unanswered — they will trigger firm and proportionate countermeasures."

Just as Trump imposed similar tariffs during his first presidency, the EU countermeasures could easily amount to those that were used to retaliate then if the measures come into force March 12.

Bernd Lange, the chair of the European Parliament's trade committee, warned that previous trade measures were only suspended and could legally be easily revived.

"When he starts again now, then we will, of course, immediately reinstate our countermeasures," Lange told rbb24 German radio.

"Motorcycles, jeans, peanut butter, bourbon, whiskey and a whole range of products that of course also affect American exporters" would be targeted, he added.

The EU Commission, which negotiates trade relations on behalf of the bloc, said it is not clear what countermeasures would apply, but officials and observers have said they would target Republican states and traditionally strong U.S. exports.

In Germany, which is the EU's largest economy, Chancellor Olaf Scholz told parliament that "if the U.S. leaves us no other choice, then the European Union will react united," adding: "Ultimately, trade wars always cost both sides prosperity."

Trump is hitting foreign steel and aluminum with a 25% tax in the hope that they will give local producers relief from intense global competition, allowing them to charge higher prices.

EU Commission vice-president Maros Sefcovic said Tuesday that the tariffs are "economically counterproductive, especially given the deeply integrated production chains established through our extensive transatlantic trade and investment ties."

"We will protect our workers, businesses and consumers," Sefcovic said, but added that "it is not our preferred scenario. We remain committed to constructive dialog. We stand ready for negotiations and to find mutually beneficial solutions where possible."

The EU estimates that the trade volume between both sides stands at about $1.5 trillion, representing some 30% of global trade. "There is a lot at stake for both sides," he told the EU legislature.

Pope rebukes Trump over deportation of migrants

Associated Press

ROME — Pope Francis issued a major rebuke Tuesday to the Trump administration's mass deportation of migrants, warning that the forceful removal of people purely because of their illegal status deprives them of their inherent dignity and "will end badly."

Francis took the remarkable step of addressing the U.S. migrant crackdown in a letter to U.S. bishops in which he appeared to take direct aim at Vice President JD Vance's defense of the deportation program on theological grounds.

The first Latin American pope has long made caring for migrants a priority, demanding that countries welcome, protect, promote and integrate those fleeing conflicts, poverty and climate disasters.

The Argentine Jesuit and President Donald Trump have long sparred over migration. In the letter, Francis said nations have the right to defend themselves and keep their communities safe from criminals.

"That said, the act of deporting people who in many cases have left their own land for reasons of extreme poverty, insecurity, exploitation, persecution or serious deterioration of the environment, damages the dignity of many men and women, and of entire families, and places them in a state of particular vulnerability and defenselessness," he wrote.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Halftime performer held after unfurling flag

LA NEW ORLEANS — A performer in Kendrick Lamar's Super Bowl halftime show who was detained on the field after unfurling a combination Sudanese-Palestinian flag with "Sudan" and "Gaza" written on it will not face charges, New Orleans police said Monday.

The the member of the 400-member field cast stood on a car used as a prop for Lamar's performance and held up the flag. The NFL said "the individual hid the item on his person and unveiled it late in the show" and that "no one involved with the production was aware of the individual's intent."

"The individual will (be) banned for life from all NFL stadiums and events," NFL spokesperson Brian McCarthy said in an emailed statement Sunday.

Researchers use saliva to prove bat migration

AZ FLAGSTAFF — Scientists have long suspected that Mexican long-nosed bats migrate through southeastern Arizona, but without capturing and measuring the night-flying creatures, proof has been elusive.

Researchers say they now have a way to tell the endangered species apart from other bats by analyzing saliva the nocturnal mammals leave behind when sipping nectar from plants and residential hummingbird feeders.

Bat Conservation International, a nonprofit group working to end the extinction of bat species worldwide, teamed up with residents from southeastern Arizona, southwestern New Mexico and west Texas for the saliva swabbing campaign.

The samples of saliva left along potential migration routes were sent to a lab at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, where researchers looked for environmental DNA — or eDNA — to confirm that the bats cycle through Arizona and consider the region their part-time home.

Person with gun fatally shot by deputy at arcade

CO DENVER — A man died after being shot by a sheriff's deputy responding to a reported active shooter inside an arcade and entertainment center in suburban Denver Saturday night, authorities said.

A sheriff's deputy who was near the Main Event in Highlands Ranch found the man armed with a handgun in the parking lot when he arrived, Douglas County Sheriff Darren Weekly said.

The man refused several orders to drop his weapon and was shot after he turned toward the deputy, he said.

Investigators learned that a woman had been shot and wounded by another woman inside the crowded venue, Weekly said.

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

Sign of progress

A team from the Rueff Sign Co. out of Louisville works to install the main entrance sign for the new Owensboro Racing & Gaming facility on U.S. Highway 60 and Wrights Landing Road in Owensboro, Ky.

Investigators believe the male who was shot by the deputy was connected to the shooting inside, he said.

The woman who was shot is expected to survive and the 23-year-old suspect was taken into custody, the sheriff's office said.

"The situation could have been much worse," Weekly said.

Main Event offers a variety of activities including bowling, laser tag and mini golf in addition to video games.

Lawmakers mull ending daylight savings time

TX MCALLEN — Texas lawmakers are reviving efforts to eliminate the decades-long practice of changing the clocks twice a year.

Several members of the Texas House and Senate have filed legislation meant to put an end to the seasonal tradition of losing an hour of sleep in the spring due to the start of daylight saving time, only to gain the hour back in the fall when clocks revert back to standard time.

Texas is on standard time right now and will begin observing daylight savings on March 9.

Most of the bills filed aim to adopt daylight saving time year-round, an effort that was pushed during the 2023 legislative session, however, state Sen. Judith Zaffirini, D-Laredo, is trying a different approach. Her bill would adopt standard time year-round in Texas, the only option allowed under federal law.

Police issue apology for mistaken allegation

NY NEW YORK — New York City police apologized for mistakenly accusing a teenager of a fatal shooting at a Brooklyn parade, then failing to retract the false allegation for nearly five months, despite knowing it was incorrect.

In a statement sent to news outlets Sunday, the NYPD said an image it circulated on social media of Camden Lee, a 15-year-old Brooklyn resident, "mistakenly stated that he was wanted for the fatal shooting" at the West Indian American Day Parade in September.

"The NYPD should have immediately corrected this misstatement," added the department's chief spokesperson, Delaney Kempner.

"We apologize for the error and will continue to seek justice for the victims of this shooting."

Football coach nominated for lieutenant governor

OH COLUMBUS — Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine on Monday nominated former Ohio State Buckeyes football coach Jim Tressel to be the state's next lieutenant governor.

Tressel retired a year and a half ago as president of Youngstown State University, a job he had held since 2014.

The Republican governor announced the pick at a news conference, calling Tressel "a natural leader" who will ably succeed Jon Husted, whom DeWine recently tapped to fill the U.S. Senate seat left open by JD Vance's election as vice president.

Older prison, boot camp are tagged for closure

PA HARRISBURG — Gov. Josh Shapiro's administration is recommending the closure of Rockview state prison and the Quehanna boot camp, both in central Pennsylvania, amid longer-term national trends of shrinking prison populations.

The administration said on Monday it expects to save more than $100 million in future fiscal years, once the facilities are closed.

Prison staff will be guaranteed a job offer at their existing pay and classification at a nearby correctional institution, the administration said.

It added that public comment will be accepted for three months before a final decision is made. The state's 24 prisons are at about 82% capacity, according to Department of Corrections data.

Shapiro announced last week when he released his budget proposal that he would close two prisons amid steeply rising Medicaid costs.

Stricter rules for lobster fishing are scrapped

ME PORTLAND — Fishing industry regulators have decided to scrap stricter new lobster fishing standards off New England in the wake of months of protest from lobster fishermen that the rules were unnecessary and would bankrupt harvesters.

The regulators were planning to institute new rules this summer that increased the minimum legal harvest size for lobsters in some of the most important fishing grounds in the world. The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Council, which manages the fishery, said the changes were important to preserve the future of a lobster population that has shown recent signs of decline.

Many commercial fishermen adamantly opposed the changes, which would have required them to throw back previously market-ready lobsters.

An arm of the commission voted on Feb. 4 to initiate a repeal of the new rules in the face of "fervent industry concerns about the potential economic impacts" of the changes, the commission said in a statement.

From The Associated Press

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OPINION

About China's 'critical minerals' controls …

By Javier Blas
Bloomberg Opinion

Reading some of the commentary about looming shortages, one would think America is doomed after China imposed export controls on five so-called critical minerals this month. Ignore the hype — the U.S. will be fine.

Rather than using the term currently bandied about, I prefer the moniker everyone used when I arrived at the commodity markets a quarter of a century ago: minor metals. Naturally, the latter is a lot less rousing than the former, which explains why every miner digging for them rebranded itself as a critical-minerals producer. That sounds a lot sexier — helpful for talking up a company's share price.

But there's a good reason why the old hands I learned from called them minor rather than critical; compared with copper and aluminum, let alone crude oil, iron ore or wheat, their market value is tiny. That doesn't mean they aren't important; but when discussing their significance to the national economy, we should look at the dollar value for some perspective.

Beijing has targeted five metals: tungsten, tellurium, bismuth, molybdenum and indium. China is the biggest producer of all of them. But would export controls — rather than an outright export ban — put the American economy on its knees? Nope. That's clear when looking at the U.S. import bills.

First, a disclaimer. Statistics on minor metals are patchy, so take my calculations as back-of-the-envelope guesstimates.

I've relied on the U.S. Geological Survey for volumes; for prices, I used data compiled by Bloomberg from different trading sources. I have used import volumes when available, net of exports; when those figures weren't available, I used total consumption. The five metals come in many forms and compounds, with prices varying significantly depending on purity and composition. I have used industry standard conversion adjustments when needed to convert oxide-compound prices to metal prices. My calculations are, therefore, an approximation.

Molybdenum sits apart from the other four metals. The U.S. is a major producer, and Washington imposes tariffs on the metal of as much as 6.6% to protect its industry. At current prices, the U.S. consumed roughly $480 million worth of molybdenum, used in the production of steel alloys, last year. Domestic production was enough to meet local demand.

The other four metals are dominated by China, with the U.S. reliant on imports. But the value of those purchases is tiny. My calculations suggest the U.S. spends about $300 million importing tungsten; roughly $30 million on bismuth; about $90 million on indium; and less than $1 million on tellurium. The total annual cost for all four comes to less than $500 million; by comparison, the U.S. spent more than three times as much importing my beloved olive oil last year.

