

YEAR IN REVIEW

Sampling some of Stars and Stripes' best photos of '24
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Azerbaijan leader says plane shot down by Russia unintentionally
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STARS AND STRIPES

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AHN YOUNG-JOON/AP

Firefighters and rescue team members work near the wreckage of a plane at Muan International Airport in Muan, South Korea, on Sunday.

Fiery plane crash in S. Korea

2 survivors found; landing gear failure suspected in fatal incident

By **HYUNG-JIN KIM**
AND **KIM TONG-HYUNG**
Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — A passenger plane skidded off a runway at a South Korean airport Sunday, slammed into a concrete fence and burst into flames after its front landing gear apparently failed to deploy. All but two of the 181 people on board died in one of the country's worst aviation disasters.

The Jeju Air plane crashed while landing in the town of Muan,

about 180 miles south of Seoul. The Transport Ministry said the plane was a 15-year-old Boeing 737-800 jet that had arrived from Bangkok and that the crash happened at 9:03 a.m.

A total of 179 people — 85 women, 84 men and 10 others whose genders weren't immediately identifiable — died in the fire, the South Korean fire agency said. Emergency workers pulled two people, both crew members, to

SEE CRASH ON PAGE 12



MAENG DAE-HWAN, NEWSIS/AP

Fire engines work to extinguish a fire at the Muan International Airport.

China video likely shows futuristic fighter jets

By **CATE CADELL**
The Washington Post

Images of advanced aircraft cruising at low altitudes in China on Thursday have surprised analysts, who say they could mark the maiden flights of sixth-generation fighter jets, representing a major breakthrough for the country's military.

Photos and videos originating on Chinese social media platforms and reposted to X on Thursday show large triangular aircraft making sweeping slow turns at a very low altitude. The images appear to show two different aircraft, one smaller than the other — both featuring a tailless, stealthy design suggesting they rely on advanced computational technology to be piloted.

Videos of the jets were trending on Friday on Weibo, a Chinese social media site similar to X, though their origin is unclear, and The Washington Post was unable to verify authenticity. In one video, the large fighter appears to be flanked by the fifth-generation J-20, China's current top operational fighter jet.

The testing of two new advanced aircraft in broad daylight is also highly unusual, analysts say, and could indicate Beijing is putting on a purposeful show of force.

It comes amid uncertainty about the future of the United States' own sixth-generation fighter initiative — known as the Next-Generation Air Dominance (NGAD) Program. Projected costs for each of the future U.S. aircraft are estimated to reach hundreds of millions of dollars, and the Air Force in November decided to defer key decisions about the project's direction to the

SEE FUTURISTIC ON PAGE 7

BUSINESS/WEATHER

Yellen: US could hit debt limit in mid-January

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said her agency will need to start taking “extraordinary measures,” or special accounting maneuvers intended to prevent the nation from hitting the debt ceiling, as early as Jan. 14, in a letter sent to congressional leaders Friday afternoon.

“Treasury expects to hit the statutory debt ceiling between January 14 and January 23,” Yellen wrote in a letter ad-

ressed to House and Senate leadership, at which point extraordinary measures would be used to prevent the government from breaching the nation’s debt ceiling — which has been suspended until Jan. 1, 2025.

The department has in the past deployed what are known as “extraordinary measures” or accounting maneuvers to keep the government operating. But once those measures run out the government risks defaulting on its debt unless lawmakers and

the president agree to lift the limit on the U.S. government’s ability to borrow.

“I respectfully urge Congress to act to protect the full faith and credit of the United States,” she said.

The news comes after President Joe Biden signed a bill into law this month that averted a government shutdown but did not include President-elect Donald Trump’s core debt demand to raise or suspend the nation’s debt limit.

EXCHANGE RATES

Military rates			
Euro costs (Dec. 30)	0.94	Switzerland (Franc)	0.9019
British pound (Dec. 30)	\$1.22	Thailand (Baht)	34.07
Japanese yen (Dec. 30)	153.00	Turkey (NewLira)	35.2051
South Korean won (Dec. 30)	1439.00		
Commercial rates		(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.)	
Bahrain (Dinar)	0.3772		
Britain (Pound)	1.2525		
Canada (Dollar)	1.4411		
China (Yuan)	7.2985		
Denmark (Krone)	7.1515		
Egypt (Pound)	50.8712		
Euro	0.9589		
Hong Kong (Dollar)	7.7623		
Hungary (Forint)	393.86		
Israel (Shekel)	3.6832		
Japan (Yen)	157.95		
Kuwait (Dinar)	0.3081		
Norway (Krone)	11.3538		
Philippines (Peso)	57.88		
Poland (Zloty)	4.10		
Saudi Arabia (Riyal)	3.7553		
Singapore (Dollar)	1.3580		
South Korea (Won)	1474.93		

INTEREST RATES

Prime rate	7.50
Interest Rates Discount rate	4.50
Federal funds market rate	4.33
3-month bill	4.29
30-year bond	4.82

WEATHER OUTLOOK

MONDAY IN THE MIDDLE EAST



MONDAY IN EUROPE



TUESDAY 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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PACIFIC

Kim vows tougher anti-US policy before Trump era

By **HYUNG-JIN KIM**
Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — North Korean leader Kim Jong Un vowed to implement the “toughest” anti-U.S. policy, state media reported Sunday, less than a month before Donald Trump takes office as U.S. president.

Trump’s return to the White House raises prospects for high-profile diplomacy with North Korea. During his first term, Trump met Kim three times for talks on the North’s nuclear program. Many experts however say a quick resumption of Kim-Trump summitry is unlikely as Trump would first focus on conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East. North Korea’s support for Russia’s war against Ukraine also poses a challenge to efforts to revive

diplomacy, experts say.

During a five-day plenary meeting of the ruling Workers’ Party that ended Friday, Kim called the U.S. “the most reactionary state that regards anti-communism as its invariable state policy.”

Kim said that the U.S.-South Korea-Japan security partnership is expanding into “a nuclear military bloc for aggression.”

“This reality clearly shows to which direction we should advance and what we should do and how,” Kim said, according to the official Korean Central News Agency.

It said Kim’s speech “clarified the strategy for the toughest anti-U.S. counteraction to be launched aggressively” by North Korea for its long-term national interests and security.

KCNA didn’t elaborate on the anti-U.S. strategy.

But it said Kim set forth tasks to bolster military capability through defense technology advancements and stressed the need to improve the mental toughness of North Korean soldiers.

The previous meetings between Trump and Kim had not only put an end to their exchanges of fiery rhetoric and threats of destruction, but they developed personal connections.

Trump once famously said he and Kim “fell in love.”

But their talks eventually collapsed in 2019, as they wrangled over U.S.-led sanctions on the North.

North Korea has since sharply increased the pace of its weapons testing activities to build more re-



KOREAN CENTRAL NEWS AGENCY, KOREA NEWS SERVICE/AP

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un attends a meeting held during Dec. 23 until Friday in Pyongyang, North Korea.

liable nuclear missiles targeting the U.S. and its allies.

The U.S. and South Korea have responded by expanding their military bilateral drills and also trilateral ones involving Japan, drawing strong rebukes from the North, which views such U.S.-led

exercises as invasion rehearsals.

Last month, Kim said that his past negotiations with the United States only confirmed Washington’s “unchangeable” hostility toward his country and described his nuclear buildup as the only way to counter external threats.

Japan to continue record-breaking run of increased defense spending

By **HANA KUSUMOTO**
Stars and Stripes

TOKYO — Japan’s Cabinet on Friday approved the country’s largest-ever defense budget for the coming fiscal year, keeping with its plan for defense budget increases until fiscal 2027.

The plan to spend 8.7 trillion yen, or about \$54.8 billion, is a 9.7% increase from this year’s budget of 7.95 trillion yen, or about \$50.1 billion. The increase marks the 13th consecutive year of increased military spending. Japan’s fiscal year begins in April.

It’s also on track with Japan’s defense buildup plan and its goal to gradually increase its defense budget to 8.9 trillion yen, or about \$56.1 billion, by fiscal 2027. The government in 2022 set a target of spending 2% of Japan’s gross domestic product for defense.

“Based on fundamental understanding that our nation is facing the most severe and complex security environment since the end of [World War II], we will continue to secure a necessary and sufficient budget for FY 2025, which is the third year of the plan, in order to drastically strengthen defense capabilities within the defense buildup plan period,” the budget document stated.

Next year’s budget continues to focus on core areas of defense, such as standoff and unmanned defense capabilities.

About 939 billion yen, or about \$5.92 billion, is allocated to continue strengthening Japan’s



GENERAL ATOMICS

Japan allocated defense spending funds to acquire 2 new MQ-9B Sea Guardians as the country continues to increase defense spending.

standoff defense capability.

The 2027 spending plan permits the Ministry of Defense and Self-Defense Forces to fundamentally strengthen its standoff response to threats from beyond the range of anti-air missiles and against naval vessels and landing forces attempting to invade, including those that target Japan’s remote islands, according to the budget document.

Among the items in that category is about 283 billion yen, or about \$1.78 billion, to build a satellite constellation for target detection and tracking capabilities.

The system is budgeted this year for the first time; the ministry hopes to see it operating by March 2027.

The budget allocates about 110 billion yen, or about \$699 million, for unmanned defense capabilities, by which Japan hopes to achieve asymmetrical superiority in the air, at sea and underwater, while minimizing human loss.

Japan in November selected the MQ-9B Sea Guardian, a long-

endurance, unmanned aerial vehicle made by U.S. firm General Atomics, which the ministry hopes will strengthen intelligence and surveillance capabilities. It allocated 41.5 billion yen, or about \$261 million, to acquire two Sea Guardians for next fiscal year.

The ministry also allocated about 3.2 billion yen, or about \$20 million, to acquire small, offensive unmanned aerial vehicles for security in the southwestern islands, a strategically important area for Japan.

Next year’s budget also focused on improving benefits for its troops, as Japan is having difficulties in recruiting personnel, the budget stated.

It allocated 409.7 billion yen, or about \$2.58 billion, to introduce over 30 new or increased allowances for troops, as well as improve living conditions to match younger troops’ lifestyles and to promote a work environment that accommodates raising children or caring for elder family members, it stated.

The budget also allocated 344.5 billion yen, or about \$2.17 billion, for realignment of U.S. Forces Japan, such as relocating Marines on Okinawa from Marine Corps Air Station Futenma to Henoko and building a facility to accommodate training at Mageshima for the U.S. carrier air wing at Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni.

“We will promote measures around bases and steadily implement the realignment of U.S. Forces,” the budget stated.

China sanctions 7 firms over DOD aid to Taiwan

Associated Press

BEIJING — The Chinese government placed sanctions on seven companies on Friday in response to recent U.S. announcements of military sales and aid to Taiwan, the self-governing island that China claims as part of its territory.

The sanctions also come in response to the recent approval of the U.S. government’s annual defense spending bill, which a Chinese Foreign Ministry statement said “includes multiple negative sections on China.”

China objects to American military assistance for Taiwan and often imposes sanctions on related companies after a sale or aid package is announced. The sanctions generally have a limited impact, because American defense companies don’t sell arms or other military goods to China. The U.S. is the main supplier of weapons to Taiwan for its defense.

The seven companies being sanctioned are Insitu Inc., Hudson Technologies Co., Saronic Technologies, Inc., Raytheon Canada, Raytheon Australia, Aerkomm Inc. and Oceaneering International Inc., the Foreign Ministry statement said. It said that “relevant senior executives” of the companies are also sanctioned, without naming any.

Any assets they have in China will be frozen, and organizations and individuals in China are prohibited from engaging in any activity with them, it said.

President Joe Biden last week

authorized up to \$571 million in Defense Department material and services and military education and training for Taiwan. Separately, the Defense Department announced that \$295 million in military sales had been approved.

The U.S. defense bill boosts military spending to \$895 billion and directs resources toward a more confrontational approach to China. It establishes a fund that could be used to send military resources to Taiwan in much the same way that the U.S. has backed Ukraine. It also expands a ban on U.S. military purchases of Chinese products ranging from drone technology to garlic for military commissaries.

Zhang Xiaogang, a Chinese Defense Ministry spokesperson, said last week that the U.S. is hyping up the “so-called” threat from China to justify increased military spending.

“U.S. military spending has topped the world and keeps increasing every year,” he said at a press conference. “This fully exposes the belligerent nature of the U.S. and its obsession with hegemony and expansion.”

The Foreign Ministry statement said the U.S. moves violate agreements between the two countries on Taiwan, interfere in China’s domestic affairs and undermine the nation’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Taiwan’s government said earlier this month that China had sent dozens of ships into nearby seas to practice a blockade of the island.

STRIPE: A YEAR IN REVIEW

Through our lens

Stars and Stripes

With wars in eastern Europe, the Middle East and tensions in the Indo-Pacific, 2024 was a year of multinational exercises and engagements for the U.S. military.

It was also a year of ceremony with deployment homecomings, sporting events and the 80th anniversaries of numerous World War II triumphs, among other things.

Take a look at the best photographs captured throughout the year by Stars and Stripes' skilled reporters.



LUIS GARCIA/Stars and Stripes

U.S. soldiers of the 11th Engineer Battalion, 2nd Infantry Division, and South Korean troops of the 5th Engineer Brigade move bridge parts during wet gap training at the Imjin River, South Korea, March 20, 2024.



SETH ROBSON/Stars and Stripes

A fellow member of the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit congratulates Cpl. Celestino Arellano, left, who sank a target boat with a Stinger ground-to-air missile from Palawan, the Philippines, Oct. 22, 2024.



ALEXANDER RIEDEL/Stars and Stripes

Tech. Sgt. Kayla Bradford waits for a radiological assessment on an F-16 Fighting Falcon during exercise Radiant Falcon, held April 24, 2024, at Spangdahlem Air Base, Germany. She is wearing a device that monitors gamma and beta radiation exposure in real time and alerts the user to unsafe exposure levels.



KELLY AGEE/Stars and Stripes

Yokota Middle School's mascot, White Tiger, high-fives students on their first day of classes at Yokota Air Base, Japan, on Aug. 19, 2024.



PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN/Stars and Stripes

Army WWII veteran Ceo Bauer, 101, downs a shot of a local spirit with World War II reenactors in Saint-Avold, France, Nov. 24, 2024. Bauer participated in the liberation of Metz 80 years ago.

STRIPE: A YEAR IN REVIEW



JONATHAN SNYDER/Stars and Stripes

Members of the 3rd Marine Littoral Regiment fire an M-777 howitzer during a Balikatan drill at the La Paz Sand Dunes in Laoag, Philippines, on May 6, 2024.



ALEXANDER RIEDEL/Stars and Stripes

An F-35 Lightning II banks through the clouds over Ramstein Air Base in Germany during an exercise on June 6, 2024.



SETH ROBSON/Stars and Stripes

A member of Marine Rotational Force-Southeast Asia watches an MV-22B Osprey land near Camp Cape Bojeador, Philippines, on Oct. 20, 2024.



ALEX WILSON/Stars and Stripes

A USS Blue Ridge sailor greets his family just moments after stepping off the ship at Yokosuka Naval Base, Japan, on Aug. 20, 2024.



COREY DICKSTEIN/Stars and Stripes

Army Capt. Tanner Potter reaches out to touch the Ranger sign at Victory Pond during the Army's annual Best Ranger Competition on April 14, 2024, on Fort Moore, Ga.

STRIPES: A YEAR IN REVIEW



ALEXANDER RIEDEL/Stars and Stripes

Space Force Tech. Sgt. Mark Fitzgerald removes his uniform top while treading water during the swim portion of the German Armed Forces Badge for Military Proficiency at Ramstein Air Base, Germany, on April 22, 2024.



COREY DICKSTEIN/Stars and Stripes

Sailors and Marines stand at parade rest on the flight deck of the amphibious assault ship USS Bataan as it pulls into the port of Miami for Fleet Week on May 5, 2024.



LYDIA GORDON/Stars and Stripes

An Apache pilot with the 12th Combat Aviation Brigade idles at a refueling point before training at Grafenwoehr Training Area in Germany, on Sept. 24, 2024.



