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EUROPE
& PACIFIC

WEEKEND

EDITION

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longer, better
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A turning point?



CHRISTOPHER SMITH/U.S. Army

U.S. Patriot missile batteries from the 5th Battalion, 7th Air Defense Artillery Regiment stand ready at sunset in Poland on April 10. The deployment of these air & missile defense systems is purely defensive. They contribute to the robust shielding provided along NATO's Eastern flank. The SBAMD systems will protect allied populations, territory and the deployed U.S. forces from attack.

Russia warns of 'consequences' if US missiles sent to Ukraine

BY JAMEY KEATEN
Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russia's Foreign Ministry warned Thursday that if the United States confirms reports that it plans to deliver sophisticated air defense missiles to Ukraine, it would be "another provocative move by the U.S." that could prompt a response from Moscow.

Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova said in a weekly briefing Thursday that "the U.S. has effectively become a party" to the war in Ukraine, following reports

EUROPE

US plans to give
Ukraine troops
smart-bomb kits

Page 7

that it will provide Kyiv with Patriot surface-to-air missiles, the most advanced the West has yet provided to help Ukraine's military repel Russian aerial attacks.

Zakharova added that growing amounts of U.S. military assistance, including the transfer of

such sophisticated weapons, "would mean even broader involvement of military personnel in the hostilities and could entail possible consequences." She did not specify what the consequences might be.

U.S. officials said Tuesday that Washington was poised to approve sending a Patriot missile battery to Ukraine, finally agreeing to an urgent request from Ukrainian leaders desperate for more robust weapons to shoot down incoming Russian missiles that have crippled much of the country's vital in-

frastructure. An official announcement is expected soon.

A Patriot battery can need as many as 90 troops to operate and maintain it, and for months the U.S. was reluctant to provide the complex system because sending forces into Ukraine to operate it is a non-starter for the administration of President Joe Biden.

Yet concerns remain that even without the presence of U.S. servicemen to train Ukrainians on how to use the system, deployment of

SEE MISSILES ON PAGE 7

White House aims to stifle bill ending support for Yemen war

BY YASMEEN ABUTALEB
AND KAROUN DEMIRJIAN
The Washington Post

The White House has mobilized to derail a Senate resolution that would end U.S. military support for Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen, creating an unusual rift among Democratic allies and forcing the bill's sponsor to pull the bill before a scheduled vote earlier this week.

The legislation, led by Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., would have ended some U.S. support for the Saudi-led war effort in Yemen, which has gone on for more than seven years. Forces from a Saudi-led coalition have bombed and killed hundreds of thousands of Yemeni civilians and blocked crucial ports, helping fuel a nationwide famine.

Similar resolutions passed the Senate in 2018 and 2019, during the Trump administration, with support of all Democratic senators. In 2019, the measure won the support of both chambers of Congress, but not enough to override a veto by President Donald Trump.

Now those efforts have been renewed. President Joe Biden's White House also opposes the measure, putting the president in the unusual position of standing against an effort to punish a Saudi regime that has been anything but friendly to him.

But Biden aides say the president is opposing the resolution for different reasons than Trump did. The current version of Sanders's measure differs from the previous versions, particularly in defining intelligence-sharing and support operations as "hostilities." That could have dire consequences for U.S. operations globally, some congressional aides say, including in such hot spots as Ukraine.

SEE YEMEN ON PAGE 6

BUSINESS/WEATHER

EUROPE GAS PRICES

Country	Super E10	Super unleaded	Super plus	Diesel	Azores	Change in price	Turkey	Change in price
Germany	\$3.621	\$4.130	\$4.462	\$5.136	..	..	\$4.351	..
Change in price
Netherlands	..	\$4.110	\$4.376	\$4.989	..	..	\$4.715	\$4.856*
Change in price
U.K.	..	\$4.066	\$4.398	\$5.072	..	..	..	..
Change in price

Fuel prices are updated daily. These prices are effective Dec. 16

PACIFIC GAS PRICES

Country	Super E10	Super unleaded	Super plus	Diesel	South Korea	Change in price	Guam	Change in price
Japan	..	\$4.129	..	\$4.799	\$3.309	..	\$3.299	\$3.809
Change in price	..	-15 cents	..	-22 cents	-15 cents	..	-15 cents	-15 cents
Okinawa	\$3.289	..	\$4.129	..	\$4.149	\$4.829	\$4.139	..
Change in price	-15 cents	..	-15 cents	..	-15 cents	-15 cents	-15 cents	..

*DieselEFD **Midgrade
Pacific prices for the week of Dec. 16-22

EXCHANGE RATES

Military rates		Commercial rates	
Euro costs (Dec. 16)	\$1.04	Bahrain (Dinar)	0.3769
Dollar buys (Dec. 16)	0.918	Britain (Pound)	1.2302
British pound (Dec. 16)	\$1.20	Canada (Dollar)	1.3613
Japanese yen (Dec. 16)	132.00	China (Yuan)	6.9627
South Korean won (Dec. 16)	1268.00	Denmark (Krone)	6.9540
		Egypt (Pound)	24.6813
		Euro	1.0700
		Hong Kong (Dollar)	7.7717
		Hungary (Forint)	380.88
		Israel (Shekel)	3.4352
		Japan (Yen)	136.79
		Kuwait (Dinar)	0.3064
		Norway (Krone)	9.7777
		Philippines (Peso)	55.77
		Poland (Zloty)	4.39
		Saudi Arabia (Riyal)	3.7600
		Singapore (Dollar)	1.3551

South Korea (Won)	1316.66
Switzerland (Franc)	0.9254
Thailand (Baht)	34.98
Turkey (NewLira)	18.6513

(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	7.00
Interest Rates Discount rate	4.50
Federal funds market rate	3.83
3-month bill	4.34
30-year bond	3.54

WEATHER OUTLOOK

FRIDAY IN THE MIDDLE EAST



FRIDAY IN EUROPE



SATURDAY IN THE PACIFIC



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

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MILITARY

DOD to raise housing allowances in US

BY ALEXANDER RIEDEL
Stars and Stripes

Financial assistance for housing is on the way in the new year for the vast majority of service members stationed in the United States.

Nearly 97% of stateside military families are going to see a boost to their Basic Allowance for Housing, with an average increase of 12.1%, the Pentagon announced in a statement Wednesday.

The new rates take effect Jan. 1 and reflect the largest year-over-year jump to housing allowances in many years. Housing allowance payments totaling an estimated \$26.8 billion will be paid to roughly 1 million service members next year, according to the statement.

Many service members have faced long waiting lists for on-base housing and found

themselves priced out of quality off-base housing.

"The significant increase ... is reflective of the unique market conditions experienced across many locations nationwide over the past year," the Defense Department statement said.

Basic housing allowance rates are calculated based on recipients' rank, location and number of dependents. The payments aim to allow service members to afford housing on par with that of civilians earning comparable incomes in the local area.

In October, the DOD temporarily increased housing allowances in 28 locations where home prices exceeded 20% of the area's BAH rate. While those enhanced rates are set to expire Dec. 31, most will remain the same, the department said.

The highest increases were seen in California and Florida, according to an online DOD table. For example, an E-5 with dependents who is stationed near Twentynine Palms, Calif., saw a jump of 60% in October, from \$1,461 to \$2,352.

Allowance calculations also factor in the average cost of utilities, including electricity, heat, water and sewer payments.

Since 2019, service members have been expected to pay about 5% of rental or monthly mortgage costs out of pocket.

Proposed legislation under the Basic Allowance for Housing Restoration Act, introduced earlier this year, would restore the full housing allowance for service members and their families.

Pentagon officials base new housing rates on cost data collected annually for approxi-

mately 300 military housing areas in the United States, including Alaska and Hawaii.

Five areas are slated to see a rate decrease, including Lake Charles, La., which is down 10%; Holloman Air Force Base, N.M., down 4%; Vance Air Force Base, Okla., and Long Island, N.Y., each of which is down 2%, according to reporting by Military Times.

Members stationed overseas are not going to see an immediate benefit from the change as BAH and Overseas Housing Allowance are based on different market and local survey data.

Service members can calculate their BAH payment by using the Basic Allowance for Housing calculator online.

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Airman is perfect in German military skills challenge

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

RAMSTEIN AIR BASE, Germany — Airman Emma Gantner felt like the underdog when she and 24 other service members recently competed in a three-day test of physical and mental toughness.

A postal clerk, Gantner, 20, was the only woman in the group vying for the German Armed Forces Badge for Military Proficiency. It is one of the few foreign military badges authorized to be worn by U.S. Air Force, Army and Space Force members.

Airmen must show their stamina on land and in water, shoot with precision and display all manner of speed, strength and agility.

When the test ended, Gantner ended up on top with a perfect score.

Gantner developed blisters and a sore back on a 7.5-mile ruck march, which she said was the hardest event. She ran parts of it to keep pace with the group, her small frame shouldering a 33-pound pack.

"When I finished the ruck and they told me I was the top performer, it was so motivating," Gantner said Wednesday. "(The pain) was worth it."

Tasks to be completed include a timed 100-meter swim in uniform, shooting with a German military pistol and the ruck march.

The German military fitness test also must be conquered, including a 1,000-meter run, a pullup bar hang and sprinting drills.

Gantner especially excelled on the pullup bar, holding herself up for nearly two minutes.

She and three others are among the few from the postal career field ever to earn the badge, Ramstein officials said.

It's more common to see "our battlefield-



JENNIFER H. SVAN/Stars and Stripes

From left, German Master Sgt. Frank Roglmeier and Senior Master Sgt. Benjamin Angel stand with Airman Emma Gantner and Chief Master Sgt. John Chacon, 86th Mission Support Group senior enlisted leader. Gantner was the top performer in a German Armed Forces Badge for Military Proficiency held at Ramstein Air Base.

type airmen" from more physically demanding career fields wearing the badge, said Chief Master Sgt. John Chacon, the 86th Mission Support Group senior enlisted leader.

When he met Master Sgt. Frank Roglmeier, one of two German airmen at Ramstein who administer the test, Chacon asked if airmen from support units could compete.

"He was like, 'Whoever wants to show up that has the warrior mindset ... have 'em show up. There is no (career field) tied to it,'" he said.

After Chacon asked supervisors to see who

might be up for the challenge, Gantner, with encouragement from her co-workers, came forward.

"I'm kind of athletic and I love that type of stuff," she said.

But they had only about one week to get ready, Chacon said.

Gantner earned the overall equivalent of "an A+++", according to Roglmeier and German armed forces Senior Master Sgt. Benjamin Angel.

When Gantner approached two minutes hanging on the pullup bar, "there was silence"

because of the surprise of it, Angel said.

The task that usually gives U.S. service members the most trouble is the 100-meter swim, the Germans said. It has to be done in four minutes or less, in uniform.

"We usually kick out 20% or 30% because the swim part is tough," Roglmeier said, adding that it's always the first event because of the high failure rate.

This time, however, only one person dropped out after the swim, Roglmeier and Angel said.

A competitive swimmer growing up, Gantner had no problem in the pool.

Roglmeier and Angel offer testing for the badge two or three times per year, depending on interest. Of the 25 who started in Gantner's group for the three-day event, 22 earned the badge: 19 U.S. airmen, two Space Force guardians and one Spanish air force member.

Four, including Gantner, earned a gold rating, symbolized by a gold eagle worn on the service dress uniform.

Angel estimates that about 800 people have earned the badge in the 10 years he has administered the test.

The program promotes cooperation between the U.S. and Germany, Roglmeier said. Those who earn the badge "will always wear a part of Germany with them," he said.

Gantner said she's considering a new military career field where she can put to use some of those same skills she demonstrated on the test. Whatever she chooses, "you're no longer the underdog," Chacon kidded her. "Now you're the big dog everyone's trying to catch."

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Japan military probe finds over 100 sex harassment cases; 5 troops fired

Associated Press

TOKYO — Japan's army on Thursday fired five servicemen and punished four others in a sexual assault case brought by a former soldier, prompting a rare investigation across the Defense Ministry that found over 100 other complaints of harassment, officials said.

Rina Gonoï filed a sexual harassment case with the Defense Ministry last year, saying she had suffered multiple assaults by several male colleagues, causing her to give up her military career.

Of the five servicemen who were dismissed from the army, four had admitted their assaults and apologized to her in October. A fifth was found to be a mastermind of the four.

Additionally, the ministry punished four others. The then-commander of the company in Fukushima that Gonoï belonged to was suspended for six months for not carrying out a proper investigation, while another one was reprimanded for verbal sexual harassment and two others were reprimanded for overlooking the problem.

Army chief Yoshihide Yoshida repeated his apology to Gonoï and said, "As head of this organization, I feel a strong sense of responsibility over (Gonoï's) sorrow and pain." He said he takes the problem seriously and is determined to "eradicate harassment."

In one incident in August 2021, the senior male colleagues pressed the lower part of their bodies against her in a dorm at a training ground, forcing her to spread her legs, as more than 10 other male colleagues watched and laughed, but none tried to stop them, Gonoï

said.

"I hope the four assailants, regardless of the seriousness of their punishment, sincerely take their responsibility," Gonoï tweeted in response to the measure taken by the ministry Thursday.

The investigation into her case was dropped in May. After she quit the army and disclosed her allegations on social media, Gonoï submitted a petition signed by more than 100,000 people to the Defense Ministry seeking a reinvestigation by a third party.

MILITARY

Marine marksmen set sights on competition

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

CAMP HANSEN, Okinawa — Staff Sgt. John Tetrault, an avionics technician, hasn't fired the Marine Corps' infantry rifle in seven years but he signed up anyway to compete in a showcase marksmanship competition on Okinawa.

Tetrault, 28, who works on F-35B Lightning II fighters at Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni, Japan, was one of 158 Marines from Japan and South Korea in the Far East Marksmanship Competition, a 10-day event that concluded Thursday.

"We don't get to shoot guns as much in the air wing as we would like to, so I wanted to come down here and get some training," he said just prior to running through a pistol event Tuesday.

The Far East contest is one of five around the world in which Marines test their skills each year with pistols and rifles, as individuals and in teams, in precision shooting and shooting on the move, Chief Warrant Officer 2 Bryan Hagan, the officer-in-charge of Hansen's marksmanship training center, told Stars and Stripes on Dec. 7.

Competing Marines may qualify for marksmanship badges and earn individual awards. The top 10% of shooters by score are invited to the Marine Corps Championships from March 28 to April 7 at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va., Hagan said.

Tetrault, of Scandia, Minn., ranked early in the Far East competition as a sharpshooter, the middle of three tiers of Marine Corps shooting proficiency. After more than a week of instruction and day-long, complex shooting events, he

reached the expert level, what the Corps considers its best shooters.

"Before I showed up, I just wanted to not be the bottom guy," he said. "I think now I'm hoping to finish overall in the top third."

Maj. Zachary Leuthardt, spokesman for Marine Corps Installations Pacific, provided a list of top scorers Thursday, but it did not include the winners' ranks or units.

In the rifle competition, Samuel Nelson and Alexis Santiago were one and two, respectively, and scored gold medals. Nelson finished with an overall average score of 92.4%, while Santiago finished with 89.1%.

Nelson also topped the field in pistol shooting with a 100% top score. Austin Hill and Kenneth Swarts also won gold medals with scores of 89.5% and 87.7% scores, respectively.

The individual portion of Tuesday's competition was spread over four Hansen ranges, said Marine Corps Shooting Team assistant officer-in-charge 1st Lt. John Bodzioch, who oversaw the event.

During the most complex pistol event, Tetrault leaned left around one barrier and with his SIG Sauer M18 pistol shot a silhouette target in the head, avoiding the simulated body armor.

He then rushed to an open corridor and fired on several more targets, some in body armor, at varied distances. He concluded the event by leaning around another wall, this time to his right, to hit another stationary target.

The event lasted about 10 seconds. Tetrault emerged smiling from his performance.

Meanwhile, Staff Sgt. Jonathan Birkeland, 32, from Albany, Ore., a 2019 Far East bronze medalist in



PHOTOS BY MATTHEW M. BURKE/Stars and Stripes

Above: A Marine fires during a distance rifle event at the Far East Marksmanship Competition at Camp Hansen, Okinawa, on Tuesday. Below: Marine Staff Sgt. John Tetrault takes a shot during the event.

rifle and a trophy winner at this year's Marine Corps Championships, said his performance on the action rifle course fell short.

He wondered aloud if luck had played a role in his previous successes.

"I don't think I'm going to place again this year," said Birkeland, an air traffic controller at Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, Okinawa. "I would like to, but my goal is to not embarrass myself because everyone seems to have high expectations of what I'm going to do."

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Experts: Long-range missiles on Okinawa should have local buy-in

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
AND KEISHI KOJA
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — A reported plan by Japan to base long-range missiles in Okinawa prefecture without first gaining local acceptance could erode confidence in the U.S.-Japan alliance, an American professor in Tokyo said recently.

The Japanese Ministry of Defense by 2026 plans to base Type 12 surface-to-ship missiles at three Japan Self-Defense Force bases in the Ryukyu Island chain: Vice Camp Katsuren adjacent to the Navy's White Beach Naval Facility on Okinawa; Camp Miyako on Miyako, an island 175 miles southwest of Okinawa; and Ishigaki, an island about 150 miles east of Taiwan, according to an Okinawa Times report Sunday that cited unnamed officials.

"Not consulting locals raises

the issue of legitimacy," Jeff Kingston, professor of Asian studies at Temple University's Tokyo campus, told Stars and Stripes in an email Wednesday. "Yet again the nation is outsourcing its defense to Okinawa and Okinawans remain marginalized from the decision-making."

An upgraded version of the high-speed, truck-mounted Type 12 is under development and would extend its range from 62 to 620 miles. That puts them in reach of potential targets around the Senkaku Islands and parts of China and North Korea.

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida's Liberal Democratic Party and their conservative coalition partner, Komeito, agreed Monday to acquire counterstrike capability, the power to strike an adversaries' missile sites, for example, in the event of attack on Japan, according to an Okinawa

Times report the following day. This language has reportedly been written into a national security strategy that Kishida's cabinet may approve as early as Friday.

The Type-12s would also be deployed to Kyushu, the southernmost of Japan's four main islands, the Okinawa Times said Sunday.

The Ministry of Defense in an email Tuesday to Stars and Stripes declined to confirm the Okinawa Times report. The ministry is considering "many things" regarding potential areas where the missiles might be placed, according to the email.

"We don't exclude any option and are considering realistically if we have the resources to protect the lives of Japanese citizens," the ministry said.

Okinawa Gov. Denny Tamaki, addressing the prefectural as-

sembly Monday, said that if Tokyo wants "deterrence power" it must first explain it to Okinawa's citizenry. He did not otherwise mention the missile-deployment report.

"If the reduction of U.S. bases is conducted at the same time, leading to the reduction of Okinawa's base burden, I would admit that line of thinking," he said.

News of the potential missile deployment left experts divided.

"The missiles must be deployed at Okinawa," Toshiyuki Shikata, a former lieutenant general in the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force, told Stars and Stripes by phone Monday. "Shooting long-range missiles from Tokyo or Kyushu is too far to reach enemy bases. I know that the Okinawans won't like it, but it is necessary."

The central government needs to explain to the people of Okina-

wa why the missiles must be placed where they can reach potential targets, Shikata said.

Junjiro Shida, an associate professor of international politics at Meio University on Okinawa, agreed.

"The situation around Okinawa is very tense," he said by phone Monday. "China needs to pass through Okinawa to expand its maritime forces. It is important to strengthen Okinawa, independently of the Taiwan issue."

Takashi Kishimoto, a deputy secretary-general of the Okinawa Peace Activity Center, an anti-base group, said he was troubled by the reports.

"This will raise tensions in the region," he told Stars and Stripes by phone Monday, "and if the missiles are deployed in Okinawa, we might be attacked."

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MILITARY

NDAA would increase border mission reports

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

Pentagon officials under a provision in the defense policy bill would be required to report every three months to lawmakers about its mission along the U.S.-Mexico border to improve oversight and understanding of the work that troops are doing to help secure the region.

The new initiative is meant to increase attention on border security as the number of migrants crossing into the U.S. and encountered by Customs and Border Protection remains high, said Sen. James Inhofe, of Oklahoma, the top Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Inhofe said Republicans pushed for the provision to be included in the fiscal 2023 National Defense Authorization Act, an annual bill that outlines defense priorities and spending, and they blame the increase in migration from Mexico on President Joe Biden's administration.

"Many of my Republican colleagues and I believe that this lax approach to border security must end — now. The NDAA's provision for quarterly briefings on border security will ensure that the highest levels of the Department of Defense are focused on the crisis at the southwest border, and compels them to brief Congress every three months on its plans for supporting border securi-



LERONE SIMMONS/U.S. Army

Air Force Gen. Glen VanHerck, commander of North American Aerospace Defense Command and U.S. Northern Command, second from right, and Marine Corps Sgt. Maj. James Porterfield, NORAD and NORTHCOM command senior enlisted leader, right, meet Feb. 17 with Sgt. Dylan Rush, second from left, and other Missouri National Guardsmen supporting the southwest border mission.

ty operations," Inhofe said in a statement.

In October, Border Patrol agents encountered more than 230,000 migrants, either detaining them or returning them to Mexico, which is about 66,000 more than the previous October, according to the agency's data.

This replaces a previous requirement for an annual briefing, according to a news release from the House Armed Services Committee.

"This ensures Congress continues to have oversight on support provided at the southern land border," the House committee said in a statement.

The briefings should include how defense officials are incorporating border mission requirements into plans, ongoing support and the risk assessment that was conducted for that support, and any efforts or updates to cooperate with Mexico for border security.

Briefings should be unclassified unless a classified briefing is necessary. The first should be held in January with the others following within 90 days until Dec. 31, 2024.

The Pentagon began deploying troops to the U.S. border with Mexico in April 2018 following then-President Donald Trump's declaration of an emergency at the border caused by migrants crossing illegally into the United States. When Biden took office in January 2021, he rescinded the emergency declaration, but left the troops at the border.

At one point in 2019, the Defense Department had nearly 8,000 troops deployed to the border, which included about 5,800 active-duty service members. However, a Government Accountability Office report released in February 2021 found the deployments had a negative impact on those units, and the military has phased out using active-duty troops at the border with Mexico.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin most recently approved up to 2,500 troops to assist CBP agents through September 2023, the end of the fiscal year. There are about 2,400 National Guard troops now serving on the mission, said Bill Lewis, spokesman for U.S. Northern Command, the Defense Department combatant command that is leading the effort.

"NORTHCOM provides information to the various defense com-

mittees, about our assigned missions, as required," he said.

The troops ordered to the border by the Defense Department operate separately from a deployment of about 5,100 Texas National Guard troops working on a state-sponsored mission that began in March 2021 to help state police deter illegal activity between the legal ports-of-entry.

Department of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas spoke this week from the border city of El Paso, Texas, and said immigration reform is needed to tackle the increased migration at the southwest border.

"Addressing this challenge will take time and additional resources, and we need the partnership of Congress, state and local officials, [non-governmental organizations], and communities to do so," he said.

The new NDAA provision requires the assistant secretary of defense for homeland defense or another assistant secretary conduct the quarterly briefings before the House and Senate Armed Services committees.

The House approved the measure last week and the Senate is expected to vote on the NDAA by the end of the week. Then it will go to the White House for Biden to sign into law.

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One of the last Merrill's Marauders dies at 101

By WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

Gabriel Kinney, who joined the Army at 21 in 1942 and later fought behind Japanese enemy lines in Burma as one of the famed Merrill's Marauders, died Sunday in Hanceville, Ala.

He was 101.

With his death, only one veteran of Merrill's Marauders remains living, 98-year-old Russell Hamler, who lives in Pennsylvania, according to Jonnie Melillo Clasen, who in recent years has served as an informal liaison to the still-living Marauders and their families as the veterans grew too old for reunions.

"Kinney's daughter, Carol Crawford, said her father was unresponsive after slumping over while sitting," Clasen said in a notice emailed Monday. "Despite his age, this was unexpected. Carol said her father attended a Christmas party Friday and was dancing, and that he had a good weekend."

Kinney was among only a handful of the roughly 3,000 original Marauders still living earlier this year when the unit was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal.

Three surviving Marauders

died within a month's span this spring.

Kinney was inducted into the Ranger Hall of Fame in July. The Army Rangers trace their lineage to the Marauders, named after their commander, Brig. Gen. Frank Merrill.

Kinney was born Feb. 2, 1921, one of 12 children, in rural Alabama. He briefly worked at U.S. Steel in Birmingham after graduating before enlisting in November 1942.



Kinney

He served first with F Company, 35th Regiment, 25th Infantry, in the South Pacific before volunteering to join what was formally known as the 5307th Composite Unit Provisional, later dubbed the Marauders.

His experiences in Burma (now known as Myanmar) left a profound and troubled mark on his psyche, Kinney said during a 2015 interview with the Alabama-based news site AL.com.

For decades after the war ended, Kinney said he refused to talk of his time in Burma.

"I still don't like to talk about it," he said in 2015 interview. "It still hurts."

The Marauders' ultimate mission was to move behind enemy lines and capture the Myitkyina airfield in northern Burma, which was considered key to keeping China supplied with weapons and other war supplies.

The Marauders succeeded in that on May 17, 1944, but at a huge cost. Only a few hundred soldiers of the unit were still standing after staggering losses from disease, malnutrition, wounds and death.

"There was no turning back, no place to go anywhere," Kinney said in the interview of the assignment in Burma, from which military leaders expected the majority of soldiers not to survive.

Kinney recalled the intense two-week battle of Nhpum Ga in the spring of 1944, during which the Japanese surrounded the soldiers of 2nd Battalion who had dug into a ridge that became known as "Maggot Hill" for the decomposing dead who could not be buried.

During the siege, he was wounded twice by shrapnel.

"My biggest concern and the gravest concern of all of us was — we were surrounded there — can

they keep us with enough ammunition?" Kinney recalled in the interview. For several days, the soldiers had no food or water.

They were rescued by the 1st and 3rd Battalions on April 9, 1944.

Some battle-weary Marauders began to envy the dead, Kinney said.

"There was a point in time we had gotten where the ones who were not alive were the lucky ones," he said in the interview. "It got to that point. I've seen them look down at one that was in very bad shape and say, 'You lucky so-and-so.'"

Kinney returned to his home state of Alabama after the war's end, but the conflict stayed with

him.

"I was really mentally not good at all," he said in the interview. "I do see now the soldiers who have been in war a while are getting psychiatric help. We did not. ... There was something wrong with us."

He returned to U.S. Steel, where he worked as an electrical engineer.

Kinney is survived by his wife, Elena, whom he married on Sept. 8, 1945, and four of their six children.

Kinney's funeral will be held at 2 p.m. Monday at Prince of Peace Catholic Church in Hoover, Ala.

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MILITARY

Russia makes a show of force near Japan

By **SETH ROBSON**
AND **HANA KUSUMOTO**
Stars and Stripes

Russian bombers made a recent show of force near Japan to indicate the cost of being an “unfriendly country,” according to a Tokyo-based security expert.

Two Russian nuclear-capable Tu-95 strategic bombers accompanied by Sukhoi fighter jets made a seven-hour patrol over the Sea of Japan, according to a Reuters report Thursday that cited a Russian Federation Ministry of Defense statement from the previous day. The report didn’t specify when the patrol happened.

Relations between Russia and Japan have deteriorated since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February.

Japan has joined western economic sanctions on Russia, which responded by withdrawing from treaty talks over the status of islands north of Japan and freezing joint economic projects in disputed islands north of Japan.

Russia can afford to send the large, four-engine, turboprop Tupolev bombers over the Sea of Japan, which is also known as the East Sea, because it does not employ them in the war against Ukraine, according to



U.S. Navy

A Russian Tu-95 long-range bomber flies south of Japan in 2008.

James Brown, an international affairs expert at Temple University’s Japan campus.

The bomber patrols are a show of force in the hope that Tokyo will think twice about introducing further sanctions, Brown told Stars and Stripes in an email Thursday.

“Russia wants to show that there is a cost to Japan to being an ‘unfriendly country,’” he wrote.

The latest bomber patrol follows a Nov. 30 mission by Russian and Chinese warplanes that flew near Japan. Russian and

Chinese aircraft also flew together near Japan in May, a spokesman for Japan’s Joint Staff said by phone Thursday. Japanese government officials routinely speak to the media on condition of anonymity.

Russia this month also deployed coastal defense missiles near four islands north of Hokkaido that have been occupied by Russia since World War II but are claimed by Japan.

Japan’s air force scrambled fighters 21 times in response to Russian warplanes approaching Japanese air space in November compared to 23 in November 2021, the Joint Staff spokesman said.

Russian planes entered Japan’s territorial air space in March and September last year, the spokesman said.

“The tendency of Russian aircraft to be active near Japan has not changed even as the international community responds to the Ukraine invasion,” he said. “We continue to closely observe Russia’s military activities in airspace surrounding Japan and take all possible measures to respond to any air territorial violation.”

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Yemen: White House cites lull in fighting while opposing resolution

FROM PAGE 1

“It really has made us nervous,” said one senior Democratic aide, who like others spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations. The changes “could have real ramifications for our support for Ukraine right now, or our support for Israel,” the aide said. “This is the first time that the Congress is being asked to vote on defining hostility as intelligence-sharing, and it’s dangerous.”

The White House is concerned enough that it distributed talking points to senators ahead of a scheduled vote Tuesday night, arguing that the resolution would endanger a fragile pause in the hostilities between the Saudi-led faction in Yemen and the country’s Houthi rebels. The talking points acknowledged that senators might be reluctant to switch their positions after taking a forceful stance in favor of the resolution just three years ago.

“We know that it is a difficult decision to change a vote, but the circumstances are fundamentally different than they were in 2019, and a vote would undermine the possibility that we can finally bring an end to this war and the humanitarian suffering of the people of Yemen,” the documents said. “If this resolution were presented to the President, his staff will recommend the President veto it. The stakes are too high.”

The White House cited a nine-month halt in fighting and pointed to ongoing U.S. diplomacy that it said was not in place three years ago. “The bottom line is that this

resolution is unnecessary and would greatly complicate the intense and ongoing diplomacy to truly bring an end to the conflict,” the talking points said.

Sanders, while nominally an independent, is allied with the Democratic Party, and he had expressed confidence in recent days that the measure would secure enough votes to pass — based, perhaps, on the support for the previous Yemen war powers resolutions.

Some proponents of the legislation pushed back on the administration talking points. “The White House is touting the lack of recent Saudi airstrikes, but their opposition to Bernie’s bill shows that they remain open to supporting a Saudi escalation,” said Erik Sperling, executive director of the advocacy organization Just Foreign Policy and a former congressional staffer who has worked on Yemen policy since 2015.

“The best way to support Yemen’s truce is to guarantee that the era of Saudi airstrikes is over,” Sperling said.

In 2019, seven Republicans joined all Senate Democrats in backing the measure — albeit with exemptions for intelligence-sharing and protections for military cooperation with Israel, which are omitted from the current resolution. In 2018, when the Senate passed a more vaguely worded resolution, seven Republicans also joined Democrats to back the measure.

The current Saudi regime, led by Crown Prince Mohammed bin

Salman, is viewed with distaste and even disgust by many in Congress, given its record of human rights violations that include the murder of Washington Post contributing columnist Jamal Khashoggi. In an effort to improve relations, Biden visited Saudi Arabia in July and was criticized in many quarters for giving Mohammed a fist bump — only to have a Saudi-led coalition announce a few months later it was slashing oil production, in a move potentially damaging to the U.S. economy as well as Biden’s political prospects.

Sanders, who caught Democrats and the White House off-guard when he announced last week he would reintroduce the measure, said he is now in talks with the administration on a compromise, though it remains unclear what that would look like. Aides and others involved in the legislative push say it is uncertain whether the outcome will be simply a delay in the vote, a diluted version of the war powers resolution, or an agreement to pull down the effort entirely while Biden officials try to forge a long-term peace agreement between Saudi Arabia and Yemen.

“Let me be clear. If we do not reach agreement, I will, along with my colleagues, bring this resolution back for a vote in the near future and do everything possible to end this horrific conflict,” Sanders said in withdrawing his resolution Tuesday.

Sanders introduced the measure in July, along with Sens. Patrick J. Leahy, D-Vt., and Eliza-

beth Warren, D-Mass. “Why are we supporting a corrupt theocracy that brutalizes its own people, in a war that is best known for causing immense suffering and death among impoverished, defenseless civilians?” Leahy said at the time.

Other key Democrats, including Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., a close ally of Biden and a longtime champion of efforts to end the bloodshed in Yemen, had expressed support for the measure ahead of the vote.

“The Saudis have shown more willingness than in the past to end the war, and right now, the Houthis are the biggest obstacle. But the Saudi interest in de-escalation comes and goes,” Murphy wrote in a tweet Tuesday.

“I just don’t think the U.S. should play any role in the war any longer,” Murphy wrote in a separate tweet several hours later.

But even supporters of Sanders’s resolution acknowledged that the vote was not as cut-and-dry as it was in 2019. Some expressed frustration at both the White House and Sanders for complicating an already difficult situation.

One Democratic congressional aide, whose boss supported the motion and who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly, said there was frustration at Sanders for bringing up the resolution when the vote is tougher for some Democrats than it was three years ago.