Commodity observers would be forgiven for a sense of déjà vu: it's the same trend as the one observed in the much-hyped rare earth elements sector. Fears abound, but the cost of importing the 17 metals that form that category is tiny. The U.S. Geological Survey calculated rare earth imports at less than $200 million in 2023. The figure is so small not even the government-cost-cutter-in-chief Elon Musk would care.

The import bill of minor metals could increase by five, 10, 20, even 50 times, and not amount to more than a rounding error for the U.S. economy. Prices, however, are lower today than they were a decade ago. Did you notice when they were high? Nope; for a reason. Indium, for example, traded as high as $800 per kilogram in 2011; it's now at $345. The cost of the most common compound of tungsten, one of the much-hyped critical minerals, is trading 25% below its 2011 peak. Even if prices rise because of Chinese restrictions, recycling will increase, American engineers will work to reduce their use and alternatives will be found. High prices cure high prices.

What if China halted, rather than merely restricted, exports? It's true that Beijing is, often, the sole source of some of those compounds, and that they are crucial in some applications. But I don't anticipate full export bans other than in the most outlandish of scenarios, such as a war between the U.S. and China. If that were to happen, I'd be more worried about the cost of nuclear weapons-grade uranium than the price of indium. Unless you're heavily involved in an industry that requires one of those minor metals — making armor-piercing ammunition that requires tungsten, say, or LCD screens that use indium or photovoltaic solar cells that use tellurium — the current Sino-American clash about them is a distraction. Don't let the "critical minerals" label care you into believing the American economy faces a threat. It doesn't.

Javier Blas is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering energy and commodities. He is coauthor of "The World for Sale: Money, Power and the Traders Who Barter the Earth's Resources." This column does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the editorial board or Bloomberg LP and its owners.

Trump voters, are you sure this is what you wanted?

By John M. Crisp
Tribune News Service

No one can fault Donald Trump for failing to accomplish at least one of the things he promised while he was a candidate: disruption.

But is it too much? A MAGA friend assures me that Trump's 77 million voters approve of his actions so far and that they are not having second thoughts.

But I wonder. If, before the election, Trump had described some of the actions that he's taken during the first weeks of his administration, would all of his voters have marked their ballots for Trump?

There are several ways to approach this question, but consider Gaza. What if, before Nov. 5, Trump had said that the United States was going to take over Gaza from Israel; deport 2 million Gazans, using U.S. troops, if necessary; level the place; and then construct the "Riviera of the Middle East"? Would all of those 77 million Americans have still voted for him?

Of course, last November most Americans were more concerned about the price of eggs and gas than about Gaza. Trump attracted many voters with his promise of near-immediate relief from the pain of President Joe Biden's inflation.

But what if Trump had said that as soon as he was inaugurated he planned to impose massive tariffs, not only on our adversaries, but on our allies and biggest trading partners?

What if, before we voted, he had said what he said on Feb. 3: "WILL THERE BE SOME PAIN? YES, MAYBE (AND MAYBE NOT!) BUT WE WILL MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN, AND IT WILL ALL BE WORTH THE PRICE THAT MUST BE PAID."?

What about the Jan. 6 "patriots"? Before the election Trump said that he planned to review their convictions on a "case-by-case" basis, implying that insurrectionists who attacked police officers would not be pardoned. He was so convincing that Vice President JD Vance said just before the inauguration: "If you committed violence on that day, obviously you shouldn't be pardoned."

Trump's new attorney general, Pam Bondi, used the "case-by-case" language, as well, adding that she condemns "any violence on a law enforcement officer."

But what if Trump had said that as soon as he became president he would forget about "case-by-case" review and proclaim a blanket pardon for all 1,500 offenders, including those who attacked police officers, as well as criminals such as Enrique Tarrio and Stewart Rhodes, both convicted of seditious conspiracy?

Before the election, Trump said, "I am your warrior, I am your justice…I am your retribution."

But retribution — especially against supposed political enemies — makes citizens in a democratic republic uneasy. Even Trump knows this. He quickly backtracked, redefining retribution as "success" in an attempt to make it sound more palatable to voters.

But now that he's in office, it's clear that he's interested in going after those that he imagines went after him. Last week Bondi created the Weaponization Working Group. Bondi seems oblivious to the group's ambiguous and ironic title, but its intent is clear: Jack Smith, Alvin Bragg and Leticia James are targeted, by name, along with their staffs.

What if Trump had said, before the election, that he might use American troops to seize the Panama Canal? What if he had said he would permit the sudden destruction of the U.S. Agency for International Development? What if he had said he planned to nominate Matt Gaetz for attorney general, a candidate so unqualified and unsuited that even Republicans couldn't hold their noses long enough to confirm him?

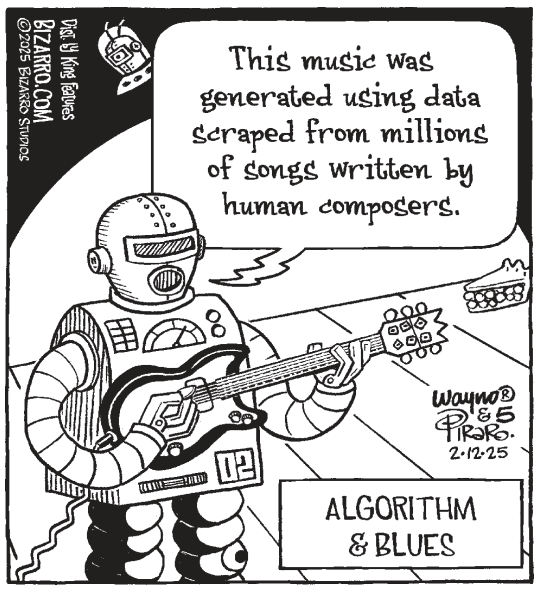
Another MAGA friend always tells me: Don't listen to what Trump says; look at what he does. But this advice overlooks the fact that what presidents and presidential candidates say, and don't say, is crucial.

Many are delighted with Trump's actions. But one wonders whether some of the voters in the 1.5% of the electorate by which Trump won the popular vote would have made a different choice if they could have foreseen the gap between what Trump said, or didn't say, during the campaign and what he has done during his first three weeks in office.

Too late now, of course. Too bad Trump didn't tell us sooner.

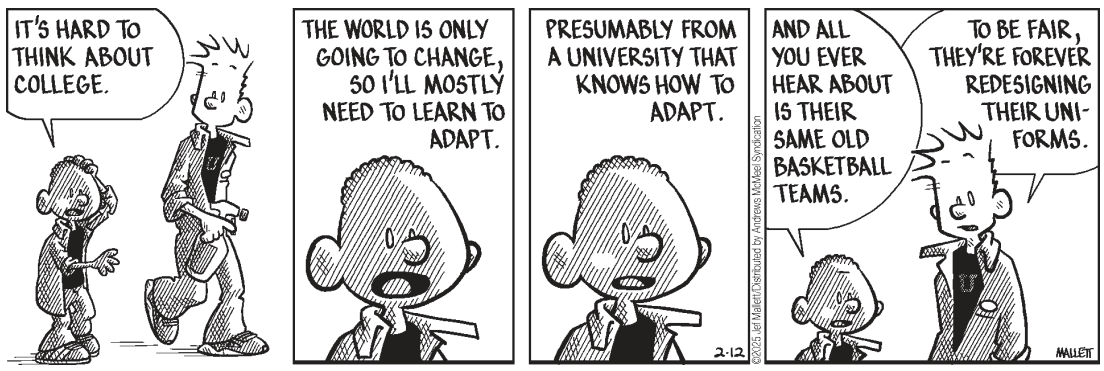
John M. Crisp, an op-ed columnist for Tribune News Service, lives in Texas.