ERIC KAYNE/Stars and Stripes

Navy's Eli Heidenreich runs for the end zone, pursued by Army cornerback Jaydan Mayes, in the second half of the Army-Navy game Dec. 14, 2024, in Landover, Md. Navy won 31-13.



BRIAN ERICKSON/Stars and Stripes

Sgt. Kaity Andersen gets set to jump out of a C-130 Hercules on March 14, 2024, during the 173rd Airborne Brigade's all-female parachute jump near Vajont, Italy.



ERIC KAYNE/Stars and Stripes

The Color Guard lines up before the Battle of the Bulge 80th Anniversary wreath laying begins at the World War II Memorial's Circle of Remembrance, on Dec. 16, 2024, in Washington.



AKIFUMI ISHIKAWA/Stars and Stripes

U.S. and Japanese soldiers train together during the North Wind exercise at Camp Higashi Chitose, Hokkaido, on Jan. 26, 2024.

MILITARY

TSP set to unveil Roth transfer option in 2026

By JONATHAN SNYDER
Stars and Stripes

The federal government's Thrift Savings Plan for service members and civilian employees will allow participants to transfer money from their traditional accounts into the plan's Roth accounts starting in 2026, according to the Federal Retirement Thrift Investment Board.

The option provides some flexibility in retirement financial planning, but it leaves some questions unanswered, according to a financial adviser.

"Adding the option for in-plan Roth conversions could offer future tax advantages for many TSP participants," Jerel Harvey, founder of Fedway Financial, told Stars and Stripes by email Dec. 21.

"While this provides some useful tax planning opportunities, it's still unclear whether in-plan Roth conversions will have restrictions compared to the more traditional route of using a Roth [individual retirement account]," he said.

The Roth transfer option was announced at the Nov. 21 meeting of the Federal Retirement Thrift Investment Board, board spokesman James Kaplan said by email Dec. 20. The benefit is expected to be available to all participants, except non-spousal beneficiaries or alternate payees, he said.

The Thrift Savings Plan is the federal government's defined contribution retirement savings plan. It consists of a traditional option similar to a 401(k) and a Roth op-

tion.

In 401(k) accounts, payroll contributions are made into the plan before income tax is withheld, which may lower the participant's income tax rate. Those taxes are eventually paid when the investment savings are withdrawn in retirement.

Contributions to a Roth account are made after the payroll deduction for federal income tax, so retirement withdrawals are tax free.

The Thrift Savings Plan has approximately 7.2 million participants and beneficiaries, with about 38% of participants having some money invested in a Roth account. However, only 7% of total plan assets are held in Roth accounts, Kaplan said.

The Thrift Savings Plan has a Roth direct investment option, but so far it hasn't accommodated transfers from traditional accounts. Instead, some account holders were converting funds from their traditional accounts into Roth accounts outside the TSP, Kaplan said.

A 2024 satisfaction survey of Thrift Savings Plan participants found that 35% were likely or extremely likely to take advantage of an in-plan Roth conversion feature, he said.

"An In-Plan Roth Conversion option will provide additional features to the TSP and may provide an incentive for participants to remain in the TSP," he said.

Kaplan said some details of the

in-plan conversion are being worked out. However, the conversion feature is expected to result in a tax bill that cannot be paid with Thrift Savings Plan assets.

Transferring retirement funds from a traditional to a Roth account has other tax implications, so choose wisely, Harvey said.

"When you convert funds, the transferred amount is taxed as ordinary income," he said. "This can lead to a significant tax bill for that year, so it's important to have a plan to cover the taxes. Think about how this decision might affect your savings, investments, or current cash flow. A conversion could also push you into a higher tax bracket or increase your Medicare premiums."

China launches Sichuan, world's largest amphibious assault ship

By JOSH XIAO
Bloomberg

China launched the first of its next-generation amphibious assault ships, as the Chinese navy ramps up capabilities amid growing territorial tensions.

The Type 076 vessel, named Sichuan, entered the water at a ceremony in Shanghai on Friday, according to the official Xinhua News Agency. It was independently developed and will enhance China's combat capabilities far from its shores, the report said.

The vessel, described as the world's largest amphibious assault

ship by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, brings more air power to China's navy as the Asian nation confronts flashpoints in the South China Sea and in the Taiwan Strait. It will undergo tests and sea trials after the launch, according to Xinhua.

The Sichuan is an upgrade from the three Type 075 ships currently operated by China's army.

It features an electromagnetic catapult system, seen also on the latest Fujian aircraft carrier, that allows it to carry fixed-wing aircraft and expand the use of drones increasingly seen as crucial in mod-

ern warfare.

The launch of the Sichuan shows the Chinese military made technological progress despite persistent corruption in the PLA, as reflected in an anti-graft campaign sweeping through the PLA since last summer.

The drive has expanded within the military after originally focusing on its equipment procurement unit and the secretive Rocket Force. Last week, a navy commander of the Southern Theater was purged for suspected violations of law and discipline, which usually means corruption, following the removal of his predecessor a year ago.



LI YUN, XINHUA NEWS AGENCY/AP

China's first Type 076 new-generation amphibious assault ship, the Sichuan, is seen in Shanghai, on Friday.

Futuristic: 'The timing on this is really curious,' analyst says of fighter jet video

FROM PAGE 1

incoming Trump administration.

The Chinese display of new military technology also follows criticism from Elon Musk — whom President-elect Donald Trump has tasked with advising on budget cuts — regarding the F-35 fifth-generation fighter jet program, which has been saddled with faulty technology and cost overruns. Musk called the F-35 builders, Lockheed Martin, "idiots" and suggested that manned fighter jets should be replaced with drones.

"It seems quite intentional that [the Chinese military] wanted us to see this aircraft flying. I would think personally that the timing on this is really curious because they're aware of this debate and it almost seems designed to influence that debate," said Kelly Grieco, a senior fellow at the Stimson Center.

Amid uncertainty over the manned fighter project, Pentagon officials have said they want to

create an unmanned "hellscape" of drones to defend Taiwan. "[China] might be more worried about the United States Air Force going in that direction," Grieco said.

The Pentagon did not respond to a request for comment on the apparent test flights. China's Defense Ministry and state media published no details of the flights — which Chinese netizens pointed out coincided with Mao Tse-tung's birthday.

There is no set pattern in how Beijing unveils new military breakthroughs, though often it is on dates that mark national anniversaries. The maiden flight of the J-20 in 2011 coincided with a visit by then-U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates to Beijing, and it was widely viewed as an effort by Beijing to signal its military might.

Domestic Chinese media reported that the test flights took place around 4 p.m. Thursday at the Huangtianba Airbase near Chengdu, home to the airfields of Chengdu Aircraft Corp. — a sub-

siary of a state-owned aircraft conglomerate tasked with designing and manufacturing some of the country's most advanced combat aircraft, including the J-20.

It has long been known that Beijing — along with the United States and other major powers — is pursuing what is broadly referred to as sixth-generation fighter capabilities. These encompass a range of potential breakthroughs, including AI-driven autonomy, hypersonic speed, advanced electronic warfare systems and next-level stealth technology — all of which could give Beijing an edge in a potential conflict around Taiwan or the South China Sea.

The initial images of the new aircraft provide no concrete evidence of such capabilities. However, analysts note that the designs hint at a significant leap forward from the country's fifth-generation fighters, including the Chengdu J-20, which has undergone several major upgrades over

the past decade.

It's not clear from the images whether either of the test aircraft would be a successor to that model. The J-20 is designed as a long-range stealth fighter and has featured prominently in increasingly aggressive drills circling the self-governed island of Taiwan. China has also produced a smaller fifth-generation stealth aircraft called the J-35, which has yet to be used in major drills but is expected to be deployed for shorter-range carrier-based operations in the coming years.

A maiden test flight of a sixth-generation aircraft would underscore the rapid pace of China's ambitious efforts to modernize its military.

In an annual report to Congress released this month, the Pentagon noted that Beijing is quickly closing the gap with the U.S. in advanced airpower, making significant strides in unmanned aircraft and increasing the proportion of advanced fighter jets in its ranks.

Wider production of a sixth-generation Chinese jet could still be many years off. The fifth-generation J-20 only began mass production around 2017, according to Chinese media reports. The Pentagon estimates that the majority of China's fighters — around 1,300 of a total 1,900 — are fourth-generation planes.

China is pressing ahead with its goal of building a "world-class military" by the middle of the century, aiming to match or surpass the U.S. despite recent setbacks.

A sweeping anti-corruption crackdown has ensnared key military units over the past 18 months, including the disappearance of two top defense ministers. The campaign initially targeted the PLA Rocket Force, which oversees the country's strategic missile systems, but has since widened. Last week, two more generals were removed from key positions, overseeing critical aspects of China's military strategy in the army and the South China Sea navy.

MILITARY

Stray bullet kills soldier driving on Eglin range

By MATTHEW M. BURKE

Stars and Stripes

A U.S. Army sergeant and former star collegiate quarterback was shot and killed by a hunter just days before Christmas while driving on a Florida training range.

Thomas Lazzaro, 27, assigned to 2nd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne), was struck by a stray round on the afternoon of Dec. 22 as he drove on the Eglin Air Force Base range in Freeport, Fla., the online military publication Task & Purpose reported Friday.

He was on his way to assist another soldier having car trouble.

The unnamed hunter remained on the scene and is cooperating with the investigation, the Walton County Sheriff's Office wrote on X the following day. The incident appeared to be a "tragic hunting accident," the sheriff's office said.

"We deeply mourn the loss of U.S. Army Sgt. Thomas Lazzaro," Col. Patrick Nelson, 7th Special Forces Group commander, said in a statement, according to Task & Purpose. "His absence leaves a void that



Lazzaro

will be felt professionally and personally among those who had the honor of working with Thomas. Our heartfelt condolences extend to his family, friends, and comrades during this difficult time."

Lazzaro played quarterback for the Central Michigan University Chippewas for four years, where he completed 72 of 149 passes for 758 yards and five touchdowns, according to the team website. He also rushed for 542 yards and 11 touchdowns.

The Eglin range, of which approximately 250,000 acres is conditionally open for recreation, is a popular hunting spot for out-

doorsmen. Permitted members of the public are granted access to hunt deer, birds and feral hogs during various seasons, according to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission website.

Lazzaro grew up in Colorado Springs where he excelled academically and athletically, according to his online obituary. His Pine Creek High School football team won back-to-back Colorado state championships in 2013 and 2014.

After graduating, he played quarterback for Central Michigan where helped guide the team to the Mid-American Conference

championship game in 2019. He earned a bachelor's degree in business.

Lazzaro followed both his father and grandfather into the Army, a university statement said Thursday.

He graduated from the Special Forces Qualification Course as a weapons sergeant, was trained to use the portable Stinger missile and had received the Army Commendation Medal, his obituary said.

Services and interment were scheduled for Saturday. He is survived by his parents, Thomas and Lisa; a sister, Lexie; and fiancé Kaley Lynch.

Last surviving vet of Pearl Harbor attack on USS Utah is dead

By WYATT OLSON

Stars and Stripes

Warren "Red" Upton, the last surviving veteran of the battleship USS Utah, which sank in Pearl Harbor during the 1941 Japanese surprise attack and remains there as a memorial, died Wednesday in San Jose, Calif. He was 105.

"Following a short hospital stay, Warren died on December 25th surrounded by his loving family," Pacific Historic Parks said in a Facebook post Thursday announcing the death.

Upton was the oldest of a handful of still-living veterans who survived the attack that killed 2,335 service members and 68 civilians on Oahu on Dec. 7, 1941.

With his death, only 15 veterans of the attack are known to be alive, according to Kathleen Farley, president of the California chapter of Sons and Daughters of Pearl Harbor Survivors, who has maintained a tally for years.

Farley said in an email Thursday that it is "hard to believe" that out of the roughly 87,000 active-duty troops stationed on Oahu on the day of the attack, so few remain.

Upton had for years been the secretary of Pearl Harbor Survivors Chapter 7 in San Jose and routinely notified Farley of the deaths of survivors, she said.

On the morning of the Dec. 7 attack, the USS Utah, a Florida-class dreadnaught battleship, was moored off Ford Island in Pearl Harbor in an area normally used by the Pacific Fleet's aircraft carriers.

Unbeknownst to the attackers, however, the carriers were at sea. Japanese torpedo bombers instead targeted the Utah, hitting the

battleship with several torpedoes within the first few minutes of the attack.

The ship began to quickly take on water and capsize.

Upton, then a 22-year-old radioman on the Utah, and the crew were forced to abandon ship, Upton said in a Dec. 7, 2021, article published in The Mercury News.

As crew members plunged into the harbor and swam for land, Upton recalled hearing a voice beside him ask, "Can you swim, Red?"

"I happened to have red hair in those days," he told the newspaper.

Beside him was a fellow sailor flailing in a life jacket and making little forward progress. He helped the man reach shore.

"You're really frightened, but your body reacts," said Upton. "We knew we had to do something—it's self-preservation."

While 58 Utah crew members died that day, 461 survived.

The hulk of the ship, partially above water, is part of the Pearl Harbor National Memorial.

Upton continued to serve as a radioman for the rest of the war. He served again during the Korean War.

He married Valeria Gene Parker several years after the end of World War II. She had served as a Navy nurse during the conflict. She died in 2018. They had five children.

Funeral arrangements are pending.

Upton, however, told The Mercury News that he had no plans to inter his cremated remains in the sunken hull of the Utah, an honor available to the crew members who survived the sinking.

"I got off there once," he told the newspaper. "I'm not going back."



ALLEN AMANI/U.S. Navy

Pearl Harbor survivor Warren Upton, right, is greeted by Michael Ferreira, commander of Pearl Harbor American Veterans, following the USS Utah Memorial Sunset Ceremony in Pearl Harbor on Dec. 6, 2019.



U.S. Navy

The USS Utah moments before rolling over on port side on Dec. 7, 1941.

NATION

Deadly tornadoes hit in Texas, Mississippi

Associated Press

HOUSTON — A strong storm system threatened to whip up tornadoes in parts of the U.S. Southeast on Sunday, a day after severe weather claimed at least two lives as twisters touched down in Texas and Mississippi.

Strong storms moving across the Southeast were expected to continue producing “gusty, damaging winds,” hail and tornadoes through Sunday, National Weather Service meteorologist Frank Pereira said. So far, the line of severe weather had led to about 40 tornado reports from southeastern Texas to Alabama, Pereira said, but those reports remain unconfirmed until surveys of damage are completed.

“It’s not unheard of but it is fairly uncommon to have a severe weather outbreak of this magnitude this late in the year,” he said. The storms will continue to slide east until they eventually move offshore, meaning severe weather risks will dwindle into Sunday evening.



JASON FOCHTMAN, HOUSTON CHRONICLE/AP

Saul Rodriguez uses a chain saw to remove debris atop a car from a woman’s home after strong thunderstorms passed through the Greater Houston region, Saturday in Porter Heights.

On Saturday, one person died in the Liverpool area, located south of Houston, Texas. Four people suffered injuries that were not con-

sidered critical, according to Madison Polston of the Brazoria County Sheriff’s Office.

There were “multiple touchdown points” in the county be-

tween Liverpool, Hillcrest Village and Alvin. Officials knew of around 10 damaged homes but were working to determine the extent of the damage, Polston said.

In Mississippi, one person died in Adams County and two people were injured in Franklin County, according to the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency.

The National Weather Service said two tornadoes hit around Bude and the city of Brandon, ripping roofs from several buildings.

It appeared at least six tornadoes touched down in the Houston area, though more may be discovered when crews go out to survey the damage. There was damage in the area from both tornadoes and straight-line winds, according to Josh Lichter, meteorologist with the National Weather Service.

North of Houston, mobile homes were damaged or destroyed in Katy and Porter Heights, where the doors of a fire station were blown in, the weather service said.

Storm damage has been report-

ed in the northern Alabama town of Athens, just northwest of Huntsville. A National Weather Service survey team was expected to begin assessing damage Sunday morning, said meteorologist Chelly Amin.