The aide added that many Democrats felt Trump had been overly

friendly to Saudi Arabia and wrote the kingdom “blank checks” without any effort to end the war, and Congress was pushing Trump to be more active in negotiations. In contrast, Biden has been far more proactive in trying to bring the conflict to a close, Democrats argued.

The White House itself is pointing to a lull in the fighting in Yemen, crediting that relative calm to its own “robust diplomatic efforts,” according to the talking points. Some advocates of the war powers resolution said continued pressure from Congress also played a key role in forcing Saudi Arabia to pull back on airstrikes.

“The port and airport have opened, with food and fuel flowing, and there’s rarely a shot fired. The Saudis have conducted no airstrikes at all over the past nine months,” the talking points said, while emphasizing that the Biden administration had “halted ALL sales of offensive munitions” to Saudi Arabia.

But few diplomats are confident the hostilities are definitively over. And the dispute over the resolution comes at a time of heightened scrutiny surrounding the Biden administration’s relations with the Saudi government.

In recent weeks, the Biden administration has taken heat for attempting to reset relations with Saudi Arabia, which wields significant influence in international markets thanks to its copious petroleum reserves at a time when oil and gas markets have been roiled by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

EUROPE

US plans to give Ukraine smart-bomb kits

BY DAN LAMOTHE
The Washington Post

The Biden administration is planning to send Ukraine advanced electronic equipment that converts unguided aerial munitions into “smart bombs” that can target Russian military positions with a high degree of accuracy, according to senior U.S. officials familiar with the matter.

The kits incorporate global positioning devices for precision and can be bolted onto a variety of weapons, creating what the Pentagon calls a Joint Direct Attack Munition, or JDAM. The U.S. military has used the technology on bombs weighing up to 2,000 pounds, usually incorporating it with bomber aircraft and fighter jets.

It was not immediately clear

whether President Joe Biden or any of his top national security advisers have approved the proposed JDAMs’ transfer to Ukraine. Those familiar with the matter, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive internal deliberations, did not say whether Ukrainian forces would employ the kits on aircraft or ground-based weapons, or what specific systems in Ukraine’s arsenal would be candidates for such augmentation.

The Ukrainian Air Force relies primarily on aging Soviet-era MiG jets, and the Pentagon has sought ways to upgrade them rather than provide newer Western aircraft that would require its pilots and maintainer units to undertake complicated new training.

The Biden administration has

previously equipped Ukraine with other advanced weaponry, including air-launched high-speed, anti-radiation missiles, or HARMs, to enhance Ukraine’s ability to carry out airstrikes. But those weapons function differently than the GPS-guided JDAM, instead hunting radiation emitted by Russian units and headquarters.

A delivery of JDAMs would mark another significant step by Washington to help Ukraine repel the invading Russian force, providing a new way to target Russian units and headquarters. Since June, Ukraine has relied heavily on the U.S.-made High Mobility Artillery Rocket System, or HIMARS, another precision system, for significant casualties among Russian troops and disruption of supply lines, Ukrainian and U.S.

officials have said.

The Kremlin has reacted angrily to the outpouring of Western military aid, making thinly veiled threats to use nuclear weapons in Ukraine and warning of the potential for a broader spillover war with NATO. For that reason, the Biden administration has sought to move cautiously in approving new capabilities that could be viewed by Russia as escalatory.

On Tuesday, senior U.S. officials told The Washington Post that the Pentagon also was preparing to provide Ukraine with a Patriot missile system, the U.S. military’s most sophisticated air defense weapon. Biden has yet to approve that move either but could do so imminently, officials said.

Ukrainian leaders have pleaded

for help bolstering their air defenses as Russia has carried out a relentless assault on the country’s electrical grid, disabling heat for much of the population as the winter cold arrives. Delivery of a Patriot, which relies on radars and long-range missiles to intercept incoming threats, would fulfill one of Ukraine’s biggest and most frequent requests of Washington.

To date, the United States has committed about \$20 billion in security aid to Ukraine since the invasion began Feb. 24.

Jake Sullivan, the White House national security adviser, said Monday that the administration is focused on “blunting any Russian effort” to gain an advantage in the war and predicted the United States would announce new arms transfers soon.

Missiles: Patriot battery from US poised for approval

FROM PAGE 1

the missiles could provoke Russia or risk that a fired projectile could end up hitting inside Russia, further escalating the conflict.

Even before reports emerged on the delivery of Patriot systems, Dmitry Medvedev, deputy head of Russia’s Security Council which is chaired by President Vladimir Putin, warned that if Patriots enter Ukraine “along with NATO personnel, they will immediately become a legitimate target for our armed forces.”

Asked Wednesday whether the Kremlin backs that threat, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov answered yes, but added in a conference call with reporters that he would refrain from more detailed comment until the U.S. officially announces the Patriot delivery to Ukraine.

Ukraine has so far been cautious in reacting to the reports. Hanna Maliar, Ukraine’s deputy defense minister, told reporters in Kyiv on Thursday that the delivery of weaponry like Patriots remains “sensitive not only for Ukraine, but for our partners,” and that only President Volodymyr Zelenskyy or Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov would make any official announcement on such an agreement.

White House and Pentagon leaders have said consistently that providing Ukraine with additional air defenses is a priority, and Patriot missiles have been under consideration for some time. Officials said that as the winter closed in and the Russian bombardment of civilian infrastructure escalated, that consideration took on increased priority.

Ukraine’s electricity provider

said Thursday that the country’s energy system was suffering a “significant deficit of electricity,” and that emergency shutdowns had been applied in some areas of the country as temperatures hover around or below freezing.

The state-owned grid operator Ukrenergo warned in a statement on Facebook that damage caused to energy infrastructure by Russian attacks is being compounded by harsh weather conditions, including snow, ice and strong winds.

Maximum temperatures in the capital, Kyiv, were forecast to barely go above freezing headed into the weekend, with even colder weather expected early next week.

Kyrylo Tymoshenko, deputy head of the Ukrainian president’s office, wrote on Telegram that the southern Ukrainian city of Kherson was left completely without power following Russian shelling on Thursday, adding that two people were known to have been killed in the attacks.

Heavy shelling of a critical infrastructure facility in the city’s Korabelny district was still underway as of around 1 p.m. local time, and Russian shells had hit 100 yards from the regional administration building, he said.

As Russian attacks on civilian infrastructure continued to knock out power around the country on Wednesday and Thursday, seven civilians were killed and a further 19 wounded, according to a Thursday report from the Ukrainian president’s office.

The head of Ukraine’s eastern Donetsk province, Pavlo Kyrylenko, reported Thursday that Russian strikes the previous day had



ALEXEI ALEXANDROV/AP

A firefighter examines a burned car after what Russian officials in Donetsk said was a shelling by Ukrainian forces in Donetsk, the capital of the Russian-controlled Donetsk region in eastern Ukraine, on Thursday.

killed two civilians and injured seven.

In Avdiivka, some 6 miles north of Donetsk, there were two airstrikes overnight Wednesday, and a residential area came under rocket fire Thursday morning. Periodic artillery fire in Vuhledar, located to the southwest of Donetsk, damaged three houses. West of Donetsk, the city of Kurakhove and two villages came under fire, with one house damaged.

Kremlin-backed authorities in the region, which was illegally annexed by Moscow in September, announced that Russia had taken control of 80% of the city of Marinka, seen as critical to Ukrainian hopes of retaking the Russian-held regional capital, Donetsk.

The Moscow-installed mayor of Donetsk, Aleksei Kulemzin, said Thursday that the city center had been hit by “the most massive

strike” since the area came under the control of Russian-backed separatists in 2014.

Writing on Telegram, Kulemzin said 40 Ukrainian rockets struck Donetsk at 7 a.m. local time on Thursday, noting that multistory residential buildings were hit and that fires had broken out at a hospital and university campus.

In other developments Thursday:

■ Russia’s Foreign Ministry says the Vatican has apologized for a statement Pope Francis made in a recent interview in which he singled out two Russian ethnic minorities — the Chechens and the Buryats — as being “the most cruel” participants in the war in Ukraine.

At a briefing on Thursday, Zakharova quoted from what she said was a message from the Vatican which “apologizes to the Russian side” for the pope’s comments.

Zakharova praised the message, saying that it showed the Vatican’s “ability to conduct dialogue and listen to interlocutors.” A Vatican spokesman, queried by reporters about Zakharova’s comments, would only say that there had been diplomatic contacts on the matter.

■ The Kremlin on Thursday characterized a Polish resolution to recognize Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism as a continuation of “anti-Russian hysteria.”

Lawmakers in the Sejm, the lower house of Poland’s parliament, passed the resolution on Wednesday, a move that Kremlin press secretary Dmitry Peskov said Russia is not ready to accept. Poland’s resolution calls Russia’s aggression against Ukraine a “gross violation” of the U.N. Charter and Ukrainian “sovereignty, political independence, and territorial integrity.”

NATION

House passes one-week spending extension

By KEVIN FREKING
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Democratic-led House passed a short-term spending bill Wednesday to keep government agencies funded at current levels through Dec. 23, giving lawmakers more time to craft a roughly \$1.7 trillion appropriations package that would cover the full fiscal year.

Congress faces a deadline of midnight Friday to pass the extension or allow for a partial government shutdown. The bill would give Congress an additional week to reach a compromise and now goes to the Senate for a

vote before it is sent to President Joe Biden to be signed into law.

The one-week extension passed by a vote of 224-201, mainly along party lines.

House Republicans overwhelmingly opposed the extension. Many complained it would allow Congress to pass a massive spending bill before a Republican majority would take charge of the House in January and impose its will on spending.

Rep. Kevin McCarthy, the Republican leader in the House, said Republicans earned the opportunity after the midterm elections to shape the spending legis-

lation early next year. He called for an extension that would last into the first quarter of 2023.

“Allow the American people what they said a month ago — to change Washington as we know it today,” McCarthy said.

While Republicans will take the majority in the House, Democrats gained one seat in the Senate and will hold a 51-49 majority there in the next session.

McCarthy said the two senators leading the efforts to craft the spending bill won't be in Congress next year and thus won't be accountable to voters for their work. Sens. Patrick Leahy, D-

Vt., and Richard Shelby, R-Ala., are both retiring. Leahy is the chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee and Shelby is the lead Republican on the panel.

“It's still not even available for anyone to read and yet they want the ability to bring that up on the eve of Christmas,” Rep. Steve Scalise, the No. 2-ranking House Republican, said of the \$1.7 trillion package. “It's a sign that Congress failed to do its job.”

However, many Senate Republicans are aware that delaying negotiations into January sets up the kind of collision course that

could lead to shutdown, and they fear the GOP would end up taking the blame.

Sen. Mitch McConnell, the top Republican in the Senate, has made the case that passing a full-year spending bill this Congress is better than the alternatives because it ensures a sizable increase in spending for defense.

“If a truly bipartisan full-year bill without poison pills is ready for final Senate passage by late next week, I'll support it for our Armed Forces,” McConnell said Wednesday. “Otherwise, we'll be passing a short-term continuing resolution into the new year.”

Biden tells African leaders US is 'all in' on continent's future

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden told dozens of African leaders gathered in Washington that the United States is “all in on Africa's future,” laying out billions in promised government funding and private investment Wednesday to help the growing continent in health, infrastructure, business and technology.

“The U.S. is committed to supporting every aspect of Africa's growth,” Biden told the leaders and others in a big conference hall, presenting his vision at the three-day U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit of how the U.S. can be a critical catalyst.

Biden, who is pitching the U.S. as a reliable partner to promote democratic elections and push critical health and energy growth, told the crowd the \$55 billion in committed investments over the next three years — announced on Monday — was “just the beginning.”

He announced more than \$15 billion in private trade and invest-

ment commitments and partnerships.

“There's so much more we can do together and that we will do together,” Biden said.

The president after his speech spent some time with leaders, including Moroccan Prime Minister Aziz Akhannouch, watching Morocco's World Cup match with France. Morocco lost but made history as the first African team to advance to the tournament's semi-final round.

The United States has fallen well behind China in investment in sub-Saharan Africa, which has become a key battleground in an increasingly fraught competition between the major powers. The White House insists this week's gathering is more a listening session with African leaders than an effort to counter Beijing's influence, but the president's central foreign policy tenet looms over all: America is in an era-defining battle to prove democracies can out-deliver autocracies.



SUSAN WALSH/AP

President Joe Biden arrives for toasts in the East Room of the White House in Washington on Wednesday during the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit dinner.



BRETT DUKE, THE NEW ORLEANS ADVOCATE/AP

Damage is seen along Schoolhouse Road after a tornado moved through area in Killona, La., Wednesday.

Louisiana rocked by tornadoes

Associated Press

KEITHVILLE, La. — A storm system that spawned dozens of reported tornadoes from east Texas to the Florida Panhandle was all but done with the South on Thursday after killing at least three people and uprooting families across Louisiana, where some homes were blown into pieces.

Elsewhere, heavy snow and high winds meant more blizzards in the northern Midwest from the Dakotas through Michigan, and more ice and snow causing trouble in places from the Appalachians through New England.

The National Weather Service can take days to confirm whether destructive winds were in fact tornadoes, but the impact was clear in places like Caddo Parish, La., where a man went out for groceries and returned to discover his mobile home was gone, and with it, his wife and son.

“You go to search a house and the house isn't even there, so where do you search?” Gov. John

Bel Edwards said as he toured the mile-long path of destruction in rural Keithville, south of Shreveport.

The body of 8-year-old Nikolos Little was found in the woods. The body of his mother, Yoshiko A. Smith, 30, was discovered later, under storm debris. “He just went to go shopping for his family, came home and the house was gone,” Caddo Parish Sheriff's Sgt. Casey Jones said.

Another Keithville man, William Walls, said a tornado picked up his home and tossed it into his brother's house next door as he found himself stuck outside on his brother's back porch. Videos he posted on Facebook show the shredded remains.

“This is my house,” Walls said. “I watched it pick my trailer up and throw it into there.”

An outpouring of support was evident in Union Parish, near the Arkansas line, where a gymnasium was busy with volunteers and survivors going through stacks of

donated clothing. Farmerville Mayor John Crow said an apartment complex where 50 families lived was badly damaged, a neighboring trailer park with about 10 homes was wiped out, and about 30 homes were damaged along nearby Lake D'Arbonne.

Possible twisters also pummeled parts of New Orleans and its neighboring parishes. A woman was found dead and eight people were hospitalized with injuries in St. Charles Parish after a suspected tornado struck the community of Killona along the Mississippi River.

Other possible twisters struck Jefferson and St. Bernard parishes — including areas badly damaged by a March tornado. St. Bernard Sheriff Jimmy Pohlman said the latest tornado damage covered a roughly 2-mile stretch. Parish President Guy McInnis said the damage was less than in the March tornado though numerous roofs were blown away or damaged.

NATION

Whelan's fate could hinge on swap for assassin

BY ADAM TAYLOR

The Washington Post

Vadim Krasikov does not have the world-spanning reputation of Victor Bout. But there are signs that Russia wants him back just as much—if not more.

The United States swapped Bout, a notorious Russian arms dealer immortalized as a Hollywood villain, for basketball star Brittney Griner this month. But Paul Whelan—a former Marine, arrested in Moscow in 2018—remains in Russia, and the chances of his return may be bound up in Russia's desire to free Krasikov, 57, convicted last year in Germany for the broad-daylight slaying of a former Chechen leader in 2019, in a bicycle drive-by in a Berlin park.

No master criminal or global “merchant of death,” Krasikov, who investigators say did dirty work for Russia's Federal Security Service, or FSB, apparently bungled the escape. He was arrested after police found him removing a disguise in a bush.

For their differences, Krasikov and Bout have a key fact in common: Convicted of high-profile crimes connected to the interests of the Russian state and held abroad, they both became bargaining chips in high-stakes talks to free Americans held in Russia.

Many Russian agents are held



Whelan

he is held in Germany as opposed to the United States and has served only a fraction of his life sentence, make his potential exchange a tall order for Washington.

The Russians “do want him badly indeed,” said Christo Grozev, executive director of the investigative outlet Bellingcat, which helped establish Krasikov's true identity and his links to the Russian state.

U.S. officials are set to meet with their Russian counterparts this week to discuss Whelan, whom a Russian court convicted of espionage in 2019 in a case that his family and the U.S. government say was politically motivated, White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan told reporters Monday. The White House maintains that efforts to include him in the swap that freed Griner were unsuccessful.

The push for a swap could be a nonstarter: German media outlets report that German officials have refused requests to release the convicted assassin.

around the world, but there appears to be something special about Krasikov for Moscow. However, his status as a brazen assassin, and the fact that

“The big challenge we had over the course of the past several months is that what Russia was asking for to secure Paul Whelan's release was not something that we had to be able to give,” Sullivan said at a news briefing.

Unlike Bout, who was convicted in 2011 of charges including conspiracy to kill U.S. nationals, Krasikov's alleged crimes are not connected to the United States. And while Bout had served 15 years after he was ensnared in a complex Drug Enforcement Administration sting that led to his arrest in Thailand, Krasikov was convicted only in late 2021 for the killing of Zelimkhan “Tornike” Khangoshvili, a Chechen born in Georgia who was opposed to the leadership of Putin ally Ramzan Kadyrov.

David Whelan, the bother of Paul, wrote in an email that his family knew of various speculated trades, but they weren't clear who the Russians were after or even who was really making the decision. He said that the Russian Foreign Ministry had noted a number of Russians held by U.S. authorities, including convicted hacker Roman Seleznev and alleged money launderer Alexander Vinnik.

Some officials say they believe that Russian demands for Krasikov were never serious and only de-

signed as a stalling tactic.

Speaking to ABC News on Sunday, White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said that offers to trade Krasikov for Griner this summer were not considered a “serious offer.”

“He's not in our custody,” Kirby said.

Liana Fix, an expert on Europe at the Council on Foreign Relations, a U.S. think tank, said that Russia might have thought Washington could simply tell Berlin to release Krasikov. “It fits Russia's worldview, where U.S. allies are regarded as satellites under U.S. control.”

But Germany is unlikely to hand over a convicted murderer as “spectacular and high-profile as Krasikov,” she said, with the new government seeking to avoid criticism for being soft on Russia. Germany's top prosecutor handled the case, and the judge spoke of state terrorism in his judgment.

Though Krasikov was traveling on a false passport, under the name “Vadim Sokolov,” investigators from Bellingcat working with Russian outlet the Insider and Germany's Der Spiegel found evidence that he was in fact Vadim Krasikov—a man linked to a similar assassination, also carried out on a bicycle, in Moscow in 2013.

Although Moscow fiercely de-

nied any links to the crime, evidence also emerged that Russian authorities had removed Krasikov's details from various databases after the 2013 murder. Krasikov did not help matters by requesting books about Soviet spies from his jailers, according to reports in the German media.

“His release would confirm what Russia has always denied—but then Moscow obviously doesn't care about the contradiction,” said Fix.

Like Bout, who was suspected of maintaining ties to Russia's military intelligence wing, the GRU, Krasikov may be considered loyal for refusing to talk to Western authorities. But his status as an assassin could give him an edge in Moscow's estimations, as well.

Writing for the Center for European Policy Analysis, exiled Russian investigative journalists Irina Borogan and Andrei Soldatov note that while spies and hackers are useful to Moscow, assassins who travel internationally serve a special purpose: instilling fear, or worse, among Russian emigres.

“The Kremlin is not short of assassins, and yet it wants this one to return home,” Borogan and Soldatov write. “This tells assassins that their work is valued, and it tells emigres that their lives are of little concern to the West; that their murderers will go free.”

Citadel suspends cadet for Jan. 6 acts

BY TED CLIFFORD

The (Columbia, S.C.) State

The Citadel has suspended Elias Irizarry, the cadet who pleaded guilty to participating in the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol.

Irizarry was suspended following a Commandant's Board where he was found to have violated the military academy's policies for “Conduct Unbecoming a Cadet,” according to a statement released Wednesday by The Citadel.

A suspension requires a cadet or student to leave the college for one semester. They may reapply for readmission after that time, said Zach Watson, director of communications at The Citadel.

Irizarry pleaded guilty Oct. 26 to entering and remaining in a restricted area or grounds.

The 20-year-old York County, S.C., native was in the Marine Corps JROTC at Nation Ford High School in Fort Mill before graduating in 2020. He was in the Gastonia, N.C., unit of the Ci-



U.S. ATTORNEY'S OFFICE/TNS

Elias Irizarry at the U.S. Capitol building on Jan. 6, 2021.

vil Air Patrol at the time of the riot.

This summer, a federal judge allowed Irizarry to study abroad in Estonia for three weeks as part of a program run through The Citadel. He received a \$2,500 scholarship for the trip.

In a May 3 hearing on Irizarry's case, U.S. Judge Tanya Chutkan told him that on Jan. 6, 2021, he was part of a “mob (that) almost caused the halt of the transfer of power in this country in what's tantamount to an attempt to overthrow this government.”

Irizarry, the judge continued, “may not have carried a weapon, he may not have stolen anything, he may not have assaulted a police officer, but he's alleged to have been part of that mob.”

In July, Elliott Bishai, a friend with whom Irizarry traveled to Washington and entered the Capitol on Jan. 6, was sentenced to two weeks in federal prison after pleading guilty to entering a restricted area.

“The Citadel will have no further comment on his status at this time,” Watson said Wednesday.

US charges 8 men in \$100M social media stock scheme

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The government on Wednesday charged eight men accused of earning more than \$100 million in illicit stock market profits by manipulating their novice-investor followers on social media.

The Justice Department and the Securities and Exchange Commission said that from early 2020 to around April of this year the men, who had a combined following of over 1.5 million on Twitter, ran a “pump-and-dump” scheme.

Seven of the social-media influencers promoted themselves as successful traders on Twitter and in Discord chat rooms and encouraged their followers to buy certain stocks, the SEC said. When prices or volumes of the promoted stocks would rise, the influencers “regularly sold their shares without ever having disclosed their plans to dump the securities while they were promoting them,” the agency said.

“The defendants used social media to amass a large following of novice investors and then took advantage of their followers by repeatedly feeding them a steady diet of misinformation,” said the SEC's Joseph

Sansone, chief of the SEC Enforcement Division's Market Abuse Unit.

Named in the SEC's complaint were Perry Matlock (@PJ_Matlock), John Rybarczyk (@Ultra_Calls) and Edward Constantin (@MrZackMorris) of Texas; Thomas Cooperman (@ohhey-tommy) and Gary Deel (@notoriousalerts) of California; Mitchell Hennessey (@Hugh_Henne) of New Jersey; and Stefan Hrvatin (@Lade-Backk) of Florida. An eighth person, Daniel Knight (@Dip-Deity) of Texas, co-hosted a podcast promoting the defendants as experts and traded in concert with them.

The Justice Department said the defendants showcased their “extravagant lifestyles” to fool others into thinking they were skilled stock traders.

If convicted, each faces a maximum penalty of 25 years in prison for conspiracy to commit securities fraud and each charged count of securities fraud, the department said.

The SEC is increasingly cracking down on social media influencers and celebrities who promote financial products, including cryptocurrency.

NATION

How the Fed's rate hikes may affect everyone's finances

BY CORA LEWIS
Associated Press

NEW YORK — The Federal Reserve's move Wednesday to raise its key rate by a half-point brought it to a range of 4.25% to 4.5%, the highest level in 14 years.

The Fed's latest increase — its seventh rate hike this year — will make it even costlier for consumers and businesses to borrow for homes, autos and other purchases. If, on the other hand, you have money to save, you'll earn a bit more interest on it.

Wednesday's rate hike, part of the Fed's drive to curb high inflation, was smaller than its previous four straight three-quarter-point increases. The downshift reflects, in part, the easing of inflation and the cooling of the economy.

As interest rates increase, many economists say they fear that a recession remains inevitable — and with it, job losses that could cause hardship for households already badly hurt by inflation.

Here's what to know:

Why the increase?

The short answer: Inflation. Over the past year, consumer inflation in the United States has clocked in at 7.1% — the fifth straight monthly drop but still a painfully high level.

The Fed's goal is to slow consumer spending, thereby reduc-

ing demand for homes, cars and other goods and services, eventually cooling the economy and lowering prices.

Fed Chair Jerome Powell has acknowledged that aggressively raising interest rates would bring "some pain" for households but that doing so is necessary to crush high inflation.

Who's affected the most?

Anyone borrowing money to make a large purchase, such as a home, car or large appliance, will take a hit, according to Scott Hoyt, an analyst with Moody's Analytics.

"The new rate pretty dramatically increases your monthly payments and your cost," he said. "It also affects consumers who have a lot of credit card debt — that will hit right away."

That said, Hoyt noted that household debt payments, as a proportion of income, remain relatively low, though they have risen lately. So even as borrowing rates steadily rise, many households might not feel a much heavier debt burden immediately.

What about credit cards?

Even before the Fed's latest move, credit card borrowing rates had reached their highest level since 1996, according to Bankrate.com, and these will likely



JACQUELYN MARTIN/AP

Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell speaks during a news conference Wednesday in Washington. He has acknowledged that aggressively raising interest rates would bring "some pain" for households.

continue to rise.

And with prices still surging, there are signs that Americans are increasingly relying on credit cards to help maintain their spending. Total credit card balances have topped \$900 billion, according to the Fed, a record high, though that amount isn't adjusted for inflation.

John Leer, chief economist at Morning Consult, a survey research firm, said its polling suggests that more Americans are spending down the savings they accumulated during the pandemic and are using credit instead. Eventually, rising rates could make it harder for those households to pay off their debts.

As rates have risen, zero percent loans marketed as "Buy Now, Pay Later" have also become popular with consumers. But longer-term loans of more than four pay-

ments that these companies offer are subject to the same increased borrowing rates as credit cards.

How are savers affected?

The rising returns on high-yield savings accounts and certificates of deposit (CDs) have put them at levels not seen since 2009, which means that households may want to boost savings if possible. You can also now earn more on bonds and other fixed-income investments.

Though savings, CDs, and money market accounts don't typically track the Fed's changes, online banks and others that offer high-yield savings accounts can be exceptions.

These institutions typically compete aggressively for depositors. (The catch: They sometimes require significantly high deposits.) In general, banks tend to cap-

italize on a higher-rate environment to boost their profits by imposing higher rates on borrowers, without necessarily offering juicier rates to savers.

What about homes?

Last week, mortgage buyer Freddie Mac reported that the average rate on the benchmark 30-year mortgage dipped to 6.33%. That means the rate on a typical home loan is still about twice as expensive as it was a year ago.

Sales of existing homes have declined for nine straight months as borrowing costs have become too high a hurdle for many Americans who are already paying much more for food, gas and other necessities.

If you're financially able to proceed with a home purchase, you're likely to have more options than at any time in the past year.

Americans: Holiday gifts hard to afford

Associated Press

More than half of U.S. adults say it's harder to afford the holiday gifts they want to give this year.

Sixty-nine percent of them say they have seen higher prices for holiday gifts in recent months, up from 58% last year, according to a new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

And 57% say it has been harder to afford the things they want to give, a dramatic increase from 40% one year ago. The vast majority of those finding it harder to afford gifts say they've cut back on giving as a result.

U.S. inflation appears to be cooling; consumer prices fell for the fifth straight month in November, the government said Tuesday. But prices were still 7.1% higher than a year earlier, an increase felt most acutely by low-income households.

About two-thirds of Americans in households earning less than \$50,000 annually say they've had a



MICHAEL DWYER/AP

People carry shopping bags on Saturday at Downtown Crossing in Boston. In a new poll, more than half of American adults say it's harder to afford the holiday gifts they want to give this year.

harder time affording gifts and food for holiday meals this year, according to the AP-NORC poll. About 6 in 10 of those in households earning between \$50,000 and \$99,999 found it harder to afford gifts and food, along with half of higher-income households.

Roslyn Coble doesn't plan to buy holiday gifts this year. Coble, 63, lives on monthly disability checks

and has struggled with higher prices for food and other necessities this year.

"I'm less interested in going out and trying to buy things," said Coble, of Oakboro, N.C. "I'm not as much into it this year."

Coble is looking forward to spending the holidays with family. And she's expecting a small raise in her disability payments in January.

Fewer people apply for jobless benefits last week

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits fell significantly last week, a sign that the labor market remains strong even as the Federal Reserve continues to raise interest rates in an effort to cool the economy and slow inflation. Applications for jobless claims fell to 211,000 for the week ending Dec. 10, down by 20,000 from the previous week's 231,000, the Labor Department reported Thursday. Jobless claims are seen as a proxy for layoffs, and last week's level was the lowest in more than two months.

The four-week moving average of claims, which evens out some of the week-to-week volatility, fell by 3,000 to 227,250.

About 1.67 million people were receiving jobless aid the week that ended Dec. 3, up 1,000 from the week before.

American workers have extraordinary job security at the moment, despite an economy some see in danger of tipping into a recession due to the aggressive interest rate hikes by the Federal Reserve this year. The Fed has raised its benchmark interest rate seven times since March in an effort to slow the economy and bring down prices that are gobbling up Americans' paychecks.

On Wednesday, the Fed raised its short-term lending rate by 0.5 percentage points, a smaller increase than the previous four increases of 0.75 percentage points.

In somewhat of a surprise, Fed policymakers forecast that their key short-term rate will reach a range of 5% to 5.25% by the end of 2023. That suggests that the Fed is poised to raise its rate by an additional three-quarters of a point and leave it there through next year.

WORLD

Floods in Congo's capital kill more than 140 people

Associated Press
KINSHASA, Congo — The number of people killed by widespread floods and landslides in Congo's capital, Kinshasa, has climbed to more than 140, said the government on Wednesday.

At least 12 others are still missing but the government is not optimistic anyone will be found alive.

"There is no hope of finding survivors," Minister of Health Lisa Nembalemba told The Associated Press by phone.

The government has announced three days of mourning that started Wednesday.

Some 12 million people live in the 24 neighborhoods of Kinshasa hit by floods and landslides, which were triggered by heavy rains Monday night. The damage flood-

ed nearly 40,000 houses and flattened nearly 300, said local authorities.

Speaking from the United States where he's attending the U.S.-Africa summit, Congo's President Felix Tshisekedi said he felt sorrow when he heard about the damage and called on authorities to speed up recovery efforts. "(It is up to) the central and provincial governments to accelerate the work of draining rainwater to avoid this type of disaster," he said. He instructed the government to help the grieving families.

In addition to people losing their lives and their homes, the rains inflicted damage throughout the city. At least one main road into the capital was cut off and much of the city is still submerged in water.



KIN CHEUNG/AP

UK nurses join strike

Nurses participate in a protest Thursday outside the St. Thomas' Hospital in London. Thousands of nurses walked off their jobs in England on Thursday, escalating a wave of industrial unrest in the U.K. this month as ambulance and postal workers, bus drivers and airport baggage handlers all stage strikes to demand better pay amid a cost-of-living crisis.

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2 Peter 3:18 (KJV)

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Colossians 3:10 (KJV)

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UNITED STATES SPACE FORCE BIRTHDAY
See page 22

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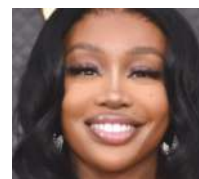


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WEEKEND



SZA makes fierce return with 'SOS' **Music, Page 28**



The next generation

Director James Cameron's second 'Avatar' film, 'The Way of Water,' goes beyond the first in ambition, setting and runtime

- Cameron profile, Page 15
- 'The Way of Water' review, Page 16

"Avatar: The Way of Water"
20TH CENTURY STUDIOS/AP

WEEKEND: GADGETS & TECHNOLOGY

'It's like fast fashion for art'

Artists say AI apps like Magic Avatar stealing their techniques without credit, compensation

BY MAHAM JAVAID
The Washington Post

If your Instagram account is overwhelmed with otherworldly, cosmic or Kawaii-inspired portraits of your friends, you are not alone. Earlier this month, the photo editing app Lensa introduced Magic Avatar, an add-on that generates 50 fantasy portraits of you if you can provide a minimum of \$3.99, 10 selfies and 20 minutes of your time.

The avatars deeply resonated with users and continue to trend.

"I saw a lot of people finding their best selves through the avatars," said Jon Lam, a digital artist.

However, some artists, including Lam, have described Lensa's creation process as "stealing."

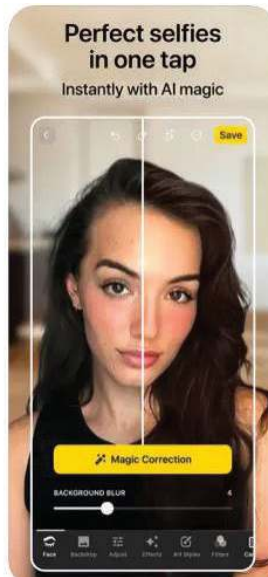
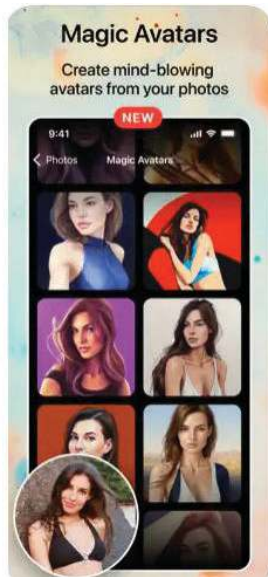
In the past few months, artificial intelligence image generators have thrust themselves into people's lives in unexpected and at times harrowing ways, outpacing laws and potentially hurting marginalized communities. Technology like Magic Avatar's has repeatedly been accused of

stealing artists' techniques without consent. Days after South Korean artist Kim Jung Gi died, his work was fed into an AI model and regurgitated. Polish artist Greg Rutkowski has seen thousands of AI-generated images using his style; so far it does not look like he will be compensated for that.