Bizarro

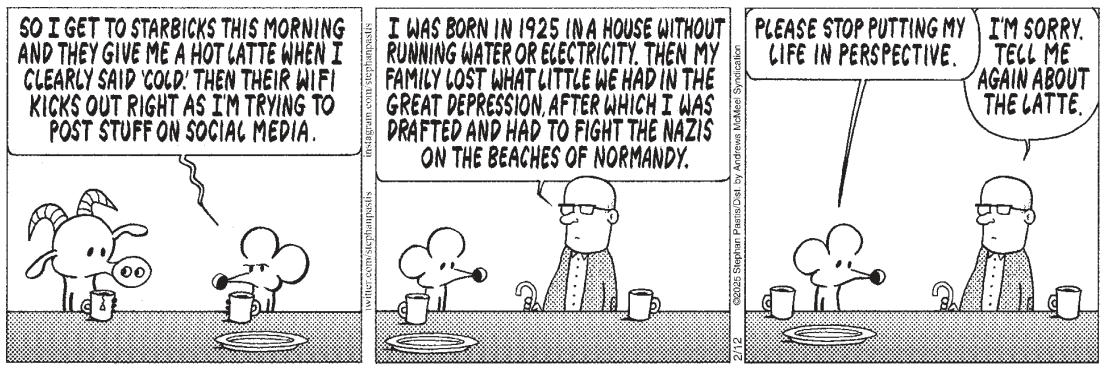


Loose Parts

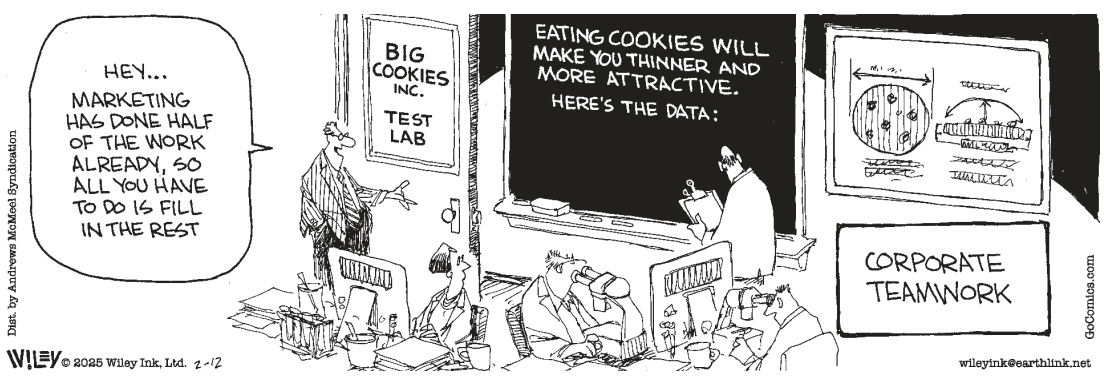
Frazz



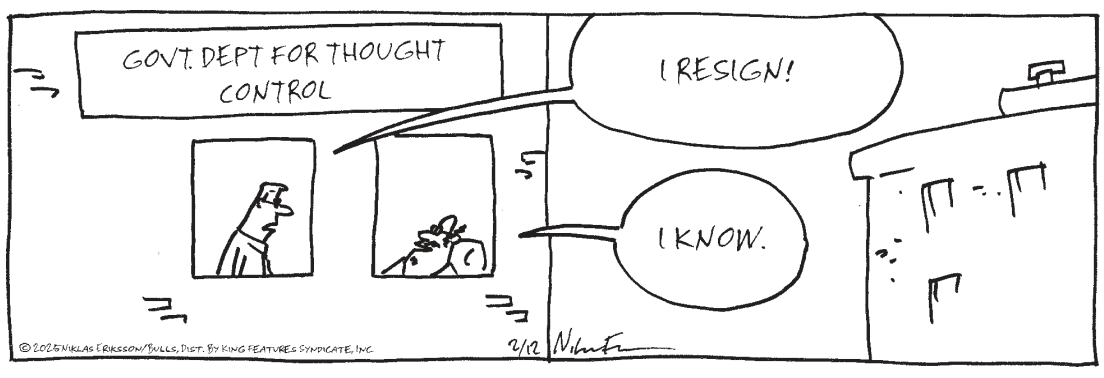
Pearls Before Swine



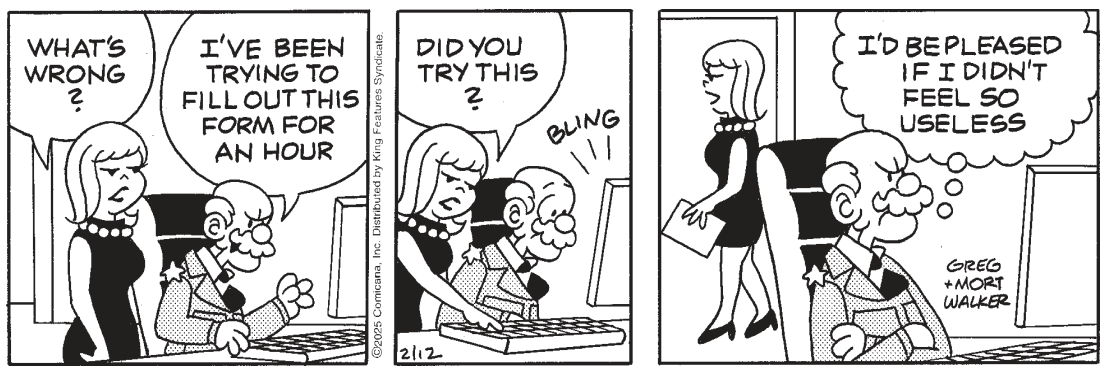
Non Sequitur



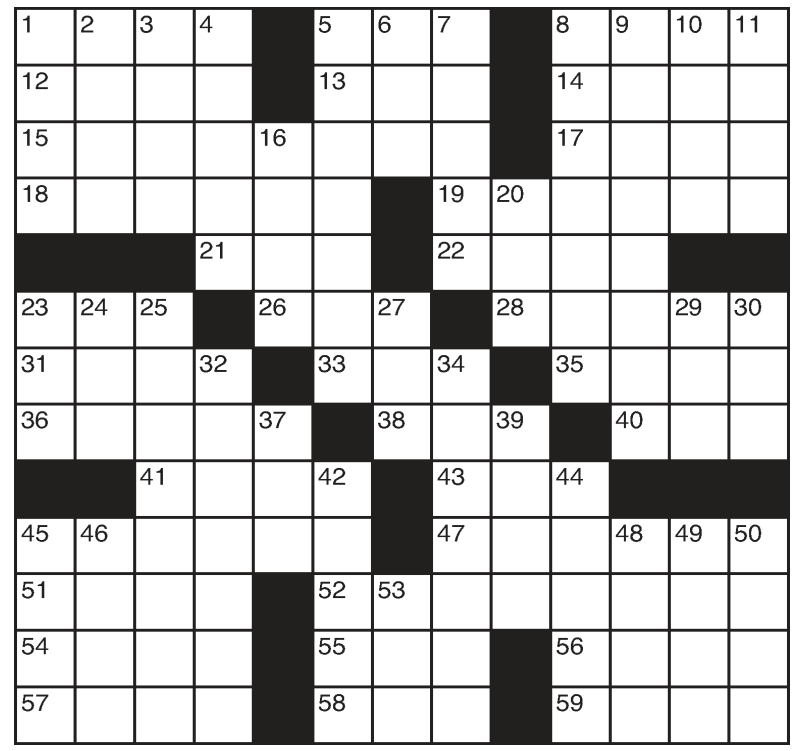
Carpe Diem



Beetle Bailey



Eugene Sheffer Crossword



ACROSS

1 Havana's land
5 High tennis shot
8 Pitt of "Moneyball"
12 Spoken
13 Shock partner
14 Shakespearean villain
15 Military groups
17 Bar fight souvenir
18 Order by classes
19 Vehement protest
21 High school subj.
22 Poi base
23 Likely
26 Small battery
28 Cowboy in "Toy Story"
31 Indy winner A.J.
33 Away from SSW
35 Peevish fit
36 Seized vehicles
38 Business mag
40 Punker Vicious
41 Shacks
43 Cyclades isle
45 1912 Olympic legend
47 Relatives of loons
51 Mine, to Marcel
52 Spoofs
54 Dresses in
55 Org. with a style manual
56 Squad
57 Celeb's aide
58 Tummy muscles
59 Young fellows

DOWN

1 Club in a Manilow song
2 Web addresses
3 Sheepish remarks
4 Choir members
5 From Vientiane
6 Personal
7 Make drunk
8 Casual eateries
9 Masked mammals
10 Lab gel
11 "Finding Nemo" fish
16 Killer whale
20 Motor City labor org.
23 Ghana's cont.
24 "The Bells" writer
25 Violent storms
27 Blackbird
29 Nero's 502
30 Since Jan. 1
32 Sightseer
34 Bafflers
37 NASCAR advertiser
39 Business abbr.
42 1965 march site
44 Capital of South Korea
45 "I did it!"
46 Med. plan options
48 — fide (genuine)
49 Oklahoma city
50 Bygone jets
53 Cleric's tunic

Answer to Previous Puzzle

W	I	P	E		R	T	S		L	O	T	S
O	D	I	N		I	W	O		A	B	I	T
L	E	T	S	S	L	I	P		S	I	M	I
F	A	A		H	E	X		O	T	T	E	R
			L	A	D		W	A	S			
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A	R	I	Z		C	O	G		R	O	N	A
L	I	L	Y	P	A	D		N	A	K	E	D
			S	U	B		R	O	W			
S	P	O	U	T		J	A	G		G	A	P
O	A	R	S		L	I	Z	S	M	I	T	H
A	R	E	A		A	M	E		A	V	I	D
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2-12 **CRYPTOQUIP**

LQND TEG FMBRR LQBFANT EI VNSGBRX XDU X MEEZQ BF RXMMBDC BV GM, VQXV UEC BF X RBSGEI RBZANI.

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: SPIRITED, DETERMINED COURAGE AND GRIT DISPLAYED BY FOLKS FROM DUBLIN: THE PLUCK OF THE IRISH.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: C equals G

FACES

Women get equal billing at the box office

Female protagonists achieve parity with men in top-grossing films of '24

By Jake Coyle
Associated Press

For the first time in recent history, the percentage of top-grossing films featuring female protagonists equaled the percentage of films with male protagonists, according to two annual studies released Tuesday.

Movies like "Wicked," "Inside Out 2" and "The Substance" lifted Hollywood's theatrical releases to gender parity in leading roles in 2024. Of the 100 top domestic grossing films in 2024, 42% had female protagonists and 42% had male protagonists, according to a report issued by the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film at San Diego State University.

The USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, which also released its annual study Tuesday, found that 54% of the top 100 films at the box office in 2024 featured girls and women as protagonists. That's a massive jump from just the year prior, when 30% of films featured women in lead roles. In 2007, when the USC annual study began, that figure was just 20%.

"This is the first time we can say that gender equality has been reached in top-grossing films," said Stacy L. Smith, founder of the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative.

"In 2024, three of the top five films had a girl or woman in a leading role, as did five of the top 10 films — including the number one film of the year, Disney's 'Inside Out 2,'" added Smith. "We have always known that female-identified leads would make money. This is not the result of an economic awakening but is due to a number of different constituencies and efforts — at advocacy groups, at studios, through DEI initiatives — to assert the need for equality on screen."

Other metrics suggested the gains in leading roles masked still-endemic disparity throughout Hollywood. The percentage of female characters in speaking roles increased from 35% to 37% in 2024, according to the San Diego State study. Major female characters rose from 38% in 2023 to 39% in 2024.

"Films such as 'The Substance' pushed back hard against a culture that considers women disposable," stated Dr Martha Lauzen's annual It's a Man's (Celluloid) World report. "While the number of films with female protagonists rose to a historic high in 2024 after a dismally lean 2023, the percentages of women in the more stable categories of major and speaking roles reflected only minor gains."

UNIVERSAL PICTURES/AP

"Wicked" stars Cynthia Erivo, left, and Ariana Grande helped boost gender parity at the box office in 2024.

Universal Studios, which is led by Donna Langley, was the studio with the best record for female representation. In 2024, 66.7% of Universal releases centered on girls and women, according to the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative.

Neither study captures the large number of films released directly on streaming platforms or films that fall outside the top 100 movies in theaters. But for decades, those top box-office films have offered a snapshot of a film industry that has long failed to come close to reflecting the demographics of American society.

That remains the case for underrepresented racial or ethnic groups, who account for roughly 42% of the U.S. population.

In the top 2024 films in 2024, 25% included an underrepresented lead or co-lead, according to Annenberg. In those 25 movies, the lead or co-leads were 38.% Black, 15.4% Asian or Asian American and 3.9% Hispanic.

That was a substantial decrease from 2023, when 37 leads or co-leads were people of color.