Also Sunday, the National Weather Service issued severe thunderstorm warnings across portions of the Deep South as the line of storms barreled east through Alabama, Georgia and into South Carolina. Wind gusts of 60 mph were expected in the Spartanburg, S.C., area. Damage to trees and power lines was expected in a number of counties, while a tornado watch was in effect for some parts of the state.

At 9 a.m. Sunday ET, nearly 65,000 customers were without power in Mississippi, down from 93,000 around 1 a.m., according to electric utility tracking website PowerOutage.us. Some 54,000 customers were without power in Georgia; 36,000, Alabama; 20,000, Louisiana; and 13,000, Texas.

15 hurt in Fla. when a train hits a fire truck that drove onto tracks

By JOSH FUNK
AND JULIE WALKER
Associated Press

Three firefighters and a dozen passengers were injured in Florida on Saturday when a fire truck with its lights flashing drove around rail crossing arms and into the path of a high-speed passenger train after waiting for another train to pass, according to video of the incident and a person briefed on what happened.

The crash happened at 10:45 a.m. in crowded downtown Delray Beach. In the aftermath, the Brightline train was stopped on the tracks, its front destroyed, about a block away from the Delray Beach Fire Rescue truck. Its ladder was ripped off and in the grass several yards away, The Sun-Sentinel reported.

The Delray Beach Fire Rescue said in a social media post that three Delray Beach firefighters were in stable condition at a hospital. Palm Beach County Fire Rescue took 12 people from the train to the hospital with minor injuries.

The person familiar with the details of the crash, who was not authorized to disclose what happened because of the ongoing investigation and spoke on condition of anonymity, said the fire truck stopped at the crossing and waited for a freight train to go by before maneuvering around the



A damaged Brightline train is seen after it collided with a fire truck in downtown Delray Beach.

lowered crossing arms.

Video of the collision shows the fire truck driving around cars stopped at the crossing with its lights flashing to cross the double tracks.

Emmanuel Amaral rushed to the scene on his golf cart after hearing a loud crash and screeching train brakes from where he was having breakfast a couple of blocks away. He saw firefighters climbing out of the front window of their damaged truck and pulling injured colleagues away from the tracks. One of their helmets came to rest several hundred feet away from the crash.

“The front of that train is completely smashed, and there was even some of the parts to the fire truck stuck in the front of the train, but it split the car right in half. It split the fire truck right in



PHOTOS BY MIKE STOCKER, SOUTH FLORIDA SUN-SENTINEL/AP

A damaged fire truck is on its side after colliding with a train in downtown Delray Beach, Fla., on Saturday.

half, and the debris was everywhere,” Amaral said.

A Brightline safety officer said the entire community is involved in ensuring railroad safety and drivers should never go around closed gates.

The Federal Railroad Administration will investigate. A spokesperson for the National Transportation Safety Board said in the afternoon that it was still gathering information about the crash and had not decided yet whether to investigate.

The NTSB is already investigating two crashes involving Brightline’s high-speed trains that killed three people early this year at the

same crossing in Melbourne along the railroad’s route between Miami and Orlando.

More than 100 people have died after being hit by trains since Brightline began operations in July 2017 — giving the railroad the worst death rate in the nation. But most of those deaths have been either suicides, pedestrians who tried to run across the tracks ahead of a train or drivers who went around crossing gates instead of waiting for a train to pass. Brightline has not been found to be at fault in those previous deaths.

Railroad safety has been a concern since a Norfolk Southern

train derailed in East Palestine, Ohio, in February 2023, spilling toxic chemicals that caught fire. Regulators urged the industry to improve safety and members of Congress proposed a package of reforms, but railroads have not made many major changes to their operations and the bill has stalled.

Earlier this month the two operators of a Union Pacific train were killed after it collided with a semi-trailer truck that was blocking a crossing in the small West Texas town of Pecos. Three other people were injured, and the local Chamber of Commerce building was damaged.

NATION

Trump appears to side with Musk on H-1B visas

By MICHELLE L. PRICE

Associated Press

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — President-elect Donald Trump appears to be siding with Elon Musk and his other backers in the tech industry as a dispute over immigration visas has divided his supporters.

Trump, in an interview with the New York Post on Saturday, praised the use of visas to bring skilled foreign workers to the U.S. The topic has become a flashpoint

within his conservative base.

“I’ve always liked the visas, I have always been in favor of the visas. That’s why we have them,” Trump said.

In fact, Trump has in the past criticized the H-1B visas, calling them “very bad” and “unfair” for U.S. workers. During his first term as president, he unveiled a “Hire American” policy that directed changes to the program to try to ensure the visas were awarded to the highest-paid or

most-skilled applicants.

Despite his criticism of them and attempts to curb their use, he has also used the visas at his businesses in the past, something he acknowledged in his interview Saturday.

“I have many H-1B visas on my properties. I’ve been a believer in H-1B. I have used it many times. It’s a great program,” Trump told the newspaper.

He did not appear to address questions about whether he would

pursue any changes to the number or use of the visas once he takes office Jan. 20.

Trump’s hardline immigration policies, focused mostly on immigrants who are in the country illegally, were a cornerstone of his presidential campaign and a priority issue for his supporters.

But in recent days, his coalition has split in a public debate largely taking place online about the tech industry’s hiring of foreign workers. Hard-right members of

Trump’s movement have accused Musk and others in Trump’s new flank of tech-world supporters of pushing policies at odds with Trump’s “America First” vision.

Software engineers and others in the tech industry have used H-1B visas for skilled foreign workers and say they are a critical tool for hard-to-fill positions. But critics have said they undercut U.S. citizens who could take those jobs. Some on the right have called for the program to be eliminated.

9th firm reportedly hit by Chinese espionage campaign

By ERIC TUCKER

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A ninth U.S. telecoms firm has been confirmed to have been hacked as part of a sprawling Chinese espionage campaign that gave officials in Beijing access to private texts and phone conversations of an unknown number of Americans, a top White House official said Friday.

Biden administration officials said this month that at least eight telecommunications companies, as well as dozens of nations, had been affected by the Chinese hacking blitz known as Salt Typhoon.

But deputy national security adviser Anne Neuberger told reporters Friday that a ninth victim had been identified after the administration released guidance to companies about how to hunt for Chinese culprits in their networks.

The update from Neuberger is the latest development in a massive hacking operation that has alarmed national security officials, exposed cybersecurity vulnerabilities in the private sector and laid bare China’s hacking sophistication.

The hackers compromised the networks of telecommunications companies to obtain customer call records and gain access to the private communications of what officials have said is a limited num-

“We know that voluntary cyber security practices are inadequate to protect against China, Russia and Iran hacking of our critical infrastructure.”

Anne Neuberger

deputy national security adviser

ber of individuals. Though the FBI has not publicly identified any of the victims, officials believe senior U.S. government officials and prominent political figures are among those whose communications were accessed.

Neuberger said Friday that officials did not yet have a precise sense how many Americans overall were affected by Salt Typhoon, in part because the Chinese were careful about their techniques, but that a “large number” were in the



PATRICK SEMANSKY/AP

Anne Neuberger, deputy national security adviser for cyber and emerging technology, said Friday that officials did not yet have a precise sense how many Americans overall were affected by the hacking blitz Salt Typhoon, in part because the Chinese were careful about their techniques.

Washington, D.C.-Virginia area.

Officials believe the goal of the hackers was to identify who owned the phones and, if they were “government targets of interest,” spy on their texts and phone calls, she said.

The FBI said most of the people targeted by the hackers are “primarily involved in government or

political activity.”

Neuberger said the episode highlighted the need for required cybersecurity practices in the telecommunications industry, something the Federal Communications Commission is to take up at a meeting next month. In addition, she said, the government was planning additional actions in coming weeks

in response to the hacking campaign, though she did not say what they were.

“We know that voluntary cyber security practices are inadequate to protect against China, Russia and Iran hacking of our critical infrastructure,” she said.

The Chinese government has denied responsibility for the hacking.

Judge signals hearing over assets might not go well for Giuliani

By LARRY NEUMEISTER

Associated Press

NEW YORK — A federal judge is signaling that Rudy Giuliani’s contempt hearing next Friday might not end so well for the former New York City mayor and onetime personal lawyer for President-elect Donald Trump as two Georgia election poll workers try to collect a \$148 million defamation award they won against him.

Judge Lewis J. Liman in Manhattan issued an order Friday in which he was dismissive of what he described as attempts by Giuliani and his lawyer to dodge providing information to the election work-



BRYNN ANDERSON/AP

Rudy Giuliani speaks outside the Fulton County jail in Atlanta, on Aug. 23, 2023.

ers’ lawyers.

And he said the litigants should be ready at the contempt hearing to explain why he should not grant a request by lawyers for the two election workers that he make adverse inferences from evidence in the case that would put Giuliani’s Palm Beach, Fla., condominium in danger of being surrendered to satisfy the defamation award.

The judge also said he may rule on the contempt request at the hearing.

Giuliani has maintained that the Palm Beach property is his personal residence now and should be shielded from the judgment. He

faces a Jan. 16 trial before Liman over the disposition of his Florida residence and World Series rings.

Lawyers for the election workers filed the contempt request after saying Giuliani had failed to turn over a lease to his Manhattan apartment, a Mercedes, various watches and jewelry, a signed Joe DiMaggio shirt and other baseball mementos. The judge ordered Giuliani to turn over the items in October.

Giuliani’s lawyers have predicted that Giuliani will eventually win custody of the items on appeal. A request for comment was sent to a lawyer for Giuliani, who was supposed to be deposed on Friday.

The contempt hearing follows a contentious November hearing in which Giuliani, a former federal prosecutor, became angry at the judge and said Liman was treating him unfairly.

Giuliani was found liable last year for defaming the two Georgia poll workers by falsely accusing them of tampering with ballots during the 2020 presidential election.

The women said they faced death threats after Giuliani falsely claimed they sneaked in ballots in suitcases, counted ballots multiple times and tampered with voting machines.

NATION

Swelling La Niña causes wild 2024 weather

BY MATTHEW CAPPUCCI
The Washington Post

If it feels like the weather was a bit much this year, you're not imagining things. The United States dealt with "hyperactive" hurricane and tornado seasons, and a burgeoning La Niña is in large part to blame.

The term "hyperactive" may seem hyperbolic, but it's actually a meteorologically defined threshold. And while tornadoes and hurricanes are vastly different phenomena, they have one thing in common: a developing La Niña weather pattern that helped increase the frequency of tornadoes and hurricanes in 2024 — even as the pattern hasn't materialized exactly how scientists expected.

For a hurricane season to be hyperactive, it has to churn through 159.6 units of "accumulated cyclone energy" — a metric that gauges how much energy a season's storms churn through. That's about 65% more than the 1991-2020 median.

The 2024 Atlantic hurricane season, which produced 18 named storms, expended 161.6 units. Five hurricanes struck the Lower 48 — Beryl, Debby, Francine, Helene and Milton. Three slammed Florida.

For tornadoes, records are a lot shakier. Data technically goes back to 1950, but most tornadoes back then were missed or not reported. It wasn't until about 1990 that cataloging tornadoes became routine and reliable, and only in the past decade have cellphones provided documentation of events that otherwise would have been overlooked.



KATHLEEN FLYNN/For the Washington Post

A man climbs through what's left of a home after a tornado in the outer bands of Hurricane Milton passed through Lakewood Park, Fla., on Oct. 11.

Still, January through November featured 1,762 preliminary tornado reports. That falls just shy of the top spot. In 2004, 1,787 tornadoes were tallied by the start of December.

The 1991-to-2020 average during this same time frame is 1,187 tornadoes nationwide — putting this year just over 48% ahead of average.

■ **How La Niña conditions can make their mark**

La Niña is the opposite of El Niño, both phases of an alternating weather pattern that begins in the tropical Pacific. In the case of La Niña, cooler than average water temperatures prevail in the eastern Pacific. That

cooling chills the air above, causing it to sink and driving pressure higher, which in turn affects weather features in the atmosphere and triggers downstream effects in North America and beyond.

A clear link exists between La Niña and hurricanes. The sinking air in the Pacific is counteracted by rising air in the Atlantic. (After all, if the air is sinking in one place, it needs to be rising in another.) That upward motion makes it easier for hurricanes to form.

When the winds are too strong, fledgling storms can be torn apart before they ever become hurricanes. That's usually not an issue during La Niña years. The ongoing conditions

have also allowed hurricanes to survive longer, which in some cases meant they could drift far enough west to affect the United States.

With tornadoes, the relationship is more nuanced. There is research to suggest that the Great Plains sees at least some uptick in tornadoes during La Niña years because the climate pattern shifts the position of the jet stream, or a river of winds in the upper atmosphere. The wavier jet stream favors the formation of low pressure systems in the Rockies, which draw warm, humid air north across the Plains and set the stage for rotating thunderstorms.

One catch is that this year, La Niña conditions did not begin to emerge until the autumn. For tornado season, the pendulum was swinging through the "neutral" category from El Niño to La Niña.

But there's emerging research to show that quick swings between El Niño and La Niña, which happened between March and May, can result in booming, busting tornado barages across the Corn Belt and Nebraska in particular, with enhancement elsewhere on the Plains.

Iowa and Nebraska in particular this year saw repeated onslaughts of destructive tornadoes, and the entirety of the U.S. Great Plains, often dubbed "conventional Tornado Alley," roared to life in a way it hadn't for years.

And there's no telling what next year's weather conditions might bring.

TikTok prankster jailed for spraying groceries with pesticides for clicks

BY AMBER FERGUSON
The Washington Post

Charles Smith walked into a Walmart, picked up a can of bug spray, and sprayed produce and other food items, according to police in Mesa, Ariz. — all in the name of going viral on social media.

The 27-year-old, known online as Wolfie Kahletti and Wolfie Party, faces a felony count for "introducing poison," along with three misdemeanor charges for criminal damage, endangerment, and theft after the Dec. 19 incident at the store.

According to a police report obtained by The Washington Post, Smith entered the store, took a can of bug spray from a shelf, and sprayed it on vegetables, fruit, and rotisserie chickens.

He later posted video of the episode on his TikTok page and Instagram stories. In the now-deleted videos, Smith is seen wearing a black hoodie and pink bandanna as he records the entire incident.

Smith returned to the store about 10 minutes later and recorded himself attempting to gather the contaminated items and wheeling them away in a cart to the rear of the store. It's unclear whether he managed to retrieve everything. Authorities reported that Walmart ultimately had to remove products



Tempe Police Department

Charles Smith was arrested Dec. 21 after admitting to spraying bug killer on produce in an Arizona Walmart for a social media video.

worth \$931 from the shelves.

"It should be noted that the time between when the defendant sprayed the items to when he placed them into the cart, left plenty of time for customers to take the contaminated items and purchase them," the police report states.

Mesa Police said Smith was identified through prior police contacts and has an open case with the Tempe Police, along with an active warrant for failure to appear. He turned himself in to Mesa Police and was arrested Dec. 21.

Smith did not respond to a request for comment.

"We're disgusted by what happened at our Mesa store, and social media pranks like this cannot be

tolerated," Kelsey Bohl, director of media relations for Walmart, told The Post in a statement. "The health and safety of our customers and associates is always a top priority. We removed all directly impacted product and cleaned and sanitized the affected area of the store. We are grateful for the swift action of law enforcement, and we'll continue to work closely with them throughout their investigation."

Smith admitted to police to stealing the bug spray and using it on produce before leaving the Walmart, the police report says. He said that online backlash prompted him to return to the store to collect the contaminated items.

Nasty norovirus back in full force in the US

Associated Press

Cases of a wretched stomach bug are surging in parts of the United States this winter, according to government data.

The most recent numbers from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show there were 91 outbreaks of norovirus reported during the week of Dec. 5, up from 69 outbreaks the last week of November.

Numbers from the past few years show a maximum of 65 outbreaks reported during that first week of December.

A norovirus infection is characterized by sudden vomiting and diarrhea. Outbreaks are often seen on cruise ships, in congregate living situations like nursing homes and jails, as well as schools and places where people are close together.