Lensa's avatars remove the tech hurdles for users and grant many the instant gratification of seeing themselves exactly as they desire, making it all the more popular. Artists accept that AI has arrived but describe it as a bandit whose images mimic their contemporaries' styles, leading them to ask for accountability.

Artist Lauryn Ipsum says that artificial intelligence may have created these original avatars, but the smaller elements that feed the creation — color palettes, brushstrokes, textures, individual styles — were taken from artists like herself without consent, credit or compensation.

"It felt like a punch in my gut to see these avatars," Ipsum said. "It's like fast fashion for art."



Screenshot from apps.apple.com

Artists say their techniques are being stolen by artificial intelligence to create images like Magic Avatar's.

Lensa's parent company, Prisma Labs, says the avatars are created through an open-source neural network called the Stable Diffusion model. This model trains to learn general how-to principles that are then applied to generate content, the company told The Washington Post via email.

The Stable Diffusion model is fueled by a database called LAION-5B, built by AI researchers by casting a net across the internet.

In essence, the database takes data, images and artwork from websites, including millions of images owned by artists, Lam said. These images — 5.85 billion of them, to be exact — are paired with text. These image-text pairs then "train" the Stable Diffusion model on how to create content

such as the Magic Avatars.

Stability AI, the company that owns the Stable Diffusion model, did not immediately respond to questions from The Post.

Ipsum compared the artificial intelligence behind avatars to a bandit-baker. A regular baker purchases the flour, salt, sugar, yeast and water, she said. A bandit-baker steals the ingredients, then bakes and sells the bread for a profit.

"The Magic Avatar is like that second baker, a bandit," she said. "The machine generated the portraits, but each element in those avatars is stolen from an actual artist who may have taken years to perfect that technique."

It is legal for LAION-5B and the Stable Diffusion model to absorb the images, despite copyrights, because the former is a

nonprofit research entity, and the latter is free for all and open source. For Lensa, which is monetizing the avatars, it is more complicated.

Prisma Labs says it is charging for the user-friendly "working toolkit" rather than a random database of artwork.

Lam thinks they have stepped into a "legal gray area" because technology moves faster than the law and currently there is no legal precedent against AI using copyrighted data to create and sell a brand new image.

Still, Ipsum said, "It's a very crummy feeling to see these images." She hasn't come across an avatar that reminds her of her own work, but she can recognize other digital artists' styles. "This is such a personal loss for the art community," she said.

iHome releasing new digital photo frame, sound soother

BY GREGG ELLMAN
Tribune News Service

iHome will soon be launching the Smartshare Frame (iPF1032), a Wi-Fi-enabled photo frame, which is a perfect holiday gift for almost anyone.

The digital photo frame is an easy way to display all those cellphone photos we all continue to snap but don't share with more than one or two people. With the Smartshare frame connected to your home 2.4 GHz or 5 GHz Wi-Fi, whoever is given access can upload their favorite photos or videos for display on the 10-inch touchscreen LCD display.

Setup is easy. Once the frame is powered on, it walks you through configuration, which includes connecting to the internet and adding friend or family access with a secure password. Images are added with the free Frameo app (iOS and Android), or you can directly connect with the micro-USB or microSD slots on the back of the frame, allowing you to add older photos stored on hard drives and memory cards.

Of course, there's a limit to how many images can be stored on the frame, but with 32GB of onboard memory, it will be challenging to hit that number. But if you do, images can be removed.

The settings allow complete control over adjustments, notifications, hiding photos,



PHOTOS BY IHOME/TNS

Photos and videos can be uploaded to iHome's Smartshare Frame via an app, microSD Card or micro-USB cable.

fitting them to the frame size and adding or deleting access. Images are shown on the eye-catching display with a 1280 x 800 resolution, which produces a sharp, vivid look.

The Smartshare Frame can display content in landscape or portrait. You can upload up to 10 images simultaneously, and the slideshow speed is adjustable. The frame accepts the popular file formats of JPEG, PNG, BMP, GIF, TIFF and MP4.

Settings also control brightness and contrast; a programmable sleep mode is also available.

Since the 11.47-by-8.23-by-1.18-inch

frame is powered by alternating current (AC), an outlet location has to be considered when choosing a viewing spot, but that shouldn't be an issue. A stand for flat surfaces and a power adapter are included. The Smartshare Frame can also be mounted on a wall.

The Smartshare Frame is available in black, oak and walnut frame finishes.

Another new iHome product coming soon, the Sweet Dream (iZBT50) sound and light soother with a cry sensor, is designed to help a baby fall asleep faster. And just as important, it will assist in keeping the baby asleep by masking distracting noises. The Sweet Dream offers two schedule modes combining lights and sounds. The six light modes include wake, rest with a red light, glow with a rainbow spectrum slow fade or one color of your choice, sunlight with a gradual waking glow and the candle mode, which has an ambient flicker.

There's no app; an integrated display shows the programs scheduled, and an included remote controls the settings. A company representative warned me that this worked so well, it

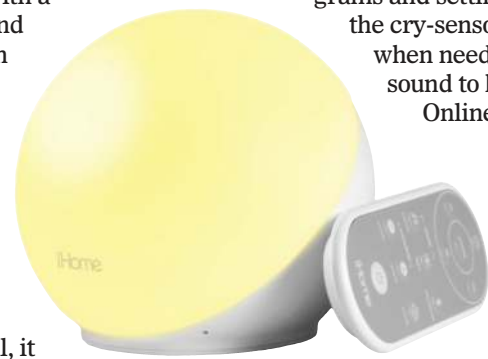
put her to sleep during a personal test. But with no baby to assist in a test, I went to the bullpen and had my wife give it a try.

The sounds were all that were needed, and after a short time, she fell asleep with white noise programmed for just a half-hour. There are 14 choices of what iHome describes as soothing sounds, including four naturally recorded environmental white noises, four lullabies and six other white noises designed to soothe infants (and adults) to sleep.

Other features of the 5-by-5-by-4.57-inch sound and light soother include Bluetooth for streaming music playlists and syncing the clock time with an iPhone's time, a night light and reading light with six modes, and brightness control.

A toddler lock prevents wandering and unwanted hands from changing the programs and settings. Parents will love the cry-sensor technology, which, when needed, activates a shush sound to help calm the baby.

Online: ihomeaudio.com



iHome's Sweet Dream sound and light soother calms babies with 14 sounds and six light modes.

WEEKEND: MOVIES



VIANNEY LE CAER, INVISION/AP

Director James Cameron poses for photographers Dec. 6 upon his arrival at the world premiere of the film “Avatar: The Way of Water” in London.

Can Cameron and ‘Avatar’ wow again?

Don’t doubt the filmmaker, who has a history of making movies that exceed expectations at the box office, awards shows

By JAKE COYLE
Associated Press

James Cameron has been living on Pandora for a long time. But 13 years after the original “Avatar” and five years after starting production on its sequel, “The Way of Water,” Cameron is unveiling the long-awaited follow-up to the highest grossing film of all time. Speaking the day after “The Way of Water” debuted in London, Cameron — back on Earth and self-admittedly out of practice with the hoopla of a red-carpet premiere — describes the experience of finally having the movie out in the world: “surreal.”

“You work on these films kind of in a bubble. You create this world around you with your artists, with your casts and so on,” Cameron says. “Then one day you realize, ‘Oh crap, we’re going to have to show this to people at some point.’”

For a long time, the “Avatar” sequel was the “Waiting for Godot” of blockbusters — more theoretical than real, with release dates that kept spiraling into the future. Meanwhile, an unending parade of pieces pondered the original’s curious place in entertainment: a box-office behemoth with little cultural footprint, a \$3 billion ghost.

But the first look at Cameron’s “Avatar” sequel has thrown some cold water on that notion. The overwhelming reaction to the director’s latest three-hour opus? Never bet against James Cameron.

“The important thing is that there are people willing to

bet on me and on the ideas that interest me and I want to go forward with,” Cameron says, speaking by video conference. “It was 20th Century Fox, Jim Gianopulos specifically, who OK’ed this film to go forward. Then we were acquired by Disney. That could have gone south, but it didn’t. The word I got from them all the way along was: ‘We want quality. We want this movie. We want this movie for the theaters. We want to remind people what the theatrical experience is.’”

With a reported price tag of more than \$350 million, a third “Avatar” film already wrapped and two more films planned after that, the Walt Disney Co. is placing a very big wager, indeed, on “The Way of Water.” But regardless of jokes about blue people or Papyrus font, Came-

“I don’t want to do anything but big swings. I’m going to fall on my ass sooner or later. But if you’re not ready to fall on your ass, you’re not doing anything interesting.”

James Cameron

ron’s latest — a deep-blue ocean epic of natural splendor, ecological protectionism and family perseverance — is poised to again blow audiences away, and possibly, once more rake in billions.

The film, which opened in theaters Thursday, might be Cameron’s most ambitious undertaking yet — which is saying something for the 68-year-old filmmaker of “Titanic,” “The Terminator” and “Aliens.”

“I don’t want to do anything but big swings,” Cameron says. “I’m going to fall on my ass sooner or later. But if you’re not ready to fall on your ass, you’re not doing anything interesting.”

We’ve been here before. After cost overruns and delays, “Titanic” was written off as a sure-to-bomb case study of Hollywood excess. Then it made \$2.2 billion in ticket sales and won 11 Oscars. Not everyone was pre-sold on “Avatar,” either, which resuscitated 3D after decades of dormancy.

“‘Titanic’ was assumed to be a big steaming pile,” Cameron says. “That was a much bigger flip. And we had a similar flip on a smaller scale with the first ‘Avatar.’ People saw the trailer on a little window on their laptop and called it ‘Smurfs’ and ‘video game cinematic’ and stuff like that. Then they went to see it in the movie theater and went, ‘Wait, wait. It’s pretty cool.’”

“There was a guarded skepticism around this film,” he

SEE AVATAR ON PAGE 16

WEEKEND: MOVIES

Avatar: Sequel poised to excite with its beauty, emotional story

FROM PAGE 15

adds, “as there should always be with any new film.”

“The Way of Water,” which Cameron scripted with Rick Jaffa and Amanda Silver, takes place a decade after the events of the first “Avatar.” Jake Sully (Sam Worthington), the paralyzed Marine who donned an avatar on Pandora, is now fully enmeshed in the remote world of the Na’vi. He and Neytiri (Zoe Saldana) have three teenage children. When human soldiers come hunting for him, Jake moves his family to a reef clan of Na’vi who live harmoniously with the ocean.

The trials the family endures turn surprisingly wrenching in what’s already been called Cameron’s most emotional film. That may be partly because much of Cameron’s own experience as a father raising five children in New Zealand is woven into the film, as is his early life growing up in Ontario as the eldest son of an electrical engineer father.

“I remember what that was like for me. I’ve been Lo-ak,” says Cameron, referring to Jake and Neytiri’s middle son. “I’ve been the kid whose father doesn’t get him or see him. I don’t mean to disparage my dad. He was a great dad of that period in the sense of putting a roof over our heads and out there working hard, breadwinner. But he didn’t know what to do with an artist kid. He didn’t know what to do with a flamboyant artist whose head was out in interstellar space all the time.”

“The Way of Water,” which is being shown in 3D and 48-frames-per-second (double the standard), also means a new generation of technological advancement. While it’s unlikely to be as much a milestone as the first was visually, the blend of computer-generated imagery and live action, above ground and underwater, makes for even more strikingly detailed vistas.

“We’re able to deliver a much greater ability of photorealism than we ever did before,” says producer Jon Landau. “When we made the first movie, I would say to people, ‘We need it to be photographic.’ Now in this movie, we have so many Avatar, Na’vi characters in the live-action world and we have so many live-action characters in the Pandora world, we need to be photoreal. That’s a new standard we have to live up to.”

That’s most beautifully rendered in the film’s waters, where teeming science-fiction species of flora and fauna enrich an imagined ocean paradise. To Cameron, an avid deep-sea explorer whose passions for the sea nearly outstrip his love of film-

making, “The Way of the Water” is his grand ode to the ocean.

“It’s also a cri de coeur to people around the world to protect and be guardians of the oceans, to be guardians of nature in general. That’s what these ‘Avatar’ movies are about,” Cameron says. “In New Zealand, the Maori people call it kaitiakitanga and it basically means guardianship of nature. I don’t think most people in so-called Western, industrial society really feel that strongly.

“Obviously, there are people of conscience, there are people who are activists for climate change and rain forest preservation and so on. But unfortunately, they’re not the majority in the seat of power. So I think it’s fair to say that we’ve got to change the way we do business or we’re not going to have these things. The ocean of Pandora is probably very much like how the ocean of Earth used to be, at least in terms of profusion.”

“The Way of Water” arrived in theaters with expectations of a debut of at least \$150 million on opening weekend in North America. More notably, it will quench the thirst of multiplexes that have, after some big summer successes, seen the number of wide releases — and moviegoers — slide this fall. When he debuted the first “Avatar,” streaming was nascent; Netflix was just getting into the business of making movies. Now, for a much different movie landscape, Cameron will again hope to show audiences the full power of visionary grand-scale filmmaking.

“I’ve been thinking a lot lately about what art is in its essence. And I think dreams have something to do with it,” he says. “There’s like a render engine or a narrative engine that runs in our heads every night. It puts images and scenarios together in some kind of sequence. Sometimes, most times, they’re completely illogical. But they have a kind of momentary logic to them. I’m always telling everybody on the film, this is a movie with floating mountains. It doesn’t have to always be logical. It just has to have that dream logic.”

At the “Way of Water” premiere in London, Cameron was struck by how the audience looked different to him. It was a black-tie affair, unusual for him as a director, but that wasn’t only it.

“I looked out at that audience and everybody looked so beautiful and they put so much energy into just showing up. It struck me that maybe we’re back,” Cameron says. “Maybe cinema’s back. Maybe enough people out there do care about that dream of cinema.”

“When we made the first movie, I would say to people, ‘We need it to be photographic.’ Now in this movie, we have so many Avatar, Na’vi characters in the live-action world and we have so many live-action characters in the Pandora world, we need to be photoreal.”

Producer Jon Landau

REVIEW



20TH CENTURY STUDIOS/AP

Britain Dalton as Lo'ak, one of Jake and Neytiri's kids, in “Avatar: The Way of Water.”

Better than the first

‘Avatar: Way of Water’ long but a visually, spiritually, narratively compelling film

BY LINDSEY BAHR
Associated Press

It is impossible to talk about “Avatar: The Way of Water” without sounding hyperbolic. But James Cameron’s sequel is a truly dazzling cinematic experience that will have you floating on a blockbuster high.

No matter if you’ve spent a second of your life in the past 13 years thinking about what’s happening on Pandora or how Jake Sully (Sam Worthington) and Neytiri (Zoe Saldana) are getting on, assuming you remember their characters’ names. “The Way of Water” will make awestruck believers out of even “Avatar” agnostics like me, at least for three hours and 12 minutes. The film isn’t just visually compelling, either, it’s spiritually rich as well — a simple but penetrating story about family and the natural world that is galaxies better than the first.

About that run time: Three hours and 12 minutes sounds excessive, but there is something decidedly decadent about really committing that much time to a movie in a theater. When the filmmaker is purposeful with that time, as Cameron is and many others have been before him, it’s a uniquely rewarding experience. In other words, it’s not a big ask. And you’ll forget all about checking the time from the first shot of Pandora and Jake’s earnest exposition about what’s been going on in the past decade.

He and Neytiri have three kids now, Neteyam (Jamie Flatters), Lo’ak (Britain Dalton), Tuk (Trinity Jo-Li Bliss) and an adopted teenage daughter, Kiri (Sigourney Weaver), and they’re happy living in the forest.

“Happiness is simple,” he says. “Who ever thought that a jughead like me could crack the code?” So, of course, it can’t last. The humans are on the hunt for Jake, with a familiar antagonist leading the charge. And soon his family is on the run, taking up home in another part of Pandora, with a new tribe led by Ronal (Kate Winslet) and Tonowari (Cliff Curtis) who reluctantly grant them refuge and try to teach them how to live on the water.

It’s worth noting that Cameron has not

stuffed the film with mind-numbing, wall-to-wall action and needlessly complicated plot. There are long stretches of movie where we’re simply exploring the environment with the characters, delighting in the intricacies of a reef or basking in the beauty of giant sea creatures. Sometimes we’re just sitting in the water with Kiri, who is also sitting in the water. It is not advancing the action in any obvious way. It is not even really developing characters. It just is, and it’s serene. You imagine that anyone without his clout would have a hard time justifying something similar.

The action is there, too, of course, and it’s exciting because you’ve become invested in the family and worried about the kids who are never where they’re supposed to be and are often in danger because of it. And though we know there are more sequels coming, and one already wrapped, this is not the kind of franchise where anyone is guaranteed to get a fake superhero death. Sure, there is some “Avatar” silliness, including the fact that the word “bro” is uttered about 8,000 times, but there is something admirable about the straightforward dialogue and emotions at play, too. No one is snarking their way through this ordeal.

“Never doubt James Cameron” has become a bit of a rallying cry lately, at least among those left on Twitter. It’s all the more extraordinary as the once-mythical sequels had become a kind of joke in the years since the first movie. Even as “The Way of Water” release date actually approached, the “who cares?” chorus intensified. Had anyone really thought twice about “Avatar”? But Cameron knows his way around a thrilling sequel, and the water for that matter (and references his own greatest hits in this film, too).

But then people saw it and the tune changed. There is something comforting about the fact that we are capable of intense, collective cultural whiplash. That “who cares?” can turn to uncynical amazement in an instant. Is that the magic of the movies? Of continuing to push the bounds of the big-screen experience? Of betting big on weird-sounding stories about giant blue environmentalists instead of superheroes every so often? Maybe it’s just the magic of James Cameron.

“Avatar: The Way of Water” is rated PG-13 for partial nudity, intense action, sequences of strong violence and some strong language. Running time: 192 minutes. Now in select AAFES theaters.

WEEKEND: MOVIES

Pulling the strings

Del Toro: Fascist Italy a perfect backdrop for 'Pinocchio'

By **TRACY BROWN**
Los Angeles Times

If you ask Guillermo del Toro whether his "Pinocchio" is appropriate for kids, he will tell you that "it's not necessarily made for children, but children can watch it."

Described as "a fable about disobedience as a virtue," "Guillermo del Toro's Pinocchio," now on Netflix, flips the script on the themes of Walt Disney's classic adaptation of Carlo Collodi's 19th century children's story and sets it in fascist Italy during the rise of Benito Mussolini.

Directed by del Toro and Mark Gustafson, the wooden puppet at the center of this tale is a grief-stricken father's drunken creation brought to life by a Wood Sprite. This Pinocchio (voiced by Gregory Mann) is not necessarily concerned about being good in order to become a real boy, but is willing to try to behave in order to make Geppetto (David Bradley) proud.

What is shown over the course of the film, however, is that it's not Pinocchio who needs to change who he is in order to be loved — it's on Geppetto to realize and appreciate the miracle that's he's been given.

"Pinocchio is there to transform the lives of the others," said del Toro during a recent video call. "It's almost the adventures of Geppetto, this movie. Geppetto, who's obsessed with perfection at the beginning ... ends up saying, 'Whatever you are, whoever you are, I love you just as you are.' This was the impetus behind this [movie]."

It was this twist that appealed to Gustafson, a stop-motion veteran making his

feature director debut with "Pinocchio."

"It opened (the story) up in a very different way," Gustafson said. "What is it about disobedience that teaches you something about yourself? What can you learn from the world by pushing back a little bit when everybody is just in lockstep and going one direction?"

For del Toro, who wrote the screenplay with Patrick McHale, the long-gestating "Pinocchio" is very personal. The Academy Award-winning Mexican filmmaker lists Pinocchio and Frankenstein's creature as two characters he identified "very strongly with" growing up.

"They both represent sort of a disenfranchised son, with a father that just throws them into the world, hoping they will figure it out," del Toro said. "I felt that it was a close match to my child-rearing experience."

Inspired by Gris Grimly's illustrations for a 2002 edition of Collodi's "Pinocchio," del Toro knew that animation, and specifically stop-motion, was the only possibility for his version of the tale. What better way to tell a story about a puppet in a world where everybody behaves like puppets, than with actual puppets? Especially to show that even in a world populated by puppets, where uniformity of thought is mandated by the fascist regime, Pinocchio is still an anomaly?

"The conceit behind fascism is the darkest interpretation of a father figure," del Toro said. "The strong man in fascism is a very dark and seductive figure of power for stray souls that are looking for a sort of father figure that can dictate what you do."



Netflix

"Pinocchio" co-director Guillermo del Toro says that in his version of the tale about a wooden puppet, Pinocchio is there to transform the lives of the other characters.

This made Mussolini's Italy a perfect backdrop for a film that tells "rhyming stories of fathers and sons." As del Toro points out, Geppetto and Pinocchio are not the only father-son pair featured in the movie. There is Volpe, the flamboyant carnival leader who seduces Pinocchio into joining his stage show, and his puppeteer monkey Spazzatura. There is also Candlewick, a young boy who lives in Pinocchio's hometown, and his father, a fascist officer who is determined to make Pinocchio follow the rules. And in all three relationships, the sons start to push back.

In juxtaposing a specific moment of history with a story about a child, "Pinocchio" carries on the spirit of such earlier del Toro works as "The Devil's Backbone" (2001) and "Pan's Labyrinth" (2006), set during the Spanish Civil War.

But beyond the connection between fascism and certain types of parenting, his "Pinocchio" addresses death and rebirth and the consequences of one's decisions — themes and topics that some may consider too weighty for children's entertainment.

"We have a lot of faith in children," Gustafson said. "They can handle it. We decided early on, we are not going to talk down to them."

Added del Toro: "Children can watch ('Pinocchio') if their parents talk to them. If they're willing to have a conversation about ideas versus ideologies, or a conversation about life and death."

It's important to have these conversations about "the bigger realities of life," he said, "because kids don't want easy answers. Kids want to put the real answers together."

Del Toro's 'Pinocchio' puts new twist on old morality tale

By **JOCELYN NOVECK**
Associated Press

Let's face it, "Pinocchio" has always been an odd choice for a children's morality tale. Of course, lying is wrong. But that's not the only message the story sends. Even the classic 1940 Disney version — lighter and more kid-friendly than the 1883 Collodi tale — still sends the message: If you're not "good," you don't deserve to be human.

"A boy who won't be good might just as well be made of wood," the beneficent Blue Fairy admonishes Pinocchio in that film. Really? What happened to the idea that "to err is human"? Not to mention second chances, or learning curves? And what does "good" mean, anyway? Have they heard of value relativism? But we digress.

Because now comes Guillermo del Toro, with his blazing creative talent, to really stir things up. And boy, this is not your Disney "Pinocchio" — not the 1940 classic nor the remake of a few months ago. How will your kid feel about fascist salutes? A guy named Mussolini? Bombs falling from the sky? A father handing a gun to his son and saying "Shoot the puppet?" (Yes, sweet Pinocchio — THAT puppet.)

Of course, del Toro, whose take on "Pinocchio" is so distinct that the movie is called "Guillermo del Toro's Pinocchio," has just the visual command you'd expect, partnering with co-director Mark Gustafson in this gorgeous stop-motion project with a starry voice cast (including three Oscar winners — Christoph Waltz, Cate Blanchett and Tilda Swinton.)

We first meet Geppetto (David Bradley) as the happy father to a real son, Carlo. "All they needed was each other's company," says the narrator, namely Sebastian J. Cricket, voiced by Ewan McGregor. They spend their



NETFLIX/TNS

Geppetto (David Bradley), left, and Pinocchio (Gregory Mann) in "Guillermo del Toro's Pinocchio."

evenings reading stories by the fire, and Carlo accompanies Geppetto to his job restoring a huge Jesus altarpiece in the church. It's there that tragedy strikes one day; a warplane drops a bomb onto the church, killing Carlo. Geppetto withdraws to drinking and mourning.

In grief, Geppetto cuts down a pine tree and makes a puppet. In the night, the Wood Sprite (Swinton, not to be confused with her sister, Death, also Swinton) comes to visit. As in other versions, she asks the cricket to watch over Pinocchio and serve as his conscience.

Geppetto brings the puppet to church, but he's greeted with hostility: "Where are his strings? Who controls him?" At home, Pinocchio wonders why everyone loves the wooden Jesus but not him. A fascist town leader pronounces Pinocchio a "dissident" and "independent thinker." Not as a compliment.

Like in other versions, Pinocchio gets caught up with a

money-hungry impresario, Count Volpe (Waltz), who puts him in a puppet show. Unlike other versions, one audience member happens to be Il Duce (Mussolini.) Also unlike in other versions, Pinocchio gets hit by a truck. Luckily, Swinton's Death brings him back to life.

If this seems a bit unsavory for the younger kids, you ain't seen nothin' yet — Pinocchio ends up at a fascist military camp, where the boys are set against each other in deadly war games. Compared to this section, the time he and Geppetto later spend in the belly of a whale seems rather quaint.

Did we mention that this movie is a musical? The musical element is best used in the theater scenes where Pinocchio is forced by Volpe to perform. And kids will definitely enjoy the song where Pinocchio boldly (and dangerously) goads the visiting Mussolini with lyrics about poops and farts.

But "Guillermo del Toro's Pinocchio" is clearly not aimed solely at kids, but rather is banking on the fact that adults, too, will be drawn to the striking visuals and mature themes at play.

Those themes include parenting. For much of the movie Geppetto wishes Pinocchio would be just like Carlo, his human son. But gradually the old man realizes he doesn't need to replace Carlo — Pinocchio is just fine, and he doesn't need to become human to be loved.

Del Toro is also making clear references to the danger of groupthink. Indeed, he seems to have chosen the background of fascism to point out that the narrow-minded townspeople who suspect Pinocchio because he's different are the real puppets, not Pinocchio.

"Guillermo del Toro's Pinocchio" is rated PG "for dark thematic material, violence, peril, some rude humor and brief smoking." Running time: 114 minutes.

WEEKEND: VIDEO GAMES

Too cute to truly be creepy

Hello Neighbor 2 offers a bigger world to explore but struggles narratively

By JHAAN ELKER
The Washington Post

Hello Neighbor 2 is a strange mashup of contradicting ideas. The first game, Hello Neighbor, was supposed to be an indie horror darling. But despite releasing at a moment when YouTube was littered with playthroughs of that sort of title, the game never reached the heights attained by its YouTube-fodder horror peers. And Eerie Guest's follow-up doesn't fare much better.

You play as an investigator looking into a person suspected of being a serial kidnapper. This person? Mr. Peterson, the cover boy for the franchise — the “neighbor” of Hello Neighbor. Narratively, the game implies that you're playing as the same main character of the last game, just grown up. This character, who is dyslexic, suffers from PTSD due to the events of the last game, where he himself became a victim of Mr. Peterson. Your goal is to find damning evidence of his kidnapping ways by infiltrating his home and searching for clues, all while avoiding Mr. Peterson as he skulks around trying to catch you.

It's a sound concept, but one that immediately stokes narrative confusion. The premise sets up an interesting gameplay loop, where you interact with various puzzles in the environment as stealthily as possible. But how does it make any sense for a player caught by Mr. Peterson to just ... be able to do it again, seconds later? The penalty for being caught is that Mr. Peterson throws you out of his house instead of, you know, kidnapping you — something he's already done to you in the past.

This narrative disconnect is evident everywhere in this game, which is a shame. Hello Neighbor 2 really does improve several gameplay elements that hampered the previous title. But in total, this stealth horror title is somehow more frustrating than scary.

Let's talk about the gameplay first. The core mechanics from the first game are still in place. It's essentially a first-person point-and-click adventure, with you solving puzzles that are naturally blended-in with their environment (like putting together pieces of a photograph that you find throughout the house). The game never spells out what precisely you should be doing, so it's up to you and your powers of observation to figure out how to unlock the next puzzle to progress. Notice that the buttons of a cash register are missing? Well, you've got to find them, put them back on the register and press the buttons in a specific order to open it. That'll reveal a key that unlocks the door to the next



tinyBuild photos

In Hello Neighbor 2, as in the original game, you search for clues in Mr. Peterson's house that implicate him as a kidnapper.



In the expanded world of the sequel, you must also hide from other neighbors, who are roaming around their homes as you invade to search for clues.

area. The entire game is basically that sort of experience.

The twist is that you can't just explore at your own pace. Your neighbors will walk around their homes as you snoop around searching for clues, and they'll kick you out if they catch you. You have the ability to hide in things like closets should they be nearby, but this isn't always a guaranteed solution.

Hello Neighbor 2 expands on the original game by giving you more stuff to explore. You're free to roam an entire neighborhood this time around, instead of just the Dr. Seussian manor of Mr. Peterson from the last game. This is a welcome change of pace, because players can't get too comfortable with their environments and constantly use the same hiding spots from their pursuers. You also have access to new tools, like a drone that gives you an aerial view of the neighborhood, which can be helpful for planning out how to evade the neighbors. Finally, and most fortunately, the wonky physics engine of the previous game appears to be gone. In the previous game, you could do illogical things to get around puzzles, like stacking cardboard boxes to access areas before you're supposed to. Nothing like that exists here.

Unfortunately, though, the improve-

ments from the previous game begin and end with the gameplay. Hello Neighbor 2 still has the aesthetic design of the previous game. It's goofy and cartoonish, with a Pixar-like charm to it. The problem with this design, though, is that it directly conflicts with the genre the game is going for. Hello Neighbor 2 bills itself as a “stealth horror” game, but it's kind of hard to take scares seriously when they're coming at you from characters who look ripped straight out of a Saturday morning cartoon lineup.

The problem, I think, is that the game rarely sets up its horror. The best horror films and games ramp up the tension — and release with a scare. But a neighbor coming up to you and catching you while you attempt to solve a puzzle mostly just feels random. There's no setup — just surprise from something you couldn't possibly foresee. More often than not, as I hid in closets from my pursuers, I felt frustrated rather than scared. I either wanted to continue what I was doing before, or for the pursuers to find me just to get it over with.

The narrative also doesn't make any sense, no matter how you try to piece everything together. Sometimes, after getting caught by a neighbor, you'll wake up in bed, implying that a part of this

game — or maybe all of it — is just taking place in the mind of the main character. There is a twisted, cartoonish logic to this; we know the main character has post-traumatic stress disorder from being kidnapped, after all. But then, something happens at the end of this game that implies everything we're experiencing is actually real. The new design of Mr. Peterson's house — which is no longer Dr. Seussian and has realistic features and proportions — seems to imply that the events are real too.

The original Hello Neighbor came out around the same time as another indie horror title that revolutionized YouTube trends: Five Nights at Freddy's, or FNAF. The game broke viewership records for popular YouTubers like Markiplier and spawned a whole subgenre of content creators dedicated to digging into the complicated lore of the games. YouTube viewers ate up FNAF content. Watching a horror game alongside a likable personality was a palatable alternative to playing for skittish gamers. It was also just plain fun watching YouTubers analyze what the heck was going on in the story.

Bendy and the Ink Machine, Doki Doki Literature Club, Poppy's Playtime and, yes, Hello Neighbor and its sequel have tried to replicate this success by creating complicated narratives within their own games. But while those titles' narratives hold up, Hello Neighbor and Hello Neighbor 2's narratives crumble under the slightest bit of scrutiny.

Fans have made their disappointment apparent. The metacritic score for the final release of the original game is among the lowest in the indie horror genre. It's easy to imagine something similar happening with the sequel.

There are glimpses of something special in the Hello Neighbor franchise, and Eerie Guest promises in an endgame screen that more content is forthcoming. Let's just hope whatever they come up with offers more horror and more intrigue — and less mystery around why we're playing these games in the first place.

Platforms: PlayStation 5, PlayStation 4, Xbox Series X/S, Xbox One, PC
Online: helloneighbor2.com

WEEKEND: TRAVEL

The spirit of St. Francis is alive in Assisi

On one night in my memory in Assisi — an Umbrian town stony with history — it seems the only ones out at 10 p.m. were Franciscan monks in their rough brown robes and rope belts. All over Europe I find monks hard to approach. But there's something about Franciscan friars that this Lutheran finds wonderfully accessible. Franciscan brothers remind me of really smart dorm kids in the University of God ... and on this night, it seemed, their studies were done for the evening.

It sounds perhaps silly, but with every visit to Italy's Assisi, I'm struck by how the spirit of St. Francis still pervades his hometown. Around the year 1200, this simple friar countered the decadence of Church government and society in general with a powerful message of non-materialism and a "slow down and smell God's roses" lifestyle.

Like Jesus, Francis taught by example, living without worldly goods and aiming to love all creation. A huge monastic order grew out of his teachings, which were gradually embraced (some would say co-opted) by the Roman Church. Christianity's most popular saint and purest example of simplicity is now glorified in

churches — known for their stark beauty. The ultimate among these is in Assisi — the magnificent Basilica of St. Francis.

The basilica is decorated from top to bottom by precious frescoes by the leading artists of the



Rick Steves

13th century. This church brought together the greatest Sieneese (Lorenzetti and Simone Martini) and Florentine (Cimabue and Giotto) artists of the day.