"The progress we saw for female-identified leads was not matched by the findings for underrepresented leads," said Smith. "This downturn signifies a lack of investment in storytelling that reflects the audience as a whole. The reality is that audiences want to see stories about women and people of color — studios and filmmakers do not have to choose between the two."

New this week: 'Yellowjackets' reappears, Alessia Cara album

Associated Press

Here's a collection curated by The Associated Press' entertainment journalists of what's arriving on TV, streaming services and music platforms this week.

Movies

■ Renée Zellweger returns to one of her most indelible roles in "Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy." If you've lost track, the film, streaming Thursday on Peacock, is the fourth "Bridget Jones" movie and first since 2016's "Bridget Jones's Baby." In "Mad About a Boy," based on Helen Fielding's 2013 novel, Jones, a widow now in her 50s, is drawn toward two romantic possibilities: a teacher played by Chiwetel Ejiofor and a 29-year-old played by Leo Woodall.

■ Questlove, the Roots drummer and ubiquitous performer, has turned into a must-watch documentarian. In "Sly Lives! (aka the Burden of Black Genius)," Questlove follows his Oscar-winning "Summer of Soul" and the recent "Ladies & Gentlemen... 50 Years of SNL Music" with the definitive documentary on Sly Stone, the funk crossover bandleader of Sly and the Family Stone. The film, stuffed with archival footage and contemporary interviews, and spanning the meteoric rise and tragic fall of Stone, streams Thursday on Hulu.

■ Scott Derrickson's "The Gorge" stars Miles Teller and Anya Taylor-Joy as operatives assigned to guard towers on opposing sides of a gorge, within which a mysterious evil lurks. The film, which debuts Friday on Apple TV+, co-stars Sigourney Weaver.

— AP Film Writer Jake Coyle

Music

■ It wasn't that long ago that Alessia Cara's full-hearted pop was unavoidable; it earned her the coveted best new artist Grammy in 2018 and "Scars to Your Beautiful" endures as a 2010s classic. But much has changed in that time, and the Canadian singer-songwriter has lived a lot of life since. Her forthcoming fourth studio album, "Love & Hyperbole," out on Valentine's Day, is an expression of that growth. "Dead Man" traces the end of a relationship; "(Isn't It) Obvious" features a guitar solo from John Mayer.

■ Giants of country music with the pipes to back it up, husband-and-wife duo The War and Treaty return with a new album, "Plus One." Like the bulk of their discography, this is a collection meant to inspire love and connection in its listeners (of course amplified by the Valentine's Day release date) with soulful, twang-y songs about family and faith.

■ For many, Shygirl is a new name, perhaps most immediately associated with her remix of Charli xcx's "BRAT" hit "365." But that's just for now. The forward-thinking English DJ and musician is making waves for her inventive approach to experimental pop, grime, house and club music that works on a sweaty dancefloor as much as it does behind a browser. Just take a look at some of the names on her upcoming EP, "Club Shy Room 2": Jorja Smith, Saweetie, BAMBII, SadBoi, PinkPantheress, Isabella Lovestory and more.

■ In 1992, Eric Clapton recorded an hourlong performance at Bray Studios in Windsor, England, titled "Eric Clapton Unplugged," one of the bestselling live albums of all time. (And of course it is — no one is immune to the charms of an acoustic "Tears in Heaven.") On Wednesday, Paramount+ subscribers will get to experience the magic once more — now in the form of an extended, remixed and remastered 90-minute edition titled "Eric Clapton Unplugged… Over 30 Years Later."

— AP Music Writer Maria Sherman

Television

■ It may still be cold outside but it's summertime on Bravo with Season 9 of "Summer House." The reality series stars a group of Manhattanites who share a house on the weekends in the Hamptons. Whereas last season followed the tumultuous engagement of cast members Lindsay Hubbard and Carl Radke, the new episodes were filmed about a year later — after their breakup. The two may have moved on, but it doesn't take a Magic 8 Ball to assume they'll still have issues. We'll also see Hubbard pregnant with her first child. "Summer House" premieres Wednesday on Bravo and streams on Peacock.

■ Ice skaters of color and their coaches are the focus of a new docuseries called "Harlem Ice." Viewers will follow the young skaters experience triumphs and challenges as they train and compete in a sport that is traditionally white. "Good Morning America" host Robin Roberts is an executive producer alongside Ron Howard and Brian Grazer. All five episodes drop Wednesday on Disney+.

■ The first two episodes of Season 3 of Showtime's horror series "Yellowjackets" drop Friday on Paramount+. When a plane carrying a girls' high school soccer team crashes in the middle of nowhere, its survivors are in a fight to survive. It's inspired by William Golding's 1954 classic, "Lord of the Flies." "Yellowjackets" unfolds in two timelines: one at the time of the crash and one two decades later when the girls are adult women. Its stars include Melanie Lynskey, Christina Ricci and Lauren Ambrose. Oscar winner Hilary Swank joins Season 3 in a recurring role.

— Alicia Rancilio

SCOREBOARD/NFL

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

AP Men's Top 25

The top 25 teams in The Associated Press' college basketball poll, with first-place votes in parentheses, and 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. Auburn (34)	21-2	1479	1
2. Alabama (23)	20-3	1470	3
3. Florida (3)	20-3	1342	6
3. Duke	20-3	1342	2
5. Tennessee (1)	20-4	1315	4
6. Houston	19-4	1235	5
7. Purdue	19-5	1142	7
8. Texas A&M	18-5	1065	10
9. St. John's	21-3	1058	12
10. Iowa St.	18-5	880	8
11. Michigan St.	19-4	868	9
12. Texas Tech	18-5	778	13
13. Arizona	17-6	701	20
14. Memphis	20-4	676	17
15. Kentucky	16-7	558	14
16. Wisconsin	19-5	488	21
17. Kansas	16-7	469	16
18. Marquette	18-6	442	11
19. Mississippi	18-6	415	25
20. Michigan	18-5	350	24
21. Missouri	17-6	333	15
22. Mississippi St.	17-6	292	22
23. Clemson	19-5	291	-
24. Creighton	18-6	198	-
25. Maryland	18-6	196	18

Others receiving votes: UCLA 123, UConn 106, Illinois 59, Louisville 53, New Mexico 40, Drake 21, Saint Mary's 20, Utah St. 8, George Mason 7, Gonzaga 5.

USA Today Men's Top 25 Poll

The USA Today sports Top 25 men's basketball poll, with team's records through Sunday 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 Alabama (20-3)	758	3	15
2 Auburn (21-2)	741	1	16
3 Florida (20-3)	688	6	0
4 Tennessee (20-4)	669	4	0
5 Duke (20-3)	665	2	0
6 Houston (19-4)	639	5	0
7 Purdue (19-5)	575	7	0
8 St. John's (21-3)	558	10	0
9 Texas A&M (18-5)	501	13	0
10 Iowa State (18-5)	482	8	0
11 Michigan St. (19-4)	458	9	0
12 Texas Tech (18-5)	369	12	0
13 Arizona (17-6)	367	20	0
14 Memphis (20-4)	357	15	0
15 Wisconsin (19-5)	284	19	0
16 Marquette (18-6)	248	11	0
17 Michigan (18-5)	241	22	0
18 Kentucky (16-7)	217	14	0
19 Clemson (19-5)	196	21	0
20 Kansas (16-7)	186	17	0
21 Creighton (18-6)	148	NR	0
22 Missouri (17-6)	142	16	0
23 Mississippi (18-6)	127	NR	0
24 Connecticut (16-7)	96	18	0
25 Maryland (18-6)	87	24	0

Dropped out: No. 23 Saint Mary's (21-4); No. 25 Illinois (16-8).

Others receiving votes: Mississippi State (17-6) 72; Louisville (18-6) 57; Saint Mary's (21-4) 51; UCLA (18-6) 42; Illinois (16-8) 19; New Mexico (20-4) 16; Gonzaga (18-7) 7; Oregon (16-8) 5; Utah State (21-3) 2; Virginia Commonwealth (19-5) 2; Baylor (15-8) 1; ; Drake (22-2) 1; UC San Diego (20-4) 1.

Monday's men's scores

EAST

American 60, Lafayette 58
Howard 77, Md.-Eastern Shore 57

SOUTH

Alabama St. 82, Southern U. 81
Alcorn St. 86, MVSU 39
Campbell 66, NC A&T 62
Clemson 85, North Carolina 65
FAU 87, Charlotte 75
Grambling St. 72, Alabama A&M 61
Jackson St. 94, Ark.-Pine Bluff 78
McNeese St. 67, East Texas A&M 51
Northwestern St. 72, Nicholls 60

SOUTHWEST

Bethune-Cookman 80, Texas Southern 77
Florida A&M 78, Prairie View 67
Houston 76, Baylor 65
Incarnate Word 75, New Orleans 65
Lamar 67, Texas A&M-CC 56
SE Louisiana 69, Houston Christian 60
Stephen F. Austin 85, Texas RGV 75

FAR WEST

Nevada 94, Fresno St. 69

Men's Top 25 schedule

Wednesday's games

No. 3 Duke (20-3) vs. California (12-12)
No. 9 St. John's (21-3) at Villanova (14-10)
No. 12 Texas Tech (18-5) vs. Arizona St. (12-11)
No. 19 Mississippi (18-6) at South Carolina (10-13)
No. 21 Missouri (17-6) vs. Oklahoma (16-7)

Thursday's games

No. 14 Memphis (20-4) at South Florida (12-12)
No. 25 Maryland (18-6) at Nebraska (16-8)

Saturday's games

No. 1 Auburn (21-2) at No. 2 Alabama (20-3)
No. 3 Duke (20-3) vs. Stanford (16-8), 4 p.m.
No. 3 Florida (20-3) vs. South Carolina (10-13)
No. 5 Tennessee (20-4) vs. Vanderbilt (17-6)
No. 6 Houston (19-4) at No. 13 Arizona (17-6)
No. 7 Purdue (19-5) vs. No. 16 Wisconsin (19-5)
No. 8 Texas A&M (18-5) vs. Arkansas (14-9)
No. 10 Iowa St. (18-5) vs. Cincinnati (14-9)
No. 11 Michigan St. (19-4) at Illinois (16-8)
No. 12 Texas Tech (18-5) at Oklahoma St. (12-11)
No. 15 Kentucky (16-7) at Texas (15-9)
No. 17 Kansas (16-7) at Utah (13-10)
No. 19 Mississippi (18-6) vs. No. 22 Mississippi St. (17-6)
No. 21 Missouri (17-6) at Georgia (16-8)
No. 23 Clemson (19-5) at Florida St. (14-9)

AP Women's Top 25

The top 25 teams in The Associated Press' women's college basketball poll, with first-place votes in parentheses, and 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. UCLA (31)	23-0	775	1
2. Notre Dame	21-2	733	3
3. Texas	24-2	713	4
4. South Carolina	22-2	687	2
5. LSU	25-1	646	6
6. Southern Cal	21-2	628	7
7. UConn	22-3	570	5
8. Kentucky	19-2	521	11
9. Ohio St.	20-3	487	8
10. NC State	19-4	480	14
11. TCU	22-3	443	9
12. North Carolina	21-4	429	13
13. Duke	19-5	426	10
14. Kansas St	22-3	407	12
15. Tennessee	17-6	316	19
16. Oklahoma	17-6	311	15
17. Maryland	19-5	290	16
18. West Virginia	19-4	258	18
19. Georgia Tech	20-4	257	17
20. Oklahoma St.	19-4	156	25
21. Alabama	20-5	146	23
22. Michigan St.	18-5	86	20
23. Florida St.	19-5	78	22
24. Creighton	20-4	61	-
25. Baylor	20-5	48	-

Others receiving votes: California 38, Illinois 22, Vanderbilt 20, Utah 14, South Dakota St. 7, Michigan 6, Richmond 5, Mississippi 4, Columbia 3, Harvard 2, Louisville 1, Grand Canyon 1.