Here are a few things to know about the virus.

■ **What is norovirus?** Norovirus is the leading cause of foodborne illness in the United States, responsible for 58% of such infections acquired in the country each year, according to the CDC.

Norovirus infections are caused by a group of viruses that spread easily, with as few as 10 viral particles having the ability to make someone sick, health experts say.

There are about 2,500 norovirus outbreaks reported annually in the United States. The outbreaks can occur throughout the year but are most common from November to April.

Along with vomiting and diarrhea, common symptoms include nausea, stomach pain, body ache, headache and fever.

■ **How do you get it?** Most norovirus outbreaks occur when people who are already infected spread the virus to others by direct means, such as through sharing food or eating utensils. Outbreaks can also be spread through food, water or contaminated surfaces.

■ **How long do you stay sick?** Illness caused by norovirus typically starts suddenly, with symptoms developing 12 to 48 hours following exposure to the virus. Most people get better within one to three days and recover fully.

■ **Who's at risk?** People of all ages can get infected and fall sick from norovirus. Young children, older people and those with weakened immune systems are most at risk, with dehydration from vomiting and diarrhea the top concern.

There is no medication to treat norovirus. Rehydration is recommended by drinking water and other liquids, with the exception of coffee, tea and alcohol.

WORLD

Azerbaijan: Russia shot down jetliner in error

Associated Press

Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev said Sunday that the Azerbaijani airliner that crashed last week was shot down by Russia, albeit unintentionally, and criticized Moscow for trying to "hush up" the issue for days.

"We can say with complete clarity that the plane was shot down by Russia. (...) We are not saying that it was done intentionally, but it was done," he told Azerbaijani state television.

Aliyev said that the airliner, which crashed Wednesday in Kazakhstan, was hit by fire from the ground over Russia and "rendered

uncontrollable by electronic warfare." Aliyev accused Russia of trying to "hush up" the issue for several days, saying he was "upset and surprised" by versions of events put forward by Russian officials.

"Unfortunately, for the first three days we heard nothing from Russia except delirious versions," he said.

The crash killed 38 of 67 people on board. The Kremlin said that air defense systems were firing near Grozny, the regional capital of the Russian republic of Chechnya, where the plane attempted to land, to deflect a Ukrainian drone strike.

Aliyev said Azerbaijan made three demands to Russia in connection with the crash.

tion with the crash.

"First, the Russian side must apologize to Azerbaijan. Second, it must admit its guilt. Third, punish the guilty, bring them to criminal responsibility and pay compensation to the Azerbaijani state, the injured passengers and crew members," he said.

Aliyev noted that the first demand was "already fulfilled" when Russian President Vladimir Putin apologized to him on Saturday. Putin called the crash a "tragic incident" though stopped short of acknowledging Moscow's responsibility.

He said that an investigation into

the crash was ongoing, and that "the final version (of events) will be known after the black boxes are opened."

He noted that Azerbaijan was always "in favor of a group of international experts" investigating the crash, and had "categorically refused" Russia's suggestion that the Interstate Aviation Committee, which oversees civil aviation in the Commonwealth of Independent States, investigate it.

"It is no secret that this organization consists mostly of Russian officials and is headed by Russian citizens. The factors of objectivity could not be fully ensured here,"

Aliyev said.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told Russian state media on Sunday that Putin had spoken to Aliyev over the phone again, but did not provide details of the conversation.

The Kremlin also said a joint investigation by Russia, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan was underway at the crash site near the city of Aktau in Kazakhstan. The plane was flying from Azerbaijan's capital, Baku, to Grozny when it turned toward Kazakhstan, hundreds of miles across the Caspian Sea from its intended destination, and crashed while making an attempt to land.

Crash: Affected runway to be closed until Jan. 1

FROM PAGE 1

Health officials said they are conscious and not in life-threatening condition.

Among the 177 bodies found, officials have so far identified 88 of them, the fire agency said. The passengers were predominantly South Korean, as well as two Thai nationals.

Ju Woong, director of the Ewha Womans University Seoul Hospital, where one of the survivors was hospitalized, said the man was being treated in an intensive care unit for fractures to his ribs, shoulder blade and upper spine. Ju said the man, whose name wasn't released, told doctors he "woke up to find (himself) rescued."

The fire agency deployed 32 fire trucks and several helicopters to contain the blaze. About 1,570 firefighters, police officers, soldiers and other officials were also sent to the site, according to the fire agency and transport ministry.

Footage of the crash aired by South Korean television channels showed the plane skidding across the airstrip at high speed, apparently with its landing gear still closed, overrunning the runway and colliding head-on with a concrete wall on the outskirts of the facility, triggering an explosion. Other local TV stations aired footage showing thick plumes of black smoke billowing from the plane, which was engulfed in flames.

Lee Jeong-hyeon, chief of the Muan fire station, told a televised briefing that the plane was completely destroyed, with only the tail assembly remaining recognizable. Lee said that workers were looking into various possibilities about what caused the crash, including whether the aircraft was struck by birds, Lee said.

Transport Ministry officials later said their early assessment of communication records show the airport control tower issued a bird strike warning to the plane shortly before it intended to land and gave its pilot permission to land in a different area. The pilot sent out a distress signal shortly before the plane overshot the end of the runway and skidded across a buffer zone before hitting the wall, the officials said.

Senior Transport Ministry official Joo Jong-wan said workers have retrieved the flight data and cockpit voice recorders of the plane's black box, which will be examined by government experts investigating the cause of the crash and fire. He said it may take months for investigators to complete their probe. The runway at the Muan airport will be closed until Jan. 1, the ministry said.

Thailand's prime minister, Paetongtarn Shinawatra, expressed deep condolences to the families of those affected by the accident in a post on social platform X. Paetongtarn said she ordered the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to provide assistance immediately.



CHO NAM-SOO, YONHAP/AP

Firefighters and rescue team members work in the aftermath of the crash-landing of a plane that arrived from Bangkok, at Muan International Airport in Muan, South Korea, on Sunday.

Kim E-bae, Jeju Air's president, bowed deeply with other senior company officials as he apologized to bereaved families and said he feels "full responsibility" for the incident. Kim said the company hadn't identified any mechanical problems with the aircraft following regular checkups and that he would wait for the results of government investigations into the cause of the incident.

Boeing said in a statement on X

it was in contact with Jeju Air and is ready to support the company in dealing with the crash.

Choi, who traveled to the site in Muan, called for officials to employ all available resources to find the missing and identify the victims as soon as possible.

Netanyahu to have prostate removed

Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is having his prostate removed on Sunday, his office said, a procedure that comes as he manages multiple crises at once, including the ongoing war in Gaza and his own trial for alleged corruption.

Netanyahu, 75, is among a cohort of older world leaders, including President Joe Biden, 82, and President-elect Donald Trump, 78, whose health and physical fitness are under deep scrutiny both at home and abroad because of their advanced age and the effect that could have on their leadership.

Netanyahu, who has had a string of health issues in recent years, has gone to great lengths to bolster a public image of himself as a healthy, energetic leader. During his trial this month he boasted about working 18-hour days, even if those long hours are accompanied by a cigar. But as Israel's longest-serving leader, such a grueling workload over a total of 17 years in power could also take a toll on his well-being.

The procedure has already had a fallout: Netanyahu's lawyer Amit Hadad said in a letter to the court the Israeli prime minister would be fully sedated for the procedure and would be hospitalized for "a number of days," asking that his three days of testimony this week be canceled. The court agreed.

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WORLD

Ukrainian troops uncertain if bloody battle in Kursk worth it

By SAMYA KULLAB
Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Five months after their shock offensive into Russia, Ukrainian troops are bloodied and demoralized by the rising risk of defeat in Kursk, a region some want to hold at all costs while others question the value of having gone in at all.

Battles are so intense that some Ukrainian commanders can't evacuate the dead. Communication lags and poorly timed tactics have cost lives, and troops have little way to counterattack, seven front-line soldiers and commanders told The Associated Press on condition of anonymity so they could discuss sensitive operations.

Since being caught unaware by the lightning Ukrainian incursion, Russia has amassed more than 50,000 troops in the region, includ-

ing some from its ally North Korea. Precise numbers are hard to obtain, but Moscow's counterattack has killed and wounded thousands and the overstretched Ukrainians have lost more than 40% of the 380 square miles of Kursk they seized in August.

Its full-scale invasion three years ago left Russia holding a fifth of Ukraine, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has hinted that he hopes controlling Kursk will help force Moscow to negotiate an end to the war. But five Ukrainian and Western officials in Kyiv who spoke on condition of anonymity to freely discuss sensitive military matters said they fear gambling on Kursk will weaken the whole 621-mile front line, and Ukraine is losing precious ground in the east.

"We have, as they say, hit a hornet's nest. We have stirred up an-

other hot spot," said Stepan Lutsviv, a major in the 95th Airborne Assault Brigade.

Army chief Oleksandr Syrskyy has said that Ukraine launched the operation because officials thought Russia was about to launch a new attack on northeast Ukraine.

It began on Aug. 5 with an order to leave Ukraine's Sumy region for what they thought would be a nine-day raid to stun the enemy. It became an occupation that Ukrainians welcomed as their smaller country gained leverage and embarrassed Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Gathering his men, one company commander told them: "We're making history; the whole world will know about us because this hasn't been done since World War II."

Privately, he was less certain.



MYKOLA TYS/AP

Relatives pray to commemorate the fallen soldiers in the "Mourning Christmas Carol" on the Mars Field military cemetery in Lviv, western Ukraine, on Saturday.

"It seemed crazy," he said. "I didn't understand why."

Some front-line commanders said conditions are tough, morale is low and troops are questioning command decisions, even the very purpose of occupying Kursk.

Another commander said that some orders his men have received don't reflect reality because of delays in communication. Delays occur especially when ter-

ritory is lost to Russian troops, he said.

Eyeing frontline losses in the eastern region known as the Donbas — where Russia is closing on a crucial supply hub — some soldiers are more vocal about whether Kursk has been worth it.

"All the military can think about now is that Donbas has simply been sold," the platoon commander said. "At what price?"

US to send \$1.25B in arms to Ukraine, pushing aid before Biden leaves

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The United States is expected to announce that it will send \$1.25 billion in military assistance to Ukraine, U.S. officials said Friday, as the Biden administration pushes to get as much aid to Kyiv as possible before leaving office on Jan. 20.

The large package of aid includes a significant amount of munitions, including for the National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile

Systems and the HAWK air defense system. It also will provide Stinger missiles and 155 mm- and 105 mm artillery rounds, officials said.

The officials, who said they expect the announcement to be made on Monday, spoke on condition of anonymity to provide details not yet made public.

The new aid comes as Russia has launched a barrage of attacks against Ukraine's power facilities

in recent days, although Ukraine has said it intercepted a significant number of the missiles and drones. Russian and Ukrainian forces are also still in a bitter battle around the Russian border region of Kursk, where Moscow has sent thousands of North Korean troops to help reclaim territory taken by Ukraine.

Earlier this month, senior defense officials acknowledged that that the Defense Department may

not be able to send all of the remaining \$5.6 billion in Pentagon weapons and equipment stocks passed by Congress for Ukraine before President-elect Donald Trump is sworn in.

Trump has talked about getting some type of negotiated settlement between Ukraine and Russia, and spoken about his relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Many U.S. and European leaders are concerned that it

might result in a poor deal for Ukraine and they worry that he won't provide Ukraine with all the weapons funding approved by Congress.

The aid in the new package is in presidential drawdown authority, which allows the Pentagon to take weapons off the shelves and send them quickly to Ukraine. This latest assistance would reduce the remaining amount to about \$4.35 billion.

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The Daily Guide to Navigating The Military Business Market




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



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AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Cat dies after eating food tainted with bird flu

OR PORTLAND — An Oregon house cat died after eating pet food that tested positive for bird flu, Oregon authorities said, prompting a recall of raw frozen pet food that was sold nationwide.

Northwest Naturals, a pet food company based in Portland, said it had voluntarily recalled one batch of its two-pound Feline Turkey Recipe raw frozen pet food after it tested positive for the virus. The product was sold through distributors in Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island and Wisconsin, as well as Canada's British Columbia.

The recalled product is packaged in two-pound plastic bags with "best if used by" dates of May 21, 2026, and June 23, 2026. The company and Oregon authorities said that consumers who bought the recalled product should throw it away immediately and contact the place of purchase for a refund.

Church donates last of its money in act of charity

PA BETHLEHEM — A church whose congregation has roots going back to the 19th century is closing and donating hundreds of thousands of dollars from the sale of its building to charity in a Pennsylvania city named for the birthplace of Jesus.

Trinity United Church of Christ in Bethlehem hosted its final service Sunday as its members ended decades as a parish with Christmas season charitable donations of nearly \$400,000, the Morning Call of Allentown reported.

Trinity has — like many other houses of worship — suffered a decline in membership and sold the Gothic Revival-style church building with large stained-glass windows to another congregation.

Man who lost home over \$588 is getting it back

NE SCOTTSBLUFF — A Nebraska man is getting title to his home back, years after losing it over a \$588 tax debt, one of his lawyers said Thursday.

Kevin Fair, of Scottsbluff, has been involved in a legal dispute since 2018, when he lost title to the home he had owned for nearly three decades for failing to pay \$588 in overdue property taxes. Scotts Bluff County sold the lien to a private investor, as allowed by Nebraska law at the time.

When Fair couldn't repay the money along with interest and fees, the title went to the investor, though Fair was allowed to stay in the home while the legal dispute played out.

The Nebraska Supreme Court ruled against Fair in 2022, but a year later, the U.S. Supreme Court ordered the state court to reconsider. In August, the Nebraska Su-



YUKI IWAMURA/AP

Prepping for the new year

Members of the media gather for the Times Square New Year's Eve Ball Crystal Installation at One Times Square on Friday. The dropping on the ball is a quintessential part of new year's celebrations.

preme Court ruled that Fair should retain title to the house.

Jailed crime boss' death blamed on drug overdose

HI HONOLULU — A Hawaii crime boss who died in federal detention this month was killed by an opioid overdose, Honolulu's medical examiner said.

Michael Miske, 50, died of "toxicity of fentanyl and para-fluorofentanyl," the medical examiner's office said in a statement. The death appears to have been accidental but the case is still under investigation, it added, and an autopsy report will likely take at least another 30 days.

It's not clear how Miske got ahold of fentanyl or para-fluorofentanyl while at the Honolulu Federal Detention Center. Para-fluorofentanyl is a synthetic opioid that appears in illicit drugs and is more potent than fentanyl.

Sinkhole prompts lane closures on Interstate 80

NJ WHARTON — A sinkhole that opened up Thursday along Interstate 80 in northern New Jersey forced authorities to close the heavily traveled highway's eastbound lanes.

Crews were evaluating how to repair the sinkhole, which left a gaping depression along the highway's right shoulder near Whar-

ton, which is about 40 miles west of New York City. It's unknown how long the repairs will take, said Steve Schapiro, a spokesperson with the New Jersey Department of Transportation.

The closure comes at a time when traffic is lighter than normal because of the holidays, he said. Motorists were being directed to take a short detour before they were able to get back on the interstate, which connects northern New Jersey with Pennsylvania.

Airport with runway in US and Canada closes

MN ROSEAU — The Piney-Pinecreek Border Airport has a unique claim to fame — its runway straddles the border of the U.S. and Canada. But after seven decades of operation, the small airport that sits near Roseau, Minn., and Piney, Manitoba, in Canada, closed for good on Friday.

The Minnesota Department of Transportation said in a news release earlier this month that the airport "had very low use and faced large maintenance expenses including runway, apron and terminal reconstruction. The international agreement required to operate the airport expires on Dec. 26 and will not be renewed by either airport owner."

The airport opened in 1953 with a grass runway — a paved runway was added in 1978. It is one of six

airports straddling the border, but the only one with a paved runway. It was often used by Americans traveling to Canada to hunt and fish.

Under the international agreement, airport staff are allowed to cross between the countries for their work without going through the typical customs process.