While the scenes may seem unremarkable today, in 1300 this was radical art — showing believable homespun vignettes, with landscapes, trees and real people. In Giotto's painting of the Crucifixion — with eight sparrow-like angels — holy people are shown expressing emotion for the first time in art. The Franciscans, with their goal of bringing God to the people, found a natural partner in Europe's first modern (and therefore naturalist) painter, Giotto.

All this great art stands atop a crypt housing the mortal remains of St. Francis himself. The church is the target of countless pilgrims and has been for centuries. Even today, it is enlivened



Rick Steves

Assisi's Basilica of St. Francis — colorfully frescoed by Giotto — inspires tourists and pilgrims today.

by the faith of the people who come to remember Francis. With the 5.5-magnitude earthquake in 1997, the church was seriously damaged. Everything's been restored except for a few blank-looking patches on the otherwise-frescoed walls and ceiling.

In the Basilica of St. Francis, along with the painted scenes from Francis' life, you'll find the actual document from the pope

blessing Francis' ministry (dating from 1223). And, of course, Francis' body is interred in its crypt.

Francis met his female counterpart, Clare, in Assisi. She went on to establish the order of the Poor Clares. Her tomb and possessions are nearby at the Basilica of St. Clare.

In the Basilica of St. Clare hangs the wooden crucifix that

changed Francis' life. In 1206, an emaciated, soul-searching, stark-raving Francis knelt before this crucifix and asked for guidance. The crucifix spoke: "Go and rebuild my Church, which you can see has fallen into ruin." And Francis followed the call.

Rick Steves (www.ricksteves.com) writes European guidebooks, hosts travel shows on public TV and radio and organizes European tours. You can email Rick at rick@ricksteves.com and follow his blog on Facebook.

Unforgettable experiences make the best holiday gifts

'Tis the season to be on the lookout for that perfect gift for a spouse, friend or family member. Should that special person on your list love nothing more than hitting the road to explore Europe's corners, they're likely to appreciate an unforgettable experience to indulge in once they get there. From painting classes to culinary tours, Europe is awash in bookable experiences.

Whereas in the past such experiences would typically have been offered through schools, rental outfits or other businesses, today's wealth of apps and online platforms enable private individuals to share their skills, passions and local knowledge with visitors to their hometowns. Listed here are offerings from both established businesses and enterprising locals.



Karen Bradbury

Taste Belgium's best beers

Belgian Experience Brussels is a tour provider offering the chance to learn the basics of Belgian beers and brewing techniques. In an old private bar in the city center, guests are instructed on the proper way to taste a beer and provided with an overview of the history of various brewing styles. Each style discussed, from sweet fruity beers to the strong 9% ales brewed by monks, is accompanied by a 12cl sample. The 75-minute experience inclusive of five tastings is available at 7:45 p.m. on most evenings and goes for 18 euros per person. Online: beerexperiencebrussels.com

Learn to bake macarons in Paris

Les Secrets Gourmands De Noémie is a cooking workshop offered by an independent host. Owner and course instructor Noémie, a trained chef, shares her love of cooking and baking in various instructional sessions, including a macaron class. Participants are guided in the preparation of two types of the melt-in-your-mouth biscuits,



iStock

Les Secrets Gourmands De Noémie is a cooking workshop offered in Paris. A trained chef shares her love of cooking and baking in various instructional sessions, including a macaron class.

which they can enjoy over a cup of tea or coffee or take home to show off their new skills. A 2½-hour class goes for 95 euros. Online: lessecretsgourmandsdenoemie.com

Escape aboard a barge in Dublin

Escape Boats Dublin offers an escape room experience in an extraordinary setting. Billed as the first ever live escape room on a boat, groups of from two to 10 players must work together to solve puzzles, crack codes and escape the perils of the Zorg Ella barge within the allotted amount of time. Players can choose from two games: SOS or Convicts. The experience is open to those ages 12 and above; those under 18 must be accompanied by an adult guardian. The cost of the hourlong experience begins at 25 euros and is bookable on most days of the week. Gift vouchers are available. Online: escapeboats.ie

Savor tapas in Madrid

Enjoy Tapas Madrid is a small company that makes use of the getyourguide platform to promote its various culinary walking tours. The Old Madrid Walking Food and Wine Tour takes guests to three different bars to enjoy the most famous food and drinks of each establishment. Groups of no more than 10 will sample products such as Iberian ham, Manchego cheese and other delicacies while taking in major attractions such as the Puerta del Sol and Plaza Mayor. The 2½- to three-hour tour goes for 68 euros per person, and includes one drink at each bar. Online: tinyurl.com/5ypm2nr5

Hone photography skills in Amsterdam

With its vibrant night life and dazzling neon lights reflected in the waters of the canals, Amsterdam by night is a photographer's delight. In this Airbnb-listed experience titled Night Photography Workshop with a Professional, participants are coached on how to take dazzling images by a seasoned photographer and university lecturer. Using long exposures, the beauty of the red-light district and its environs can be captured in stunning images. Groups are made up of no more than five people, and the host will provide cameras and tripods to those who don't have their own equipment. The 90-minute workshop goes for 79 euros per person. Online: tinyurl.com/57wphs48

Explore WWII history in Munich

Munich Walk Tours, an organization working in partnership with the city's tourism office, offers a walking tour that delves into the dark history of the Nazi Movement in the Bavarian capital. The tour traces the birth of Nazism, the rise of Hitler and the Third Reich with stops at sites including the Hofbräuhaus, Feldherrnhalle and Königsplatz. A two-hour, non-private tour in English goes for 20 euros and is bookable through the getyourguide platform. Online: tinyurl.com/4wzcr53p

WEEKEND: TRAVEL



Port of Portland

The designers of Portland International Airport's new main terminal aim to evoke city streets and parks with live vegetation and corridors lined by stores, as seen in this concept art.

US airports are getting a glow-up

Wave of modernization projects transforming how these transportation hubs look, feel and operate

BY JAMES BIKALES
AND HANNAH SAMPSON
The Washington Post

For many years, going to the airport in the United States has meant trudging through dark and low-ceilinged terminals, crowding in dreary security checkpoints and throwing elbows to secure one of the few power outlets at the gate.

"A bus depot is not a great way to describe it, but that's kind of the methodology that a lot of American passengers saw," said Ty Osbaugh, an architect who helps lead the aviation practice at the architecture firm Gensler.

Airports built in the 20th century were largely designed to get customers in, out and through as quickly as possible. They didn't account for the high volume of passengers we see today or the logistical demands the age of Homeland Security would create. According to the trade group Airports Council International-North America, the average airport terminal in the United States is more than 40 years old.

That's not the case overseas, where

some of the world's grandest airports are designed for passengers to actually enjoy their experience. In Singapore's Changi Airport, for example, a towering indoor waterfall, forested walking trails and a glass-bottom bridge compete for travelers' attention. It's given many Americans "terminal envy," Osbaugh said.

Now, U.S. airports are catching on with a wave of modernization projects. With the urgency higher than ever — U.S. airports are in need of \$115 billion in improvements, according to a 2021 survey by the airport trade association — and an injection of funds from the bipartisan infrastructure law, there's new money and momentum for version "2.0 of airport design," Osbaugh said.

"I think we're always going to be in a constant need to upgrade," said Kevin Burke, president and CEO of Airports Council International-North America. "Not all airports are going to be modernized at the same time."

To get a better understanding of the design trends that will define our airport experience in the future, The Washington Post examined renovations that are either



CHRIS BOUSSELOT/DFW Airport

The new "High C" gates at Dallas Fort Worth International feature massive digital signs so that passengers can see their flight's status from across the terminal.

in progress or were recently completed at six U.S. airports: Orlando International, Los Angeles International, Dallas Fort Worth International, Portland International, Pittsburgh International and New York City's LaGuardia Airport.

Bright, open spaces

Airports across the country are investing billions to help passengers "look forward to the time they spend at the airport, instead of just really hating it," said Harriet Baskas, creator of the blog Stuck at the Airport.

At Dallas Fort Worth International, a \$2 billion expansion to Terminal C that opened over the summer is supposed to help customers relax in comfort, said Khaled Naja, the airport's executive vice president for infrastructure and devel-

opment. Naja said the four new "High C" gates feature high ceilings; large, tinted windows that let in copious natural light; and seating areas designed both for solo business travelers who need a quiet space to work and families or larger groups. Every seat features a wireless charger.

At Portland International Airport in Oregon, a new main terminal set to open in 2025 as the centerpiece of a \$1.5 billion project is laid out like an indoor version of a small town's main street. It will feature wide corridors lined by trees and local shops and restaurants.

Pittsburgh International Airport's new \$1.4 billion terminal, also scheduled to open in 2025, will include outdoor terraces both pre- and post-security.

SEE AIRPORTS ON PAGE 21

WEEKEND: TRAVEL

Airports: Improvements also made to sustainability

FROM PAGE 20

“We want people to have access to fresh air,” said Christina Cassotis, CEO of the Allegheny County Airport Authority.

LaGuardia’s Terminal B opened its final two gates in July as part of an \$8 billion overhaul for the airport. Developers wanted to build a space that felt more like a “nice hotel” than a transportation hub, said Stewart Steeves, chief operating officer of Vantage Airport Group, part of the group that is redeveloping and managing the terminal. That means using tile on the floor instead of the more institutional-seeming terrazzo, incorporating art in the check-in area, providing “hotel-style” baggage carts that are less loud and using sound-absorbing materials.

On the way to gates, there are indoor parks with plants and trees and children’s play areas where kids can customize a plane on a tablet, then watch it fly on a giant digital screen. These are “in-between” spaces where people feel removed from a boarding lounge, Steeves said.

DFW’s new gates also feature massive digital signs that can be seen from a distance and indicate the status of a flight, meaning customers never have to rush to the gate to check on their flight, Naja said. In the meantime, they can visit the terminal’s new “smart restrooms,” which include digital indicators as to whether each stall is occupied.

Long maligned as one of the worst parts of travels, airport bathrooms have seen significant improvements in recent years. Philadelphia International received \$24 million from the bipartisan infrastructure law to overhaul 30 restrooms, and the facilities in Tampa International’s Airside C — which feature a clean, contemporary aesthetic and personal paper towel dispensers and trash cans at each sink — were recently named the nation’s best restrooms by Cintas, beating out those of spas and top restaurants.

Steeves is enthusiastic about the restrooms in LaGuardia’s Terminal B, where stalls were designed to fit a human and a suitcase without requiring a contortion act to reach the toilet.

Creating a ‘sense of place’

Several airports are focusing on highlighting the city they serve, adding some local flavor into drab facilities that may seem to exist in a kind of geographic purgatory.

In Pittsburgh, the roof has been designed to represent the area’s rolling hills. Steel columns that look like trees are meant to “provide an aesthetic sense of place, evoking the woods of Western Pennsylvania,” the airport says.

A 9-acre wood roof in Portland’s forthcoming main terminal marks a first in airport construction. Built in a lattice of exposed wood sourced from a 300-mile radius of the city, the roof is more sustainable and seismically resilient than steel, Port of Portland chief projects officer Vince Granato said.

It’s designed to be “like a walk in the forest, which is what we’re famous for out here,” he said. “It’s like a tree canopy with lots of skylights.”

At Orlando International Airport’s new \$2.8 billion Terminal C, which started welcoming flights in September, an “open, airy environment” was the goal, said Greater Orlando Aviation Authority CEO Kevin Thibault. Skylights allow sun to filter through the high ceiling that towers over a portion of the terminal; below, “forever trees” using preserved material from palm and cypress trees line the walkway.

“What we did was try to create that type of environment ... so you know you’re in the Sunshine State,” he said.

Technology that makes IDs obsolete

Imagine an airport experience where you can go from the curb to the gate without pulling out your boarding pass or a phone, or without even slowing down.

That’s the future that advancements in technology might be able to offer within a decade, Osbaugh said.

With facial recognition tech, passengers will be able to place their bag on a belt themselves, walk through security, purchase concessions and board their flight without a physical ID.

Already, the Transportation Security Administration is



JOSHUA SUDOCK/Los Angeles World Airports

Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti tries the new biometric boarding gates at Los Angeles International Airport.

testing facial recognition technology at 16 airports across the country, a rollout that has generated some controversy, The Washington Post reported. In other seemingly sci-fi moves, Delta unveiled technology at Detroit Metropolitan Airport this summer that shows travelers their personalized flight information on a giant shared screen. The “Parallel Reality” has not yet expanded to other airports.

Some futuristic features are already in place at Los Angeles International as part of the airport’s broader digital transformation initiative, including self-service bag drops and boarding with facial scans on international flights, according to Justin Erbacci, the CEO of Los Angeles World Airports.

“We’re at the forefront of the use of biometrics here to make the passenger journey more secure, but also easier and contactless for the customer,” he said.

LAX is also aiming to make it possible for a passenger to control their entire airport journey through their phone, including a smart parking system that guides drivers to an open spot, the ability to reserve a time to go through the security checkpoint instead of queuing, and mobile food ordering so passengers can skip the line at Starbucks, Erbacci said.

Pittsburgh International Airport has created a testing platform called the xBridge to pilot tech innovations like food delivery robots, semiautonomous vehicles for shuttling employees and an installation that uses algae to reduce carbon dioxide and produce oxygen.

At Orlando International Airport’s new terminal, each gate has biometric screening devices. That means all international passengers can use facial recognition technology instead of showing boarding passes. Thibault said the airport has been working with the TSA and Customs and Border Protection with the goal of using the same technology for domestic flights.

At TSA checkpoints, bins are automatically brought to the screening area and returned. If someone leaves anything inside after going through a checkpoint, a sensor will not allow it to return.

“All that has streamlined the processing so we are efficiently putting passengers through the security lanes,” Thibault said.

New construction methods

One factor limiting airport modernizations across the country is space, especially at city airports like LaGuardia.

To solve that problem, engineers for LaGuardia’s new Terminal B built vertically, with food and shops on the

fourth level down to ground transportation on the first.

Osbaugh said LaGuardia will be a “test bed” for future terminals which might be even taller.

“It’s kind of like the Guggenheim, where you start on the upper level and you just kind of spiral down,” he said. “You can then start to use the verticality of the space to create different zones for passengers and let them choose what they want to do.”

In the first project of its kind for an airport terminal, Dallas built its new High C gates using modular construction, meaning the building was constructed elsewhere at the airport, carried on modified NASA transporters overnight and set onto a foundation, Naja said.

The construction process — which Naja said has been used for airport bridges and connectors, but not a terminal — allowed the airport to finish the new gates four months early and under budget. It also never had to shut down existing parts of its terminal or impact flight operations.

Self-powered airports

To meet a Biden administration goal that the aviation industry reaches net-zero emissions by 2050, the FAA is offering grants to U.S. airports to put clean tech projects in place, develop sustainability plans and buy zero-emissions cars, buses and other vehicles.

New building projects are turning to solutions like reflective glass for energy efficiency and different sources of fuel for air conditioning and heat, Burke said. On the airfield, more are using battery-powered vehicles than those powered by diesel.

Dallas is already the “largest carbon-neutral airport in the world,” and is aiming to have net-zero emissions by 2030, Naja said. LAX is aiming for net-zero by 2045, according to Erbacci.

The Pittsburgh airport has already gone “off the grid,” Cassotis said, powered through nearly 10,000 solar panels and natural gas wells on the property. She said the airport has already realized \$2 million in cost savings as a result.

On a smaller scale, the Orlando airport now has 360 floating solar panels, which it calls “a first step in the evaluation of using renewable energy.”

LaGuardia’s new Terminal B has earned LEED Gold certification by the U.S. Green Building Council, a measure for sustainable construction. According to a news release, nearly all of the debris recycled from the terminal’s garage demolition went to new construction.

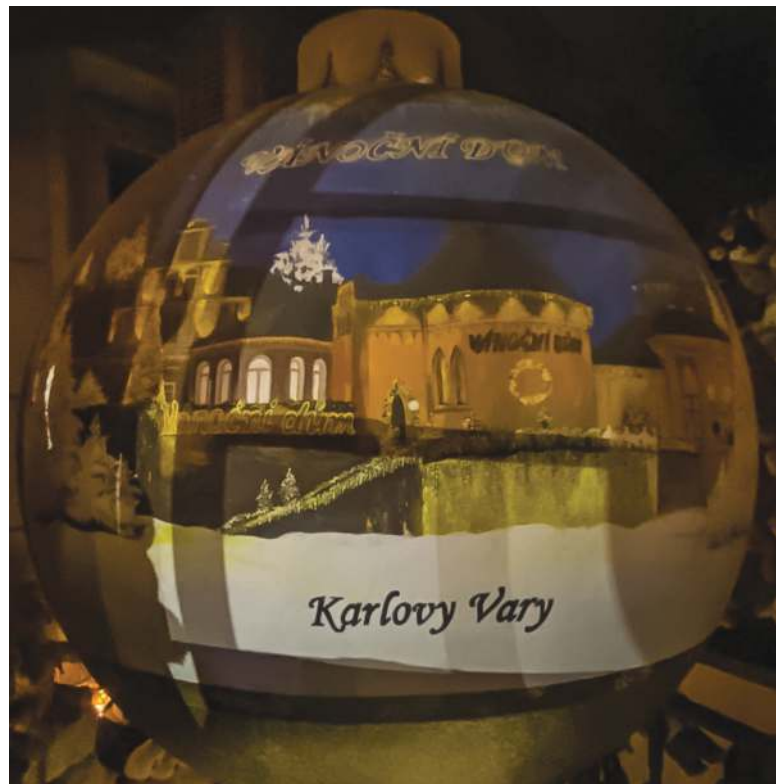
The terminal was designed in such a way as to reduce energy costs 18% and reach water savings of more than 43% .

WEEKEND: TRAVEL



PHOTOS BY DAVID EDWARDS/Stars and Stripes

A Santa hat decorates a footbridge over the Tepla River in Karlovy Vary, Czech Republic. The location is a popular photo stop for visitors to the Bohemian spa town during the winter holiday season.



A giant Christmas ornament shows the exterior of the Vanocni Dum, or Christmas House, in Karlovy Vary.

Noel knockout

Czech mansion full of Christmas beauty — and teddy bears

BY DAVID EDWARDS
Stars and Stripes

If a certain center of holiday magic in the Bohemian spa town of Karlovy Vary had been around when Charles Dickens wrote *Ebenezer Scrooge* into existence in 1843, the icon of Christmas curmudgeons might not have long endured, if persuaded to visit.

Luckily for literature, the Christmas House, or Vanocni Dum as its Czech name is rendered without diacritical marks, didn't come into being until 2008. It has since become enough of a phenomenon to warrant an Atlas Obscura listing.

A mansion that has a twin billing of museum and year-round retail extravaganza of the yuletide, the Christmas House becomes most captivating with the approach of its namesake holiday — or in other words, now.

Tickets provide dual admission to the Christmas House and the Teddy Bear Museum, which has more than 12,000 of the plush toys, the largest collection in the Czech Republic, according to the establishment's website.

Although the two places are described as separate, I did not see a space designated as the Teddy Bear Museum during my visit. Instead, the vast trove of teddies was splayed out across the warren of rooms along with a cornucopia of Christmas stuff.

If I did somehow miss the Teddy Bear Museum while exploring the place, I didn't feel cheated, though. In fact, I derived much amazement from a

Christmas House

Address: Studenska 1/4, Karlovy Vary, Czech Republic. From Grafenwoehr, it's an hour and 20 minutes by car.

Cost: Adult admission is 200 Czech crowns (about \$8.75); children ages 3-15 and people with a disability get in for 100 crowns (about \$4.25); admission for retirees costs 150 crowns (about \$6.50); a family rate of 550 crowns (about \$23.75) allows admission for two adults and up to three children; no charge for children age 2 and under.

Hours: Closed Monday year-round as well as Dec. 24-25 and Jan. 1; November and December, 10 a.m.-7 p.m. Tuesday through Friday, 10 a.m.-8 p.m. Saturday and Sunday; 10 a.m.-7 p.m. on Dec. 26; 10 a.m.-4 p.m. on Dec. 31; January through October, 1-6 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday.

Information: Phone: +420 353-220-091; Online: vanocnidum.cz/en; email: info@vanocnidum.cz

David Edwards

single tawny teddy bear that was placed behind a rotary-dial phone with a bell and bearing a sticker for the Wisconsin Telephone Co.

My mom spent her entire childhood in Wisconsin and many of my relatives still live there. Also, since my early teen years I have regarded the University of Wisconsin's Bucky Badger as the coolest NCAA mascot.

According to the Teddy Bear Museum part of the website, the largest specimen in the collection is 15 feet tall, but the young lady at the ticket booth told me that the behemoth bear was on the mend after having a rip open up.



Stuffed toy bears are posed with an old-time children's book titled "President Masaryk's Teddy Bears" at the Christmas House. The building also houses a museum boasting a collection of over 12,000 teddy bears.

It is therefore not on public display now.

She added that the current height champion is in the part of the mansion where browsing turns into buying. The volume and variety of winter holiday wares on sale in the Christmas House store are staggering.

My arrival about 90 minutes before closing time proved to be a rather tight fit for appreciating the place's full splendor. And I had a minimal budget as well, given that my gift-buying list consisted of just one person. Even so, the temptation to splurge was strong.

The cash register clerk when I was there did not speak English.



The shop at the Christmas House and the Teddy Bear Museum sells an assortment of wares pertaining to its two themes, often in tandem.

I don't know whether that's standard practice, but American shoppers might be well-advised to have a translation app or a Czech phrasebook at the ready.

I would recommend spending two to three hours on a visit to the Christmas House. That would allow for a diversion to the cafe for some refreshment and enjoyment of that area's decorations, which include swan-themed setups and a fish tank.

There is another purported museum on site, and this one, the Christmas Museum, I did check out. I say "purported" because it's basically a small cave containing a nativity scene and a modest assortment of bric-a-brac. I wasn't compelled to stay in that section for much longer than five minutes.

The Christmas House is near the western fringe of Karlovy Vary, putting it about 10 minutes by car from the part of the city where the promenade along the Tepla River showcases the flashiness and healthful hot springs that are its biggest allure.

Once during the afternoon and again after sunset, I enjoyed a leisurely stroll amid the opu-

lence, beautiful architecture and festive decoration.

It's a safe bet that visitors who spend as much time hoofing it through KV as I did will work up an appetite in the process. For a hot drink and a snack, I found the Cafe Elephant offerings scrumptious. Dinner at Goethe's Beer House was filling and tasty.

Both eateries are just a stone's throw down Stara Louka from the Beerland beer spa, where you can bathe in hot suds while drinking the cold variety. Speaking of spas, the region of Karlovy Vary, which means "Charles' Hot Springs," has them in spades.

It is the site of the Bohemian spa triangle, a trio of resort areas among the 11 that in combination make up the UNESCO World Heritage Site known as the Great Spa Towns of Europe. The other two are nearby Frantiskovy Lazne and Marianske Lazne.

The abundance of things to see and do in Karlovy Vary can easily fill any itinerary. But whatever the plans, make time for the Christmas House and the Teddy Bear Museum. Despite the name, it's always in season.

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WEEKEND: FOOD & DINING



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL SLAVIN/Stars and Stripes

Fried duck with pickled onions and cucumbers at the Sai Nam Thai restaurant in Freihung, Germany.

Spicing up rural Bavaria

Sai Nam satisfies a Thai food craving

BY MICHAEL SLAVIN
Stars and Stripes

Sometimes the best food is down the dark, single-lane gravel road and the reward is worth the spike in adrenaline you feel on the approach.

Sandwiched between a series of ponds and the fields of the local soccer club, the Sai Nam Thai restaurant in the Bavarian town of Freihung is a delightful change of pace from the normal flavor profile that makes up most German food.

Restaurant patrons can find a typical Bavarian dining area after climbing the stairs to the second floor, but what separates Sai Nam is cuisine, and more importantly the spiciness.

For an appetizer, I ordered the fried chicken wontons, which sound Chinese but are relatively popular in Thailand. They were a little bland, but the sweet and sour dipping sauce saved the day. Based on my observations of the selections by people at other tables, the fried shrimp also is a favorite starter.

Despite the somewhat shaky start to the meal, I had no cause for worry after the first satisfying sips of the iced Thai tea served in a half-liter beer stein. The taste took me back to my former favorite haunt for Thai food in Washington, D.C.

Meanwhile, the kitchen kept the food coming to my table and the others with little to no wait.

I ordered two main dishes, the chicken and wok fried vegetables with pad prik sauce, made of chili paste, oyster, chili, tomato and fish sauces. I followed that



The chicken wonton appetizer at Sai Nam Thai was slightly bland, but the sweet and sour dipping sauce improved the dish.



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Sai Nam Thai

Address: Am Hacklweiher 12, Freihung, Germany

Hours: Tuesday to Sunday, 5-10 p.m.; Saturday, 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. and 5-10 p.m.

Prices: Between 1.80 and 18 euros. Cash and most credit cards are accepted.

Menu: Available in English and German.

Information: Phone: +49 09646 808850; Online: facebook.com/sainamthairestaurant

Michael Slavin

with the "smile duck." From what I could see and taste, the dish was fried duck with pickled vegetables with a sweet sauce.

I noticed something I had not run into since arriving in Germany: spice, both in the standard arrangements and in the extras.

A red pepper on the menu indicates entrees with variable spiciness levels. Customers can choose their preference from among mild, medium or extra.

However, my recommendation is to add a dusting of the homemade spice blend that comes in a tray with sweet and sour, soy and sriracha sauces, as well as crushed peanuts.

If you are looking for the most authentic Thai food the country has to offer, Sai Nam is not going to be your first stop, as the dishes didn't quite measure up to the ingredients that some of the larger German cities offer. However, if you are looking to spice things up without driving to Munich for a meal, then Sai Nam will scratch that itch.

The friendly waitstaff, easy-to-read menus and affordable prices make Sai Nam one of my new go-to spots for an enjoyable quick bite just 15 minutes from Vilseck or Grafenwoehr.

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Fast hoisin stir-fry solves dry chicken breast issue

BY CHRISTOPHER
KIMBALL

For The Associated Press

Boneless, skinless chicken breast is the most-purchased cut of poultry in the U.S., but it's easy to overcook and generally bland. Thankfully, the solution to both problems happens to be both simple and fast — a boldly flavored stir-fry.

For this recipe from our book "Cook What You Have," which draws on pantry staples to assemble easy, weeknight meals, we rely on hoisin.

Thick, sweet and rich with umami, the fermented soy-based sauce hits several flavor notes at once. By mixing it with a bit of soy sauce and dry sherry or sake for acidity, we balance its richness so it's not cloying.

To ensure the chicken remains tender, we slice it crosswise against the grain, which shortens the muscle fibers so the meat contracts less when exposed to the high heat of a stir-fry. And making the slices only ¼-inch thick means it needs only a few minutes to cook before the sauce is added to the pan.

Freshly grated ginger and crushed red pepper brighten the dish, and snappy bell pepper adds a welcome contrast to the tender chicken.

The cooking goes quickly, so be sure the ingredients are prepped and at the ready before you head to the stove. Serve with steamed rice.

Stir-Fried Hoisin Chicken and Bell Peppers

Start to finish: 25 minutes
Servings: 4 to 6



MILK STREET/AP

Stir-fried Hoisin Chicken and Bell Peppers features bold flavors and chicken that remains tender when cooked.

Ingredients

¼ cup hoisin sauce
2 tablespoons dry sherry OR sake
1 tablespoon soy sauce, plus more if needed
3 tablespoons grapeseed or other neutral oil
2 medium green OR red OR orange OR yellow bell peppers OR a combination, stemmed, seeded and sliced about ¼ inch thick
2 medium garlic cloves, minced
1 tablespoon finely grated fresh ginger
½ teaspoon red pepper flakes
1½ pounds boneless, skinless chicken breasts, sliced crosswise ¼ inch thick

Directions

In a small bowl, stir together the hoisin, sherry and soy sauce; set aside. In a 12-inch skillet over medium-high, heat the oil until shimmering. Add the bell peppers and cook, stirring occasionally, until softened and beginning to brown, 4 to 5 minutes. Add the garlic, ginger and pepper flakes. Cook, stirring, until fragrant, 30 to 60 seconds.

Add the chicken and cook, stirring occasionally, until lightly browned and opaque throughout, 7 to 8 minutes. Add the hoisin mixture and cook, stirring, until the sauce slightly thickens, 1 to 2 minutes. Off heat, taste and season with additional soy sauce, if needed.

Optional garnish: Thinly sliced scallions

Editor's note: For more recipes, go to Christopher Kimball's Milk Street at 177milkstreet.com/ap

WEEKEND: TRAVEL



PHOTOS BY KOICHI KURIYAMA/Stars and Stripes

Kiss performs Nov. 30 for what is expected to be its final performance in Tokyo for Japanese fans, who helped make them popular in the 1970s.

‘Rock and Roll All Nite’

Kiss delivers what is likely its final salute to loyal fans at Tokyo Dome

By KOICHI KURIYAMA
Stars and Stripes

When an urgent email from Stars and Stripes’ Pacific bureau chief fell into my inbox Nov. 30 asking if I could get to the Tokyo Dome quickly for a final Kiss concert that night, I was more than ready.

The “Awesome KISS Mix” folder is always available on the very top of my smartphone playlists. Only the previous day I had grabbed my Les Paul and without a thought started on “Deuce,” my favorite Kiss guitar riff. Ace Frehley, the band’s original lead guitarist, was my model for a cool rock star, the musician on whose playing style I based my own.

“Sure, why not!” I replied via email. No one is a bigger Kiss freak than I, and this, after all, was the band’s End of the Road World Tour.

Excitement grew as I jumped onto the metro and headed for the Tokyo Dome. I recalled the last time I was inside the Dome, in 1997, coincidentally, for a Kiss concert. I also saw the band play the prior year in Seattle during the same tour.

Exiting the subway, I could see the band’s legion of fans, the Kiss Army, out in force: in restrooms, restaurants, convenience stores — everywhere I turned.

Outside the Dome, kids and families heading for a nearby roller coaster jostled with middle-aged Kiss fans heading for the arena. Some fans wore Kiss T-shirts from previous tours, some wore the kabuki-style trademark Kiss makeup and others went all out and dressed in handmade old-school Kiss stage costumes.

This was a special occasion, the last tour ever by the band, of whom just two members of the founding lineup remain: rhythm guitarist and singer Paul Stanley and bassist Gene Simmons, now ages 70 and 73, respectively.

Inside, Led Zeppelin’s “Rock And Roll” issued from the loudspeakers, signaling that the show was about to start. The audience was up and screaming. Then came a voice: “All right Tokyo! You wanted the best; you got the best. The hottest band in the world, KISSSSSS!!”

Drummer Eric Singer manned his kit on the riser as Simmons, Stanley and lead guitarist Tommy Thayer descended from the ceiling playing “Detroit Rock City,” a Kiss start-up standard since the 1970s, amid pyrotechnics, flashing lights and a mega-screen backdrop.

I almost cried thinking this may be the very last Kiss visit to Tokyo as the band plans to retire from the stage at the end of the tour.

Simmons still sparked fire with “I Love It Loud” and spit blood during “God of Thunder.”

Stanley, in his thigh-high black platform boots, flew via an overhead cable to a platform in mid-arena to play “Love Gun.” It was good to hear their announcer shout, “Anata Wa saikou!” (You’re the best!)

Thayer blasted rocket fire from his Les Paul during “Cold Gin” as ably as Ace Frehley in earlier days. Singer delivered a melancholy “Beth,” the band’s signature ballad and ode to broken hearts and burgeoning rock stars. The Tokyo audience lifted lit smartphone screens, an echo of Bic lighters held aloft a generation ago.

Kiss had already played a “final show” in Tokyo in 2019, right before the pandemic started. So, you might think, what, a final show, again? For the money?

The answer is that, like many other bands, Kiss canceled the remainder of its tour due to the pandemic.

The band rescheduled the final world tour after the pandemic eased a bit, but revisiting Japan was already a possibility. Many popular rock bands of the 1970s, including Queen, Cheap Trick and, later, Bon Jovi, were “discovered” while on tour in Japan and became quite popular here.

Kiss was definitely one of those bands. Hit-making performances in New York



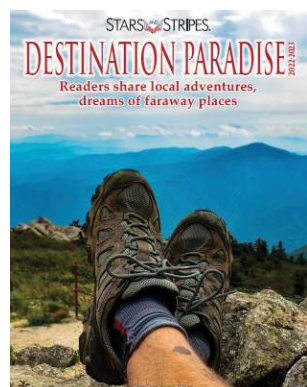
Paul Stanley soars over the crowd at the Tokyo Dome on Nov. 30 during Kiss’ farewell performance in Japan.

and Detroit made them popular in Japan before the band even hit these shores. I believe Kiss returned for one more night to repay their Japanese fans’ loyalty.

Then came the finale, the final song in Tokyo, and the last Kiss performance in Japan, “Rock and Roll All Nite,” their monster 1975 hit. Balloons fell from the ceiling and confetti cannons showered the crowd; Stanley finished up 50 years on stage by smashing his guitar.

Then the huge rock ‘n’ roll party was over, but the next party was only getting started. At home I took out my collection of Kiss vinyl and spent the weekend spinning records on the turntable, a rock ‘n’ roll party, ’70s style.

kuriyama.koichi@stripes.com



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STARS AND STRIPES

WEEKEND: QUICK TRIPS

Where cashiers work from home

Lawson's opens Japan's first avatar-staffed, environmentally conscious convenience store

BY HANA KUSUMOTO
Stars and Stripes

Digital avatars greet customers at a near-futuristic prototype shop opened recently in Tokyo by one of Japan's largest convenience store franchises.