Monday's women's scores

EAST

Howard 66, Md.-Eastern Shore 56

SOUTH

Mississippi 66, Kentucky 57

MIDWEST

Iowa 81, Nebraska 66

SOUTHWEST

Oklahoma 73, Auburn 71

FAR WEST

Portland 77, Pepperdine 75, OT

Women's Top 25 schedule

Wednesday's games

No. 7 UConn (22-3) vs. St. John's (13-10)
No. 14 Kansas St. (22-3) at Cincinnati (14-8)
No. 20 Oklahoma St. (19-4) vs. Arizona (15-10)
No. 22 Michigan St. (18-5) vs. Wisconsin (11-13)

Thursday's games

No. 1 UCLA (23-0) at No. 6 Southern Cal (21-2)
No. 2 Notre Dame (21-2) at Pittsburgh (11-14)
No. 3 Texas (24-2) at No. 8 Kentucky (19-2)
No. 4 South Carolina (22-2) vs. Florida (12-12)
No. 9 Ohio St. (20-3) vs. Minnesota (19-6)
No. 10 NC State (19-4) vs. Miami (13-10)
No. 12 North Carolina (21-4) vs. Virginia Tech (16-8)
No. 13 Duke (19-5) at Wake Forest (8-15)
No. 15 Tennessee (17-6) vs. Auburn (12-11)
No. 17 Maryland (19-5) vs. Nebraska (16-7)
No. 19 Georgia Tech (20-4) at Clemson (11-13)
No. 23 Florida St. (19-5) vs. Louisville (17-7)

DEALS

Monday's transactions

BASEBALL
Major League Baseball
American League

BALTIMORE ORIOLES — Assigned INF Emmanuel Rivera outright to Norfolk (IL). Agreed to terms with RHP Dylan Coleman on a minor league contract.

MINNESOTA TWINS — Agreed to terms with RHPs Scott Blewett, Randy Dobnak, Darren McCaughan, Alex Speas and Huascar Ynoa, LHP Anthony Misiewicz, and INFs Armando Alvarez and Mike Ford on minor league contracts.

National League

CHICAGO CUBS — Agreed to terms with RHP Brayden Spears on a minor league contract.

MIAMI MARLINS — Agreed to terms with RHP Janson Junk and C Rob Brantly on minor league contracts.

NEW YORK METS — Announced RHP Dylan Covey refused outright assignment to Syracuse (IL) and elected free agency.

BASKETBALL
National Basketball Association

LOS ANGELES CLIPPERS — Signed G Ben Simmons to a rest-of-season contract.

FOOTBALL
National Football League

NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS — Released OT Chukwuma Okorafor.

NEW YORK GIANTS — Hired Chad Hall as assistant quarterbacks coach.

WASHINGTON COMMANDERS — Singed CB Bobby Price to a contract.

HOCKEY
National Hockey League

NASHVILLE PREDATORS — Claimed D Andreas Englund on waivers from Los Angeles.

OTTAWA SENATORS — Sent LW Cole Reinhardt to Belleville (AHL).

TAMPA BAY LIGHTNING — Reassigned C Gage Goncalves, G Brandon Halverson and LW Dylan Duke to Syracuse (AHL).

SOCCER
Major League Soccer

COLORADO RAPIDS — Acquired M Ted Ku-DiPietro from D.C. United in exchange for $1,125,000. Acquired $200,000 in 2025 general allocation money and a 2026 first-round pick from Columbus in exchange for a 2025 international roster slot.

ORLANDO CITY SC — Signed M Eduard Atuesta to a one-year contract.

SAN DIEGO FC — Signed D Willy Kumado to a two-year contract.

National Women's Soccer League

HOUSTON DASH — Signed M Evelina Duljan to a one-year contract.

TENNIS

Qatar Total Open

Tuesday
At Doha, Qatar
Surface: Hardcourt outdoor
Seedings in parentheses
Women's Singles
Round of 32

Linda Noskova, Czechia, def. Yulia Putintseva, Kazakhstan, 6-2, 6-3.
Jasmine Paolini (4), Italy, def. Caroline Garcia, France, 6-3, 6-4.
Elise Mertens, Belgium, def. Cristina Bucsa, Spain, 6-2, 6-3.
Sofia Kenin, United States, def. Alycia Parks, United States, 7-6 (3), 3-6, 6-2.
Elena Rybakina (5), Kazakhstan, def. Peyton Stearns, United States, 6-2, 6-4.
Marta Kostyuk, Ukraine, def. Coco Gauff (3), United States, 6-2, 7-5.
Jelena Ostapenko, Latvia, def. Liudmila Samsonova (16), Russia, 7-6 (5), 7-5.

AP SPORTLIGHT

Feb. 12

1937 — Cleveland is granted an NFL franchise. The Rams play in Cleveland for nine years before moving to Los Angeles. After the 1994 season, the Rams move to St. Louis before moving back to LA in 2016.

1947 — Boston's Bill Cowley becomes the NHL all-time scoring leader when he scores a goal and an assist for the Bruins in a 10-1 win over the New York Rangers. Cowley's 529 points is one more than Syd Howe, who retired one year earlier.

1958 — Boston's Bill Russell scores 18 points and grabs 41 rebounds to lead the Celtics to a 119-101 victory over the Syracuse Nationals.

1972 — The Soviet Union ice hockey team wins the gold medal with a 5-2 victory over Czechoslovakia at the Winter Olympics. The United States is awarded the silver because it had beaten and tied Czechoslovakia.

1982 — Wayne Gretzky scores his 153rd point of the season, breaking the NHL record.

1994 — Loy Allen Jr. becomes the first Winston Cup rookie to win a pole in the Daytona 500.

2005 — Allen Iverson scores 60 points, a career high, to lead the Philadelphia 76ers to a 112-99 victory over the Orlando Magic.

2007 — Duke, saddled by its first four-game losing skid in 11 years, falls out of The Associated Press men's poll for the first time since the end of the 1995-96 season. The Blue Devils had been in the media poll for 200 straight weeks — the second-longest streak behind UCLA's record 221 weeks.

REED HOFFMANN/AP

Expanding replay assist to include more plays, including facemask penalties, is expected to be a major topic this offseason.

Offseason agenda already pretty full

BY ROB MAADDI
Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — The NFL offseason won't last long.

By the time the Philadelphia Eagles complete their Super Bowl victory parade Friday, it will be less than two weeks until the scouting combine kicks off in Indianapolis.

Free agency follows on March 10 with the two-day negotiating period. The annual league meeting starts on March 30.

The seven teams with new head coaches may open offseason workout programs on April 7 and the remaining 25 teams can follow two weeks later.

Then, it's time for the NFL draft on April 24 in Green Bay, where Miami quarterback Cam Ward is the bettors' pick to be the No. 1 overall pick.

Some of the league's offseason priorities include player health and safety and conversations about potential new rules, including reviewing kickoffs following a one-year experiment with dynamic changes.

Player safety

"We're going to talk about moving players to better-performing helmets. That's a big one," NFL executive Jeff Miller told The Associated Press.

In 2024, players suffered the fewest concussions in a season since the league began tracking data nine years ago, according to the NFL. The total decline from 2023 was 17%, including all practices and games in both the preseason and regular season.

Miller, the league's executive vice president overseeing player health and safety, and NFL chief medical officer Dr. Allen Sills have cited several reasons for the drop-off, including safer equipment, enforcement of safety rules and broader efforts to foster a culture of safety regarding concussions.

"It's not the end of the story. There are still opportunities to decrease those," Miller said, pointing out the desire to have more players choose position-specific helmets designed to reduce the impact of hits. "But also we need to enforce some of the rules around head contact, which our friends on the officiating side are doing a better and better job of, and eliminating more unnecessary or avoidable head contact is going to make players safer."

Dynamic kickoff

The league and its competition committee also will decide whether to tweak the rules on kickoffs.

"It's really going to be the headline for us in the offseason, how'd we do and what changes need to be made?" Miller said. "The story in Year 1 was a good one, 332 more returns than a year ago and a lower injury rate. We hit the mark on that and we got as many touchdowns as we did since 2020 and some long kickoffs past the 40. Is there more that we can do to create more incentive for more of those returns and yet keep the injury rate more like a run or pass play? We were getting really close to that this year, which is the goal."

Replay review

Replay assist will be a major topic, too. NFL executive Troy Vincent said in December that expanding replay assist to include facemask penalties and other plays is going to be considered.

Current rules allowed replay assist only to help officials pick up a flag incorrectly thrown on the field, or in assisting proper enforcement of a foul called.

NBA

ROUNDUP

Doncic makes his debut with Lakers

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Luka Doncic was the last starter introduced by the Los Angeles Lakers, an honor normally reserved for LeBron James. When Doncic jogged into the spotlight on a darkened court through a cordon of his new teammates, his new fans stood and roared while wearing thousands of gold T-shirts with his name and number.

Even a young superstar could feel the magnificence of the moment.