Trial delayed for man accused in Trump plot

FL ORLANDO — A man accused of attempting to assassinate President-elect Donald Trump in South Florida won't be tried until September, a federal judge ruled last week.

Ryan Routh's trial will begin Sept. 8 instead of the previously scheduled Feb. 10 start date, U.S. District Judge Aileen Cannon said in an order released last Monday.

Routh, 58, a Hawaii resident, has pleaded not guilty.

Routh's attorneys had asked the judge to delay the trial until no earlier than next December, saying they needed more time to review the evidence against him and decide whether to mount an insanity defense.

Routh owned 17 cellphones and numerous other electronic devices, and there are hundreds of hours of police body camera and surveillance videos that have been provided to the defense, Routh's attorneys argued during a hearing two weeks ago in Fort

Pierce, Fla.

In her order, Cannon said she wanted to err on the side of providing more time given the seriousness of the allegations, but that starting the trial no earlier than December would be an excessive amount of time.

Customs seizes 22,000 fake inspection stickers

PA HARRISBURG — The U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency said it has seized more than 20,000 counterfeit Pennsylvania vehicle inspection stickers that were shipped from Israel to an address in Philadelphia.

Customs officers found the stickers in two different shipments that arrived on two different days, Nov. 26 and Dec. 9, and confirmed with Pennsylvania authorities that the stickers were counterfeit, the agency said.

The agency did not say in a Thursday statement who sent the stickers, who was to receive them or what purpose the stickers were going to serve. The agency said it made no arrests.

Had they been real, the 22,000 stickers would have a value of \$1.4 million, the agency said. Selling fake vehicle inspection stickers is illegal and a persistent problem for law enforcement, although at a much smaller scale.

FACES

Prime chance to polish act

Comedian using NFL postgame slot to help prepare for Golden Globes gig

By **JOE REEDY**
Associated Press

What do Tom Brady, Taylor Swift and comedy have to do with learning about football?

In the case of comedian Nikki Glaser, it is all intertwined.

Glaser has become a familiar face to football fans this season. Her breakthrough performance at the Tom Brady Roast on May 5 paved the way for five appearances on Amazon Prime Video's "Thursday Night Football" postgame show.

Before a Dec. 19 game between the Denver Broncos and Los Angeles Chargers, Glaser said doing her "Late Hits" segment was a no-brainer following her success at the Brady roast.

"The football audience is kind of familiar with me already. It's one that is OK with me not knowing every detail about football or expecting me to be an expert about it because I was who I was on the Brady Roast. I kind of admitted to not really following football that much," Glaser said. "And I became a fan of Tom Brady and the sport in doing it through that process. So then I was like, 'Let me just keep learning about football through joking about it.' And that was kind of my goal."

Glaser admits her knowledge of football is not all the way there yet. Still, it is further ahead than it was a year ago when she started casually watching Chiefs games due to Swift's relationship with Kansas City tight end Travis Kelce.

And mostly then, it was to see when Swift appeared on screen.

However, Glaser decided to start learning more about the game, which she compared to trying to learn a new language.

"I went my whole life putting on blinders because I was just scared to look stupid if I tried to learn. I always thought football fans would be really judgmental and cruel about my lack of knowledge. But they're not," Glaser said. "They're eager for you to understand and explain."

While NFL viewers are used to seeing comedians, those were mostly confined to the pregame shows and have been taped segments. Fox Sports used Frank Caliendo and Rob

Riggle for years, while Caliendo has also made appearances on ESPN.

Glaser's appearances on "Thursday Night Football" took place after the games and are more like roasts of both teams.

Instead of having at least a week to try out a joke or hone material, Glaser and her team of writers are coming up with material as the game is taking place.

"I give her and her team a ton of credit because what they did was they took a risk by doing live stand-up comedy on a sports show. And there's no way we could have rehearsed what our first one was going to be like. None of us knew what the reaction would be in the crowd," said Spoon Daffary, senior coordinating producer at Prime Video's pregame, halftime and postgame shows.

According to Nielsen, Prime's postgame show is averaging 2.05 million viewers, an 11% increase over last season. That is also outdrawing network late-night shows.

Glaser and her team working on jokes and doing them live also has served as good preparation for her hosting the Golden Globes on Jan. 5, which will air on CBS and Paramount+. Coincidentally, the Golden Globes will come on after CBS Sports airs a doubleheader of NFL games for the final week of the regular season.

"It was a perfect training program for the Golden Globes coming up because I'm going to write jokes about things happening during that show, which is something I've never done before. I've always been someone who, like, really prepares beforehand and knows exactly what they're going to say," she said. "We're just tossing out these insane jokes that we don't even have time to go run them at comedy clubs to see if they even work. I mean, we're finding out live on air if they work or not."

Glaser is not scheduled for any more appearances on Prime Video's postgame show this season, but all parties would be interested in doing it next year.

"I feel like I'd come to the table with a lot more knowledge about the sport that I got from doing it this year," she said. "I find myself now like I'm able to walk by a TV in a bar, and I can watch it and kind of talk about football with people where I can kind of hold my own in conversation, and that is a huge triumph for me."



ERIC THAYER/AP

Nikki Glaser stands on the field in Los Angeles after the Dec. 19 NFL game between the Chargers and Denver.

'Missing You' lands in time for New Year

Associated Press

It seems to be Netflix's resolution every new year to give viewers a head-scratcher in January.

Since 2020, the streamer has released a U.K. mini-series based on a thriller book by Harlan Coben over the holidays. It seems to have paid off: "Fool Me Once," starring Michelle Keegan, Adele Akhtar and Joanna Lumley, launched in January and became what Netflix says was one of their most-watched shows of 2024, amassing 108 million views.

The latest seasonal suspense series is "Missing You," based on Coben's 2014 New York Times best-seller. It stars Rosalind Wiseman ("Slow Horses") as Detective Inspector Kat Donovan, a police officer who specializes in finding missing people — apart from the fiancée that vanished 11 years earlier.

"They know Jan. 1 is the sweet spot for them," says actor Richard Armitage, who has appeared in each winter Coben adaptation, which relocates the stories from the books' America to the north of England. "People have ownership over the show now, so like, 'I want my Harlan Coben show on New Year's Day. Give me my Harlan Coben fix.'"

"It's perfect timing for the release, to be honest," says co-star Ashley Walters. "Most people are going to be hung over or, you know, just not have anything to do with the day."

The show opens with the shock of Donovan's ex-



Netflix

Rosalind Wiseman plays police officer Kat Donovan in "Missing You," landing on Netflix on Wednesday.

fiancée (Walters) popping up on a dating app, over a decade after she came home one day to find him gone.

Wiseman promises twists and turns along the way, adding that the actors weren't initially given the final two scripts and had to turn to the book to find out what happens.

Coben "really is a genius at taking you up the wrong track," says Wiseman. "You're so sure that this time you've got it right and it's this person or this thing, but you are inevitably always wrong."

Bad Bunny teases album coming in January

Bad Bunny revealed one final gift this year: his forthcoming album, "Debi Tirar Más Fotos," debuting Jan. 5. This will mark his sixth studio album, two years following the release of the trap-heavy "Nadie Sabe Lo Que Va a Pasar Mañana."

The 30-year-old singer teased the LP on his Instagram, uploading a clip featuring renowned Puerto Rican film director Jacobo Morales. The poet-writer ponders life with his critter friend "Concho," fatefully regretting not taking more photographs that could have jogged his memories now in old age — thoughtfully weaving in the album name, "Debi Tirar Mas Fotos." As the video frame expands to include a box of photographs and his tiny pal, Morales advises that while one is alive, they must live and love as much as they can.

Concho replies, "That's why I love you a lot."

News of the album also includes a late Christmas gift from Bad Bunny with the release of "Pitorro de Coco," a nostalgia-riddled song

fused with Caribbean beats that trigger holiday blues and a yearning for love lost.

Public speculation about a new album began to circulate on Christmas day when Bad Bunny posted 17 separate lines with the word "Bomba" on the

platform X, hinting at a 17-track lineup that has now been confirmed in a press release statement.

One of those tracks will include "El Club," a synth beat that slowly builds into a catchy dance hook, with an emo twist that bemoans ruminating thoughts about an ex-lover and what they might be up to. Released this month, the eclectic song debuted at No. 2 on the Billboard Hot Latin Song chart, Bad Bunny's 77th hit to grace the list.

"Debi Tirar Más Fotos" is available to pre-save and pre-add on all major music streaming platforms.

Los Angeles Times

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OPINION

How Alaska is making government work again

BY MEREDITH SUMPTER

The Fulcrum

At the end of a bitter and closely divided election season, there's a genuine bright spot for democracy from our 49th state: Alaskans decided to keep the state's system of open primaries and ranked choice voting because it is working.

This is good news not only for Alaska, but for all of us ready for a government that works together to get things done for voters.

Alaska's new system has only been in place for two years. Yet, voters protected it from a repeal effort driven from the extremes because it has already delivered results that Americans in other cities and states would be wise to look to.

I was born and raised in Alaska, so I can attest that ranked choice voting and open primaries have returned a spirit of problem-solving and collegiality to a state where voters want practical results instead of partisan plays. The reality of the state's terrain and climate require Alaskans to rely on our neighbors no matter their politics.

Before voters enacted this reform, however, Alaska's Legislature had stopped working this way. Like so many legislatures across the country, lawmaking was stifled by elected leaders beholden to a small partisan primary electorate rather than the needs of the majority. Many Alaskan voters felt alienated by how toxic and partisan elections had become, contributing to lower turnout and engagement, particularly among rural and Alaska Native communities.

As a result, Alaska's Legislature was one of the least productive in the country. Lawmakers failed to agree on a budget and couldn't pass key bills on topics like education, pensions and health care.

Now, that problem-solving spirit is back. With ranked choice voting and open primaries, Alaskans running for office need to talk — and listen — to all of their voters. In Alaska's system, the top four finishers in an open primary advance to the general election. There, voters have the option of ranking candidates according to their preferences. The winner is the candidate supported by the majority of Alaska's voters. In other words, candidates campaign not just to a partisan base, but to all voters in their state.

Voters — including the nearly 60% of Alaska voters unaffiliated with either party — have seen firsthand how effective this new system is. In 2022, nearly 20% of Alaskans ranked candidates of multiple parties, simply voting for the candidates they thought would do the best job. Alaskans have found ranked choice voting easy to use and like the results it generated.

Yet, the most important improvement hasn't been the election itself, but what comes after. Those who win know that they have a mandate to solve problems, having won support from a real majority of voters. As a result, lawmakers from across Alaska's political landscape — Republicans, Democrats and independents — have come together to create governing coalitions that have made real non-partisan progress on addressing energy issues, growing the state's economy and workforce, and improving public education.

And so a broad coalition of Alaskans came forth to protect the reform, even as extreme partisans encouraged them to repeal it and put them back in charge.

The final results were close. But Alaskans of all backgrounds were heard loud and clear. The new system worked, and it is here to stay.

This is a proven and viable system that rescued Alaskan politics from the ditch of dysfunction and potholes of polarization. Just think what ranked choice voting and open primaries could do in your state.

It's true that voters in three other states (Idaho, Colorado and Nevada) turned down similar systems this year — in part because they were drowned out by millions of dollars and old-fashioned partisan misinformation from those seeking to preserve their hold on power. But Alaska is proof that the people who use this system like it and will work to retain it.

Meanwhile, ranked choice voting's momentum continued unabated at the city level in November. Washington, D.C., voted overwhelmingly to adopt it, as did Oak Park, Ill. That makes 31 wins in its last 32 votes at the city level, for what has become one of the nation's most potent and popular election reforms.

That march forward will continue, and the governing results from Alaska are the reason why. Ranked choice voting will keep growing because it works for voters and elected leaders who want to get things done — and voters know it.

Meredith Sumpter is president and CEO of FairVote, a nonpartisan organization seeking better elections.

Thanks for the laughs, 2024, you ridiculous year

BY GEORGE F. WILL

The Washington Post

Viewed in a bemused spirit, 2024 provided (in Mark Twain's words) "not merely food for laughter," but "an entire banquet." Begin with the Texan who, preparing to run for president, changed his name to Literally Anybody Else. John Kerry, the Democrats' 2004 nominee and, in 2024, the State Department's designated climate worrier, said people would "feel better" about the war in Ukraine if Russia would "make a greater effort to reduce emissions." War criminals should minimize their carbon footprints.

A whistleblower charged that a federal supervisor directed workers responding to hurricanes Helene and Milton to "avoid homes advertising Trump." Miss Sassy, the Springfield, Ohio, cat who police were told might have tempted hungry Haitian immigrants, was found healthy in her owner's basement. Online applicants for some positions in Kamala Harris' campaign were invited to say whether they are "he/him," "she/her," "they/them," "xe/xem," "ze/hir," "ey/em," "hir/hir," "fae/faer" or "hu/hu." At a post-election seminar, a senior official of the campaign pronounced it "flawless." The day after the election, various universities provided milk, cookies, coloring books, Legos, "reflection spaces" and "destress sessions" for young adults "struggling" with the election results.

A Page 1 New York Times headline announced a discovery: "Progressive Ideals Losing a Grip on the Country." The story did not disclose when the country was in this grip. Rwanda, unlike America, evidently is not polarized: Paul Kagame, president since 2000, won reelection with 99.18% of the vote. South

Dakota Republican Gov. Kristi Noem, asked about her memoir claiming that she had once met with North Korea's Kim Jong Un, said this "anecdote" has since been "adjusted."

According to Democratic vice-presidential candidate Tim Walz, socialism is "neighborliness." Cuba, where neighborliness is strict, cut from 80 grams to 60 grams (2.1 ounces) its subsidized daily ration of bread. When German troops volunteered to help Poland recover from flooding, Poland's prime minister told his nation, "If you see German soldiers, don't panic." It was learned that in 2023 Amtrak lost \$1.7 billion but scraped together "incentive" bonuses of more than \$200,000 each for 14 executives.

In his 1867 poem "Dover Beach," noting the decline of religion, Matthew Arnold evoked "the sea of faith" retreating with a "long, withdrawing roar." In 2024, the ersatz religion of "diversity, equity and inclusion" emitted a long, withdrawing whimper. Many corporations (e.g., Walmart, the nation's largest private-sector employer) reconsidered the employee indoctrination and racial spoils system dictated by DEI orthodoxy. Even academia, always the last to learn, awakened to the obvious: Wokeness, including mandatory statements of DEI groveling by faculty applicants, is incompatible with intellectual freedom. A federal judge handling litigation concerning the crashes of two Boeing 737 Max jets that killed 346 people was unamused by the Justice Department's "diversity and equity" provisions when choosing the monitor of Boeing's compliance with its plea deal. Eighty-four percent of San Francisco voters supported restoring algebra to middle schools, it having been banished to serve "equity." A Virginia school district paid \$575,000 recompense to a teacher

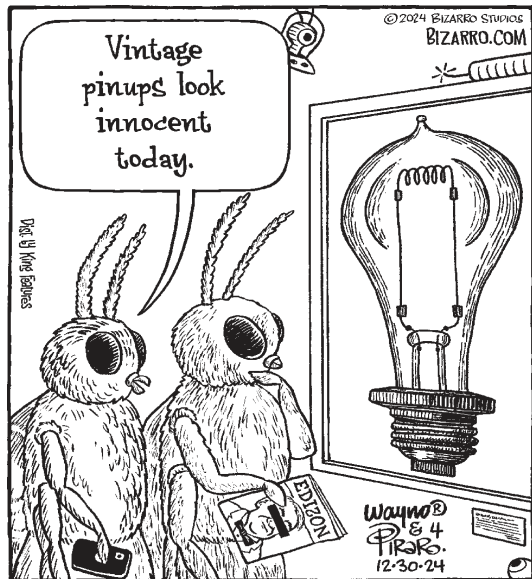
fired for mis-pronouncing. When the New York-New Jersey region experienced an earthquake, the Green Party candidate for Senate in New Jersey said: "We never get earthquakes. The climate crisis is real."