Lawson's opened a "Green Lawson" for a trial run in November in the Toshima ward, a four-minute walk from the Otsuka Station on the JR Yamanote Line. The store aims to tackle food and plastic waste and manpower shortages, the company said in a November news release.

"Green Lawson is a sustainable store that will be created together with customers and the community," according to the company. "Lawson will try to solve public problems by dealing with changes in the community as well as customer needs."

Employees working remotely through two-way cameras are behind the two avatars, the female Aoi and the male Sorato, who guide customers through the checkout stations and even make interactive small talk. Aoi made peace signs and posed for photos during a customer's recent visit.

She also gave step-by-step directions through the self-serve checkout, such as what buttons to push and where to insert payment. She chatted during the process, asking about the weather in Tokyo. The conversation was in Japanese; the avatars are

Green Lawson

Location: 1-13-4 Kita Otsuka, Toshima-ku, Tokyo
Hours: Open around the clock, seven days per week
Prices: Comparable to other area convenience stores.
Dress: Casual
Directions: A short walk from Otsuka Station on the JR Yamanote Line.
Information: Online: www.e-map.ne.jp/p/lawson/dtl/209496/?&his=cb

Hana Kusumoto

unable to assist customers in English and there are no plans to introduce other languages.

The Lawson's employee operating Aoi said she was working remotely from Osaka in western Japan. The company release said about 30 employees are controlling the avatars throughout Japan and that working remotely allows them to accommodate a flexible schedule, caregiver roles or disabilities.

Green Lawson is meant to be an environmentally friendly store that sells a larger variety of frozen bento boxes, which have a longer shelf life, along with bentos that are made to order on the premises to reduce food waste, according to the company.

In the green store, refrigerated shelves that are usually uncovered have doors to reduce energy



PHOTOS BY AKIFUMI ISHIKAWA/Stars and Stripes

Customers shop Dec. 5 at Green Lawson, the first convenience store in Japan to be staffed by avatars.



An avatar guides a customer through a transaction Dec. 5.

consumption. Also, the green store does not provide or sell plastic shopping bags and as of Jan. 10, it will not provide disposable plastic utensils.

The store also collects unwanted paper bags to reuse as shopping bags and conduct food drives to reduce food waste.

Lawson plans to open another 100 Green Lawsons across Japan by 2025, Kyodo News reported Nov. 28.

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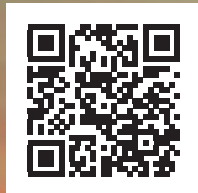


Green Lawson is meant to be an environmentally friendly store that sells a variety of frozen bento boxes, which have a longer shelf life.

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WEEKEND: LIFESTYLE



Mini but merry

Put your own creative spin on the decades-old tradition of creating, displaying a holiday village

BALSAM HILL/AP

Balsam Hill's Christmas Mantel Village is crafted of plywood and hand painted. With built-in lights, it's a charming Victorian-era decoration for mantels, windows or tabletops.

BY KIM COOK

Associated Press

Whether in cardboard, wood or porcelain, little villages — with houses, shops, miniature figures and snowy fir trees — have long been part of many families' holiday decorating tradition.

They're also popular now as part of an ongoing love of the cozy and the do-it-yourself.

"Nostalgia is at the forefront of holiday decor this year," says Dayna Isom Johnson, a trend expert at the crafts site Etsy.com. "So it's no surprise that tiny Christmas villages are trending.

"From classic scenery with snowy layers to modern ceramics with clean lines, families are putting their creative spin on this decades-old tradition," she says.

Little 19th century-style villages came to America with European immigrants and were further popularized by the father of five-and-dime stores, F.W. Woolworth, who sold tiny German-made cardboard houses.

In the 1970s and '80s came ceramic houses; the company Department 56 began making their popular ones in 1976 and still do today. These sturdier buildings were easy to store seasonally.

Robin Zachary, who works as a prop stylist on commercial photo shoots, has amassed a collection of vintage cardboard houses, matchbox cars, bottlebrush trees and little people that she likes to set up for the holidays in her New York City home.

She advises checking out model train shops for accessories: "The scale is perfect for a holiday village vignette."

She also suggests using fake snow to dress your display, "with a dash of silver or gold glitter mixed in, and snips of fresh evergreens placed in tiny containers."

And if you've got limited space for a holiday display?

"I'd create a village as a centerpiece on



AP

Crate & Barrel sells a collection of white ceramic buildings. Tealights add a lovely glow.

a dining table or console," Zachary says. "A large platter can serve as the base, lined with fake snow and fresh evergreen branches that encircle your village. That's easily moved if you need to use the space temporarily."

Sarah Fishburne, Home Depot's director of trend and design, says fireplace mantels and side tables also make great display spots for mini Christmas villages.

"You could also place one on the floor surrounding your Christmas tree, or distribute your pieces throughout a bookcase," she says.

If you're making a Christmas village yourself, Fishburne says, get everybody in the family involved, whether decorating a miniature tree, assembling a little structure or adding other personal elements.

You'll find sets of unfinished wood and

cardboard miniature houses online; you add the paint, washi tape or other decorative trim. Some will fit nicely over a battery-operated tealight to glow in the evenings.

Kelly Mandell, a DIY blogger in Los Angeles, transformed birdhouses into a modern holiday village using pastel-hued craft paint and loads of glitter. Drifts of fluffy snow and colorful bottlebrush trees added to the playful vibe.

Another creative option: a village of snow globe houses. Buy ready-made ones, or make your own using clean jars, distilled water, a droplet of glycerin to suspend your tinsel glitter and then whatever elements you'd like to attach to the jar lid. Cyd Converse, a DIY blogger in Watertown, N.Y., shares a how-to at www.thesteetstocasion.com.

You might even weave village elements into the branches of a wreath, Fishburne suggests.

Beyond the traditional, Dickensian look, Fishburne suggests creating a vignette that reflects your family's favorite activities. Are you all ice skaters? Do you love to bake? Is a visit to grandparents a holiday must? You could depict these things in your village display with mementos and other items.

Or get inspired by the places you've visited on your travels. Fishburne says her family always brings home a little building or other miniature from a destination.

Etsy makers offer a variety of creative and decorative miniatures to bring a holiday scene to life, and retailers have a wide selection.

Balsam Hill's plywood Victorian village has intricately carved houses, trees and street elements integrated into a single base. A remote controls the warm backlighting. There are little houses with a sturdy hook to use as stocking holders, too.

If your vibe is contemporary, West Elm, for instance, has a collection of ceramic-and-wood, minimalist buildings and trees. Or create your own modern neighborhood with ceramic ranch houses and split levels, from Crate & Barrel. All will glow nicely at night with some battery-operated tealights.

Anthropologie has shelf-ready wooden monogram letters carved with vignettes of snow revelers and evergreens.

Finally, if there's no space for a 3D display, Zachary suggests a different kind of family craft project: a village mural of sorts.

"Why not have the kids draw and decorate houses, then pin them up in a row on the wall? Make sure they make some trees, as well as any of your town's significant buildings," she says. "You can pin up a glittery garland of stars or fairy lights above the skyline."

WEEKEND: BOOKS

Demystifying cybercurrency

Greenberg's 'Tracers' about the sleuths who track and take down crypto crooks



BY FRANK BAJAK
Associated Press

The year was 2011. Cryptocurrency was a little-understood novelty, and Sen. Chuck Schumer called a news conference to vent outrage over a one-stop online shop for illegal drugs whose technology made sellers “virtually untraceable.”

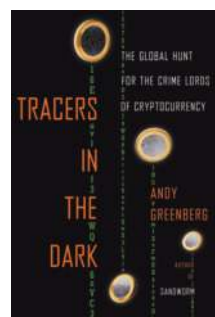
The New York lawmaker's description of Silk Road helped seed a persisting myth that technology reporter Andy Greenberg exhaustively dispels in “Tracers in the Dark,” that transactions of Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies can't be tracked.

Greenberg sketches the evolution of a wholly new discipline in the surprisingly lively real-life police procedural, following law officers and programmers who invent and deploy cryptocurrency-tracking tools to catch a new breed of criminal. They take down Silk Road and other “dark web” markets and merchants, finger crypto money launderers and snare the sysadmin and users of Welcome to Video, a major South-Korea-based distributor of child sexual abuse material.

Best of the action are two takedown dramas. A young Quebecois behind the AlphaBay dark web market, Alexandre Cazes, lives large in Thailand, rocketing around in a Lamborghini, running up \$12,000 restaurant bills and boasting of adulterous sexts online. The other takedown is of a DEA agent and a Secret Service agent who illegally enriched themselves off Silk Road while investigating it — each wholly on their own.

But Greenberg is more interested in the uber-geeks blazing this new digital law enforcement trail as they track cryptocurrency on the so-called blockchain, where every transaction is recorded. The people making the transactions may not be immediately identifiable and often use so-called “mixers” to try to obscure them. But painstaking digital sleuthing — and carelessness — foils many cybercrooks.

In the spotlight are Armenian-born accountant-turned-IRS agent named Tigran Gambaryan and blue-eyed Danish programmer Michael Groniger, co-founder of Chainalysis, a pioneer in commercial crypto-tracing,



which counts law enforcement and intelligence agencies among its main customers. Readers also meet academic crypto-tracking pioneer Sarah Meiklejohn, a meticulous prosecutor's daughter. To his credit, Greenberg deftly teases out technical detail without slowing the narrative. A writer for Wired, he's done this in other titles charting the beginnings of major tech phenomena. “This Machine Kills Secrets” explores WikiLeaks and other actors in politically motivated secrets-spilling. “Sandworm,” named for a notorious Russian military hacking team, chronicles the rise of cyberattacks.

“Tracers” following its main characters through the Silk Road and AlphaBay take-

downs, the 2014 theft of the Bitcoin exchange Mt. Gox (\$530 million at the time) and the disturbing Welcome to Video bust. The agents who worked that case can never unsee the terrible images they gathered as evidence, linking purchases to patrons' cryptocurrency wallets.

Well told is how Dutch cyber police surreptitiously take over and run the Hansa dark web marketplace just as patrons of the shuttered AlphaBay sign up in droves. The author also tackles newer cryptocurrencies including Monero and ZCash that claim untraceability.

One tale Greenberg is unable to tell well is of the biggest criminal cyber coin exchange to date, BTC-e. That's hardly his fault.

Before it was taken down in 2017, BTC-e was the No. 1 laundering facility for proceeds from extortive ransomware gangs, who, like the exchange, operate mostly in post-Soviet countries. Important details of its relationship with the Kremlin remain unreported. Its alleged administrator, Alexander Vinnik, was arrested in Greece and extradited to the United States. The rare Russian cybercrook to face Western justice, he is alleged to have laundered more than \$4 billion and awaits trial in California.

For all their success tracking Bitcoin and other cybercurrencies, the heroes of Greenberg's book are often frustrated by a lack of Russian legal cooperation in particular. None of the powerful tools smithed by programmers at Chainalysis and its competitors — Elliptic and TRM Labs, among them — can put away a thief that justice cannot reach.

A CIA agent hires a thief in Lindsay's new thriller

BY BRUCE DESILVA
Associated Press

After the Cold War, former Soviet spy Ivo Balodis built himself a fortress in an abandoned missile site on an island in the Baltic Sea. There, he has continued to deal in secrets — but for profit instead of for country.

Balodis is now in possession of America's most vital defense secret and is accepting bids on it, expecting to net \$2 billion.

Chase Prescott, an insufferably haughty CIA agent, is desperate to retrieve it. But how? The secret is on a flash drive stored in a state-of-the-art vault. The vault

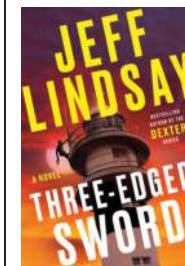
lies at the bottom of a missile silo on Balodis' Island. The island is fortified and guarded by a team of former Russian special forces troops.

So Prescott turns to Riley Wolfe, self-proclaimed world's greatest thief — a man motivated less by profit than by the thrill of doing the impossible. As readers of Jeff Lindsay's first two books in this series know, Wolfe is a chameleon who can alter his appearance, a parkour master able to scale buildings and has proven he can steal anything, no matter how well guarded.

As “Three-Edged Sword” opens, Prescott abducts Wolfe and presents him with a proposition. If Wolfe can retrieve the flash drive, Prescott will arrange immunity for his crimes. If he doesn't, the agent will kill Wolfe's ill mother and his best friend, an art forger named Monique. Wolfe agrees, even though he has no doubt that Prescott will have him killed as soon as he delivers.

Wolfe is not Lindsay's first anti-hero. He is also the author of eight thrillers featuring Dexter Morgan, a serial killer who murdered only other serial killers. Those novels provided the inspiration for “Dexter,” a popular Showtime TV series.

As usual with a Lindsay thriller, the darkly humorous tale is tightly written. The ingenious plot mostly unfolds at the furious pace the author's fans have come to expect. Occasionally, it slows in poignant sections about Monique. The young woman is just awakening from a coma, the result of an attack on her in a previous Wolfe novel, and Lindsay does a fine job of portraying her struggle as she tries to remember who she is.



Navy spouse's Pearl Harbor book translated into Japanese

Japan News

A former junior high school teacher in Sasebo, Japan, has translated an English book written by a U.S. Navy spouse about Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor. The Japanese edition, “Pearl Harbor no Mokugekisha: Kodomo-tachi no Dec. 7, 1941,” was released prior to the 81st anniversary of the attack.

The original book, “Ford Island December 7, 1941: A Collection of Eyewitness Accounts from the Residents Closest to Battleship Row,” is a collection of testimonies from U.S. military families who witnessed the attack while living on Ford Island in the middle of Pearl Harbor in Oahu, Hawaii.

Mizuho Yamamoto, who translated the book, said, “I want people to be interested in the history of the war through the eyewitness stories of local children, which are not well known in Japan.”

Katrina Luksovsky, 55, the author of the book, married a Navy officer and lived in Sasebo, where a U.S. military base is located, and got to know Yamamoto when Luksovsky was working as an English conversation teacher there in 2010.

In 2013, Luksovsky moved into Navy housing on Ford Island and became interested in local history. Her house, built before the war, was just a few hundred meters from where the USS

Arizona had been anchored along with the other warships before it was sunk by the Japanese surprise attack.

Luksovsky spent a year searching for people who had lived in 17 of the housing units at the time: visiting them on the U.S. mainland, interviewing them and asking them to contribute related documents. The book was published in 2014.

The testimonies include the experience of a man who, as a 5-year-old boy, saw the USS Arizona in flames and ran in fear from the attacking planes.

Yamamoto, who was born on Dec. 7, learned that her birthday is the same date as the attack and developed a sense of respon-



Japan News-Yomiuri

Mizuho Yamamoto holds a copy of “Pearl Harbor no Mokugekisha: Kodomo-tachi no Dec. 7, 1941,” which she translated to Japanese.

sibility to make this incident known to others.

“I hope many Japanese will pick up the book,” Yamamoto, 63, said.

WEEKEND: MUSIC REVIEW

One of a kind

On the dazzling 'SOS,' SZA spares no one, least of all herself



SZA
'SOS' (RCA)

By **MIKAEL WOOD**
Los Angeles Times

SZA bookends her enthralling new album with a pair of boom-bappy hip-hop tracks in which the R&B singer — a onetime cult figure who's transformed into a major pop presence in the half-decade since her 2017 major-label debut, "Ctrl" — raps as ferociously as anyone has this year.

On the LP's opening title track, "SOS," she announces her long-anticipated return by comparing herself to Tom Brady and Kevin Durant; in the closer, "Forgiveless" — which pairs an ethereal Björk sample with a loopy verse by the late Ol' Dirty Bastard — she's looking for competition but can't find anyone equal to the task.

Both songs show off a rhythmic acuity and a nimbleness of flow that put the 33-year-old up there pretty close to Beyoncé and Lauryn Hill in the pantheon of female singers with the hardest of bars. (The album's "general theme is: I'm pretty pissed," SZA said this month in a radio interview with Hot 97.) Indeed, there's actually a third rap cut on "SOS" at the midpoint of this 23-track set, and it might be the most stank-face-inducing of all: "Your favorite athlete screaming, 'Text me back,'" she raps in "Smoking on My Ex Pack," the words steaming like cooling lava, "I make no exception — the lesser part of me loves all the cap."

Part of what makes "Smoking on My Ex Pack" such a jolt is that it comes amid a series of delicate acoustic tunes in which SZA, who broke out with songs that seemed to channel the unease of a generation of young Black women, lays bare her most intimate anxieties. She describes her fear of giving away what makes her special; she admits that if she were her ex, she wouldn't take herself back. Heard as SZA presents it, the range is astounding — the different ways she uses her voice, which can be serrated or chirpy or sultry or conspiratorial, and the different ways she frames her stories of disappointment and dissatisfaction. In its emotional sprawl — not to mention its diverse assortment of styles,

SEE SZA ON PAGE 29

In this photo from June, SZA performs onstage at Spotify's Night of Music party during VidCon 2022 at Anaheim Convention Center in Anaheim, Calif.

ANNA WEBBER/TNS



WEEKEND: MUSIC

Blackberry Smoke keeps Southern rock thriving

BY BRETT MILANO
Boston Herald

The Georgia band Blackberry Smoke never set out to be the standard-bearers for classic-model Southern rock. It just wound up happening that way.

“That music was all required listening where we came from,” frontman Charlie Starr said. “When I was a teenager and I started playing in bars around the Southeast, people eat, sleep and breathe that music — If you don’t play the (Allman) Brothers, Marshall Tucker and Lynyrd Skynyrd, then you (stink). It’s just sacred to people. People forget that those bands were so different from each other, but they love ’em all because it was quality, the songs were so damn good. So that all comes into our music— It wasn’t a specific goal, but it comes out when we get together.”

Like those bands, Blackberry Smoke bring something of their own into the mix— in their case, a healthy dose of outlaw country, gospel and Southern soul. While on tour recently, they’ve been playing the entirety of their third album “The Whippoorwill,” for its 10th anniversary. It was their breakthrough album, the first where they flexed their stylistic muscles.



Joe Lopez

Blackberry Smoke mixes Southern soul with outlaw country and gospel.

Starr recalls that the band was raring to go when they recorded it, after being sidelined by record-label issues. “Our last label went out of business and the CEO went to prison, but we still couldn’t record for three years. So when Zac Brown asked us to be on his label we said ‘Great, but only if we can make the music we want to make.’ But I think

at that point, we would have been glad to sell records out of the trunk of our car. We made the album in eight days, so I hear it now and it’s really a snapshot of that week. I guess every band has a project where they look back and say, ‘That was my favorite time,’ and I think that was it for us.”

The only strange part has been

playing the songs live in the album sequence.

“It’s been really interesting to play the songs in their original order. When we first tried it I started thinking, ‘Who the hell put these songs in this order? Oh yeah, I did that.’”

As the band’s main songwriter, Starr has given the band some quotable lyrics; the line “Let’s

live it up ’til we can’t live it down” was his.

“It makes me smile when I can think of one like that. I never look at it as anything you might call poetry. To my mind, (Texas country legend) Billy Joe Shaver was the greatest at the clever turn of phrase; he just had the knack of putting simple things together. When I hear certain lyrics of his, I think, ‘Why was he the first person to say it this way?’ So if I aspire to anything, it would be that.”

Earlier this year Starr toured with some of his Southern brethren, when the Black Crowes asked him to stand in as lead guitarist. He was there for a string of high-profile shows, including the New Orleans Jazz-fest and the Jimmy Kimmel show.

“I didn’t get a lot of notice, but I do love their music dearly. (Crowes guitarist) Rich Robinson gave me about a month, and he said there were thirty or forty songs — and I said ‘Man, can’t you narrow it down just a little?’ But I can’t talk because I write the Blackberry Smoke setlists, and I’m always putting more songs in. But really, it’s all music so there are no rules, you just play it with some sincerity.”

SZA: Sense of humor, self-awareness shines on latest album

FROM PAGE 28

from dusty soul to throbbing trap to trippy psychedelic rock — “SOS” evokes natural memories of “The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill” and “Beyoncé.” (Throw in another precursor by another singer-slash-rapper: Rihanna’s proudly eclectic “Anti,” which featured an up-and-coming SZA in a guest appearance.) All those strummed guitars at the LP’s center, though, can also make you think about Taylor Swift’s “Red,” in which the country-turned-pop star achieved perhaps her most artful balance of resentment and vulnerability.

Like Swift, SZA writes with pinprick precision about the illusions that prop up ideas of romance and about the grim exhilaration to be found in crashing through them. “Damn, you was out of reach,” she sings over the head-nodding groove of “Kill Bill,” “You was at the farmers market with your perfect peach.” In the jazzy “Gone Girl,” she longs for the reliability of a committed relationship only to find the reality stifling: “I need your touch, not your scrutiny / Squeezing too tight, boy, you losing me.”

Unlike Swift, SZA seems not at all to enjoy the celebrity her



AP

SZA, winner of the award for best pop duo/group performance for “Kiss Me More,” poses April 3 in the press room at the 64th Annual Grammy Awards at the MGM Grand Garden Arena in Las Vegas.

insights have brought her. (Heed that rare usage of the word “scrutiny” in a pop lyric.) Though she’s engaged plenty with the star-making machine during the lengthy wait for “SOS” — this is a woman, let’s remember, who’s collaborated with both Justin Timberlake and Maroon 5 — SZA speaks often and openly about her distaste for being a commercial recording artist and her eagerness to leave

the whole enterprise behind for something less encumbered by the expectations and the unearned familiarity of strangers.

That introspective bent is crucial, of course, to her songwriting; it creates the environment necessary to land on a confession as painful and true as “I hate me enough for the two of us,” as she sings in “F2F.” Yet SZA is so skillful — so adept in funneling the mess of her feelings into vivid

bursts of hooks, beats and words — that your heart breaks at the prospect that she might give it up. (That sound you hear is hundreds of music critics cursing the fact that they published their best-of-2022 lists before SZA announced she was finally dropping “SOS.”)

Working with a varied cast of studio pros including DJ Dahi, Babyface, Benny Blanco, Shellback, Rodney Jerkins, Carter Lang and ThankGod4Cody, SZA paints a detailed portrait of millennial insecurity. Her thesis arrives in “Too Late,” which layers fluttering dream-pop riffs over bubbling drums like an indie Destiny’s Child: “Is it bad that I want more?” she asks — a question that gets more complicated as she keeps repeating it.

In the devastating “Special,” about a loser who made her feel like a loser too, she’s unsparing in her self-assessment: “I got pimples where my beauty marks should be/ I got dry skin on my elbows and knees.”

“Ghost in the Machine,” a haunting electro-folk song featuring Phoebe Bridgers, ponders sex as a distraction from the “disaster” that is modern life; “Nobody Gets Me” charts a toxic

relationship from the good old days (“Had me butt naked at the MGM”) to a present both partners know they’ll regret (“Stick it in ‘fore the memories get to kicking in”).

In “F2F,” an instant-classic bubble-grunge jam à la Avril Lavigne’s “Complicated” or Liz Phair’s “Why Can’t I,” SZA depicts a hookup in its most elemental form: “I f— him ‘cause I miss you.” And then there’s the gorgeous “Open Arms,” in which she’s in so deep with the wrong guy that she wonders, “Who needs self-esteem anyway?”

Do these lines (and the many more like them) make “SOS” sound like a slog? SZA’s real genius is that the album floats by thanks to her sense of humor — “In a drop-top ride with you I feel like ‘Scarface’/ Like the white bitch with the bob, I’ll be your main one,” she sings in the dreamy “Snooze” — and to her wonderfully asymmetric melodies, which hardly ever go where you expect them to.

Because her singing is so conversational, you always stick with her to find out; because she puts so much of herself into her songs, the answer makes sense every time.

WEEKEND: TELEVISION

REVIEW

A spirited
'Kindred'FX adaption of time-shifting novel
about slavery a bold, if uneven,
homage to the original storyBY BETHONIE BUTLER
The Washington Post

It's been more than four decades since Octavia E. Butler published "Kindred," her genre-defying novel about a young Black woman who spontaneously travels through time from 1976 to 1815, where she finds herself on the Maryland plantation that once held her ancestors in bondage. Classic and beloved across generations, "Kindred" has long been ripe for an on-screen adaptation. But for the same reasons, reimagining "Kindred" is a tall and delicate order: Any reinterpretation must be grounded in the themes — generational trauma, survival, power and privilege, among them — that Butler explored so adroitly in her book.

FX on Hulu's adaptation, developed for television by the playwright Branden Jacobs-Jenkins ("An Octaroon"), seems to understand this inherent challenge and rises to meet it with a modern retelling that brings the central story closer to our own present day. It's 2016 when Dana James (Mallori Johnson) is inexplicably pulled back to the antebellum horrors of the 19th century.

The time jump may rankle purists but it's hard to imagine that an author as prescient as Butler, who died in 2006, wouldn't appreciate such an update. Her work, which also includes "Parable of the Sower" and its Nebula Award-winning sequel "Parable of the Talents," contemplated climate change, wealth inequality and the racial inequities on which America — whether we acknowledge it — was founded. Setting "Kindred" in 1976 as Butler did originally wouldn't do it justice today.

"Kindred" takes other detours that don't pay off as well in the first season, all eight episodes of which are now available on Hulu. In the novel, Dana was in an interracial marriage with Kevin, a white man who joins his wife on one of her involuntary journeys to Easton, Md. The series, perhaps in a nod to millennial aimlessness, envisions Dana's relationship with Kevin (Micah Stock) as a one-night stand that turns into something deeper amid the time warp that exists between the hours that pass in Los Angeles and the years that simultaneously unfold on the plantation of Tom Weylin ("True Blood's" Ryan Kwanten). In the novel, Dana and Kevin were new to Los Angeles, but in the series it's only Dana who has recently moved — from the Brooklyn brownstone her late grandmother left her to an airy house in an L.A. suburb.

Dana's updated backstory also includes a more prominent role for the aunt and uncle referenced as her foundation in Butler's book. In the first episode, directed by

Janicza Bravo ("Zola"), Dana stuns her aunt Denise (Eisa Davis) and uncle Allan (Charles Parnell) by announcing her move, which her relatives deem impulsive and concerning. The series establishes a pattern of mental illness in Dana's matrilineal line that is given a different context in Easton, where — in perhaps the biggest departure from Butler's novel — Dana discovers that her late mother, Olivia (Sheria Irving), is living as a free woman. The revelation calls into question everything Dana knows about her mother, who was believed to have died alongside Dana's father in a car accident.

The core impulse behind Dana's time travel remains true to Butler's novel: Dana is pulled to Easton whenever Tom's son Rufus — mischievous and bored under the frantic watch of his insufferable mother Margaret (Gayle Rankin) — fears for his life. After several trips back and forth, Dana realizes that Rufus is her ancestor, rendering her role as his protector integral to her survival.

As Dana quickly discovers, life on the Weylin plantation is filled with pain and suffering, predicated on the false belief that she and other Black people are less than human. Without papers to prove otherwise, Dana is assumed to be an enslaved person, and presumed to be Kevin's property when he accompanies her through time. The series presents the horrors of slavery in unflinching detail: At one point, Tom forces his "stock" to go without food while trying to determine the whereabouts of an enslaved woman who has escaped. In a scene pulled directly from Butler's novel, Tom whips Dana after he catches her with a book. The beating is so severe that Dana — fearing for her own life — is pulled back to the present, where mere minutes have passed.

The series weaves in a thread aligning the 19th-century patrolmen who gleefully round up runaways with modern-day police forces, a comparison Butler explored much more subtly in her book. The opening scene finds Dana returning to 2016 Los Angeles with the literal scars to prove her unbelievable predicament; moments later, the police arrive at her door for a purported wellness check that feels more like an interrogation. The scene, which plays out fully in the season's final episode, is an example of the show's struggle with tone as Dana's neighbors gather to see what all the commotion is about. Among them are Hermione (Brooke Bloom) and Carlo (Louis Cancelmi), a nosy couple convinced that Dana's presence is a threat to their quiet neighborhood — but indignant at any suggestion their suspicions may have racial motivations.

Mallori Johnson's character, Dana, lives in 2016 but travels back in time to the 19th century in FX's adaptation of Octavia E. Butler's "Kindred."

FX photos



TINA ROWDEN/FX

Mallori Johnson and Micah Stock travel backward in time to an antebellum era in the FX series "Kindred."

Butler infused "Kindred" with dry, observational humor, but Hermione and Carlo seem to exist for the type of camp that is prevalent in FX dramas but feels decidedly out of place here. It doesn't help that Bloom, whose character embodies the type of next-door Karen who would call the police on a Black neighbor she believes to be in distress, recently appeared on "Atlanta" as a similarly weepy white woman who feels entitled to monitor the Black people in her midst.

Dana's aunt pointedly notes that the police seem far more concerned about Kevin — whom Dana knows to be trapped back in the 19th century — than about her niece, whose back is still bloody from Tom Weylin's beatings. Denise, previously ready to commit her niece out of concern for her mental state, realizes that Dana is telling the truth about her distressing time travel and begins to help Dana piece together the reason behind it. An incredible development opens the series to further seasons — and the potential to make the show's biggest swings more successful. One particularly intriguing thread is the complicated relationship between Dana and Olivia, as Dana struggles to understand what she reads as her mother's complacency to exist in a time when — even as an ostensibly free woman — she has no rights.

"I don't want to be like you," Dana tells Olivia in one emotional scene. "I don't want to get used to this."

"Yeah, it's hard to believe that you could," Olivia says. "All this suffering. But people here choose survival for its own sake. They have to."

"Kindred" (eight episodes) is now streaming on Hulu.

WEEKEND: TELEVISION



DISCOVERY COMMUNICATIONS/AP

A new season of Mike Rowe's "Dirty Jobs" started this month and sees him stirring massive vats of hot sauce made from fearsome chili peppers in Fort Mill, S.C., and getting dirtier by the minute trying to empty ultrafine carbon dust bags in Berthoud, Colo., among other jobs.

Reconnecting Americans to 'Dirty Jobs'

New season of Rowe's show highlights more types of blue- and white-collar work and dismantling stereotypes

BY MARK KENNEDY
Associated Press

It may come as no surprise to fans of Mike Rowe that when he recently visited the Florida Panhandle, he didn't lay out on the beach or take a cruise.

He donned a 100-pound diving helmet, waded into a smelly, muddy creek and joined a work crew putting concrete jackets around wooden bridge pylons. Emerging from the muck after several hours, he told the crew: "Glad you do it. Don't know how you do it."

Rowe has been immersing himself like that in some of the toughest professions for years as host of "Dirty Jobs" every Sunday on Discovery and streaming on Discovery+. A new season started this month.

"What makes the show relevant, I think, is that it's a constant reminder to things we've become disconnected from as a country," Rowe says. "You can learn a lot from dirty jobs collectively."

The show shines a light on those hardworking Americans whose contributions are rarely acknowledged in industries like construction, sanitation, manufacturing and more.

"If you share my addiction to smooth roads and affordable energy and well-maintained runways and indoor plumbing, then the show has a message for you," he says.

The new season sees Rowe stirring massive vats of hot sauce made from fearsome chili peppers in Fort Mill, S.C., and getting dirtier by the minute trying to empty ultrafine carbon dust bags in Berthoud, Colo.

He descends into an aging manhole in Tennessee to provide sewer maintenance and helps control the Texas feral cat population by sedating, shaving and neutering two dozen kitties.

"The intent with every segment is to make people who have nothing to do with that industry feel connected to it," Rowe says. "Think about the people who allow the lights to come on when you flip the switch."

There are some TV rules: No second takes, no pre-production, no casting and no writing. Just a behind-the-scenes camera that's always rolling, trying to capture a day in the life. He is inspired to visit dirty job sites by viewers who nominate candidates.

Rowe is eager to explode stereotypes of what blue-collar and white-collar work is these days or what is a so-called good job. Many of the workers he gets dirty with are millionaires, though you wouldn't know it.

Part of the appeal of the show is the humor, both Rowe's self-deprecating style and what naturally emerges from the workers, whether they're gently mocking Rowe or good-naturedly teasing each other.

"All you have to do is get out of the way and let it come out because it always will," Rowe says. "There's always humor. Sometimes it's gallows, sometimes it's inappropriate, sometimes dad jokes. But whatever it is, that honestly became the most important component."

Rowe did some 300 "Dirty Jobs" shows after he sold the concept in 2003 and took a break in 2012, having shot in all 50 states half a dozen times. The network continued to air reruns for the next decade.

"When 'Dirty Jobs' was at its best, we were going to

towns you couldn't find on maps to meet people you didn't know existed doing jobs you didn't know got done," he says.

Then the pandemic in 2020 put a focus on jobs like nursing, food delivery workers and store cashiers that suddenly became vital for Americans, reviving interest in new "Dirty Jobs" episodes.

Rowe started back up in July 2020 with a four-episode run of "Dirty Jobs: Rowe'd Trip," in which he toiled around the country in a recreational vehicle, and the main show returned in January 2022.

"Essential work is suddenly back in the headlines," he says. "Something's happening with work in general and that was reason enough to kick the tires."

Rowe is alarmed by what he notes is an employment picture that shows 7 million able-bodied men between 25 and 54 who are not looking for work.

"That worries me. Because there are 11 million open jobs in the country. A lot of them look dirty, most of them are better than people think and almost none of them require a four-year degree."