"I was a little nervous before," Doncic said. "I (don't remember) the last time I was nervous before the game. But once I stepped on the court again, it was fun. Just being out there, it felt amazing."

Doncic's debut with the Lakers was brief and successful Monday night, but it piqued the anticipation of everybody involved for his days and years ahead in Los Angeles.

Doncic scored 14 points while playing just 23 minutes, immediately getting into the flow with James and his teammates during Los Angeles' 132-113 victory over the Utah Jazz. Doncic added five rebounds and four assists — none prettier than a three-quarter-court strike to James for a layup late in the first half.

Doncic was grateful to be playing basketball after nearly seven weeks of injury absence, and he was happy to begin to move past the upheaval in his life ever since the Dallas Mavericks shocked the sports world 10 days ago by trading their 25-year-old centerpiece and NBA scoring champion.

Doncic got multiple standing ovations from a Los Angeles crowd wearing thousands of No. 77 shirts, but his pregame introduction was something he'll remember for a long time.

"Just the amount of cheering there was in the arena was absolutely unbelievable," Doncic said. "That was my favorite part — and to play again."

Doncic said James texted him in the morning and offered to do anything to help — and Doncic took him up on it by taking the final intro spot. They'll swap for the Lakers' next home game next week, Doncic said with a grin.

"Shows what kind of person he is," Doncic said. "He let me have my moment."

The Slovenian scorer's first bucket was a 3-pointer in the opening minutes on his second shot. Doncic scored 11 points while Los Angeles streaked out to a 25-point halftime lead, and he sat down for good with 3:07 left in the third quarter with the Lakers far ahead in their sixth consecutive victory.

The game was Doncic's first since he strained his left calf on Christmas. After a full week to settle in Los Angeles and to return to full strength, Doncic joined James, Austin Reaves, Rui Hachimura and Jaxson Hayes as starters for the streaking Lakers, who had won 11 of 13 even before adding a five-time All-NBA selection to their lineup.

The Lakers have Doncic on a minutes restriction after his injury absence. His legs aren't quite there yet — he went 1-for-7 on 3-point attempts in his debut — but his playmaking immediately meshed with his new teammates.

Doncic's first touch was an alley-oop assist to Hayes, and he hit his 3-pointer moments later. He was serenaded with "Luka! Luka!" chants at the first dead ball, and several times thereafter.

The crowd included Dirk Nowitzki, who overlapped with Doncic for one season in Dallas and served as his mentor. Doncic appeared to be the natural heir to the German Hall of Famer's incredible run in Dallas — until current Mavericks general manager Nico Harrison decided otherwise.

Cavaliers 128, Timberwolves 107: Evan Mobley scored 28 points, fellow All-Star Donovan Mitchell added 23 and Cleveland had little trouble against visiting Minnesota.

The East-leading Cavs scored the game's first 16 points. They welcomed new addition De'Andre Hunter and improved to 25-4 at home.

All-Star Anthony Edwards led the Timberwolves with 44 points.

Hawks 112, Magic 106: Trae Young scored 11 of his 19 points in the fourth quarter as Atlanta won at Orlando.

Young was 6-for-17 from the field and committed nine turnovers. But he also had eight assists and five rebounds on the same day he was added to the All-Star roster as an injury replacement for Milwaukee forward Giannis Antetokounmpo.

Franz Wagner led Orlando with 35 points. Paolo Banchero added 31 points, including a career-high 20 in the third quarter.

Spurs 131, Wizards 121: Victor Wembanyama had 31 points and 15 rebounds to help San Antonio hold off host Washington.

De'Aaron Fox contributed 30 points for the Spurs, and Chris Paul had 10 assists. Rookie Stephon Castle added 16 points.

Tristan Vukcevic led Washington with 18 points.

Nets 97, Hornets 89: Nic Claxton scored 16 points and Brooklyn pulled away after LaMelo Ball was lost to another ankle injury and beat visiting Charlotte.

Moussa Diabate had a career-high 21 points and grabbed 10 rebounds for the Hornets before he was forced out of the game with a right eye abrasion. Tidjane Salaun scored 16 points.

Celtics 103, Heat 85: Jayson Tatum scored 33 points, Kristaps Porzingis added 17 and visiting Boston rolled past Miami.

Bam Adebayo scored 22 points and grabbed 12 rebounds for Miami, which was without Tyler Herro and Jaime Jaquez Jr. — both sidelined by illness.

Andrew Wiggins had 11 points in his Heat debut. Miami shot 33.7% and has been held under 90 points in each of its past five matchups with Boston.

Warriors 125, Bucks 111: Stephen Curry scored a season-high 38 points and visiting Golden State pulled away in the fourth quarter to beat Milwaukee.

Jimmy Butler had 20 points, nine rebounds and six assists in his second game with the Warriors.

Milwaukee was playing its sixth consecutive game without two-time MVP Giannis Antetokounmpo, who will be out through the All-Star break as he deals with a left calf strain.

Damian Lillard scored 38 points for the Bucks.

Thunder 137, Pelicans 101: Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 31 points in three quarters as host Oklahoma City routed New Orleans.

Trey Murphy III scored 23 points and Zion Williamson added 17 for the Pelicans.

Kings 129, Mavericks 128 (OT): DeMar DeRozan scored a season-high 42 points, including a baseline floater with 2 seconds left in overtime, and visiting Sacramento beat depleted Dallas.

Kyrie Irving scored 30 points for the Mavericks. Irving was added to the All-Star roster earlier in the day, replacing Davis.

Nuggets 146, Trail Blazers 117: Nikola Jokic scored 40 points, Christian Braun added 26 and surging Denver beat visiting Portland for its seventh straight victory.

The seven-game winning streak is the longest of the season for the Nuggets, who played without Michael Porter Jr. for the second straight game due to hamstring tightness.

Donovan Clingan scored a career-high 21 points and Dalano Banton added 22 for the Blazers, who lost their second straight after winning 10 of 11.

MARK J. TERRILL/AP

Lakers guard Luka Doncic shoots as Utah Jazz guard Isaiah Collier defends Monday night in Los Angeles. Doncic scored 14 points in 23 minutes as the Lakers beat the Jazz 132-113.

Scoreboard

Eastern Conference

Atlantic Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Boston	38	16	.704	—
New York	34	18	.654	3
Philadelphia	20	32	.385	17
Brooklyn	19	34	.358	18½
Toronto	16	37	.302	21½

Southeast Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Miami	25	26	.490	—
Atlanta	26	28	.481	½
Orlando	26	29	.473	1
Charlotte	13	38	.255	12
Washington	9	44	.170	17

Central Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Cleveland	43	10	.811	—
Indiana	29	22	.569	13
Milwaukee	28	24	.538	14½
Detroit	27	26	.509	16
Chicago	22	31	.415	21

Western Conference

Southwest Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Memphis	35	17	.673	—
Houston	33	20	.623	2½
Dallas	28	26	.519	8
San Antonio	23	28	.451	11½
New Orleans	12	41	.226	23½

Northwest Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Oklahoma City	43	9	.827	—
Denver	35	19	.648	9
Minnesota	30	24	.556	14
Portland	23	31	.426	21
Utah	12	40	.231	31

Pacific Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
L.A. Lakers	32	19	.627	—
L.A. Clippers	29	23	.558	3½
Sacramento	27	26	.509	6
Golden State	27	26	.509	6
Phoenix	26	26	.500	6½

Sunday's games

Detroit 112, Charlotte 102
Houston 94, Toronto 87
Milwaukee 135, Philadelphia 127

Monday's games

Cleveland 128, Minnesota 107
San Antonio 131, Washington 121
Atlanta 112, Orlando 106
Boston 103, Miami 85
Brooklyn 97, Charlotte 89
Oklahoma City 137, New Orleans 101
Golden State 125, Milwaukee 111
Sacramento 129, Dallas 128, OT
Denver 146, Portland 117
L.A. Lakers 132, Utah 113

Tuesday's games

Toronto at Philadelphia
New York at Indiana
Detroit at Chicago
Memphis at Phoenix

Wednesday's games

Charlotte at Orlando
Indiana at Washington
San Antonio at Boston
Atlanta at New York
Cleveland at Toronto
Philadelphia at Brooklyn
Detroit at Chicago
Miami at Oklahoma City
Milwaukee at Minnesota
Sacramento at New Orleans
Phoenix at Houston
L.A. Lakers at Utah
Portland at Denver
Golden State at Dallas
Memphis at L.A. Clippers

Thursday's games

Golden State at Houston
Sacramento at New Orleans
Miami at Dallas
Oklahoma City at Minnesota
L.A. Clippers at Utah

Scoring leaders

Through Monday

	G	FG	FT	PTS	AVG
Gil.-Alexander, OKC	51	579	402	1664	32.6
Antetokoun., MIL	41	521	254	1302	31.8
Jokic, DEN	48	545	243	1432	29.8
Maxey, PHI	45	441	230	1264	28.1
Edwards, MIN	52	479	254	1432	27.5
Durant, PHO	39	381	196	1050	26.9
Tatum, BOS	51	463	263	1374	26.9
Booker, PHO	47	405	304	1239	26.4
Brunson, NY	51	461	299	1340	26.3
Lillard, MIL	44	350	280	1133	25.8

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

No. 3 Florida thrives on being overlooked

By Mark Long
Associated Press

GAINESVILLE, Fla. — Florida coach Todd Golden has a theme for this season, one he recounts in the locker room before every game: "A lot of us weren't supposed to be here."

It's a friendly reminder about how far the third-ranked Gators have come — mostly as individuals but also as a group.

"We all feel like we have this collective energy with the chip on our shoulder," Golden said. "If we maintain that, we'll be in good shape."

When Golden started piecing together Florida's roster more than two years ago — he has only two players remaining from his first season in 2022-23 — he sought out ultra-competitive guys with something to prove.

The result was a tough and tenacious team that tends to set the tone regardless of venue or opponent. It helped the Gators (20-3, 7-3 Southeastern Conference) earn their first road win against a No. 1 team in program history — a 90-81 stunner at Auburn on Saturday — and become the fifth men's team in college basketball history to knock off two different top-ranked teams in the same season. Florida beat then-No. 1 Tennessee by 30 points in early January.

The Gators played at No. 22 Mississippi State (17-6, 5-5) on Tuesday, a chance to face former Florida guard Riley Kugel for the first time.