Illinois' legislature passed a bill renaming some "offenders" as "justice-impacted individuals." Five crime-busting Mississippi cops arrested a 10-year-old for peeing behind his mother's car. He was sentenced to three months' probation, with drug tests at his probation officer's discretion. Embracing today's rule "Never miss an opportunity to criminalize something," an Ohio legislator, incensed not by the rioters but by their excuse for rioting, proposed legislation making it a felony to plant a visiting team's flag at the center of Ohio State's football field. Elsewhere in education, Chicago's teachers unions (aka the city's government) pronounced it "misogynistic" to report that 4 in 10 Chicago public school teachers (median salary: \$95,000) were "chronically absent."

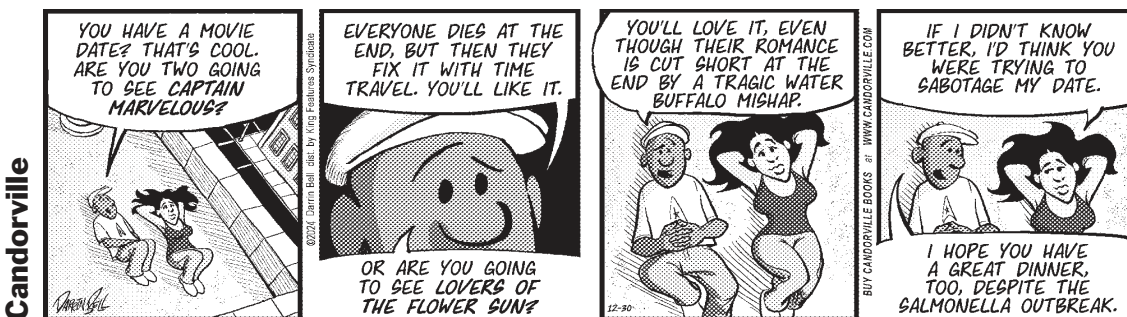
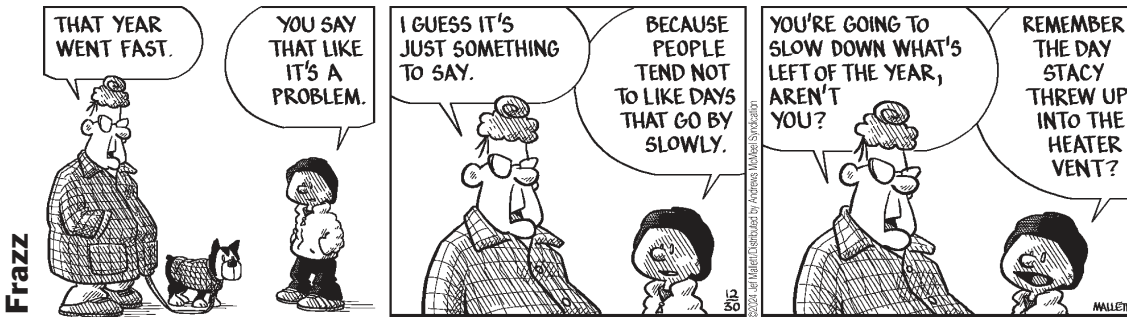
Brooklyn's PS 261, where the "Arab Cultural Arts" program is funded by Qatar, had a map of the Middle East with Israel omitted. An Amnesty International report this year began: "On 7 October 2023, Israel embarked on a military offensive ..." One wonders why. The New York Times reported that on Oct. 9, 2023, "senior administrators at Harvard University" removed the word "violent" from the description of Hamas' attacks because a dean explained that it "sounded like assigning blame."

In Bolivar, Mo., Bill Pool, who was born when his father was 80, will turn 100 in January. Bill, reportedly the last living son of a Civil War veteran, survived 2024, perhaps laughing all the way.

Bizarro



Loose Parts



Eugene Sheffer Crossword

Grid for Eugene Sheffer Crossword with numbers 1-51 indicating starting positions for clues.

ACROSS

- 1 Jolly laugh
5 Resort
8 Lugosi of film
12 Semisoft cheese
14 Corp. bigwig
15 Gas station store, often
16 Lovers' quarrel
17 "Shoo!"
18 Camera settings
20 Emulate Monet
23 Metric weight
24 Bloodline sharers
25 Permitted
28 "How — you doing?"
29 Crabby type
30 White wine cocktail
32 Caribbean island
34 Architect Saarinen
35 Author Wiesel
36 Awaited
37 Breath mint brand
40 Texas tea
41 Former Dallas QB Tony
42 Barista's designs
47 Heaps
48 Respected
49 Long hair

DOWN

- 50 — Paulo
51 Agrees silently
23 1971 Jane Fonda film
25 Items
26 Scratched (out)
27 Tragic
29 Arizona river
31 Scepter
33 Perfumery compound
34 Brennan in "Clue"
36 Take the bait
37 Streetcar
38 Teeny bit
39 "Let's go!"
40 "Beetle Bailey" dog
43 Simile words
44 I love (Lat.)
45 Scarlet
46 NFL six-pointers

Answer to Previous Puzzle

Answer grid for the previous crossword puzzle with words like DODO, CAB, ZAC, ADEN, ASEA, ELO, RENT, LAST, RMS, NASH, APT, GOAT, EMIOHO, MADRAS, FELLAS, VIDOR, ADEPT, PRECIS, ELIDED, KEADSL, JAGS, LOW, ONTO, URI, AURA, CAMP, DOS, STAR, KLEE, ENT, PEND, SAND.

12-30

CRYPTOQUIP

FYXD JYX CMETGRJ DEJGZXH
SMM YXT LGDQ CMEFXTR YSH
HTEELXH, RYX RYTGXQXH

"FYSJ GD ZSTD SJGED?!"
Saturday's Cryptoquip: FILMS WHICH PROFILE THE CAREERS OF FOLKS LIKE PHIL DONAHUE AND OPRAH WINFREY: TALK-UMENTARIES.
Today's Cryptoquip Clue: M equals L

SCOREBOARD/NBA

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Saturday's men's scores

EAST

Boston College 78, Fairleigh Dickinson 70
Columbia 85, Fairfield 72
Georgetown 83, Coppin St. 53
Maryland 81, Md.-Eastern Shore 66
Saint Joseph's 76, Delaware St. 58
St. John's 97, Bucknell 63
Syracuse 75, Duquesne 63

SOUTH

Charleston Southern 95, Columbia (SC) 89
Davidson 86, E. Michigan 64
Elon 73, Marshall 59
Florida Gulf Coast 75, Richmond 57
George Mason 64, Mount St. Mary's 56
Georgia Tech 92, Alabama A&M 49
Hampton 83, Howard 67
Louisville 78, E. Kentucky 76
McNeese St. 86, New Orleans 61
Memphis 87, Mississippi 70
Mercer 71, Georgia St. 68
Morehead St. 94, Alice Lloyd 63
NC A&T 85, NC Central 72
Old Dominion 82, Va. Wesleyan 44
South Florida 106, Webber International 49

UNC-Greensboro 105, Va.-Lynchburg 50
UNC-Wilmington 99, Pioneers 47
Wofford 100, Kentucky Christian 55

MIDWEST

DePaul 84, Loyola (Md.) 65
E. Illinois 99, Blackburn 55
Omaha 81, Mount Marty 51
Saint Louis 78, William Woods 57

SOUTHWEST

Sam Houston St. 111, Dallas 65
Texas A&M 92, Abilene Christian 54
Texas Southern 103, Ambassadors 68
Tulsa 96, SW Christian 63
UTEP 79, Northern New Mexico 60

FAR WEST

Boise St. 73, San Jose St. 71
CS Northridge 87, La Sierra 52
Cal Baptist 79, Jackson St. 73
Cal St.-Fullerton 93, Knights 60
Grand Canyon 68, San Diego 55

New Mexico 76, Colorado St. 68
New Mexico St. 85, Southwest 52
Saint Mary's (Cal.) 70, Pacific 60
San Francisco 70, Loyola Marymount 55
Santa Clara 91, Pepperdine 80
UC Davis 109, Cal Maritime 46
UC San Diego 109, Occidental 51
UC Santa Barbara 89, Westcliff 72
UCLA 65, Gonzaga 62
UNLV 87, Fresno St. 77
Utah St. 67, San Diego St. 66
Utah Valley St. 119, Bethesda 59
Washington St. 89, Portland 73
Wyoming 66, Nevada 63

Saturday's women's scores

EAST

Buffalo 107, Le Moyne 59
Coppin St. 69, Bryant 52
Creighton 75, St. John's 56
Detroit 66, Robert Morris 58
Fairleigh Dickinson 66, Maine 48
Georgetown 78, Md.-Eastern Shore 68

SOUTH

Austin Peay 73, Tennessee Southern 66
Georgia 83, Ohio 50
Kentucky 88, W. Kentucky 70
North Alabama 84, Bethel (Tenn.) 54

MIDWEST

Akron 80, Harriers 52
Fort Wayne 76, Wright St. 49
IUPUI 65, Youngstown St. 50
Illinois 64, Oregon 59
Indiana 83, Wisconsin 52
Minnesota 90, Penn St. 54
N. Illinois 92, V-Hawks 44
St. Thomas (MN) 81, E. Michigan 65
Toledo 114, Defiance 30
Washington 90, Northwestern 71

SOUTHWEST

Oral Roberts 124, Haskell 47

FAR WEST

Cal Poly 66, S. Utah 58
Oregon St. 71, Gonzaga 67, OT
Portland 81, Santa Clara 54
Saint Mary's (Cal) 80, Pacific 78, OT
San Francisco 85, Loyola Marymount 73
UC Davis 115, Cal Maritime 29
Washington St. 67, Pepperdine 46

DEALS

Saturday's transactions

BASEBALL Major League Baseball American League

BOSTON RED SOX — Agreed to terms with RHP Walker Buehler on a one-year contract.

BASKETBALL National Basketball Association

NBA — Suspended Dallas F Naji Marshall four games without pay and Phoenix C Jusuf Nurkic three games without pay for their involvement in an on-court altercation in a Dec. 27 game.

MINNESOTA TIMBERWOLVES — Waived G P.J. Dozier.

FOOTBALL National Football League

ARIZONA CARDINALS — Elevated RB Michael Carter and S Andre Chachere to the active roster.

ATLANTA FALCONS — Elevated CB Lamar Jackson and OL Tyrone Wheatley Jr. to the active roster. Placed CB Antonio Hamilton Sr. on injured reserve. Signed ILB Josh Woods to the active roster.

BUFFALO BILLS — Elevated WR Tyrell Shavers and S Lewis Cine to the active roster.

CAROLINA PANTHERS — Placed RB Chuba Hubbard and CB Chau Smith-Wade on injured reserve. Signed RB Mike Boone and QB Jack Plummer to the active roster.

DALLAS COWBOYS — Placed WR CeeDee Lamb and CB Amani Oruwariye on injured reserve. Signed LB Darius Harris to the active roster. Elevated OT Dakoda Shepley and CB Troy Pride to the active roster.

DETROIT LIONS — Signed CB Morice Norris Jr. to the active roster. Signed LB Kwon Alexander to the practice squad.

GREEN BAY PACKERS — Elevated S Omar Brown from the practice squad.

MIAMI DOLPHINS — Signed WR Erik Ezukanma to the active roster. Placed CB Kendall Fuller on injured reserve. Elevated CB Nik Needham and QB Skylar Thompson to the active roster.

MINNESOTA VIKINGS — Activated LB Ivan Pace Jr. from injured reserve. Waived LB Jamir Davis.

NEW ORLEANS — Signed G Kyle Hergel and LB Isaiah Stalbird to the active roster. Elevated OT Austin Deculus and RB Clyde Edwards-Helaire to the active roster.

AP SPOTLIGHT

Dec. 30

1973 — The Miami Dolphins, behind 266 yards rushing, beat the Oakland Raiders 27-10 for an unprecedented third straight AFC title.

1981 — In the 39th game of the season, Edmonton's Wayne Gretzky scores five goals, including his 50th into an empty net, to lead the Oilers to a 7-5 victory over the Philadelphia Flyers. Gretzky bettered the mark of 50 goals in 50 games held by Maurice Richard and Mike Bossy.

1990 — Orlando point guard Scott Skiles dishes out an NBA-record 30 assists in a 155-116 victory against the Denver Nuggets. Skiles breaks the record of 29 assists set by the Nets' Kevin Porter in 1978.

2000 — Nebraska ends a disappointing season by setting a bowl record for points

in a 66-17 victory over Northwestern in the Alamo Bowl.

2002 — TCU sets an NCAA record for fewest points allowed when the Lady Frogs beat Texas Southern 76-16. The 16 points allowed breaks the Division I record for fewest points. Prairie View scored 19 points against Jackson State in 1983.

2008 — NFL head coach Mike Shanahan is fired by the Denver Broncos.

2010 — Top-ranked Connecticut's record 90-game winning streak in women's basketball ends when No. 9 Stanford outplays the Huskies from the start in a 71-59 victory at Maples Pavilion.

2016 — Isaiah Thomas scores 29 of his career-high 52 points in the fourth quarter, setting a club record for points in a period and leading Boston to a 117-114 victory over the Miami Heat.

NBA ROUNDUP

Hawks beat Heat for 3rd straight win

Associated Press

ATLANTA — Jalen Johnson scored 28 points and the Atlanta Hawks closed out a four-game homestand by winning a third straight contest, 120-110 over the Miami Heat on Saturday.

Trae Young added his 22nd double-double of the season, with 11 points and 15 assists, and De'Andre Hunter scored 26 points in his 14th consecutive game with at least 15 points coming off the bench.

After a close first half that featured nine lead changes, Atlanta seized control early in the second half. With five minutes to go in the third quarter, Garrison Mathews and Hunter hit back-to-back 3s to give Atlanta an 81-72 lead, its biggest of the night, and forcing a Miami timeout.

Tyler Herro scored 28 points and dished out 10 assists and Bam Adebayo added 17 points and 10 rebounds. It was the Heat's fourth game in a row without star Jimmy Butler, who sat out for what the team called "return to competition reconditioning."

Thunder 106, Hornets 94: Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 22 points, Jalen Williams added 20 and visiting Oklahoma City beat Charlotte for its 10th straight regular-season win.

Aaron Wiggins added 17 points and Isaiah Hartenstein had 12 points and 15 rebounds for the Thunder, who never trailed.

Miles Bridges had 19 points and 10 rebounds, while Vasa Micic added 16 points for the Hornets, who have lost 15 of their last 16 games.

Knicks 136, Wizards 132 (OT): Jalen Brunson scored nine of his season-high 55 points in overtime and Karl-Anthony Towns had 30 points and 14 rebounds as visiting New York extended its season-long winning streak to seven games by beating Washington.

Playing without leading scorer Jordan Poole, who was out with a bruised left hip, Washington led for most of the game but committed 17 turnovers that resulted in 26 New York points.

Bulls 116, Bucks 111: Josh Giddey had 23 points, 15 rebounds and 10 assists for his second triple-double this season to lead host Chicago to a win over Milwaukee.

Giddey sank two free throws with 10 seconds left to make it 115-111, then pulled down a rebound to help seal it as Chicago snapped a three-game losing streak.

Coby White, who scored 22, nailed a tiebreaking jumper with 32 seconds remaining.

Damian Lillard returned to the lineup with 29 points and 12 assists, but the Bucks dropped their second straight.

Warriors 109, Suns 105: Jonathan Kuminga had 34 points and made the go-ahead free throw in host Golden State's win over Phoenix.

With the Warriors down one, Kuminga was fouled after getting inside positioning on Kevin Durant on an out-of-bounds play with 29 seconds to go. Kuminga made both free throws to put Golden State ahead.

Durant, who led the Suns with 31 points, missed a shot on the other end.

Nuggets 134, Pistons 121: Nikola Jokic had 37 points, Jamal Murray scored 21 of his 34 in a decisive third period, and host Denver survived Detroit's fourth-quarter rally to win.

Michael Porter Jr. finished with 26 points for Denver, which used an 18-4 run to take the lead for good at halftime and opened a 25-point lead heading into the fourth.

Cade Cunningham and Jaden Ivey scored 17 points each to lead Detroit.