In 2008, Rowe created the mikeroweWORKS Foundation to launch a national campaign for skilled labor and has a scholarship program to help people get trained for in-demand skilled jobs.

One sector Rowe is eager to highlight is environmental jobs, like visiting a biochar maker that turns scrap lumber into highly absorbent charcoal fertilizer.

There's money in green jobs, but he has an on-brand warning: "If you want to clean the planet, you better be willing to get dirty."

WEEKEND: HEALTH & FITNESS

Seasonal sounds to sweat, spin to

Fitness Volt analysis reveals the best Christmas workout songs, explains why they're suitable

BY ANDREW HERRIG
Wealth of Geeks

A new study analyzed more than 47,000 tracks to reveal which Christmas songs are the most popular for rockin' around the Christmas tree — at least if you're in the mood to break a sweat. The research, conducted by fitness experts Fitness Volt, analyzed hundreds of Spotify's most popular Christmas gym and Christmas workout playlists to determine which festive tunes are featured the most and identify which type of workout to which they're best suited.

All I want for Christmas is a killer workout playlist

Mariah Carey's "All I Want for Christmas Is You" takes the top spot, appearing 354 times across workout playlists. Kelly Clarkson's "Underneath the Tree" and Ariana Grande's "Santa Tell Me" take second and third place, appearing 202 and 185 times, respectively.

Other festive favorites that make up the top 10 most-featured tracks are Wham!'s "Last Christmas" (102 appearances), Nat King Cole's "Joy To The World" (101 appearances) and — surprisingly to some — Jonas Brothers' "Like It's Christmas" (100 appearances).

Christmas covers are a seasonal staple, so it's no surprise some tracks appear multiple times across workout playlists, with some artists' versions proving more popular than others.

The songs that appear the most frequently are: "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," with seven different artists covering it, "The First Noel" (six covers) and "Jingle Bell Rock" (five covers).

Some artists are also featured more often across the playlists than others, with the top Christmas performers coming out as Pentatonix (13 tracks) and Sovereign Grace Music (12 tracks).

Run Rudolph run

So what is it that makes festive songs great for fitness?

The characteristics behind the 100 most popular festive songs reveal that the majority have a tempo of between 120-170 beats per minute (BPM), meaning they're well-suited to a range of different workouts that raise heart rates.

In fact, Carey's "All I Want for

Top 10 Christmas workout songs

- "All I Want for Christmas Is You" by Mariah Carey (354 appearances)
- "Underneath the Tree" by Kelly Clarkson (202 appearances)
- "Santa Tell Me" by Ariana Grande (185 appearances)
- "Last Christmas" by Wham! (102 appearances)
- "Joy To The World" by Nat King Cole (101 appearances)
- "Like It's Christmas" by the Jonas Brothers (100 appearances)
- "Mary, Did You Know?" — Pentatonix (85 appearances)
- "Carol of the Bells" by Mykola Dmytrovych Leontovych (93 appearances)
- "Holly Jolly Christmas" by Michael Buble (93 appearances)
- "It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year" by Andy Williams (84 appearances)

Spotify listeners

Christmas Is You" has a tempo of 150, making the track perfect for high-intensity interval training workouts (target 150-170 BPM), spin classes (target 120-150 BPM), Zumba (130-170 BPM) and aerobics (145-160 BPM).

Meanwhile, Taylor Swift's "Christmas Tree Farm" is best for weightlifting (target 130-140 BPM) and Michael Buble's "It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas" is perfect for cooling down and warming up during yoga (target 60-100 BPM).

The majority of the most popular festive songs are also in the keys of G# major, G or A, which are associated with feeling upbeat, victorious and happy — perfect for boosting a winter workout.

And Americans are already keen to get these festive vibes flowing, with searches for "Christmas music" 114% higher now than at the end of October.

A spokesperson at Fitness Volt commented on the findings: "Many gym-goers find it harder to motivate themselves to work out between Thanksgiving and Christmas, and music is key to amping up our levels of exertion and workout intensity to make the most of each session. This data offers an insight into how fitness fanatics can best incorporate some Christmas cheer into their routine — and help stick to their healthy habits over the festive period."



WEEKEND: FAMILY

Opting out of stress during the holidays

Some moms learning how to say no, set boundaries, manage expectations

By JENNIFER B. WALLACE
The Washington Post

Beth Berry, a mother of four in Asheville, N.C., spent holiday seasons when her girls were young making everything as special as possible. This meant crafting homemade presents, decorating the house, traveling around visiting relatives — and running herself into the ground. “I thought that’s just what good mothers do,” she says.

She would find herself exhausted and worn out every year, unable to enjoy the actual holidays.

It’s the most wonderful time of the year, but what about the people tasked with creating the holiday magic? In a 2021 poll by the University of Michigan, 20% of parents acknowledged that holiday stress — the endless to-do lists, planning and expenses surrounding the season — negatively affects their family life, with nearly twice as many mothers rating their stress level as “high” compared with fathers’.

“The expectations put on mothers across the board are so high that it’s almost unmanageable,” says Katie Ward, a mother of two children, ages 2 and 5, in New York. On top of school pickups and drop-offs, and running her own business as a portrait photographer, the holidays bring a third shift of additional work, like being a personal shopper for everyone in the family: her kids, in-laws, the cousins.

“It all falls on me,” she said. “It feels like there’s a never-ending to-do list on top of the never-ending to-do list that is parenthood.”

Then add to that the guilt of feeling like you’re not doing enough as a mother, she says: “It can be crippling.”

At the core of holiday overwhelming and over-functioning is the expectation of what “good” parents, namely mothers, are expected to do: create picture-perfect memories and rich holiday traditions for everyone, piled on top of the heavy mental load mothers already carry day in and day out managing their family’s busy lives.

Berry says her best holiday intentions were really about wanting to feel connected as a family around something meaningful, but all the running around prevented that. Cooking for hours on end, for example, meant that she would be in the kitchen listening to everyone having fun and connecting in the other room.

“The resentment crept in when, year after year, I worked tirelessly to make things feel magical for others, meanwhile I felt exhausted and invisible,” she says.

A turning point came when she started thinking about the type of motherhood she was modeling for her four daughters. Did she want them to be running around trying to please everyone, feeding the kind of perfectionism that’s expected of mothers today? Or, did she want them to take care of themselves, too?

She came to realize that “being a present, more lighthearted mother” would be a better gift to her kids than “pretty pies and handmade gifts that took hours to make and no one really appreciated.” To model this kind of motherhood would require a conscious shift: slowing down and being more intentional about how she spent her energy.

“I now say no to a lot to protect my own desire to move slowly,” says Berry, whose daughters are now



15 to 27. What Berry came to realize is that saying “no” to someone else’s request really meant saying “yes” to herself.

It’s not always easy to do. “Boundary setting is a skill you develop over time,” says psychoanalyst Robin Stern, co-founder and associate director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. A critical part of boundary-making is being specific about your limits. Stern points to one evidence-based strategy that can help: creating a “feelings charter,” or a few words describing how you and your family want to feel at home during the holiday season or anytime.

“There’s something powerful about putting the emotions you want to feel as a group in writing and then being specific about what that looks like,” Stern says. For example, if as a family you want to feel “connected,” you might make a rule that everyone participates in preparing the holiday meal. The more specific you are, the more likely you can get your needs met. For families who have been struggling, these charters offer a hopeful pathway to less drama and stress, Stern says.

Upholding boundaries requires a tolerance for disappointing people. Disappointing people is one of the hardest emotions to acknowledge and to regulate, Stern says. Evolutionary psychologists theorize that saying no to others can feel uncomfortable because it goes against our evolutionary wiring, our basic need to make and maintain connections that once were critical for survival.

One way to cope with the uncomfortable feelings around saying no is to create some “family policies” this year, a list of things your family does and doesn’t do. So saying no, then, is not a rejection of someone’s request but an effort to uphold your family’s policy. For example, after years of participating in multiple extended-family gift exchanges, Berry opted out, saving time and money and hugely decreasing her mental load. Initially, she was afraid of offending or disappointing certain family members, but no one seemed to really mind. It was nothing personal, just something that they decided not to do.

Family policies can include positive things too, like new traditions that give a good return on your investment. “We sometimes have mistaken notions that a busy schedule equals stress, but not all commitments are the same,” says time management expert Laura Vanderkam, author of “Tranquility by Tuesday: 9 Ways to Calm the Chaos and Make Time for What Matters” and a mother of five children under 16. While the activities we don’t want to do may drain us, Vanderkam says, we tend to draw energy from things we enjoy doing.

With this in mind, Vanderkam keeps a yearly “holiday fun list” — a “yes” list of activities she and her kids look forward to doing. One favorite family tradition, for example, is building small, holiday-themed Lego designs and displaying past creations as part of their holiday decor.

THE MEAT AND POTATOES OF LIFE

Lisa Smith Molinari



More forced family fun foils festivities again

“I told you, I don’t want gifts this year,” my son said after I asked him to fill out a “Molinari Family Game Night” questionnaire asking about Christmas gifts, cookies, movies and foods our kids might want this holiday season. “I don’t want cologne, I don’t want shirts, I don’t want back-scratchers,” Hayden added, passively-aggressively complaining about past gifts we’d given him. “I have everything I need.”

Admittedly, Hayden is a successful software engineer in his mid-20s. He didn’t want to play games or fill out silly questionnaires. “But how am I supposed to make holidays fun for my family?” I thought. His younger sisters, Anna and Lilly, also in their 20s, looked back and forth between Hayden and me, feeling the tension.

I’d been planning game night for weeks. It had taken two hours to get the questionnaire just right, complete with a score sheet to tally points for three table games I’d set up in the dining room — shuffleboard, bowling and Skittles. Prizes were wrapped and ribboned on the buffet. Christmas music was playing. An elaborate nacho bar was displayed on the kitchen counter. Brownies were baking in the oven.

I’d envisioned an evening of loving interactions, but my son’s early refusal to play along felt like the needle of a record player scratching violently across my expectations.

“C’mon Hayden, this is supposed to be fun,” I urged. He opened his mouth to speak. Anticipating another negative tirade, I interrupted, “Okay fine, let’s move on.”

“More forced fun,” I heard our middle child, Anna, whisper to her sister Lilly. I pushed away an inkling of anger.

My husband, Francis dragged the kids off to play games, while I stayed back in the kitchen to check the brownies and take a few deep breaths. “Keep it together,” I told myself. “They’ll come around.”

“Okay, so that’s four points for Hayden and five for Anna,” I heard Francis say as I entered the dining room.

“So, I win?” Anna asked.

“No, you have to get to 21 points,” Francis said.

“Twenty-one?” Hayden blared. “That’ll take forever. I’m not doing that.”

“Then don’t play, Hayden,” I heard myself say.

The next few moments were fuzzy, but something triggered me — the snide remark, that eye roll, the smirk? — and before I knew it, the boil of my anger had burst.

“This isn’t working. No one is having fun. We are done,” I said matter-of-factly. Our three adult children stared at me like Santa’s reindeer in the headlights. They were used to their mother planning “forced fun” events, but they had never seen me abruptly pull the plug like this before.

In the days that followed, I received a sincere apology from Hayden, and an unsolicited gift from Anna and Lilly. All three kids acknowledged needing to be more grateful for their parents’ efforts. However, something still felt wrong.

“Aliya’s not coming home this year. I tried decorating, but instead I just sat on my couch and cried,” my friend Annette said over the phone. We compared notes about our grown children, our transitioning family roles and our communal holiday “funk,” finally recognizing that we needed to change our attitudes as mothers.

After three decades as a military wife and primary caregiver to our three children, I’d become accustomed to being solely responsible for my family’s enjoyment of the holidays. They depended on me to supply the fun, and my happiness depended upon them having fun. This dynamic made sense when the kids were little, but now that they’re adults, it smacks of co-dependency.

Although our young adult children aren’t quite ready to host our Christmas gatherings themselves, I also can’t force fun on my family anymore. One day soon, maybe even this year, everyone in our family will contribute to the cheer, and holiday spirit will happen spontaneously.

Read more at themeatandpotatoesoflife.com and in Lisa’s book, “The Meat and Potatoes of Life: My True Lit Com.” Email: meatandpotatoesoflife@gmail.com

WEEKEND: CROSSWORD AND COMICS

NEW YORK TIMES CROSSWORD

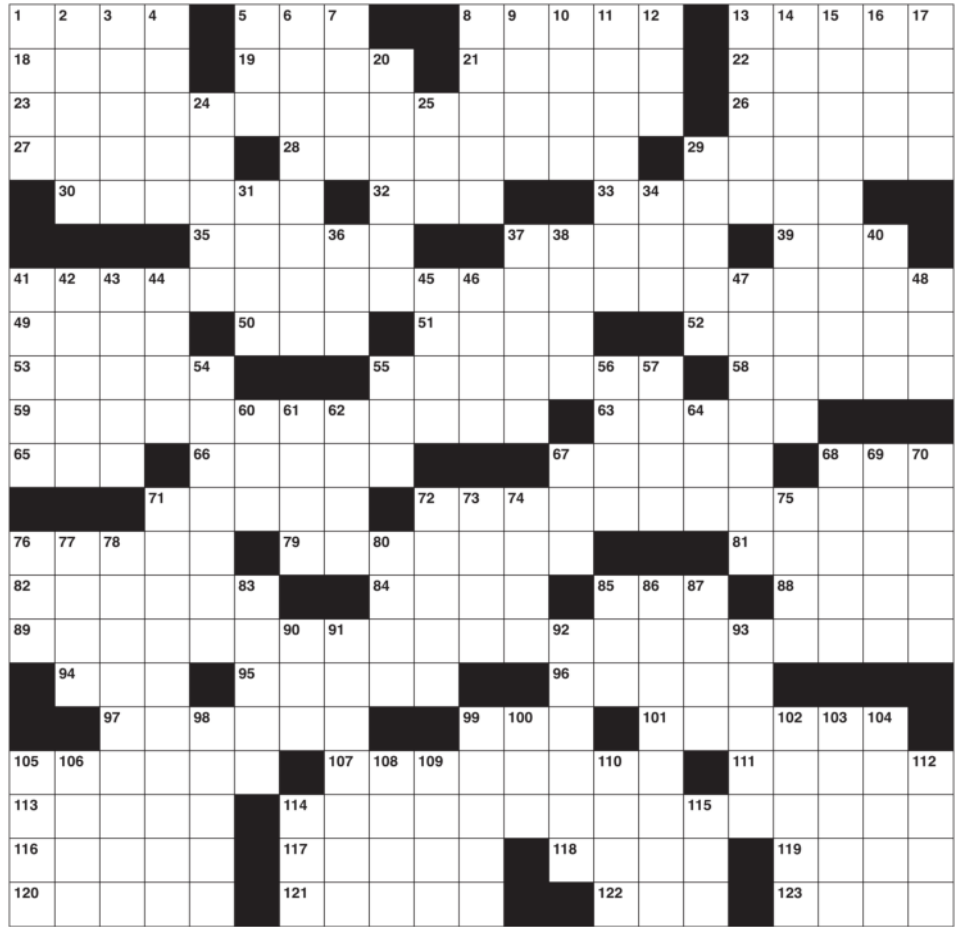
GOSSIP SESSION

BY GUSTIE OWENS / EDITED BY WILL SHORTZ

Gustie Owens, of New York City, is a research assistant at MDRC, a nonprofit education and social policy research organization. She has been solving crosswords since middle school. Once, in history class, her teacher announced to her from across the room, "12-Across is ALLIGATOR." She realized that the puzzle she was doing was reflected in her glasses. Last spring, while a senior at Barnard, she was a member of The Times's first Diverse Crossword Constructor Fellowship program. This is her first puzzle for the paper. — W.S.

ACROSS

- 1 Concerning sights at beaches
- 5 Badly
- 8 Catherine O'Hara's role on "Schitt's Creek"
- 13 Get in the loop?
- 18 Smart ____
- 19 Regard
- 21 Regarding
- 22 "Gotcha," more informally
- 23 A lover of gossip, the Netflix user . . .
- 26 Savage
- 27 Actor Channing
- 28 Defense of a history paper?
- 29 Andy who voiced Gollum in "The Lord of the Rings"
- 30 Goal of some criminal justice advocacy groups
- 32 Honey
- 33 Flower cultivated by the Aztecs
- 35 Like a dream scenario
- 37 "Bodak Yellow" rapper ____ B
- 39 Farm share inits.
- 41 The smoothie-bar worker . . .
- 49 Food thickener
- 50 Ending with book or boor
- 51 Home of the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi
- 52 Hang loose
- 53 Proportion
- 55 Cretan-born painter who was a leader of the Spanish Renaissance
- 58 Anti-anxiety drug with a palindromic name
- 59 The Boston Harbor worker . . .
- 63 Denim jacket adornment
- 65 Farm female
- 66 Assembly kit piece
- 67 "Woot woot!"
- 68 Print maker
- 71 Clock-changing time, for daylight saving time
- 72 The cooking-show contestant . . .
- 76 "____ bleu!"
- 79 Draws out
- 81 Currency exchange option
- 82 ____ Questionnaire, character assessment that might ask "What is your idea of perfect happiness?"
- 84 Plane prefix
- 85 Big name in wings
- 88 Words after break or shake
- 89 The athlete in the locker room . . .
- 94 "____ is never finished, only abandoned": Leonardo da Vinci
- 95 Puts in order
- 96 New York City's mayor after de Blasio
- 97 Auction actions
- 99 Bag
- 101 Useless
- 105 Small lump
- 107 Wash with a spray
- 111 Sneeze guard?
- 113 ____ acid
- 114 And the up-and-coming trial judge . . .
- 116 Red animal in the 2022 Pixar film "Turning Red"
- 117 Home of the rides Frozen Ever After and Remy's Ratatouille Adventure
- 118 Big name in party cups
- 119 "Peter Pan" pirate
- 120 Teenage torment
- 121 Toots
- 122 "That's a big ____"
- 123 Baking-soda unit: Abbr.
- 15 "Hang loose" hand gesture
- 16 Avid assent in Acapulco
- 17 Goes (for)
- 20 High-end countertop choice
- 24 Communicate with, in a way
- 25 Silicon Valley exec
- 29 Drew away
- 31 Savory rice cake of southern India
- 34 Chime in
- 36 "That feels good!"
- 37 One-named collaborator with Missy Elliott on "1, 2 Step" and "Lose Control"
- 38 Teenage torment
- 40 Penne ____ vodka
- 41 Tough
- 42 Clearly stunned
- 43 Audited a class, perhaps
- 44 Edible piece from a pomegranate
- 45 Suddenly say "I don't" to, say
- 46 Push
- 47 Auditing guideline
- 48 Dr. Ruth's field
- 54 Where Wells Fargo got its start
- 55 Delicacy with kabayaki sauce
- 56 47-Down experts, for short
- 57 Home of Wheeler Army Airfield
- 60 Phillipa of Broadway's "Hamilton"
- 61 What comes before the night before Christmas?
- 62 Half: Prefix
- 64 Dreidel, e.g.
- 67 Times of one's life: Abbr.
- 68 Medicare section that covers prescription drugs
- 69 Francophile's love
- 70 Like some old-money Americans
- 71 Some sources of old money
- 72 Loses layers
- 73 Grammy-nominated Amos
- 74 "____ out?" (question to a pet)
- 75 Bankrupt, say
- 76 Destination for a "Treat yourself" day
- 77 Opera highlight
- 78 Wearing down
- 80 Part of PRNDL
- 83 How March may be written
- 85 Syd tha ____, onetime hip-hop moniker
- 86 Some fall weather attire
- 87 ____ pants
- 90 Musical skill
- 91 Fit
- 92 They must be avoided at all times
- 93 Welcome, with "in"
- 98 Ice cream treat
- 99 Fits, as matryoshka dolls
- 100 Big inits. in home security
- 102 Nightmarish address, for short
- 103 Slangy thing that may be "dropped" in a serious relationship
- 104 Sweat spots
- 105 Spot for Golden State estates
- 106 U.N. member classified as a sultanate
- 108 In times past
- 109 Subway map dot
- 110 "No way!"
- 112 Mourn, maybe
- 114 It's designed to catch bugs
- 115 Doin' just fine

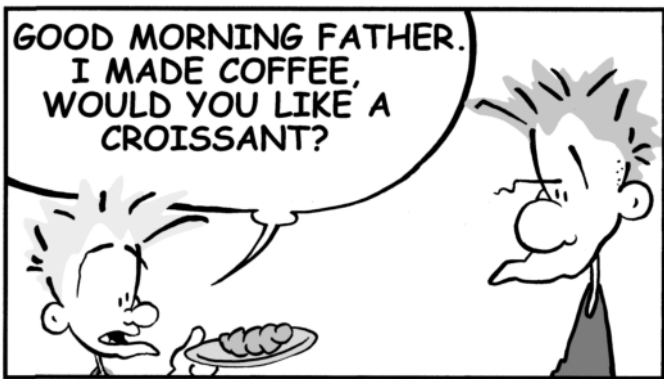


DOWN

- 1 What many do during Ramadan and Yom Kippur
- 2 Representative Omar
- 3 "Suh-wee!"
- 4 Second- or third-stringer
- 5 Things that may be checked at the door, for short
- 6 Handouts at some protests
- 7 Former "Tonight Show" host
- 8 Econ subfield
- 9 It's used to tune an orchestra
- 10 Money promises
- 11 Gets fully depleted
- 12 Football box score abbr.
- 13 Print issue?
- 14 Best-selling Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie novel whose protagonist leaves Nigeria for a U.S. university

- 92 They must be avoided at all times
- 93 Welcome, with "in"
- 98 Ice cream treat
- 99 Fits, as matryoshka dolls
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GUNSTON STREET



"Gunston Street" is drawn by Basil Zaviski. Email him at gunstonstreet@yahoo.com, and online at gunstonstreet.com.

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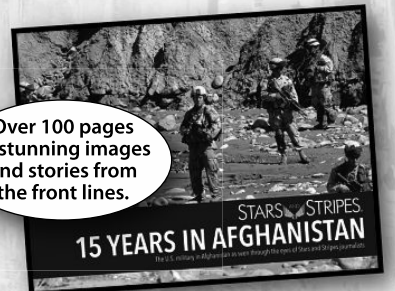


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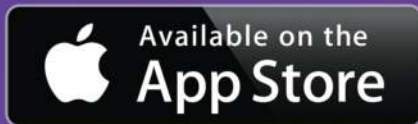
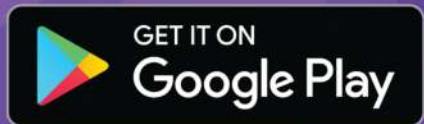
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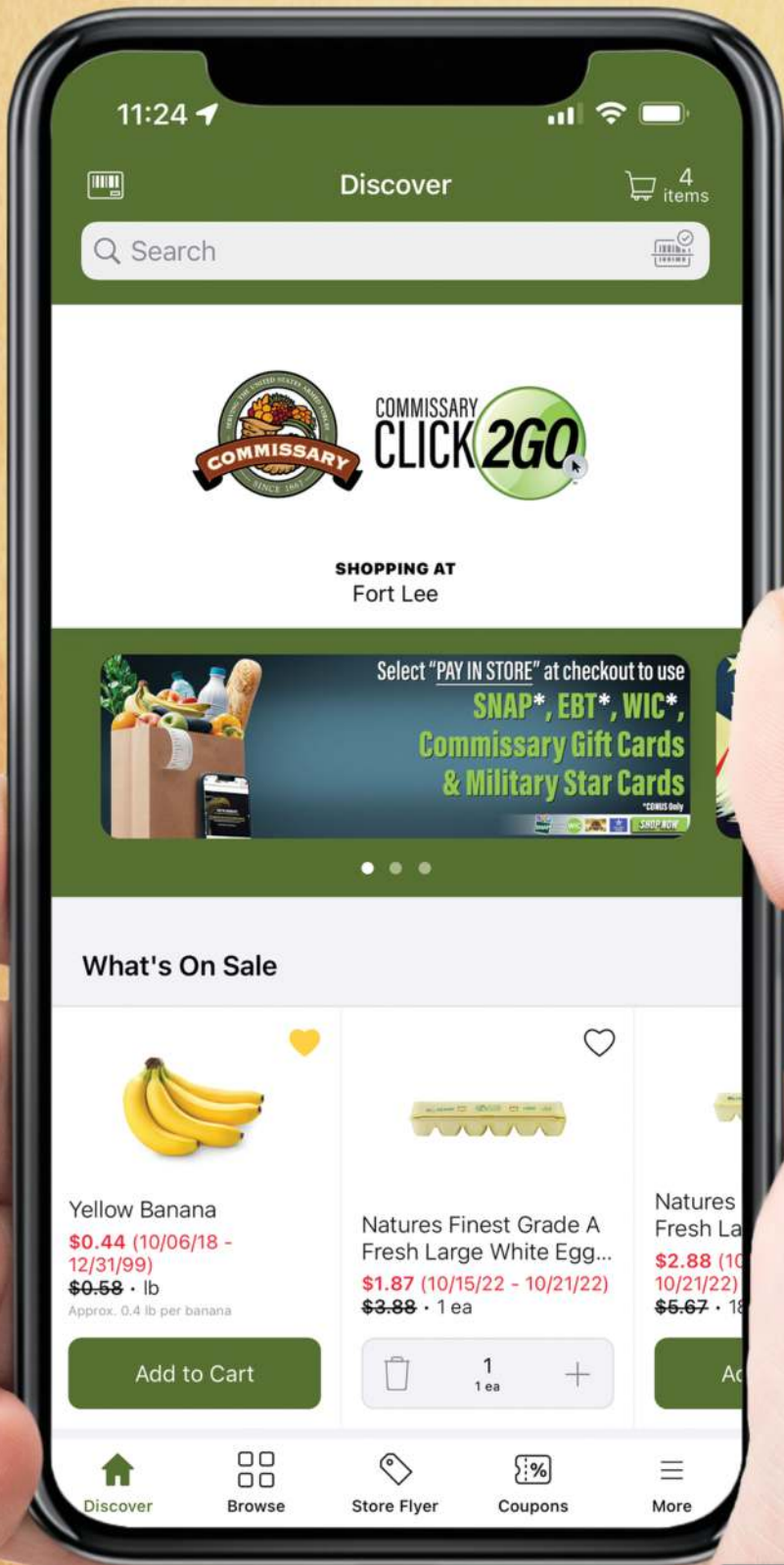
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Why the EU's carbon border tax is a very bad idea

BY HENRY OLSEN

The Washington Post

The European Union's recent decision to impose tariffs on select carbon-heavy imports such as steel and cement is a long-sought victory for climate activists. But the United States should not follow suit. These measures are likely to both increase global human suffering and strengthen China.

Unlike with normal tariffs, the EU will not apply equal charges to the same sorts of goods; instead, EU member nations will estimate how much carbon was directly or indirectly consumed in the product's creation. That means firms in nations with more carbon-intensive energy consumption will pay higher rates than those that rely more on renewable energy sources. The intent is simple: Use the market power of wealthy nations to push other parts of the world to invest in cleaner sources of energy. Nations that comply will see their firms rewarded with de facto preferential trade treatment; those that do not will face a price disadvantage. As a result, proponents argue, developing economies will be incentivized to bite the bullet and make the changes European nations want.

But this seems to be a matter of hope triumphing over experience. Many developing nations use coal to generate electricity because it is significantly cheaper than other options. And they might not have the money to finance a rapid switch-over to fuels that emit less greenhouse gas, such as natural gas. Many nations might choose to face the eco-

nomie costs the tariffs will impose rather than expend scarce capital for new — and possibly more expensive — energy plants.

It will likely be even harder for them to switch to renewable power sources such as wind or solar, which are capital intensive and often require large public subsidies to remain economically viable. Rich nations can afford that, but places such as Bangladesh probably cannot afford it at the scale needed. That means serious energy transition in the developing world would likely take large quantities of Western capital. That's not likely to happen, especially if government money or guarantees are needed to spur that investment. Voters are not likely to tax themselves to pay for-igners to compete with them.

These considerations likely mean the EU's tariffs will slowly encourage firms to produce energy-intensive goods in the developed world. That on-shoring might help workers in those countries with the return of relatively high-paying jobs. But it also means consumers in those countries will pay more for previously imported goods, as labor and energy costs cause prices to rise. This transfer of wealth from one class to another will be difficult to manage, especially if it happens as rapidly as climate activists hope.

Developing countries will feel lots of pain as a result. Jobs that once pulled their citizens out of poverty will disappear. Globalization unsettled the developed world, but it was a boon for poorer nations. In 1990, more than a third of the world lived in extreme poverty. By 2015, that rate had fallen to less than 10%. Slowing or

even reversing globalization will stop this progress in its tracks.

Don't expect the leaders of these nations to go along quietly. They will look for new markets to sell products — and that's where geopolitics comes in. China is large and rich enough to step at least somewhat into the breach. Unless China also imposes carbon-adjusted border charges, many nations will start to curry favor with it as essentially the only country that could help them. That is not in the West's interest.

U.S. global strategy must focus on weakening and isolating China as long as it pursues its aggressive policies and remains a tightly controlled authoritarian state. Joining the EU in imposing green tariffs would likely have the opposite effect, strengthening China's appeal to nations that often are not firmly democratic to begin with. It might even lead to worse results for the climate if it creates an economic bloc of countries that does not adhere to Western climate goals.

This is why rapid progress on global decarbonization is so difficult to achieve. The EU's approach might be climate-wise, but it's freedom foolish. President Joe Biden should resist the temptation to follow Europe's example. Instead, he should focus on the only things that can stave off the worst effects of climate change without robbing our way of life: the rapid spread of Western ideals and climate-friendly technology.

Henry Olsen is a Washington Post columnist and a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center.

US bailout of Teamsters' pension plan is bad policy

BY CHARLES LANE

The Washington Post

In American political jargon, "bailout" is a pejorative synonym for the taxpayer-funded rescue of an insolvent bank or other institution that at least partly brought its predicament on itself.

This connotation reflects the principle that society as a whole shouldn't have to pay for avoidable errors by one segment, and that doing so creates "moral hazard," which is a fancy term for enabling, and, hence, encouraging financial sloppiness.

Of course, there are bailouts — and there are bailouts. Government rescues are defensible where the alternative would be unacceptable collateral damage to society, the recipient's distress is due to circumstances beyond its control, and financial aid is conditioned on structural reforms. Examples: Congress' imposition of a financial control board on the District of Columbia in 1997; the federally-backed General Motors rescue in 2008; or legislation to address Puerto Rico's debt crisis in 2016.

Unfortunately, President Joe Biden seems intent on redefining bailouts down. His student loan relief plan, an estimated \$400 billion transfer to the minority of Americans who took out loans for their higher education, from everyone else, contains no requirement that government or universities address the root causes of high tuition. This is on top of \$5 billion per month in student debt payment pauses that began — reasonably — when the pandemic hit, but which the Biden administration has extended to June 30, 2023, long after the economy's recovery. These pauses disproportionately help borrowers employed in higher paid professions, according to a report by the Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget.

And now comes a \$36 billion dollar bailout of the Teamsters' pension plan, which the president, surrounded by union leaders, announced at the White House on Dec. 8. The cash infusion, which is funded by the Treasury Department but administered by the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corp. (PBGC), ensures that 350,000 retirees get all the benefits their union bargained for through 2051. This is undoubted good news for them. Except for the enormous cost, though, there's not much in it for the rest of the 165 million people who participate in the labor force, 88% of whom do not even have a defined-benefit pension.

Whereas Biden stretched to find a legal basis for the student loan bailout in a 2003 statute, this one is specifically authorized by Congress. A provision of the \$1.9 trillion pandemic relief legislation, enacted in March 2021, offered to shore up underfunded multiemployer pensions — the Teamsters' Central States Pension Fund being the largest — and conditioned the aid on essentially no structural reforms. It need not have come to this. Multiemployer plans cover about 10 million unionized workers employed across various industries — trucking, coal, commercial baking — as opposed to those on a single company's payroll. Once upon a time, such plans seemed like a sound idea and their insolvency, against which the PBGC insured, a remote risk.

But this was before years of deregulation, recessions and other upheaval weakened the industries involved — and before years of what critics call the pensions' systematic overstatement of their funding levels.

As of the 2010s, 100-plus multiemployer plans covering about 1.3 million workers were facing short-term collapse, threatening to bankrupt the PBGC, which also insures much more stable single-employer plans.

Reasoning that the situation called for shared sacrifice among companies, unions and taxpayers, Congress in 2014 adopted a bipartisan reform providing for employers to pay more for PBGC insurance, limited "haircuts" to retiree benefits and PBGC financial support for pension plan mergers.

But the 2014 law failed to solve the biggest problem — that Teamsters fund — in part because, on the eve of the 2016 election, the Obama administration rejected politically sensitive benefit trims.