Butch Dill/AP

Florida guard Walter Clayton Jr. prepares to shoot a 3-point basket against Auburn guard Chad Baker-Mazara during the first half Saturday in Auburn, Ala. The Gators knocked off the then-No. 1 Tigers.

Kugel, a junior from nearby Orlando, played two seasons with the Gators. He was often caught on camera brushing off teammates and coaches last season, got benched for two games in last year's SEC Tournament and clearly fell out of favor long before he entered the transfer portal.

Most would agree that Kugel's departure ended up being addition by subtraction.

"We stress getting guys that have great attitudes, great work ethics, but most importantly have pride and want to be here at Florida," Golden said. "More often than not, our team talent and our collectiveness will carry us. But we want to have those hungry guys that are appreciative of the opportunity and want to continue to prove what they're capable of."

Midmajor transfers

Golden's backcourt might be the best example of his "remember where you came from" approach. Leading scorer Walter Clayton Jr. transferred from Iona, fellow guard Will Richard from Belmont and Alijah Martin played four seasons at Florida Atlantic.

"A lot of people didn't expect us to be where we're at, overlooked us when we were younger or whatever," Clayton said. "Now we got this group of guys, and I don't think he wants us to just lose that mentality. We worked hard to get here. You can't get to this point and then just kind of stop having that mentality."

Even though Martin and the Owls advanced to the Final Four two years ago, he landed in Gainesville with little fanfare.

"Sometimes you got to be reminded where you come from, how you got there," Martin said.

Plenty to prove

Center Rueben Chinyelu transferred from Washington State, forward Sam Alexis from Chattanooga, and fellow big men Alex Condon and Thomas Haugh were three-star recruits coming out of high school. Condon played rugby and water polo growing up before sprouting 6 inches between 10th and 11th grades and taking a "no-brainer" hoops path.

Now, Condon and Haugh make up one of the most efficient post tandems in college basketball — and could carry the torch when seniors Clayton, Richard and Martin move on in two months.

"None of us were supposed to be here, so that fires the boys up," Condon said. "Everyone was lowly recruited and wasn't expected to be here, so having that amongst us and having that over other teams I think is an advantage to us for sure."

TOP 25 ROUNDUP

No. 23 Clemson back in rankings, rolling in ACC

Associated Press

CLEMSON, S.C. — Clemson returned to the national rankings Monday. The 23rd-ranked Tigers showed a few hours later that they plan to be part of the national picture going forward this season.

Clemson followed up a 77-71 win over then-No. 2 Duke on Saturday night by dismantling the Atlantic Coast Conference's other traditional power in North Carolina, 85-65.

"Very proud of this team," said Viktor Lakhin, the Cincinnati transfer who had 22 points with a season-high four 3-pointers and helped the Tigers take control in the opening half by building a 49-33 lead.

"What we're doing, we're obviously not done yet," added Lakhin, who also had 22 points against Duke two nights earlier. "That's why we came here, because of the team's success last year. We just joined to keep it going."

Chase Hunter, the team's top scorer this season, added 19 points and Zackery had 16 in taking down the Tar Heels. Clemson improved to 20-5, Brownell's third straight season with 20 or more wins.

At 12-2 in the Atlantic Coast Conference, the Tigers are a game behind the league-leading Blue Devils and tied in the loss column with surprising Louisville.

Zackery was glad to be back in the Top 25 this week, but whether Clemson was or wasn't doesn't change its focus on what's ahead.

"We know there's a whole thing that we weren't in it," Zackery said. "People were mad about it. But we don't really care about that. We just come out and just prove ourselves every night."

No. 6 Houston 76, Baylor 65: L.J. Cryer scored 14 points, Milos Uzan added 12 points and six assists, and the host Cougars beat the Bears for their third straight victory.

Terrance Arceneaux had 11 points and J'Wan Roberts scored 10 for Houston (20-4, 12-1 Big 12). Emanuel Sharp also finished with 10 after missing two games with an ankle injury.

The Cougars shot 51% and went 10-for-24 on 3-pointers. They reached 20 wins for the 10th consecutive season.

Norchad Omier scored 19 points and Langston Love added 15 for Baylor (15-9, 7-6), which shot 58% — including 9-for-15 on 3s. VJ Edgecombe had 14 points and Robert Wright III finished with 10.

Scott Kinser/AP

Clemson guard Chase Hunter dunks against UNC in the second half Monday in Clemson, S.C.

Texas looking to make headway in strong SEC

Associated Press

The Southeastern Conference has been the best league in college basketball this season, with nine ranked teams and five in the top 10.

One team that hoped to contend for the conference title will likely need a strong finish just to get into the NCAA Tournament.

Texas (15-9, 4-7 SEC) started the season at No. 19 in the preseason AP Top 25, but has had trouble gaining much traction since. The Longhorns lost both of their games last week and are 4-7 since the start of the new year.

Texas is No. 31 in the NET rankings and has two big resume-building opportunities against No. 2 Alabama on Tuesday and No. 15 Kentucky on Saturday.

Bubble watch

Arkansas at No. 8 Texas A&M, Saturday. The Razorbacks (14-9, 3-7 SEC, No. 43 NET) are coming off a tight loss to No. 2 Alabama and are 7-9 against the top three quadrants.

UCLA at Illinois, Saturday. The Bruins (18-6, 9-4 Big Ten, No. 25 NET) once looked like a lost cause with a stretch of five losses in six games, but have won seven straight to strengthen their NCAA Tournament resume.

West Virginia vs. BYU, Tuesday and at Baylor, Saturday. The Mountaineers (15-8, 6-6 Big 12, No. 38 NET) have wins over Kansas, Gonzaga and Arizona, but have lost six of nine.

Key ratings

Villanova: The Wildcats (14-10, 7-6 Big East) picked up a key win over Xavier last week to move up to No. 53 in the NET. Villanova faces a huge game against No. 8 St. John's on Wednesday.

San Diego State: With the Mountain West Conference likely to get fewer NCAA Tournament teams than last year's six, the Aztecs (15-6, 8-4) could use a strong finish. San Diego State is No. 52 in the NET, with games against Boise State, Utah State and New Mexico still on its schedule.

HOCKEY

Teams start with little time to spare

By Stephen Whyno
Associated Press

BROSSARD, Quebec — The last time Jon Cooper coached an international tournament featuring the NHL's best players, the 2016 World Cup of Hockey came with a training camp and a slate of exhibition games to get ready.

The 4 Nations Face-Off has none of that. Cooper's Canada, the United States, Sweden and Finland took the ice Monday for each team's first practice knowing there's no time to spare. Canada and Sweden get just two practices and a game-day morning skate before playing each other, and the lack of a ramp-up period puts an emphasis on developing chemistry right away.

"This one we have to jump right in," Cooper said. "Being in these situations, it's not always the best players that win. It's the best team that wins. And I think the team that jells the quickest and kind of plays for each other, especially in such a short tournament, will have the advantage."

Establishing that advantage began Sunday night with team Super Bowl parties. The Philadelphia Eagles crushing the Kansas City Chiefs turned out to be background noise for bonding.

"Unfortunately the Super Bowl wasn't too close of a game, but we still had a great time and it was good to see everyone," Sweden captain Victor Hedman said. "Some of the guys I barely got a chance to hang out with before. No, it's been great. Now you have to switch gears and focus on this and kind of put everything else away."

All four rosters are full of Stanley Cup champions and All-Stars, but Canada's first practice stood out for the incredible amount of talent on the ice at the same time. The top power-play unit includes Sidney Crosby, Connor McDavid, Nathan MacKinnon, Cale Makar and Sam Reinhart.

That's what U.S. coach Mike Sullivan means when he says, "They're all dream teams." His group and Finland get some extra prep before their opening game Thursday night in Montreal, but the principles of figuring it out fast still apply.

"Becoming a team is the biggest challenge," Sullivan said. "It's going to take more than talent to win. I think a big part of it is becoming a team in the true sense of the word, and that's the challenge. We're going to try to do our best. It's everything from the chemistry on the ice with our line combinations, defense pairs, whatever it may be, to accepting and embracing roles."

Advantage, Finland? The small Scandinavian country of 5.5 million people might not have big-name talent that jumps off the page, but playing the same style of hockey as a national team has the chance to be a major benefit.

"Finland is known for being together," captain Aleksander Barkov said. "Growing up in the Finnish system, the national team system, you kind of know how to play. But the most important thing (is) we play together no matter what the systems are. Everyone's going to give their best, and that's why Finland has been successful and it's no different here."

Christinne Muschi, The Canadian Press/AP

The United States' Austin Matthews, second from left, Jack Eichel, left, and Jack Hughes, right, speak with the coaching staff during during a 4 Nations Face-Off practice in Brossard, Quebec, on Monday.

Scoreboard

Eastern Conference

Atlantic Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Florida	57	34	20	3	71	192	165
Toronto	55	33	20	2	68	169	156
Tampa Bay	55	31	20	4	66	197	153
Ottawa	56	29	23	4	62	158	156
Detroit	55	28	22	5	61	160	171
Boston	57	27	24	6	60	157	182
Montreal	56	25	26	5	55	163	194
Buffalo	54	22	27	5	49	171	185

Metropolitan Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Washington	55	36	11	8	80	196	140
Carolina	56	33	19	4	70	184	154
New Jersey	57	31	20	6	68	175	142
Columbus	56	26	22	8	60	184	186
N.Y. Rangers	55	27	24	4	58	165	168
N.Y. Islanders	55	25	23	7	57	152	162
Pittsburgh	57	23	25	9	55	164	201
Philadelphia	57	24	26	7	55	162	192

Western Conference

Central Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Winnipeg	56	39	14	3	81	202	134
Dallas	55	35	18	2	72	182	139
Minnesota	56	33	19	4	70	163	159
Colorado	57	33	22	2	68	186	174
Utah	56	24	23	9	57	158	170
St. Louis	56	25	26	5	55	154	171
Nashville	54	19	28	7	45	144	179
Chicago	55	17	31	7	41	149	191

Pacific Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Edmonton	55	34	17	4	72	182	152
Vegas	56	33	17	6	72	185	155
Los Angeles	53	29	17	7	65	151	136
Vancouver	55	26	18	11	63	155	166
Calgary	55	26	21	8	60	148	165
Anaheim	54	24	24	6	54	137	165
Seattle	57	24	29	4	52	169	183
San Jose	57	15	35	7	37	148	216

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.