76ers 114, Jazz 111: Joel Embiid and Tyrese Maxey each scored 32 points to lead visiting Philadelphia over Utah.

Embiid went 11-for-13 from the free-throw line to rally the 76ers from a 14-point first-half deficit for their ninth victory in 12 games. Paul George had a season-high five steals to go along with 13 points.

Utah trailed by 11 early in the second half before rallying, but the 76ers took a 110-108 lead with 1:38 left on back-to-back baskets from Maxey and Embiid. Lauri Markkanen cut the deficit to 112-111 on a 3-pointer with 4.1 seconds remaining, but Maxey sealed the win with two free throws.

Trail Blazers 126, Mavericks 122: Shaedon Sharpe scored 23 points and Anfernee Simons 22 as host Portland held off Dallas.

Deandre Ayton had 21 points, 16 rebounds and three blocks and Deni Avdija had 21 points, five rebounds and five assists.

Kyrie Irving led all scorers with 46 points and was the only consistent offensive threat for the Mavericks, who were playing without Naji Marshall, PJ Washington — suspended for their involvement in an on-court fight against the Suns — Luka Doncic and Dereck Lively II.

Lakers 132, Kings 122: Anthony Davis had 36 points, 15 rebounds and eight assists for host

NBA scoreboard

Eastern Conference

Atlantic Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Boston	23	8	.742	—
New York	22	10	.688	1½
Philadelphia	12	17	.414	10
Brooklyn	12	19	.387	11
Toronto	7	24	.226	16

Southeast Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Orlando	19	14	.576	—
Atlanta	17	15	.531	1½
Miami	15	14	.517	2
Charlotte	7	24	.226	11
Washington	5	24	.172	12

Central Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Cleveland	27	4	.871	—
Milwaukee	16	14	.533	10½
Indiana	15	17	.469	12½
Chicago	14	18	.438	13½
Detroit	14	18	.438	13½

Western Conference

Southwest Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Memphis	22	10	.688	—
Houston	21	10	.677	½
Dallas	20	12	.625	2
San Antonio	16	15	.516	5½
New Orleans	5	27	.156	17

Northwest Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Oklahoma City	25	5	.833	—
Denver	17	13	.567	8
Minnesota	16	14	.533	9
Portland	11	20	.355	14½
Utah	7	23	.233	18

Pacific Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
L.A. Lakers	18	13	.581	—
L.A. Clippers	18	13	.581	—
Golden State	16	15	.516	2
Phoenix	15	16	.484	3
Sacramento	13	19	.406	5½

Friday's games

New York 108, Orlando 85
Boston 142, Indiana 105
San Antonio 96, Brooklyn 87
Minnesota 113, Houston 112
Memphis 132, New Orleans 124
Cleveland 149, Denver 135
Dallas 98, Phoenix 89
L.A. Clippers 102, Golden State 92

Saturday's games

Atlanta 120, Miami 110
Oklahoma City 106, Charlotte 94
New York 136, Washington 132, OT
Chicago 116, Milwaukee 111
Golden State 109, Phoenix 105
Denver 134, Detroit 121
Philadelphia 114, Utah 111
Portland 126, Dallas 122
L.A. Lakers 132, Sacramento 122

Sunday's games

Brooklyn at Orlando
Atlanta at Toronto
Indiana at Boston
Memphis at Oklahoma City
Miami at Houston
San Antonio at Minnesota

Monday's games

Chicago at Charlotte
New York at Washington
L.A. Clippers at New Orleans
Denver at Utah
Cleveland at Golden State
Dallas at Sacramento
Philadelphia at Portland

Tuesday's games

Milwaukee at Indiana
Toronto at Boston
L.A. Clippers at San Antonio
Minnesota at Oklahoma City
Cleveland at L.A. Lakers
Memphis at Phoenix

Los Angeles in Sacramento's first game under interim coach Doug Christie.

LeBron James didn't play for the Lakers because of illness, but a balanced effort helped make up for his absence, led by Austin Reaves with 26 points and a career-high 16 assists.

Playing for the first time since Mike Brown was fired on Friday, De'Aaron Fox led the Kings with 29 points and 12 assists.

NHL

Scoreboard

Eastern Conference						
Atlantic Division						
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF GA
Toronto	37	22	13	2	46	115 105
Florida	37	22	13	2	46	126 116
Boston	38	20	14	4	44	101 115
Tampa Bay	33	20	11	2	42	132 92
Ottawa	35	18	15	2	38	107 102
Montreal	35	15	17	3	33	105 123
Detroit	35	13	18	4	30	90 116
Buffalo	36	13	19	4	30	110 122

Metropolitan Division						
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF GA
New Jersey	39	24	12	3	51	130 98
Washington	35	24	9	2	50	130 91
Carolina	36	22	13	1	45	125 102
Pittsburgh	37	16	16	5	37	115 139
Philadelphia	36	16	16	4	36	111 131
Columbus	37	15	16	6	36	123 133
N.Y. Islanders	36	14	15	7	35	99 116
N.Y. Rangers	35	16	18	1	33	98 108

Western Conference						
Central Division						
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF GA
Winnipeg	37	26	10	1	53	137 91
Minnesota	36	22	10	4	48	107 98
Colorado	37	22	15	0	44	125 121
Dallas	34	20	13	1	41	107 88
Utah	35	16	13	6	38	103 103
St. Louis	37	17	16	4	38	98 111
Nashville	36	11	18	7	29	88 114
Chicago	36	12	22	2	26	93 118

Pacific Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF GA
Vegas	35	24	8	3	51	126 99
Los Angeles	35	20	10	5	45	108 91
Edmonton	35	21	11	3	45	114 99
Vancouver	35	17	10	8	42	111 112
Calgary	35	17	11	7	41	98 107
Seattle	37	16	19	2	34	106 117
Anaheim	34	13	17	4	30	83 106
San Jose	39	11	22	6	28	105 142

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.

Friday's games
 Toronto 5, Detroit 2
 Buffalo 6, Chicago 2
 New Jersey 4, Carolina 2
 Columbus 6, Boston 2
 Minnesota 3, Dallas 2, OT
 St. Louis 7, Nashville 4
 Colorado 4, Utah 1
 Vegas 6, San Jose 3

Saturday's games
 Montreal 4, Florida 0
 Seattle 5, Vancouver 4, OT
 Philadelphia 3, Anaheim 1
 Los Angeles 4, Edmonton 3, OT
 Boston 4, Columbus 0
 Winnipeg 4, Ottawa 2
 Washington 5, Toronto 2
 Carolina 5, New Jersey 2
 Tampa Bay 6, N.Y. Rangers 2
 N.Y. Islanders 6, Pittsburgh 3
 Calgary 3, San Jose 1

Sunday's games
 Buffalo at St. Louis
 Edmonton at Anaheim
 Montreal at Tampa Bay
 Washington at Detroit
 N.Y. Islanders at Pittsburgh
 Calgary at Vegas
 Ottawa at Minnesota
 Dallas at Chicago
 Philadelphia at Los Angeles

Monday's games
 N.Y. Rangers at Florida
 Nashville at Winnipeg
 Utah at Seattle

Tuesday's games
 Boston at Washington
 N.Y. Islanders at Toronto
 Montreal at Vegas
 St. Louis vs. Chicago at Wrigley Field
 Buffalo at Dallas
 Carolina at Columbus
 Nashville at Minnesota
 New Jersey at Anaheim
 Philadelphia at San Jose
 Pittsburgh at Detroit
 Winnipeg at Colorado
 Utah at Edmonton
 Vancouver at Calgary

Scoring leaders Through Saturday				
	GP	G	A	PTS
Nathan MacKinnon, COL	37	14	46	60
Nikita Kucherov, TB	31	16	37	53
Mikko Rantanen, COL	37	20	33	53
Leon Draisaitl, EDM	35	24	29	53
Mitch Marner, TOR	37	13	37	50
Connor McDavid, EDM	32	15	35	50
Kirill Kaprizov, MIN	34	23	27	50

ROUNDUP

Caps' Ovechkin scores in return

Associated Press

TORONTO — Alex Ovechkin's record chase is back on.

His empty-net goal for the Washington Capitals in Saturday's 5-2 victory over the Toronto Maple Leafs wasn't the most challenging goal among the 869 he's scored in the NHL, but it was significant given his return from a 16-game hiatus due to injury.

"Every goal is hard to score in this league, so if you want to try, put on skates and go six on five," Ovechkin quipped after the game.

Washington's captain moved closer to Wayne Gretzky's record of 894 career goals. Ovechkin is 25 back with 46 games remaining in the regular season.

Ovechkin played his first game since fracturing his left fibula Nov. 18 in a game against the Utah Hockey Club.

The 39-year-old said it didn't take long for him to get back in rhythm.

"I tried to feel how I feel with the puck, mentally, physically. And as soon as the first shift ended, I was feeling like 'OK, now I could play,'" he said.

Ovechkin scored a league-leading 15 goals in 18 games before the injury occurred.

Andrew Mangiapane, Jakob Chychrun, Nic Dowd and Tom Wilson also scored for the Capitals. John Tavares and Bobby McMann scored for the Leafs.

Logan Thompson stopped 35 shots for the win. Matt Murray made 27 saves for Toronto.

Jets 4, Senators 2: Connor Hellebuyck made 33 saves, Nikolaj Ehlers had a goal and two assists and NHL-leading Winnipeg beat visiting Ottawa.

Gabriel Vilardi gave Winnipeg a 3-2 lead on a power play midway through the third period, scoring off Ehlers' one-touch pass.

Kyle Connor and Mark Scheifele each had a goal and an assist. The Jets have won three in a row and seven of eight to improve to 26-10-1.

Tim Stutzle and Ridly Greig scored power-play goals for Ottawa. Sogaard made 19 saves.

Canadiens 4, Panthers 0: Jakub Dobes stopped 34 shots in his NHL debut, Kirby Dach had his first two-goal game in nearly two years, and Montreal won at Florida.

Dobes, a 23-year-old from the Czech Republic, went 9-3-1 with a 2.44 goals-against average and a .910 save percentage in the minors this season, his second as a pro.

He became the first goaltender to record a shutout against the defending Stanley Cup champion in his NHL debut since Daren Puppa for Buffalo at Edmonton on Nov. 1, 1985, according to STATS.

Cole Caufield and Jake Evans also scored for Montreal, and Alex Newhook had two assists.

Flyers 3, Ducks 1: Noah Cates extended his goal-scoring streak to five games, Morgan Frost scored the go-ahead goal early in the third period and visiting Philadelphia beat Anaheim.

Joel Farabee also scored for the Flyers, who had lost four of their past five. Samuel Ersson stopped 31 shots.

Troy Terry scored for Anaheim, and Lukas Dostal made 22 saves.

Cates tied Nashville's Jonathan Marchessault for the longest active goal streak in the league at 4:03 of the second off a snap shot in front of the goal to give the Flyers a 1-0 lead.

Kraken 5, Canucks 4 (OT): Vince Dunn scored his second goal of the game 2:15 into



FRANK GUNN, THE CANADIAN PRESS/AP

Washington's Alex Ovechkin, left, battles with the Maple Leafs' Chris Tanev during the first period in Toronto on Saturday. Ovechkin scored an empty-net goal in the Capitals' 5-2 victory.

overtime and Seattle overcame a three-goal, third-period deficit to beat host Vancouver.

Jaden Schwartz also scored twice, tying it at 4 with 49 seconds left and goalie Philipp Grubauer off for an extra attacker.

Matty Beniers also scored to help the Kraken end a five-game losing streak. Grubauer made 25 saves.

Kings 4, Oilers 3 (OT): Quinton Byfield scored his second goal of the game with 1:41 remaining in overtime as Los Angeles beat visiting Edmonton.

Byfield scored on a wrist shot from the right circle to give Los Angeles a win in its first of four regular-season games against Edmonton, which has knocked the Kings out of the playoffs for three straight seasons.

Warren Foegele had a goal and two assists, Tanner Jeannot also scored and the Kings won their sixth straight home game. Darcy Kuemper made 24 stops.

Ryan Nugent-Hopkins had a power-play goal, Kasperii Kapanen and Viktor Arvidsson also scored for the Oilers, who had their three-game winning streak halted. Stuart Skinner made 24 saves.

Bruins 4, Blue Jackets 0: Jeremy Swayman stopped 18 shots for his second shutout of the season, David Pastrnak scored on a clean breakaway and Boston beat visiting Columbus to split consecutive-night, home-and-home games between the teams.

Morgan Geekie, Justin Brazeau and Cole Koepke also scored for the Bruins, who won for the fifth time in seven games. Swayman is 7-1-1 in his last nine starts.

Hurricanes 5, Devils 2: Jackson Blake scored a power-play goal with 9:17 remaining to give Carolina the lead, and Jack Roslovic scored twice as it beat visiting New Jersey.

Rod Brind'Amour became the fastest coach to 300 wins in NHL history. It was the Hurricanes' 488th game under Brind'Amour, who reached that mark in eight fewer games than Bruce Boudreau.

Lightning 6, Rangers 2: Brayden Point scored twice and added an assist to lead host Tampa Bay past reeling New York.

Nikita Kucherov added a goal and two assists for Tampa Bay. Anthony Cirelli and Ryan McDonagh each had a short-handed goal.

Nick Paul also scored for the Lightning, who have won six of seven. Andrei Vasilevskiy finished with 42 saves.

After a strong start, the Rangers are 4-14 in their past 18 games.

Tampa Bay scored three goals in the second, two by Point. He has 24 this season, tied with Edmonton's Leon Draisaitl for the NHL lead.

Islanders 6, Penguins 3: Casey Cizikas and Anders Lee each scored twice as host New York beat Pittsburgh.

Jean-Gabriel Pageau and Anthony Duclair also scored, and Mathew Barzal and Alexander Romanov each had two assists for New York, which had lost three of four. Ilya Sorokin finished with 22 saves.

Flames 3, Sharks 1: Jonathan Huberdeau scored twice and visiting Calgary handed San Jose its seventh straight loss.

Mikael Backlund also scored and Nazem Kadri had two assists for the Flames, and Dustin Wolf had 21 saves.

Macklin Celebrini got his 12th goal of the season for San Jose, and Yaroslav Askarov stopped 30 shots. The Sharks are 0-6-1 during their skid, and 1-9-1 in their past 11 games.

Celebrini, who had the tying goal early in the second, leads all rookies in goals and is tied for the lead in points (27).

COLLEGE BASKETBALL/NFL

TOP 25 ROUNDUP

No. 22 Bruins rally, hold off No. 14 Zags

Associated Press

INGLEWOOD, Calif. — Eric Dailey Jr. scored 18 points, making four 3-pointers, and No. 22 UCLA edged 14th-ranked Gonzaga 65-62 on Saturday in the first college basketball game played at Intuit Dome, the new home of the NBA's Los Angeles Clippers.

Ryan Nembhard's basket tied it at 60 before the Bruins (11-2) scored five points in a row. Nembhard then drove the length of the court and scored while getting fouled. After a timeout, he missed the potential tying free throw with 8 seconds remaining.

Graham Ike fouled Skyy Clark, who made both free throws for a 65-62 lead with 5 seconds left. Nembhard's 3-point heave from halfcourt missed at the buzzer.

Ike led the Bulldogs (9-4) with 24 points and eight rebounds. Nembhard had 16 points and eight assists.

Graham was 11-for-16 from the floor on a day when both teams struggled offensively in the 18,000-seat arena.

It was a tough shooting day for UCLA's Tyler Bilodeau, who was limited to seven points — well under his team-leading 15.1 average — while going against Ike.

No. 13 Texas A&M 92, Abilene Christian 54: Wade Taylor IV had 15 points and a career-high 10 assists, and Zhuric Phelps had 12 points and 10 rebounds in the host Aggies' win.

Taylor's 15 points passed Vernon Smith, who scored 1,778 points at A&M from 1977-81, for second on Texas A&M's all-time scoring list. Taylor now has 1,779 career points and needs 212 more to pass Bernard King, who scored 1,990 points from 1999-2003, as Texas A&M's all-time scoring leader.