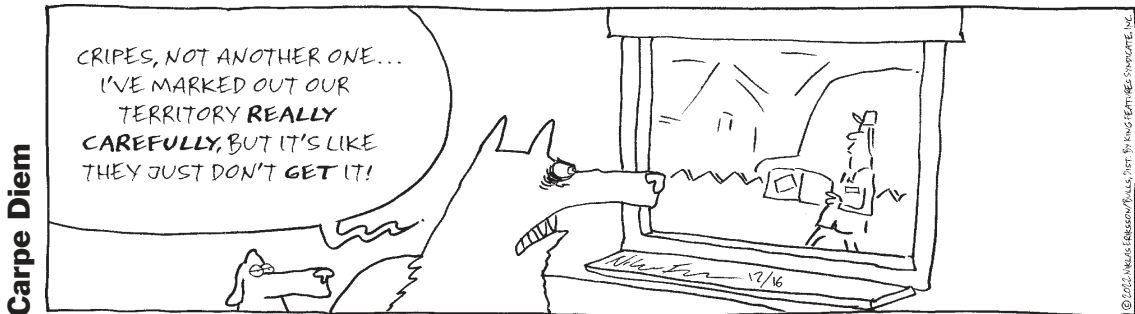
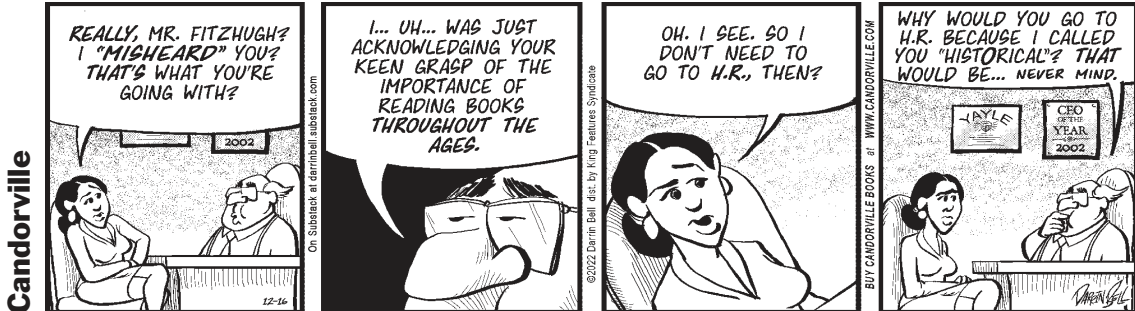
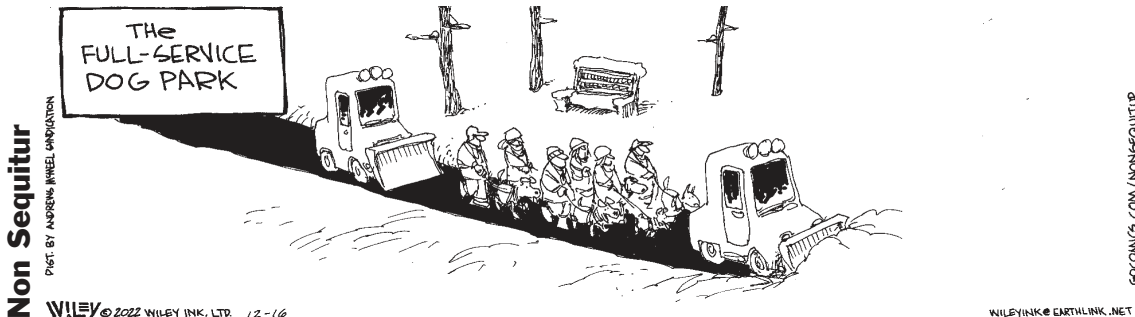
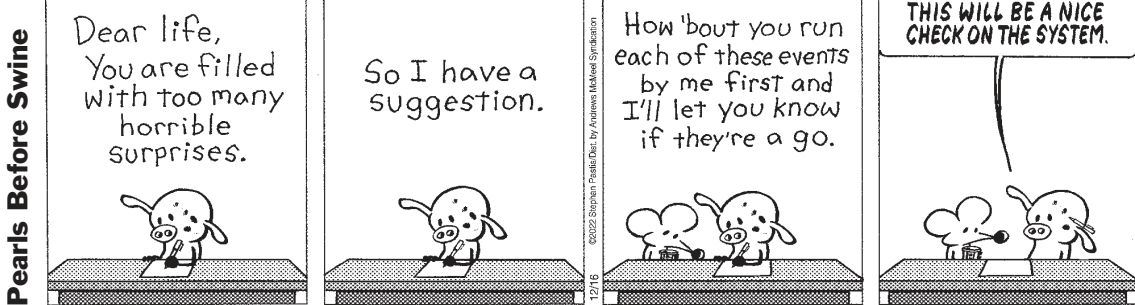
Stalemate ensued in Congress. In 2018, a bipartisan select committee on the issue failed to come up with a bill that could pass. The next year, Republicans offered a modified version of the 2014 law's shared-sacrifice approach; Democrats countered with a proposal that would have the government pick up the tab, basically with no strings attached.

The latter prevailed in 2021 because Democrats won control over the presidency, Senate and House after 2020, and the pandemic bill provided a legislative vehicle that could avoid a GOP filibuster. At the time, the Congressional Budget Office estimated the cost at \$85.9 billion; the most recent CBO estimate, issued Sept. 30, raised that to \$90.4 billion.

To repeat: There was a case for protecting most of the Teamsters' pensions, with modest taxpayer support. But there was no case for using public money to protect every single dollar of them, when the vast majority of taxpayers enjoy no such perks.

This obviously happened because of the influence organized labor currently enjoys in Washington. Politically motivated, economically regressive, expensive and unconditional — this is bad policy, even for a bailout.

Charles Lane is a Washington Post editorial writer and columnist.



Eugene Sheffer Crossword

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	
12						13				14	
15						16			17		
		18			19				20		
21	22			23				24			
25			26		27		28				
29				30			31		32	33	34
			35			36			37		
38	39	40				41		42		43	
44					45			46			
47				48				49		50	51
52				53				54			
55				56				57			

ACROSS

- 1 Politico Stevenson
- 6 Bit of advice
- 9 Airline to Sweden
- 12 Pianist Glenn
- 13 Work with
- 14 Blaster's need
- 15 Perfectly timed
- 16 Italian pal
- 18 Pictures
- 20 Small combo
- 21 Ms. Farrow
- 23 "Do the Right Thing" pizzeria owner
- 24 Allayed
- 25 Annapolis sch.
- 27 Plank
- 29 Abase oneself
- 31 Van Gogh painting
- 35 Declares
- 37 Saab model
- 38 Mountain crest
- 41 Yale grad
- 43 Jamie Foxx biopic
- 44 "Brave New World" drug
- 45 First game of the season
- 47 Choir member
- 49 Bargains
- 52 Ballpark fig.
- 53 California's Big —
- 54 Column style

DOWN

- 1 Past
- 2 Mafia boss
- 3 Opera legend Pavarotti
- 4 Grad
- 5 Concepts
- 6 Elvis' birthplace
- 7 "Nothing — it seems"
- 8 JFK Library architect
- 9 Luminaries
- 10 Sandy's owner
- 11 Offered one's seat
- 17 Sports venues
- 19 Roof feature
- 21 Coffee vessel
- 22 Leb. neighbor
- 24 Mess up
- 26 Online icon
- 28 Supermarket section
- 30 First lady?
- 32 Hot chili pepper
- 33 Time line period
- 34 Tofu source
- 36 Bulletin
- 38 Ninnies
- 39 Perch
- 40 Void
- 42 Privately made film
- 45 Burden
- 46 Fair-hiring org.
- 48 Fire sign?
- 50 Rapper — Kim
- 51 High school subj.

Answer to Previous Puzzle

O	A	K	S	T	D	S	S	T	E	P
R	U	N	E	O	O	P	T	O	R	E
A	T	O	P	W	E	E	I	W	I	N
L	O	T	I	O	N	C	A	N	N	E
		A	R	C	T	S				
P	I	C	S	A	M	B	U	S	H	E
O	D	A	R	O	O	I	N	D		
E	S	P	R	E	S	S	O	O	P	T
		E	A	T	M	A	N			
U	N	T	I	D	T	A	H	I	T	I
T	A	O	S	E	G	O	O	D	O	R
A	S	W	E	W	O	W	L	E	D	A
H	A	N	D	S	O	N	D	A	D	S

12-16 CRYPTOQUIP

H U B H J M P Y P K K O ' D V O Q H B

V P J N L Y T O M O K E O F D G P P J

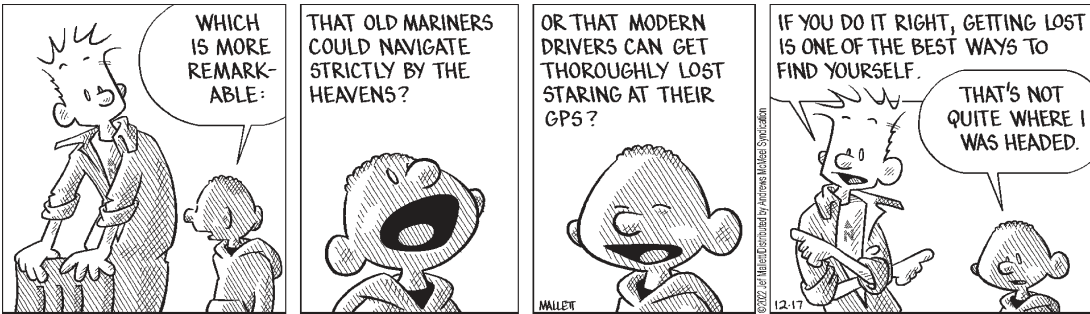
O J Q Y F , H Q R P D D D T P E L R K M G P

T P Y U H P Y F Q L M V L N T P Y .

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: I HAVE TO ASSUME THAT ANY COMPANY PRODUCING COOLING DEVICES MUST RECEIVE A LOT OF FAN MAIL.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: Q equals G

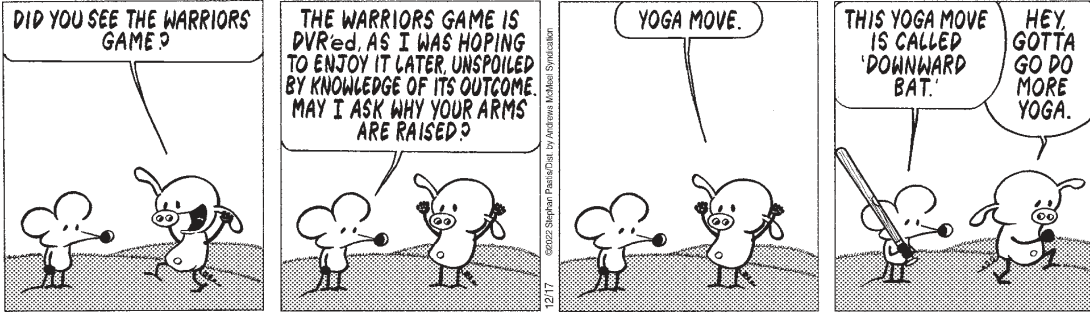
Frazz



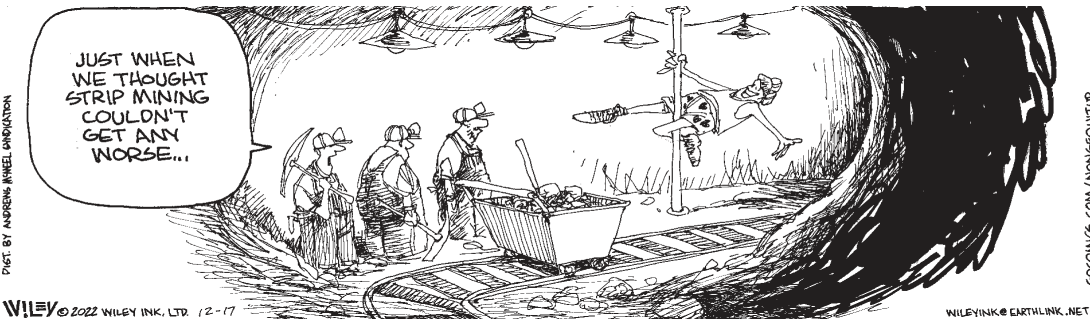
Dilbert



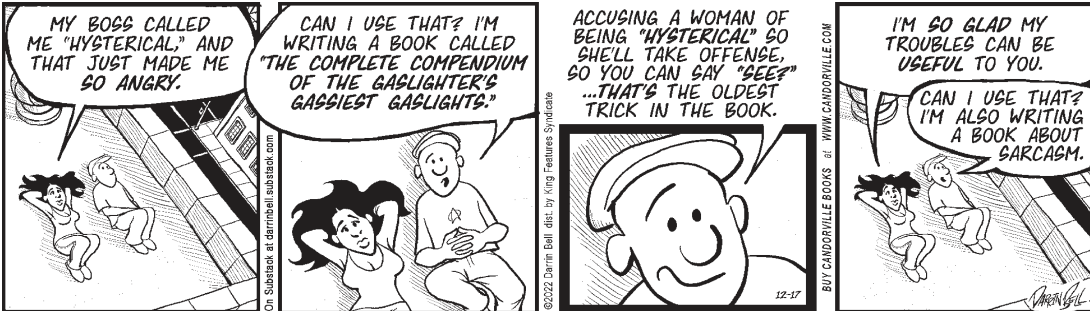
Pearls Before Swine



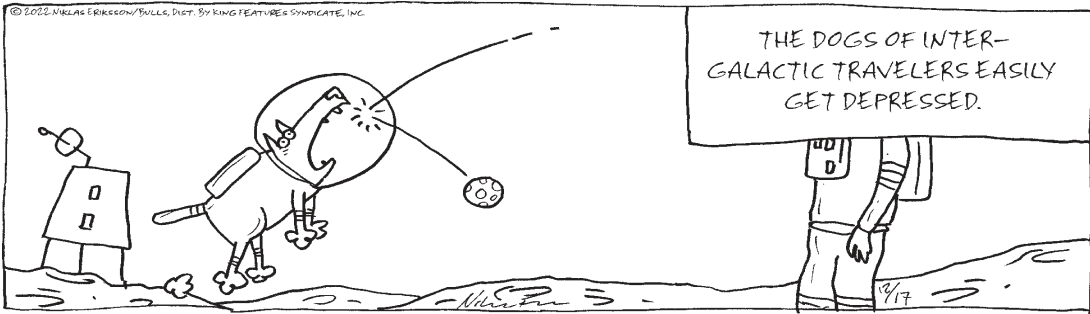
Non Sequitur



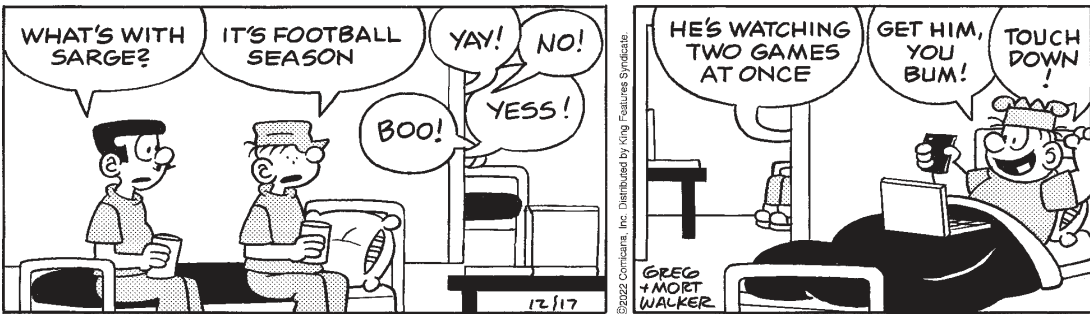
Candorville



Carpe Diem



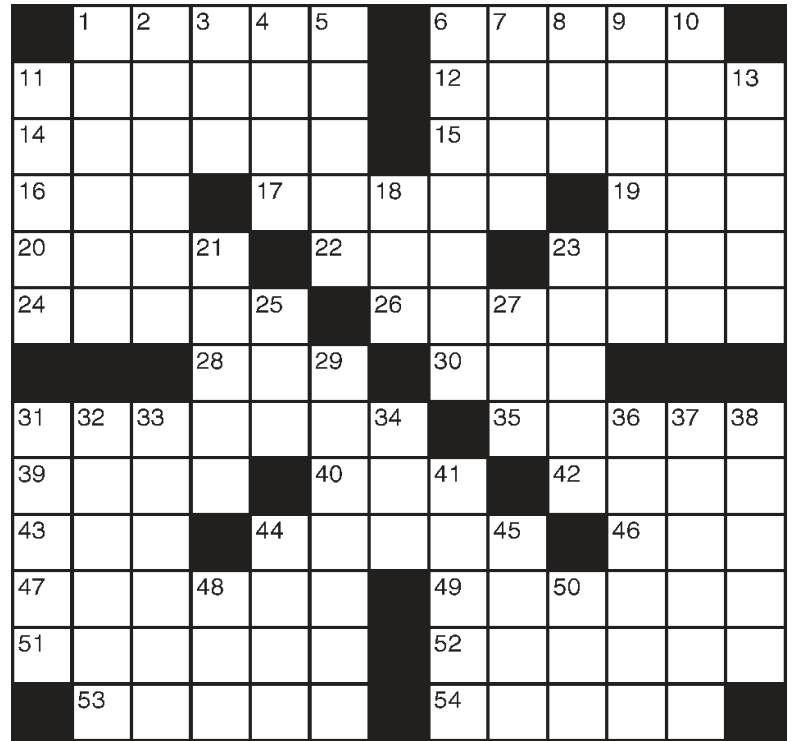
Beetle Bailey



Bizarro



Eugene Sheffer Crossword



ACROSS

- 1 "Divine Comedy" author
- 6 Abstains from food
- 11 Zipped
- 12 Additional items
- 14 Engraved
- 15 Tell
- 16 Fed. office supplier
- 17 Pricy designer gowns
- 19 Lion's home
- 20 Dad's sister
- 22 Time line period
- 23 Bank charges
- 24 Sly one
- 26 Daughter of Minos
- 28 Ms. Farrow
- 30 "Nasty!"
- 31 Italian aperitif
- 35 Mirren of "The Queen"
- 39 Novelist Oz
- 40 Savings plan acronym
- 42 Challenge
- 43 Drunkard
- 44 Rep
- 46 Rover's warning
- 47 "Jeopardy!" fodder
- 49 Balm of —
- 51 Learned one
- 52 Backs of boats

- 53 Slow musical tempo
- 54 Raise a glass to

- 18 "... cone — cup?"
- 21 Packs down
- 23 Pretended
- 25 Sportage maker
- 27 German pronoun
- 29 "Thanks" in Kyoto
- 31 Broadway rosters
- 32 Unprincipled
- 33 Criminal's "why"
- 34 Rage
- 36 Some beers
- 37 Straying
- 38 Dweebs
- 41 Uneasy feeling
- 44 "— She Sweet"
- 45 One of the Jackson 5
- 48 Moving day rental
- 50 Grazing tract

DOWN

- 1 Nissan, once
- 2 Esoteric
- 3 Ultimate
- 4 Ticked (off)
- 5 "Frasier" pooch
- 6 Italian sports car
- 7 Chopping tools
- 8 Cardinal cap letters
- 9 Swapped
- 10 Lustrous fabric
- 11 Painter of ballerinas
- 13 Feel

Answer to Previous Puzzle



12-17

CRYPTOQUIP

XV KTIW MZHMNR TX DTKYVR
 EJT VOEVLW IWMA V DTKYFPMA
 WHMVN VPA YVRROM - VZ :
 JVOYMNA MFPWRMFP.

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: IF CINDERELLA'S MAGIC MENTOR HAD ALWAYS BEEN ANGRY, I GUESS SHE WOULD BE HER FIERY GODMOTHER.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: A equals D

SCOREBOARD

DEALS

Wednesday's transactions

BASEBALL
Major League Baseball American League

DETROIT TIGERS — Agreed to terms with LHP Matthew Boyd on a one-year contract.

OAKLAND ATHLETICS — Designated 2Bs Ernie Clement and Yonny Hernandez for assignment.

TORONTO BLUE JAYS — Agreed to terms with OF Kevin Kiermaier on a one-year deal.

National League

CHICAGO CUBS — Agreed to terms with OF Cody Bellinger on a one-year contract.

LOS ANGELES DODGERS — Acquired RHP J.P. Feyereisen from Tampa Bay in exchange for RHP Jeff Belge.

MILWAUKEE BREWERS — Acquired INF Owen Miller from Cleveland in exchange for a player to be named later or cash considerations.

WASHINGTON NATIONALS — Agreed to terms with 1B Matt Adams, INF Travis Blankenhorn and RHPs Anthony Castro and Tommy Romero on minor league contracts.

FOOTBALL

National Football League

ARIZONA CARDINALS — Signed QB David Blough from Minnesota's practice squad. Designated OL Will Hernandez to return to practice from injured reserve. Promoted TE Maxx Williams from the practice squad to the active roster. Re-signed CB Jace Whittaker. Placed WR Rondale Moore and QB Kyler Murray on injured reserve. Signed QB Carson Strong to the practice squad.

ATLANTA FALCONS — Placed QB Marcus Mariota on injured reserve.

CLEVELAND BROWNS — Promoted LB Jermaine Carter Jr. from the practice squad to the active roster. Signed LB Storey Jackson and WR Marquez Stevenson to the practice squad.

DALLAS COWBOYS — Signed DT Anthony Rush to the practice squad. Released LB Malik Jefferson from the practice squad. Placed OT Terence Steele and DT Johnathan Hankins on injured reserve. Claimed CB Trayvon Mullen off waivers from Houston.

DENVER BRONCOS — Designated OLB Randy Gregory and RT Billy Turner to return to practice from injured reserve. Signed WR Freddie Swain from Miami's practice squad. Placed DE Jake Martin on injured reserve. Signed RB Tyreik McAllister and DE Wyatt Ray to the practice squad.

GREEN BAY PACKERS — Reinstated T Caleb Jones from the non-football injury (NFI) list.

HOUSTON TEXANS — Signed QB Jeff Driskel. Signed WR D.J. Montgomery to the practice squad. Placed WR Jalen Camp on the practice squad injured reserve. Reinstated OT Jordan Steckler from injured reserve.

KANSAS CITY CHIEFS — Designated WR Mecole Hardman to return to practice from injured reserve.

LAS VEGAS RAIDERS — Designated TE Darren Waller and WR Hunter Renfrow to return to practice from injured reserve.

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Wednesday's men's scores

EAST

Albany (NY) 76, LIU 59
 Duquesne 66, DePaul 55
 Seton Hall 66, Drexel 49
 UCLA 87, Maryland 60

SOUTH

Auburn 72, Georgia St. 64
 Campbell 97, William Peace 58
 Charleston Southern 91, Tennessee St. 87
 Coll. of Charleston 65, Stetson 60
 FAU 97, St. Thomas (Fla.) 74
 Florida 82, Ohio 48
 Gardner-Webb 120, Piedmont International 44
 Jacksonville St. 97, Reinhardt 63
 Lipscomb 64, Tennessee Tech 63
 Louisville 94, W. Kentucky 83
 Mississippi St. 69, Jackson St. 59
 Morehead St. 74, Georgia Southern 71
 N. Kentucky 64, E. Kentucky 61
 Norfolk St. 81, Bowling Green 75
 Queens (NC) 78, ETSU 75
 Sam Houston St. 79, Louisiana-Monroe 53
 Stephen F. Austin 80, Louisiana Tech 79, OT

MIDWEST

UAB 84, South Carolina 70
 UCF 72, Mississippi 61
 VCU 70, Radford 62
 Wake Forest 67, Appalachian St. 66

MIDWEST

Akron 66, Wright St. 54
 Cincinnati 103, Miami (Ohio) 76
 Coastal Carolina 87, South Dakota 86
 Minnesota 72, Ark.-Pine Bluff 56

SOUTHWEST

Arkansas St. 68, SE Missouri 61

FAR WEST

Denver 85, Colorado Christian 74
 Nevada 64, UC San Diego 56
 Oregon 71, UC Riverside 65
 Saint Mary's (Cal.) 81, New Mexico St. 68
 Southern Cal 88, Long Beach St. 78

Men's Top 25 schedule

Saturday's games

No. 1 Purdue vs. Davidson at Indianapolis

LOS ANGELES RAMS — Signed DL Khalil Davis and DB Richard LeCounte to the practice squad.

MIAMI DOLPHINS — Signed WR DaeSean Hamilton and CB Ka'dar Hollman to the practice squad.

MINNESOTA VIKINGS — Signed CB Kalon Barnes from Miami's practice squad. Signed LB William Kwenkeu. Signed DL Sheldon Day to the practice squad. Placed T Blake Brandel on injured reserve.

NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS — Designated DT Christian Barmore to return to practice from injured reserve.

NEW ORLEANS SAINTS — Claimed RB Eno Benjamin off waivers from Houston. Placed RB Mark Ingram on injured reserve. Designated C Erik McCoy and LB Chase Hansen to return to practice from injured reserve. Signed G Josh Andrews to the practice squad.

NEW YORK GIANTS — Signed WR Jaydon Mickens to the practice squad. Released OT Roy Mbaeteka to the practice squad.

NEW YORK JETS — Signed OL Eric Smith to the practice squad.

PHILADELPHIA EAGLES — Designated TE Dallas Goedert to return to practice from injured reserve.

PITTSBURGH STEELERS — Placed DL Chris Wormley on injured reserve. Signed DT Jonathan Marshall from the New York Jets' practice squad.

TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS — Promoted CB Anthony Chesley from the practice squad to the active roster. Signed OLB Hamlicar Rashed Jr. to the practice squad.

TENNESSEE TITANS — Designated LB Zach Cunningham to return to practice from injured reserve. Signed RB Jonathan Ward to the practice squad.

HOCKEY

National Hockey League

ANAHEIM DUCKS — Recalled G Olle Eriksson Ek from San Diego (AHL).

BOSTON BRUINS — Recalled F Curtis Hall from Maine (ECHL) to Providence (AHL).

CAROLINA HURRICANES — Returned D Max Lajoie to Chicago (AHL).

COLORADO AVALANCHE — Returned RW Shane Bowers to Colorado (AHL).

DALLAS STARS — Reassigned F Antonio Stranges from Texas (AHL) to Idaho (ECHL).

DETROIT RED WINGS — Recalled F Elmer Soderblom from Grand Rapids (AHL).

OTTAWA SENATORS — Recalled D Dillon Heatherington and LW Jake Lucchini from Belleville (AHL).

PITTSBURGH PENGUINS — Placed D Jeff Petry on long-term injured reserve.

TORONTO MAPLE LEAFS — Reassigned D Mac Hollowell to Toronto (AHL).

WASHINGTON CAPITALS — Returned D Lucas Johansen to Hershey (AHL).

SOCCER

Major League Soccer

D.C. UNITED — Signed G Alex Bono to a two-year contract.

SEATTLE SOUNDERS — Re-signed F Freddy Montero to a one-year contract.

COLLEGE

NORTH CAROLINA — Named Randy Clements football offensive line coach.

THE CITADEL — Named Maurice Drayton head football coach.

No. 2 Virginia vs. No. 5 Houston
 No. 3 UConn at Butler
 No. 4 Alabama vs. No. 15 Gonzaga at Birmingham, Ala.
 No. 6 Tennessee at No. 9 Arizona
 No. 8 Kansas vs. No. 14 Indiana
 No. 10 Arkansas vs. Bradley at North Little Rock, Ark.
 No. 13 Kentucky vs. No. 16 UCLA at New York
 No. 17 Mississippi St. vs. Nicholls
 No. 18 Illinois vs. Alabama A&M
 No. 23 Ohio St. vs. North Carolina at New York
 No. 24 Virginia Tech vs. Grambling St.
 No. 25 Miami vs. St. Francis (Pa.)

Wednesday's women's scores

EAST

Albany (NY) 47, Stonehill 46

SOUTH

Campbell 101, William Peace 38
 ETSU 65, Charleston Southern 45
 Jacksonville St. 71, Alabama St. 60
 LSU 88, Lamar 42
 MVSU 67, New Orleans 63, OT
 McNeese St. 76, Louisiana-Monroe 66
 Middle Tennessee 68, Houston 61
 Mississippi 66, Jacksonville 52
 SC-Upstate 60, Montreal 41
 South Alabama 74, Nicholls 73
 South Florida 77, Marshall 68
 Tennessee 99, UCF 64
 Texas 75, Jackson St. 58
 Troy 114, LaGrange 49

MIDWEST

Green Bay 70, Wisconsin 60
 Lindenwood (Mo.) 96, Hannibal-LaGrange 36
 Louisville 73, Bellarmine 43
 Minnesota 75, Milwaukee 59
 Northwestern 66, Ill. Chicago 62
 St. Thomas (MN) 74, Chicago St. 56
 UT Martin 67, South Dakota 61

SOUTHWEST

Tarleton St. 67, Northwestern St. 46
 Texas Tech 82, Oral Roberts 68

FAR WEST

Arizona 89, Texas Southern 55
 UC Irvine 85, Westcliff 37
 Utah 85, Colorado 58

PRO FOOTBALL

NFL

American Conference East						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Buffalo	10	3	0	.769	353	221
Miami	8	5	0	.615	316	312
N.Y. Jets	7	6	0	.538	264	243
New England	7	6	0	.538	276	239

South						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Tennessee	7	6	0	.538	241	276
Jacksonville	5	8	0	.385	294	294
Indianapolis	4	8	1	.346	209	298
e-Houston	1	11	1	.115	211	314

North						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Baltimore	9	4	0	.692	301	250
Cincinnati	9	4	0	.692	335	265
Cleveland	5	8	0	.385	300	323
Pittsburgh	5	8	0	.385	227	293

West						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Kansas City	10	3	0	.769	384	298
L.A. Chargers	7	6	0	.538	295	326
Las Vegas	5	8	0	.385	308	313
e-Denver	3	10	0	.231	194	238

National Conference East						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
x-Philadelphia	12	1	0	.923	386	248
Dallas	10	3	0	.769	360	229
N.Y. Giants	7	5	1	.577	267	300
Washington	7	5	1	.577	253	256

South						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Tampa Bay	6	7	0	.462	224	254
Atlanta	5	8	0	.385	288	312
Carolina	5	8	0	.385	260	290
New Orleans	4	9	0	.308	265	297

North						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Minnesota	10	3	0	.769	312	313
Detroit	6	7	0	.462	349	347
Green Bay	5	8	0	.385	263	302
e-Chicago	3	10	0	.231	270	333

West						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
San Francisco	9	4	0	.692	317	197
Seattle	7	6	0	.538	342	334
Arizona	4	9	0	.308	277	348
L.A. Rams	4	9	0	.308	218	296

e-Eliminated from playoffs
 x-clinched playoff spot

Thursday's game

San Francisco at Seattle

Saturday's games

Indianapolis at Minnesota
 Baltimore at Cleveland
 Miami at Buffalo

Sunday's games

Atlanta at New Orleans
 Dallas at Jacksonville
 Detroit at N.Y. Jets
 Kansas City at Houston
 Philadelphia at Chicago
 Pittsburgh at Carolina
 Arizona at Denver
 New England at Las Vegas
 Cincinnati at Tampa Bay
 Tennessee at L.A. Chargers
 N.Y. Giants at Washington

Monday's game

L.A. Rams at Green Bay

Thursday, Dec. 22

Jacksonville at New York Jets

Saturday, Dec. 24

Buffalo at Chicago
 Atlanta at Baltimore
 Cincinnati at New England
 Detroit at Carolina
 Houston at Tennessee
 New Orleans at Cleveland
 New York giants at Minnesota
 Seattle at Kansas City
 Washington at San Francisco
 Philadelphia at Dallas
 Las Vegas at Pittsburgh

Sunday, Dec. 25

Green Bay at Miami
 Denver at L.A. Rams
 Tampa Bay at Arizona

Monday, Dec. 26

L.A. Chargers at Indianapolis

Thursday, Dec. 29

Dallas at Tennessee

PRO HOCKEY

NHL

Eastern Conference Atlantic Division							
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Boston	28	23	4	1	47	110	61
Toronto	30	19	5	6	44	100	70
Tampa Bay	28	18	9	1	37	101	84
Detroit	29	13	10	6	32	85	91
Florida	30	14	12	4	32	102	98
Montreal	29	14	13	2	30	86	100
Ottawa	29	13	14	2	28	89	91
Buffalo	29	13	14	2	28	115	103

Metropolitan Division							
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
New Jersey	29	21	6	2	44	104	71
Carolina	28	16	6	6	38	81	73
Pittsburgh	29	17	8	4	38	102	84
N.Y. Islanders	30	17	12	1	35	95	84
N.Y. Rangers	30	15	10	5	35	93	85
Washington	31	15	12	4	34	94	92
Philadelphia	30	9	14	7	25	72	99
Columbus	28	10	16	2	22	80	115

Western Conference Central Division							
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Dallas	30	17	8	5	39	110	84
Winnipeg	28	18	9	1	37	94	75
Minnesota	29	16	11	2	34	92	86
Colorado	27	15	10	2	32	85	76
Nashville	27	12	12	3	27	70	85
St. Louis	29	13	15	1	27	85	108
Arizona	27	9	14	4	22	74	99
Chicago	27	7	16	4	18	65	101

Pacific Division							
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Vegas	31	21	9	1	43	104	85
Seattle	28	16	9	3	35	98	91
Los Angeles	32	15	12	5	35	106	118
Edmonton	30	17	13	0	34	109	102
Calgary	30	13	11	6	32	90	93
Vancouver	29	13	13	3	29	101	112
San Jose	31	10	16	5	25	96	112
Anaheim	30	7	20	3	17	70	130

Western Conference Central Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Dallas	30	17	8	5	39	110	84
Winnipeg	28	18	9	1	37	94	75
Minnesota	29	16	11	2	34	92	86
Colorado	27	15	10	2	32	85	76
Nashville	27	12	12	3	27	70	85
St. Louis	29	13	15	1	27	85	108
Arizona	27	9	14	4	22	74	99
Chicago	27	7	16	4	18	65	101

Pacific Division							
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Vegas	31	21	9	1	43	104	85
Seattle	28	16	9	3	35	98	91
Los Angeles	32	15	12	5	35	106	118
Edmonton	30	17	13	0	34	109	102
Calgary	30	13	11	6	32	90	93
Vancouver	29	13	13	3	29	101	112
San Jose	31	10	16	5	25	96	112
Anaheim	30	7	20	3	17	70	130

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.