Wednesday's game

Canada vs. Sweden at Montreal, **AFN-Sports, 2 a.m. Thursday CET, 10 a.m. Thursday JKT**

Thursday's game

USA vs. Finland at Montreal, **AFN-Sports, 2 a.m. Friday CET, 10 a.m. Friday JKT**

Global: Tournament more than just preparation for Olympics

FROM PAGE 24

Aleksander Barkov, who was very early in his career when he helped his country take home bronze in Sochi 11 years ago.

"I remember every single moment there," said Barkov, who's one of eight Florida Panthers players at the 4 Nations. "We've been talking about this tournament for a long time. Now it's here."

Finland announced Sunday that Philadelphia's Rasmus Ristolainen is out because of injury and is being replaced by fellow defenseman Nikolas Matinpalo.

The format

Unlike the Olympics, there isn't a surefire spot in the quarterfinals of an elimination tournament this time, so every game matters. Each team faces one another in round-robin play, with the top two meeting in the championship.

"I truly believe this is a tournament where you're basically playing three Game 7s," Canada coach Jon Cooper said. "There's no, really, margin for error."

Canada and Sweden open the tournament Wednesday night, with the U.S. and Finland playing 24 hours later. Sweden-Finland and U.S.-Canada follow Saturday before the action shifts to Montreal.

A regulation win is worth three points, a shootout or overtime win is worth two points and a shootout or overtime loss is one point.

The fun

After the NHL skipped the 2018 Pyeongchang Games and pulled out of the 2022 Beijing Games because of pandemic-related scheduling issues, the league, union, International Ice Hockey Federation and International Olympic Committee struck a deal for players to go to Milan in 2026 and the French Alps in 2030.

The 4 Nations provides a chance to see how players handle a high-stakes competition, but those involved don't see it as just a prep tournament for the next Olympics.

"When that puck drops on the first game of the tournament, zero people will be thinking about the Olympics and everybody will be thinking — on our team anyway — about winning the hockey game," Cooper said. "I don't think at one time anybody's going to sit here and say, 'This is a stepping stone for the Olympics.'"

That's what the next 10 months or so are for. Men's hockey in Milan begins on Feb. 11, 2026.

"Hopefully we can go to the Olympics as well in a year from now, but now we have this tournament ahead of us, playing against the best players in the world and it's a great challenge for us as individuals and as a team, as well," Barkov said. "Everyone wants to do really well and everyone wants to win, and that's what we're going to go there and do."

The entertainment

Canada-Sweden on Wednesday will air on TNT, U.S.-Finland on Thursday on ESPN and the Saturday games will be on ABC. TNT has Canada-Finland and Sweden-U.S. on Monday, Feb. 17, while the championship game on Thursday, Feb. 20 will be on ESPN.

The U.S. and Canada are co-favorites on BetMGM Sportsbook.

"Every team's got great depth, great players," U.S. defenseman Adam Fox said. "It's a star-studded tournament."

Christinne Muschi, The Canadian Press/AP

Canada players, from left, Connor McDavid, Sam Reinhart, Nathan MacKinnon and Sidney Crosby talk on the bench during 4 Nations Face-Off practice in Brossard, Quebec on Monday.

HOCKEY/SKIING

Crosby is cleared for 4 Nations

Associated Press

BROSSARD, Quebec — After missing Pittsburgh's final two games before the NHL break for the 4 Nations Face-Off, Sidney Crosby took part in Canada's first practice Monday and declared himself good to go.

When it comes to a rare chance at an international tournament with the best players in the world, it was going to take more than a banged-up arm to keep Crosby out, though the past several days included plenty of work to make sure it was safe to get on the ice.

"I've talked to docs here and had some good dialogue with the coaches and just seeing where I was at," Crosby said in his first public comments since getting sandwiched between New Jersey's Erik Haula and Luke Hughes last week and skating away favoring his left arm. "There's been a lot of questions. A lot of, 'How are you feeling?' the last five days, so I'm excited just to get into a routine here and get back to normal."

Crosby is the captain again after helping Canada win the 2016 World Cup of Hockey and take gold at the 2014 Sochi Olympics. And, of course, he scored the winning goal on home ice at the 2010 Vancouver Games.

Suffice it to say, his teammates were happy to have him after cringing at the injury.

"All of us would have been really bummed if he wasn't here," said reigning league MVP Nathan MacKinnon, who grew up in the same Nova Scotia town of Cole Harbour that Crosby is from. "It means a lot. I think he looks great, and I think he feels pretty healthy. But if he's not, then he's the last guy I'm worried about in terms of toughness."

Coach Jon Cooper stopped short of definitively saying Crosby would play in Canada's 4 Nations opener Wednesday night against Sweden, but his opening practice was one of many signs pointing in that direction. Crosby centered a line with MacKinnon and 2023 Stanley Cup-winning Vegas winger Mark Stone.

JEFF CHIU/AP

Sidney Crosby missed his last two games before the NHL broke for the 4 Nations Face-Off.

GABRIELE FACCIOTTI/AP

Mikaela Shiffrin, of the U.S., competes in a slalom run during the women's team combined event at the Alpine world championships in Saalbach-Hinterglemm, Austria, on Tuesday. Shiffrin won her 15th career world championships medal in the event.

Shiffrin, Johnson strike gold

American women win team combined at Alpine world championships

Associated Press

SAALBACH-HINTERGLEMM, Austria — Mikaela Shiffrin won a record-equaling 15th world championship medal and Breezy Johnson became double world champion on Tuesday when the American pair took gold in the new team combined event.

Shiffrin was third-fastest in the slalom at the Alpine skiing worlds, just over three hours after Johnson had clocked the fourth-best time in the downhill, as together they beat silver medalists Lara Gut-Behrami and Wendy Holdener of Switzerland by 0.39 seconds.

Stephanie Venier and Katharina Truppe of Austria took bronze.

The gold was Shiffrin's 15th career medal from world championships and she matches the record set in the 1930s by German skier Christl Cranz.

It's the second gold medal for Johnson, who won the downhill last Saturday, two months after she returned from a 14-month ban for three violations of the "whereabout" anti-doping rules.

"It's pretty crazy. I think if you would have told us when we met that we would team up to win a world championship medal, I think neither of us would have believed it," said Johnson, who has been friends, and skied, with Shiffrin since their youth.

Shiffrin said: "So many things had to happen in the last … how long it's been since we were 11. In order for this to happen we needed a new event entirely. This was an amazing day for me up there, nerve-racking because Breezy did her job just spectacularly this morning. It was so much fun to watch all these days, day in day out, she has been executing … So, really, really unbelievable."

MARCO TROVATI/AP

Shiffrin, left, and Breezy Johnson celebrate on the podium after winning the gold medal. Shiffrin had the third-fastest in the slalom and Johnson was fourth-best in the downhill.

Reacting to Shiffrin's 15th career medal in the worlds, Johnson quipped, "If we keep adding team events, maybe we can get 32 for her or something," before adding, "she is a legend, it's super cool to be hitting my stride and she's obviously been on hers for a decade."

The team combined entails one racer competing in a downhill run and another in a slalom, with their two times added up to determine the final results.

The team combined will make its debut at next year's Milan-Cortina Olympics.

Lauren Macuga had posted the fastest time in the downhill, but her American team dropped to fourth and missed a medal by 0.11 seconds after Paula Moltzen's slalom.

Lindsey Vonn finished the downhill 2.51 seconds off the lead in 21st position out of 26 starters and ended up in 16th with teammate AJ Hurt.

Recovered from an abdominal injury that required surgery in December, Shiffrin competed in her first event at the worlds.

She initially planned to race in the giant slalom, as defending champion, and the slalom but skip the team combined, then changed her mind Monday when she felt not ready yet to compete in Thursday's GS.

With GS training off her schedule, she then decided to enter the team combined.

Vonn had campaigned to race with Shiffrin on an American team that would have united the two most successful skiers in World Cup history, but the coaching staff decided to form the teams based on "season-best results" in both downhill and slalom.

"It would have been a cool thing if those two greats would have raced together, but at the moment others are stronger in their performance," American speed coach Alex Hoedlmoser said. "We had to make sure to bring the fastest pairings together, and it was very obvious that Breezy was the fastest in the downhill and therefore would race with Mikaela."

Vonn came out of retirement, after nearly six years, at age 40 this season with a new titanium knee. She scored two top-10 finishes on the World Cup circuit in January but did not finish the super-G and placed 15th in the downhill at the worlds.

SPORTS

Double dominance

US women Shiffrin, Johnson pair up to win at worlds » Skiing, Page 23

CHRISTINNE MUSCHI, THE CANADIAN PRESS/AP

United States players take part in a 4 Nations Face-Off hockey practice in Brossard, Quebec, on Monday. The U.S. has its first match in the tournament against Finland on Thursday.

Global all-stars facing off

4 Nations Face-Off ends hockey's long wait for international tournament

BY STEPHEN WHYNO
Associated Press

It has been more than a decade since the NHL last participated in the Olympics and almost nine years since the league's top players took part in an international tournament.

That wait is about to end when the puck drops on the 4 Nations Face-Off involving the United States, Canada, Sweden and Finland. The slimmed-down event taking place in Montreal and Boston lacks history, tradition and some of the top talent from elsewhere on Earth, but the prolonged gap between the 2016 World Cup of Hockey and this makes it a must-see, premier showcase of the sport.

"It's been a while," U.S. captain Auston Matthews said. "It's something that the players have been craving and looking forward to, and I think the fans, as well. I think it's going to be great for the game."

The talent

Matthews in red, white and blue alongside Jack Eichel and Matthew Tkachuk. Sidney Crosby, Connor McDavid and Nathan MacKinnon suiting up with Canada's Maple Leaf on their chests. Sweden and Finland renewing the Scandinavian nations' intense rivalry.

Everything from the star power to the format to the anticipation of a return to the Olympics in Milan in 2026 has players and coaches thrilled to be a part of it.

"When you put guys together representing their countries, I think it brings out the best in them," said Crosby, who helped Canada win Olympic gold in 2010 and 2014. "If you look at the rosters, I think there's a lot to get excited about when you look at that and you look at the matchups and best on best — everyone competing against each other internationally. For people that are hockey fans, that's what you love to see. I think for that reason alone and the fact that it's been a while will just add to it."

Sweden has 2020 playoff MVP and two-time Stanley Cup champion Victor Hedman. Finland has reigning Cup-winning captain

SEE GLOBAL ON PAGE 22

Doncic scores 14 in first game with Lakers » NBA, Page 20

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