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WORLD CUP/NWSL



MANU FERNANDEZ/AP

France players celebrate at the end of the semifinal match between France and Morocco at the Al Bayt Stadium in Al Khor, Qatar, on Wednesday. France won 2-0 to advance to the World Cup final.

Mbappé, France knock out Morocco, advance to final

By STEVE DOUGLAS
Associated Press

AL KHOR, Qatar — Kylian Mbappé vs. Lionel Messi.

Soccer's latest superstar against perhaps the sport's greatest player in the World Cup final just about everyone was hoping to see.

France and Mbappé are headed back to the biggest game in soccer, and to a much-anticipated matchup with Argentina, after ending Morocco's historic run at the World Cup on Wednesday.

In front of the country's president, Emmanuel Macron, France beat Africa's first ever semifinalist 2-0, with Mbappé playing a part in goals by Theo Hernandez in the fifth minute and substitute Randal Kolo Muani in the 79th.

Mbappé became a global phenomenon by leading France to the title in Russia in 2018 and has a chance to emulate Brazil great Pele as a champion in his first two World Cups when he comes up against the 35-year-old Messi, who has dominated the game with Cristiano Ronaldo for the past 15 years.

It's the dream final for many, with France looking to become the first team to retain the title since Brazil in 1962 and Argentina on a mission to win soccer's ultimate prize for the third time in what is likely to be Messi's last World Cup.

"We need all our strength, all our energy to face a very competitive team with one of the legends in the sport with Messi," France goalkeeper Hugo Lloris said.

There will be no team from the Arab world in the final of the first World Cup in the Middle East, a prospect that seemed nigh impossible before the tournament yet nearly happened in Qatar.

Scoreboard

World Cup SEMIFINALS Tuesday

Argentina 3, Croatia 1

Wednesday

France 2, Morocco 0

THIRD PLACE Saturday

Croatia vs. Morocco. **AFN-Sports, 3:45 p.m. Saturday CET; 11:45 p.m. Saturday JKT**

FINAL Sunday

Argentina vs. France. **AFN-Sports, 3:45 p.m. Sunday CET; 11:45 p.m. Sunday JKT**

Morocco has been widely lauded for breaking ground for Africa and generated an outpouring of pride among Arab nations after topping a group containing Croatia and Belgium and eliminating two more European powers — Spain and Portugal — in the knockout stage. Their players gave France a far-from-easy ride, too, before collapsing on the ground in despair after the final whistle.

"We are disappointed for the Moroccan people — we wanted to keep their dream alive," Morocco coach Walid Regragui said. "We felt we could have gone further, but we have given a good image of Morocco and of African football. That was important to us."

Remarkably, Hernandez's early goal was the first scored against Morocco by an opposition player in the tournament — the other had been an own-goal in the group stage — but the team responded to that and injury issues in its defense with a fearless performance in front of tens of thousands of fans who dominated the 60,000-seat Al Bayt Stadium.

France was forced into some last-ditch defending at times, but has developed a knack of pulling

out victories despite not playing its best. The country will be playing in the final for the fourth time in the last seven World Cups, more than anyone else.

"It wasn't easy," France coach Didier Deschamps said, "and we showed our quality, experience and team spirit."

Mbappé failed to add to his five goals in the tournament but helped create the opener for Hernandez when his shot deflected off a defender and into the path of the left back. Hernandez let the ball bounce before driving a downward effort into the net from a tight angle.

Typically a defense-first team, Morocco was forced to come out and play even though it was reeling from losing Nayef Aguerd to injury in the warmup and another center back, captain Romain Saiss, after only 21 minutes because of a hamstring injury. Both players were doubts ahead of the game but were risked by Regragui along with left back Noussair Mazraoui, who has had the flu and only lasted until halftime.

Roared on by its red-and-green-clad fans, Morocco came closest to scoring when Jawad El Yamiq hit the post with an overhead kick in the 44th minute and forced France to defend in numbers, with Antoine Griezmann — the team's playmaker — effectively playing as a deep-lying midfielder and often clearing balls from inside his box.

Mbappé enjoyed more space as Morocco tired late in the second half, however, and he was moved into a central position. After dribbling past two defenders, he took a shot that deflected toward Kolo Muani, who tapped in having been on the field for less than a minute.

Extensive misconduct found in investigation

By ANNE M. PETERSON
Associated Press

An investigation commissioned by the National Women's Soccer League and its players union found "widespread misconduct" directed at players dating back to the beginnings of the league nearly a decade ago.

A report detailing the results of the yearlong investigation was published Wednesday, a little over two months after the release in October of a report on a separate investigation by former acting U.S. Attorney General Sally Q. Yates that found emotional abuse and sexual misconduct were systemic in the sport, impacting multiple teams, coaches and players.

The second investigation also found instances of sexual abuse and manipulation. The NWSL-commissioned report said club staff in positions of power "made inappropriate sexual remarks to players, mocked players' bodies, pressured players to lose unhealthy amounts of weight, crossed professional boundaries with players and created manipulative working conditions."

"They used derogatory and insulting language toward players, displayed insensitivity toward players' mental health and engaged in retaliation against players who attempted to report or did report concerns," the report said.

"This report clearly reflects how our league systemically failed to protect our players. On behalf of the Board and the league, let me first and foremost sincerely apologize to our players for those failures and missteps. They deserve, at a minimum, a safe and secure environment to participate at the highest level in a sport they love, and they have my unwavering commitment that delivering that change will remain a priority each and every day," NWSL Commissioner Jessica Berman said in a news release.

The joint investigation was launched last year after a pair of former players came forward and

accused longtime NWSL coach Paul Riley of sexual harassment and coercion.

Riley, who has denied the allegations, was fired by the North Carolina Courage in the aftermath. He was among five head coaches in the league who were either fired or resigned in 2021 amid claims of misconduct.

The fallout has continued into this year. Portland Thorns owner Merritt Paulson announced on Dec. 1 that he was putting the team up for sale amid calls for him to do so that began after the Yates report detailed how the Thorns mishandled complaints about Riley when he coached the team in 2014-15. Paulson stepped down from a decision-making role with the team in October and two Thorns executives were fired.

The investigative team for the joint investigation reached out to 780 current and former players, all 12 NWSL teams and 90 current and former club staff, and those from the league office. More than 200 documents were reviewed during the probe, which was conducted by the law firms of Covington & Burling and Weil, Gotshal & Manges.

"This report speaks to the power of the players, the power of the truth and the power of a strong labor union," Meghann Burke, executive director of the NWSL Players Association, said during a video conference that also included Berman. "Players have willed this moment into existence. The NWSL Players Association would like to thank, honor and acknowledge every player, whether known or unknown, identified or not, in this report, for speaking truth to power. Players who have lent their names to this report know that kind of courage is hard to understand."

Two coaches, James Clarkson of the Houston Dash and Amanda Cromwell of the Orlando Pride, were suspended earlier this year at the recommendation of investigators. Cromwell was subsequently fired.



STEVE DIPAOLA/AP

Portland Thorns fans hold signs during the first half against the Houston Dash in Portland, Ore., on Oct. 6, 2021.

COLLEGE BASKETBALL/NBA



KEVIN M. COX/AP

Houston guard Jamal Sheard drives past Alabama guard Mark Sears on his way to score during the second half Saturday in Houston.

Marquee games filling the week

By JOHN MARSHALL
Associated Press

The holiday break is usually a quiet time in college basketball, with many of the top teams playing small-conference schools at home or taking extra time off before conference schedules start in full.

The season isn't quite there yet and this week is loaded with marquee games, including two involving No. 16 UCLA.

The big day is Saturday when No. 4 Alabama faces No. 15 Gonzaga in Birmingham, Alabama, No. 6 Tennessee is at No. 9 Arizona and No. 8 Kansas hosts No. 14 Indiana. UCLA also faces No. 13 Kentucky in New York on Saturday after cruising past No. 20 Maryland 87-60 on Wednesday.

The most intriguing game Saturday might be No. 5 Houston at No. 2 Virginia.

The Cougars (9-1) lead the nation in scoring defense (49.7 points per game) and field goal defense (33.8%) despite losing to Alabama last week. The Cavaliers love to grind out possessions and are 13th nationally in scoring defense, allowing 57.9 points per game.

The Alabama game is the Zags' latest against a high-level opponent.

Gonzaga (7-3) has dropped in the AP Top 25 after starting at No. 2 in the preseason, thanks to losses to No. 7 Texas, top-ranked Purdue and No. 11 Baylor. The Zags do have wins over No. 13 Kentucky and Michigan State on their resume.

Alabama (8-1) climbed four spots in this week's poll after joining Oklahoma in 1990 as the only teams to beat two No. 1 teams in the same season. The Crimson Tide outlasted North Carolina in four overtimes on Nov. 27 and proved it was no fluke by topping Houston 71-65 on Saturday.

No. 14 Indiana at No. 8 Kansas
AFN-Atlantic
6 p.m. Saturday CET
2 a.m. Sunday JKT

No. 5 Houston at No. 2 Virginia
AFN-Atlantic
8 p.m. Saturday CET
4 a.m. Sunday JKT

The Tennessee-Arizona game will be a head-butting of strengths.

The Volunteers (9-1) are one of the nation's best defensive teams, leading the country in three-point defense (20.2%) while ranking in the top six in scoring defense, field goal percentage against and steals.

Meanwhile, Arizona (8-1) leads the nation with 91.2 points and 21 assists per game.

The Hoosiers (8-2) get another massive test playing the Jayhawks at Allen Fieldhouse. Indiana allowed Arizona to go on a 17-0 run in Las Vegas, rallied to make it close and faded down the stretch without stellar freshman guard Jalen Hood-Schifino due to a back injury.

Kansas (9-1) has been solid after winning its fourth national title last season, its only loss coming to Tennessee in the Battle 4 Atlantis title game. The Jayhawks have wins over No. 12 Duke and No. 22 Wisconsin, and they blew out rival Missouri last weekend.

UCLA (9-2) may have the toughest task of all, facing two ranked teams in the same week for the second time this season. They managed to get the best of the Terps in Maryland, but the Bruins might face an even tougher test next.

Kentucky (7-2) has been dominant at times and its only losses were to Michigan State in double overtime and to Gonzaga in Spokane. The Wildcats also figure to get strong support at Madison Square Garden.

Fast-paced Indiana holding its own in Eastern Conference

By NOAH TRISTER
Associated Press

When the season began, it wasn't clear how much longer Myles Turner would be with the Indiana Pacers.

That's still a reasonable question — but now there's another one alongside it: How much longer can those Pacers stay in the playoff race?

After losing 57 games a season ago, the Pacers are a game above .500 at the moment — and that's despite dropping six of their past 10. Coach Rick Carlisle's group can push the tempo, and the Pacers have a 22-year-old standout in point guard Tyrese Haliburton. Indiana should be taken lightly.

"They beat us the last time and they're ahead of us in the standings," Miami coach Erik Spoelstra said Monday when asked about not overlooking opponents. "There is more parity, I think, overall in the league and I think it's good for the league."

The Heat beat Indiana 87-82 on Monday night in what was easily the Pacers' lowest-scoring game of the season. They've been held under 100 points only one other time. They rebounded to beat Golden State 125-119 on Wednesday.

Indiana is fifth in the NBA in pace after ranking 18th last season.

"I'm not that surprised, seeing Ty ... for two months last year and knowing we'd get (T.J.) McConnell back and he plays pretty fast," Carlisle said. "But it does tell a story of who we are as a team and it tells a story that if we don't come up with rebounds, we're not going to be able to play fast. We love playing fast. It's fun (and) it's gotten interest from the fans in this team."

The Pacers are showing the type of improvement that can easily stay under the radar. They aren't leading their conference like New Orleans, another sub-.500 team from last season. Instead, they're in the middle of the pack in the

Eastern Conference. Joining them there are the New York Knicks, who have won five straight to pull two games above .500 — after going 37-45 in 2021-22.

No matter how the rest of this season unfolds for the Pacers, they have some young talent they can get excited about. Haliburton is averaging a career-best 19.4 points per game in his third season. Benedict Mathurin is averaging 17.6, and fellow rookie Andrew Nembhard had 31 points and 13 assists in a win over Golden State last week. Nembhard also made a three-pointer at the buzzer to beat the Los Angeles Lakers last month.

That talented trio is one the Pacers can move forward with even if they end up dealing the 26-year-old Turner and 29-year-old Buddy Hield. Although for now, those two are still with Indiana and making their own contributions, averaging about 17 points apiece.

Turner is in the final year of his contract and could bring back a good haul in a trade. Indiana is still less than a year removed from a major makeover. The Pacers traded star forward Domantas Sabonis to Sacramento in February and received Haliburton in return. Hield also went to Indiana in that deal.

Indiana does have a couple of obvious weaknesses it needs to shore up. The Pacers are allowing opponents to shoot 25.8 free throws a game, the second-most in the NBA. Rebounding is also an issue. The 6-foot-11 Turner is one of the game's top shot blockers, but on the boards, the Pacers are vulnerable.

Indiana ranks 27th in the league in defensive rebounding percentage. The Pacers gave up 29 offensive boards to the Brooklyn Nets in Saturday's loss.

"It's effort really, and that's something we talked about in practice," Carlisle said. "That's something we've got to concentrate on. We need it to be a real wake-up call."



DARRON CUMMINGS/AP

Indiana Pacers guard Tyrese Haliburton passes the ball against Washington Wizards guard Jordan Goodwin, center, and forward Deni Avdija during the second half Dec. 9 in Indianapolis.

NBA scoreboard

Eastern Conference				
Atlantic Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Boston	22	7	.759	—
Brooklyn	17	12	.586	5
Philadelphia	15	12	.556	6
New York	15	13	.536	6½
Toronto	13	15	.464	8½
Southeast Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Miami	14	15	.483	—
Atlanta	14	15	.483	—
Washington	11	18	.379	3
Orlando	9	20	.310	5
Charlotte	7	21	.250	6½
Central Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Milwaukee	20	7	.741	—
Cleveland	18	11	.621	3
Indiana	15	14	.517	6
Chicago	11	16	.407	9
Detroit	8	22	.267	13½
Western Conference				
Southwest Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
New Orleans	18	9	.667	—
Memphis	18	9	.667	—
Dallas	14	14	.500	4½
Houston	9	18	.333	9
San Antonio	9	19	.321	9½
Northwest Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Denver	17	10	.630	—
Portland	16	12	.571	1½
Utah	16	14	.533	2½
Minnesota	13	15	.464	4½
Oklahoma City	11	17	.393	6½
Pacific Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Phoenix	16	12	.571	—
L.A. Clippers	17	13	.567	—
Sacramento	15	12	.556	½
Golden State	14	15	.483	2½
L.A. Lakers	11	16	.407	4½
Tuesday's games				
Philadelphia 123, Sacramento 103				
Milwaukee 128, Golden State 111				
Houston 111, Phoenix 97				
Utah 121, New Orleans 100				
Boston 122, L.A. Lakers 118, OT				
Wednesday's games				
Orlando 135, Atlanta 124				
Indiana 125, Golden State 119				
Detroit 141, Charlotte 134, OT				
Sacramento 124, Toronto 123				
New York 128, Chicago 120, OT				
Portland 128, San Antonio 112				
Miami 110, Oklahoma City 108				
Cleveland 105, Dallas 90				
Denver 141, Washington 128				
L.A. Clippers 99, Minnesota 88				
Thursday's games				
Miami at Houston				
Milwaukee at Memphis				
New Orleans at Utah				
Phoenix at L.A. Clippers				
Friday's games				
Atlanta at Charlotte				
Sacramento at Detroit				
Brooklyn at Toronto				
Golden State at Philadelphia				
Indiana at Cleveland				
Orlando at Boston				
Minnesota at Oklahoma City				
New York at Chicago				
Portland at Dallas				
Denver at L.A. Lakers				
Saturday's games				
Washington at L.A. Clippers				
Miami at San Antonio				
Dallas at Cleveland				
Memphis at Oklahoma City				
Portland at Houston				
Utah at Milwaukee				
New Orleans at Phoenix				
Sunday's games				
Orlando at Boston				
New York at Indiana				
Brooklyn at Detroit				
Golden State at Toronto				
Chicago at Minnesota				
Charlotte at Denver				
Washington at L.A. Lakers				
Assist leaders				
Through Wednesday				
	G	AST	AVG	
Haliburton, IND	27	286	10.6	
Young, ATL	26	257	9.9	
Jokic, DEN	24	217	9.0	
Doncic, DAL	26	225	8.7	
Garland, CLE	23	179	7.8	
Morant, MEM	22	172	7.8	

COLLEGE FOOTBALL



JACOB KUPFERMAN/AP

Cade Klubnik, above, is the undisputed starting quarterback after DJ Uiagalelei entered the NCAA transfer portal. Klubnik came on in relief and led the Tigers to victory in the ACC title game against North Carolina.

Cade's time

Klubnik, finally Clemson's starter at QB, preps to face Tennessee in Orange Bowl

By PETE IACOBELLI
Associated Press

CLEMSON, S.C. — Cade Klubnik looked poised and confident in his new role as the No. 1 quarterback at Clemson. The only difference is he didn't have experienced teammate DJ Uiagalelei alongside to help guide him.

Klubnik took control of the offense — for good this time, after Uiagalelei entered the NCAA transfer portal last week — as the 10th-ranked Tigers continued postseason preparations for their Orange Bowl game against No. 6 Tennessee on Dec. 30.

The game marks Klubnik's first college start after a season mostly on the sidelines behind Uiagalelei, Clemson's often criticized two-year starter.

Klubnik, who came on in relief in a 39-10 win over North Carolina in the ACC title game, has had "a front-row seat to the good and the bad of what it's like to play quarterback at this level," Tigers coach Dabo Swinney said Tuesday.

Klubnik was among the country's top quarterback prospects when he signed at Clemson. Many supporters were looking to replace Uiagalelei, who fought through injuries and poor play as the Tigers' streak of six consecutive ACC titles and College Football Playoff appearances ended with a 10-3 season in 2021.

But it was Uiagalelei, a junior, who led Clemson to a 7-0 start and a projected playoff spot.

That's when things went off the rails for the Tigers' offense. Klubnik came off the bench for an ineffective Uiagalelei to spark a 27-21 victory over then-ranked Syracuse on Oct. 22.

Klubnik was called on again in

relief two weeks later in a 35-14 loss at Notre Dame. Then, when Uiagalelei started with two three-and-out series against the Tar Heels with a league title at stake, Swinney put in Klubnik and never looked back.

Klubnik was ready for the moment, finishing 20-for-24 for 279 yards and a touchdown. He also ran for a TD and was named the game's MVP. Uiagalelei made his departure official two days later.

Klubnik said he was coached all year to prepare as if he were starting and it paid off in helping the Tigers win their seventh ACC crown in eight seasons.

"I've learned so much this year," he said. "I'm just super thankful for me just kind of getting to sit back and watch."

Uiagalelei won't be the only Clemson regular missing against Tennessee. Tigers starting defensive end Myles Murphy, a projected high first-round NFL draft pick, has opted out of the Orange Bowl to start training for the pros. Starting linebacker Trenton Simpson, second on the team with 77 tackles, re-injured his ankle in the ACC title game and won't be ready to play, Swinney said.

The coach has had to sit more experienced, well-liked quarterbacks in the past such as starter Cole Stoudt in 2014 for freshman Deshaun Watson and Kelly Bryant during Trevor Lawrence's first year in 2018. Swinney anticipates a smooth transition going forward.

"These guys are all competitors, they all understand the game," Swinney said of his players. "And Cade's an easy guy, it's not like he's some hard personality. He's an easy guy to get to like."

Buckeyes: Getting to Georgia QB Bennett priority for Ohio State



AP photos

Ohio State offensive tackles Dawand Jones, left, and Paris Johnson Jr., both second-team All-Americans, will need to play a big role in the run game and in protecting quarterback C.J. Stroud.

FROM PAGE 48

"One of the best football players in the country, and you can see it," Day said. "He's very, very productive, so it'll be a big challenge for our guys up front and we'll have to know exactly where he is."

Aside from second-team All-America tackles Paris Johnson Jr. and Dawand Jones, Day said Ohio State's combination of guard and center along the offensive line will be the key to opening up running lanes and protecting quarterback C.J. Stroud.

"That'll be a big part of the game for sure is winning the game up front like it always is, but certainly on the interior it's going to be even more amplified," Day said.

The Buckeyes won't have standout running back TreVeyon Henderson, who will miss the playoff with a foot injury.

Georgia quarterback Stetson Bennett, who attended the Heisman Trophy ceremony on Dec. 9 as a finalist alongside Stroud, has a range of weapons at his

disposal. They include tight ends Brock Bowers and Darnell Washington, who've combined for over 1,100 receiving yards and eight touchdowns.

Getting after Bennett is the top priority for Ohio State's defense, Day said.

"It's the quarterback that makes it all go, and he's played unbelievable," he said. "What an unbelievable story of somebody that came through a lot of adversity along the way in his journey to get to where he's at. So from afar it's been a joy to watch him compete."

The Buckeyes know what could possibly await them if they get past Georgia and into the national championship game — a potential rematch with the No. 2 Wolverines, who have beat their rival two years in a row.

"You don't want to get ahead of yourself, but that would be unbelievable," Day said on Dec. 4. "It would be historic to have that opportunity, and to say that we haven't thought about that, of course we have."

NFL

McDaniels discovered importance of details while under Belichick

BY MARK ANDERSON
Associated Press

HENDERSON, Nev. — When Josh McDaniels left New England the first time in 2009 to become the Denver Broncos' coach, he didn't appreciate some of the little things that went into Patriots coach Bill Belichick's success.

So when he returned to the Patriots in 2012, McDaniels took greater notice of Belichick's approach to all aspects of the program, including his approach to bye weeks and the offseason.

Details, McDaniels acknowledged Wednesday, "that maybe I wasn't even clued in on that existed before I left."

"And so it gave me a great opportunity to kind of look at it through a different lens and really try to take some time to process those things while I was watching somebody that's obviously the best that's ever done it do it again," McDaniels said. "The time for me was important for me personally and ... he's always given to me time, attention and information. He's been very open and honest with me about everything, and I wouldn't be standing here if it wasn't for him."

McDaniels' stint in Denver didn't go well. He was fired after going 11-17 in less than two seasons. He believes he can do better in his second go-round as a head coach.

The Raiders are 5-8 going into Sunday's home game against the Patriots (7-6).

With New England fighting for a playoff spot, McDaniels doesn't expect Belichick to let sentimentality get in the way this week.

"And that's not a bad thing," McDaniels said. "I don't think he would expect anything less from me than to just compete and do everything we can to help our team win, and I know that's what he's going to do."

McDaniels has his own motivation beyond trying to prove the student can beat the teacher, hoping to put together a strong finish to what

**New England Patriots (7-6)
at Las Vegas Raiders (5-8)**
AFN-Sports
10:00 p.m. Sunday CET
6:00 a.m. Monday JKT

has been a disappointing season for the Raiders.

Few coaches understand New England's inner workings quite like McDaniels, but if Belichick has specialized in anything, it's presenting unique game plans for his opponents. McDaniels knows that's what's in store for Las Vegas.

"It's very challenging because what you see on tape is not necessarily what you're going to get," McDaniels said.

Part of that challenge is stopping Patriots quarterback Mac Jones, who was a rookie last season under McDaniels. Jones started all 17 games and led New England to a 10-7 record, throwing 22 touchdown passes and 13 interceptions.

He has taken a step back this season, with seven TD passes and eight picks, though his completion percentage has inched up from 67.6 to 68.2.

"He expects a lot out of his players, and he's a smart guy," Jones said of McDaniels on Boston radio station WEEI. "He's got great recall. He remembers things from certain games and all that stuff. Definitely a great coach, and looking forward to going against him this weekend."

McDaniels spent 18 years with the Patriots, including 13 as offensive coordinator. He was an instrumental part of a two-decade dynasty that won six Super Bowls, including three when he ran the offense.

"It's obvious I wouldn't be here, or even in the National Football League, if it wasn't for Bill," McDaniels said. "He's been invaluable to me in a lot of ways. Hard to measure all of them. Obviously, football background, understanding how this league works. I got to see firsthand how to try to do it the right way."



ADRIAN KRAUS/AP

Buffalo Bills defensive tackle Ed Oliver collides with New York Jets quarterback Mike White during the first half Sunday in Orchard Park, N.Y. The Bills won 20-12.

Done with stingy Jets, Bills focus on Dolphins

BY JOHN WAWROW
Associated Press

ORCHARD PARK, N.Y. — Before looking ahead to a prime-time showdown against Miami on Saturday — with the top spot in the AFC East hanging in the balance — Josh Allen and the Buffalo Bills should be relieved to have the New York Jets off their schedule.

For now, at least. Barring a playoff meeting, which remains a possibility, no opponent this season has done a better job smothering the Bills high-powered offense than what the Robert Saleh-coached Jets did in splitting their two outings after Buffalo eked out a 20-12 win on Sunday.

It was a win for the Bills that required trickery — Buffalo fooled the Jets into jumping offside on fourth-and-1 to set up its first touchdown — and was keyed by a defense that forced two second-half turnovers before closing the game, forcing Mike White to throw four consecutive incompletions and turn the ball over on downs.

Easy as it might have been to suggest the Bills offense didn't resemble that of a Super Bowl contender, as was raised to Allen following the game, what's hard to overlook is how Buffalo sputtered in each of its two meetings against Gang Green.

Buffalo managed what had been season lows with 317 yards offense

**Miami Dolphins (8-5)
at Buffalo Bills (10-3)**
AFN-Sports
2:30 a.m. Sunday CET
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and 19 first downs in a 20-17 loss at New York on Nov. 6. Five weeks later, the Bills set new lows with 232 yards offense and 14 first downs, though this time in a victory.

Take away those two games, and Buffalo is averaging 419 yards offense and 29 points per outing.

Part of the difference Sunday was Allen playing turnover-free football after he threw two interceptions — one in the red zone, and the second inside Buffalo's 25 to set up a Jets touchdown — in the first meeting.

"We're 10-3 and finding ways to win football games," Allen said in response to the offensive struggles Sunday. "I know that's not what you want to hear, but just playing complementary football, not putting ourselves and our defense in bad positions, and just trying to win football games no matter how it happens."

The Bills won despite top receiver Stefon Diggs being limited to three catches for 37 yards, his fourth-lowest output in three seasons in Buffalo, and an offense that committed six three-and-outs, its most since having that many in a

27-10 win over the Jets in last year's season finale.

What's encouraging is three of Buffalo's four final opponents feature defenses ranked outside the NFL's top 10, with New England (ranked sixth as of Monday) the exception.

On Saturday, the Bills face an altogether different test in hosting Miami (8-5), whose defense has dropped to 20th after allowing a combined 783 yards and 56 points in losing its past two games.

The Dolphins won the first meeting against Buffalo 21-19 in a game played in sweltering conditions in south Florida. This time, the long-range forecast calls for snow and temperatures in the high-20s. The warm-weather Dolphins even resorted to having heaters near their bench during a 23-17 loss to the Chargers in Los Angeles on Sunday.

Buffalo lost in September despite outgaining Miami in yards offense 497-212 and having a near 21-minute edge in time of possession. It was a game which ended with Buffalo's first-year offensive coordinator Ken Dorsey infamously caught on camera trashing his notes in the visitor's coaching booth.

Having put the Jets in their rear-view mirror, the Bills can do the same to the Dolphins on Saturday in their quest to win a third straight AFC East title.



MATT YORK/AP

Las Vegas Raiders head coach Josh McDaniels walks on the sideline against the Los Angeles Chargers on Dec. 4 in Las Vegas.

NFL

Chargers can be dangerous with Williams, Allen

BY DAN GREENSPAN
Associated Press

COSTA MESA, Calif. — It was a catch that Los Angeles Chargers wide receiver Mike Williams shouldn't have been able to make.

Miami Dolphins cornerback Xavien Howard had denied Williams a free release off the line of scrimmage on third-and-9 in the first quarter before keeping him to the outside on an underthrown ball, only for Williams to climb over the defender to make a juggling 23-yard catch.

"Dude had perfect coverage. Mike just found a way to get the ball," Chargers cornerback Bryce Callahan said Wednesday.

Wide receiver Joshua Palmer was more effusive in his praise.

"It's art, you know," he said of Williams' latest outstanding performance.

There is also the science that comes with having Williams and Keenan Allen back on the field at the same time, the arithmetic of favorable defensive coverages they dictate and the geometry of the space they create.

The Chargers (7-6) believe having both Williams and Allen available for their last four games can make the difference in reaching the playoffs, confidence that comes from how the pair contributed in Sunday's 23-17 win over the Dolphins. Williams had six receptions for 116 yards and a touchdown, and Allen had 12 catches for 92 yards.

"They are two of the best to ever do it," quarterback Justin Herbert said after the game. "To have guys like that on our team, they bring a different energy, a different vibe to our team. ... Keenan and Mike, they were out there making plays."

The complementary nature of Williams and Allen has been a key piece of Los Angeles' offense over the past four seasons, with Allen moving the chains on crossing routes and other intermediate plays and Williams generating big gains and finding the end zone.

It was just the second time this season they made it through an entire game healthy together. Allen missed time because of a pulled hamstring, and Williams' high ankle sprain kept him out of four of the previous five games and limited him to six snaps in Week 11 against Kansas City.

Palmer said not having Allen and Williams gave opposing de-

Tennessee Titans (7-6)
at Los Angeles Chargers (7-6)

AFN-Sports

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fenses more ways to limit Herbert and his remaining targets.

"Any one of us can make plays, so it puts them in a bind because they don't know who they might want to double," Palmer said. "A good example of that was Vegas (in Week 13). Like imagine if Mike was there, you know what I'm saying. Just having to have us be matched up, you have to be willing to sacrifice something."

That often involves teams playing a safety over the top of Williams to try and eliminate explosive plays. In response, the Chargers used a deep crossing pattern, sending Williams across the field off a play-action fake to free him up for a 55-yard catch against Miami, his 11th play of 40 or more yards over the past two seasons.

Williams also got both feet down for a nifty 10-yard touchdown grab, but it was his catch against Howard that dominated social media. Williams labeled it "pretty good" but not on the short list of his best plays.

To Palmer, it was nothing new.

"Nothing surprises me anymore, honestly, from Mike," he said. "I've seen him do that every day in practice, you see him do it in the game, so it's almost like when he doesn't do it I'm surprised."

With all the pieces finally together, Palmer expects the passing offense can propel the Chargers into the postseason.

"Felt like we can still make some more plays on top of that," he said. "So it's really exciting, but it was a long time coming for us, to be honest with you."

Notes: The Chargers held a walkthrough Wednesday but estimated that S Derwin James Jr. (quad) would not have participated in a regular practice. Callahan (groin), DT Sebastian Joseph-Day (knee) and RT Trey Pipkins III (knee) would have been limited. ... Coach Brandon Staley said it was possible that OLB Joey Bosa (groin) could be activated off injured reserve to return to practice this week. ... TE Donald Parham Jr. (hamstring/concussion) is expected to play this week. He has appeared in two games this season and has not played since Oct. 17 against Denver.



JAE C. HONG/AP

Los Angeles Chargers wide receiver Mike Williams makes a catch over Miami Dolphins cornerback Xavien Howard during the first half Sunday in Inglewood, Calif.

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It's Mbappé vs. Messi
France ends Morocco's historic run, sets up dream final » **World Cup, Page 43**

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

Ohio State's opportunity

Ryan Day, Buckeyes feel urgency behind their second chance at CFP

BY JACOB BENGE
Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio

Ohio State didn't get to control its playoff destiny after losing to rival Michigan at the end of the regular season.

No matter. The Buckeyes are in the postseason, and they're yearning for redemption.

Coach Ryan Day said the No. 4 Buckeyes had productive practices last week and realize the opportunity they have in front of them with a semifinal showdown against top-ranked Georgia.

"I think the guys have really had good urgency about them," Day said Tuesday. "We're going to start making the transition into game planning here soon and then we get down to bowl week, so we have three phases when we talk about bowl practice, but the energy has been really, really good."

The Buckeyes took the back door into the College Football Playoff, benefiting from USC's second loss this year to Utah in the Pac-12 championship game.

Defending champion Georgia will host Ohio State on New Year's Eve. The Bulldogs bring the No. 2 scoring defense in the Football Bowl Subdivision into the Peach Bowl in Atlanta. They have held teams to fewer than 13 points per game.

Defensive tackle Jalen Carter is a big reason why. The AP All-America First Team selection leads Georgia's top-ranked rushing defense that has held opponents to 77 yards per game.

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Ohio State coach Ryan Day is preparing his team for a Peach Bowl showdown with defending champion Georgia on Dec. 31 in Atlanta.

BEN JACKSON, GETTY IMAGES/TNS



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