Taylor returned to action after

he missed his first career game on Dec. 20 against Houston Christian.

The Aggies (11-2) opened the game on a 7-0 run and never looked back.

Quion Williams led Abilene Christian (8-6) with 14 points.

Memphis 87, No. 16 Mississippi 70: Colby Rogers scored 28 points and Moussa Cisse had 13 points, 11 rebounds and three blocks as the host Tigers defeated the Rebels.

PJ Haggerty finished with 17 points as Memphis (10-3) won for the third time in four games.

Sean Pedulla led Ole Miss (11-2) with 13 points and four assists. Jaylen Murray scored 12 and Malik Dia 11 as the Rebels had their five-game winning streak halted.

Memphis' defense caused early problems for the Rebels, and the Tigers extended their lead to double digits. But, Ole Miss made five straight field goals, including a string of 3-pointers, to get back into the game before halftime, trailing by just two points at the break.

The Tigers opened the second half on a 14-4 run and extended their lead to as many as 13 points near the midway point of the second half.

Utah State 67, No. 20 San Diego State 66: Tucker Anderson made a 3 from the right wing with 6.8 seconds left as the visiting Aggies stunned the Aztecs after rallying from an 18-point deficit.

SDSU's Wayne McKinney III missed a 3-pointer with two seconds left, and the Aggies' reserves rushed to the other end of the court to swarm Anderson. The winning shot came after SDSU's BJ Davis missed a 3-pointer.

Ian Martinez scored 17 points, Mason Falslev 16 and Anderson 14 for Utah State (12-1, 2-0 Mountain West).



UCLA's Eric Dailey Jr., left, dribbles past Gonzaga's Michael Ajayi during the first half on Saturday. Dailey led the Bruins with 18 points.

ETIENNE LAURENT/AP



ALEX GALLARDO/AP

The ball deflects off Arizona Cardinals tight end Trey McBride's helmet in the closing seconds against the Los Angeles Rams on Saturday. Ahkello Witherspoon, not shown, made a diving interception on the play.

Witherspoon's last-minute pick preserves Rams' win

BY GREG BEACHM

Associated Press

INGLEWOOD, Calif. — The Los Angeles Rams spent the entire second half struggling on offense while bending just enough on defense to preserve a tiny lead.

Arizona even backed Los Angeles into its own end zone in the final minute, needing just one big play to steal a win.

Ahkello Witherspoon and the Rams hung on by their fingertips, and now they're on the brink of another NFC West title.

Witherspoon made a diving interception on a deflected pass in the end zone with 37 seconds to play, and the Rams barely maintained command of the division race with a 13-9 victory over the Cardinals on Saturday night.

Puka Nacua had 129 yards receiving and Kyren Williams scored the only touchdown for the Rams (10-6), who grinded through a difficult offensive night and survived a hair-raising fourth quarter for their fifth consecutive victory.

"We didn't do a whole lot great, to be honest with you," said Matthew Stafford, who passed for 189 yards in the Rams' ninth win in 11 games. "Didn't run it great. Didn't throw it great. But found a way to get a win and get enough points."

The Rams host Seattle (9-7) in their regular-season finale next weekend, but they could already have coach Sean McVay's fourth division title clinched before then.

If the Bills, Browns, Vikings, Commanders and 49ers combine for three wins — or two wins and a tie — over the next two days, Los Angeles will be NFC West cham-

pions based on its strength of schedule, no matter what happens against Seattle.

If the Rams don't get that strength-of-schedule help this week, they're still in command of the division race: The Seahawks will have to beat the Rams and get help from multiple teams to claim the West while denying the Rams' sixth playoff berth in eight seasons under McVay.

The Rams narrowly avoided a winner-take-all finale against Seattle by holding off the Cardinals, who played a tremendous defensive game one week after getting eliminated from playoff contention.

Kyler Murray passed for 321 yards and threw two late interceptions for Arizona (7-9), which managed just three points out of three drives into Rams territory in the fourth quarter.

Arizona drove to the Los Angeles 5 in the final minute, but the Rams called an all-out blitz on first down. Murray's quick pass deflected off tight end Trey McBride's helmet, and Witherspoon made a 10-fingertip interception in the end zone that was upheld by video review even though the ball touched the ground while between his hands.

"Just the way the NFL works, you never really know, honestly," Witherspoon said. "I thought I stuck it. You saw by my celebration. But once I saw that replay, any time that ball hits the ground, you never know."

McBride made both his 100th reception and his first touchdown catch of the season for Arizona, which has lost five of six. McBride

had 12 catches for 123 yards, and Marvin Harrison Jr. had 96 yards receiving.

"The ball didn't bounce our way," Arizona coach Jonathan Gannon said. "Got the ball at the end, thought we were going to win, and they made a good play. It stings because we're there, but we're not there. When we play our brand of ball, we can compete and beat everyone, but it doesn't mean a lot."

Williams' 14th rushing TD of the season 3:23 before halftime opened the scoring and capped the Rams' first good drive.

Arizona finally scored midway through the third quarter on a 1-yard catch by McBride, who got his first touchdown on the 98th reception of his franchise-record season for a tight end.

The Cardinals got to 10-9 early in the fourth quarter with Chad Ryland's short field goal after their second straight impressive drive. Rams rookie Joshua Karty made his second field goal with 6:41 left.

Arizona drove to the Rams 40, but stalled before rookie Kam Kinchens intercepted Murray's fourth-down heave to the goal line with 3:02 left. But Kinchens cost the Rams a few dozen yards of field position by returning it to the 11 instead of batting it down, and the Rams' offense punted the ball back to the Cards just 1:01 later.

"I felt like for sure we were going to win that game," Murray said. "We drove down the field, and (there's) nothing the defense can do to stop us, and at the end a (lousy) turn of events. We got unlucky."

NFL

Scoreboard

American Conference						
East						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
y-Buffalo	12	3	0	.800	469	331
Miami	7	8	0	.467	305	329
e-N.Y. Jets	4	11	0	.267	292	344
e-New England	3	13	0	.188	266	401
South						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
y-Houston	9	7	0	.563	349	358
Indianapolis	7	8	0	.467	318	359
e-Jacksonville	3	12	0	.200	277	396
e-Tennessee	3	12	0	.200	284	417
North						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
x-Baltimore	11	5	0	.688	483	351
x-Pittsburgh	10	6	0	.625	363	328
Cincinnati	8	8	0	.500	453	417
e-Cleveland	3	12	0	.200	245	380
West						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
*-Kansas City	15	1	0	.938	385	288
x-L.A. Chargers	10	6	0	.625	368	281
Denver	9	7	0	.563	387	311
e-Las Vegas	3	12	0	.200	264	390

National Conference						
East						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
x-Philadelphia	12	3	0	.800	402	283
Washington	10	5	0	.667	432	348
e-Dallas	7	8	0	.467	324	404
e-N.Y. Giants	2	13	0	.133	215	362
South						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Atlanta	8	7	0	.533	327	349
Tampa Bay	8	7	0	.533	427	352
e-New Orleans	5	10	0	.333	309	346
e-Carolina	4	11	0	.267	283	448
North						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
x-Detroit	13	2	0	.867	493	299
x-Minnesota	13	2	0	.867	396	276
x-Green Bay	11	4	0	.733	413	287
e-Chicago	4	12	0	.250	286	348
West						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
L.A. Rams	10	6	0	.625	342	356
Seattle	9	7	0	.563	345	343
e-Arizona	7	9	0	.438	353	355
e-San Francisco	6	9	0	.400	331	349

e-Eliminated from playoffs
 x-clinched playoff spot
 y-clinched division
 *-clinched home-field advantage

Wednesday's games
 Kansas City 29, Pittsburgh 10
 Baltimore 31, Houston 2

Thursday's game
 Seattle 6, Chicago 3

Saturday's games
 L.A. Chargers 40, New England 7
 Cincinnati 30, Denver 24, OT
 L.A. Rams 13, Arizona 9

Sunday's games
 Carolina at Tampa Bay
 Dallas at Philadelphia
 Indianapolis at N.Y. Giants
 Las Vegas at New Orleans
 N.Y. Jets at Buffalo
 Tennessee at Jacksonville
 Miami at Cleveland
 Green Bay at Minnesota
 Atlanta at Washington

Monday's game
 Detroit at San Francisco

Sunday, Jan. 5
 Buffalo at New England
 Carolina at Atlanta
 Chicago at Green Bay
 Cincinnati at Pittsburgh
 Cleveland at Baltimore
 Houston at Tennessee
 Jacksonville at Indianapolis
 Kansas City at Denver
 L.A. Chargers at Las Vegas
 Miami at N.Y. Jets
 Minnesota at Detroit
 N.Y. Giants at Philadelphia
 New Orleans at Tampa Bay
 San Francisco at Arizona
 Seattle at L.A. Rams
 Washington at Dallas

Playoffs
Wild Card weekend
 Jan. 11-13

Herbert, Chargers secure playoffs

By **KYLE HIGHTOWER**
Associated Press

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. — As spontaneous celebrations rippled throughout the Los Angeles Chargers' locker room after their resounding 40-7 win over the New England Patriots, coach Jim Harbaugh grabbed general manager Joe Hortiz and wrapped him up in a bear hug.

"Love you!" Harbaugh said.
 "Love you!" Hortiz responded.
 "Great job! Let's keep it going," Harbaugh replied, finally loosening his grasp.

The Chargers (10-6) are back in the playoffs. But the message is clear: They have their eyes on achieving much more.

Justin Herbert threw three touchdown passes and Los Angeles locked up its second playoff appearance in three seasons with Saturday's victory.

"We had a good opportunity tonight and we went out and took it," Herbert said. "We had a good plan. All week we knew how big of a game this was for us. Guys were dialed in, focused and we executed today."

The Chargers also secured the fourth post-season appearance in Harbaugh's five seasons as an NFL coach, adding to the three he made during his stint with the San Francisco 49ers.

"You talk to them and there's more to do," Harbaugh said. "There's no coach who could have it better than to be coaching these players. Nobody. Maybe the only person would be future us, could have it better than us."

Herbert finished 26 of 38 for 281 yards to become the third player in NFL history with at



MICHAEL DWYER/AP

Chargers wide receiver Ladd McConkey, right, is congratulated by quarterback Justin Herbert after a touchdown on Saturday.

least 3,000 passing yards and 20 touchdown passes in each of his first five seasons. He joins Pro Football Hall of Famer Peyton Manning and Russell Wilson.

Ladd McConkey had eight catches for 94 yards and pulled in TD throws of 6 and 40 yards. With a 10-yard reception in the second quarter, he passed 1,000 yards receiving for the season, making him the third Chargers rookie receiver to reach that milestone.

JK Dobbins rushed 19 times for 76 yards and a TD.

The Patriots (3-13) have lost six straight, their second such losing streak of the season. "We just didn't play well enough in any

phase of the game," coach Jerod Mayo said. "No complementary football, and that's what you get."

Asked if he thinks he is coaching for his job, Mayo said it comes with the territory.

"I'm always under pressure and it's been that way for a very long time, not just when I became the head coach of the Patriots," he said.

New England quarterback Drake Maye finished 12-for-22 for 117 yards and a touchdown. He became the first rookie quarterback in franchise history with a TD pass in eight straight games. But he was sacked four times, and a second-quarter fumble marked his eighth straight game with at least one turnover.

Los Angeles outgained New England 428-181.

Maye briefly left the game to be evaluated for a head injury following a blow to his helmet in the first quarter.

He was scrambling near the sideline on third down of the Patriots' first possession when he was hit by Chargers cornerback Cam Hart, jarring the ball loose as Maye spun out of bounds.

No flag was thrown on the play and Maye stayed down on the turf for several seconds before eventually getting up and jogging off the field. He initially sat on the bench before going to the medical tent for evaluation.

He was replaced by backup Jacoby Brissett in the next series, which ended in a punt. But after further evaluation in the locker room and a Cameron Dicker 27-yard field goal put the Chargers in front 10-0, Maye returned to the game for the Patriots' third series.

Burrow hits Higgins for winning TD in OT

By **MITCH STACY**
Associated Press

CINCINNATI — This time, near the very end of a mostly agonizing season, the Cincinnati Bengals made enough plays to win.

A familiar connection closed it out.

Joe Burrow threw his third touchdown pass to Tee Higgins with 1:07 left in overtime, and the Bengals kept their slim playoff hopes alive with a wild 30-24 victory over the Denver Broncos on Saturday.

"This is one of the crazy ones I've been involved with in the NFL," Burrow said. "It feels like we had a couple of those this year, and it's nice to come out on top in one."

After Denver's second punt in overtime, Burrow completed a 31-yard pass to Higgins to the Denver 3, and then went back to the lanky receiver for the final play in Cincinnati's fourth consecutive victory. Higgins finished with 11 receptions for 131 yards.

Cade York had a chance to win it for Cincinnati with about three minutes left in overtime, but his 33-yard field goal bounced off the left upright. Denver then went three-and-out, including a Bo Nix interception on third down, handing the ball right back to Burrow and the Bengals (8-8).

"Tough one to lose," Denver coach Sean Payton said. "We had

our opportunities. The will to compete and answer, it was pretty impressive. In the end, we didn't make enough plays, and they did."

It was the Bengals' first win this season against a team with a winning record. They need another victory in their final game at Pittsburgh and some help from other teams to make it to the postseason for the first time since 2022.

"We know we can hang with anybody," Burrow said.

"We've proven that this year. We played everybody this year close. It's just about making the plays down the stretch to win those games. Today we did. The last four weeks we have. We've got to continue to do it."

The Broncos (9-7) would have secured an AFC wild card with a victory over the Bengals. They'll have another opportunity to earn a postseason berth when they host Kansas City next weekend. A victory over the Chiefs also would eliminate the Bengals.

Burrow continued his stellar season, going 39-for-49 for 412 yards and three touchdowns, all to Higgins. Ja'Marr Chase finished with nine receptions for 102 yards.

"I just throw it where the defense tells me to," Burrow said. "If they're going to double Ja'Marr, I'm going to throw it to Tee. If Ja'Marr is going to get a one-on-one, I'm going to throw it to him."

Burrow has at least 250 yards



JEFF DEAN/AP

Bengals wide receiver Tee Higgins, left, catches a touchdown pass in front of Broncos cornerback Riley Moss during the second half on Saturday. Higgins had three TD catches in the game.

passing and three touchdowns in eight straight games, extending his NFL record.

"I don't know that anybody can stand on the field and watch Joe Burrow and say he's not the best player in the world," Bengals coach Zac Taylor said.

Burrow's 1-yard touchdown run gave Cincinnati a 24-17 lead with 1:29 left in regulation. On the play before Burrow's TD, Chase Brown hurt his right ankle on an

awkward slide while going down in an effort to help the Bengals run out the remaining time.

Brown's injury stopped the clock, and Nix threw a spectacular 25-yard touchdown pass to a leaping Marvin Mims Jr. for the tying score with 8 seconds left.

Nix was 24-for-31 for 219 yards and three touchdowns with one interception. Mims finished with eight catches for 103 yards and two TDs.

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

Iowa State rallies past Miami in Pop-Tarts Bowl

BY TIM REYNOLDS

Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. — It was a season of Iowa State comebacks. And fittingly, that's how it ended for the Cyclones.

Game MVP Rocco Becht scored from a yard out on fourth-and-goal with 56 seconds remaining and No. 18 Iowa State capped the best season in school history by rallying past No. 15 Miami 42-41 in the Pop-Tarts Bowl on Saturday.

Becht finished with 270 passing yards and three touchdowns for Iowa State (11-2), a program that entered this season — the 133rd year of Cyclone football — never having won more than nine games

in a year.

"If you look at this team, it's really who they've been all year," coach Matt Campbell said.

The win marked the fourth time in 2024 that Iowa State got a winning score with less than two minutes remaining. For this one, the Cyclones rallied from a 10-point deficit in the second half — with Miami quarterback Cam Ward watching after a record-setting first half — to get win No. 11. Carson Hansen rushed for two touchdowns for Iowa State.

And as the MVP, Becht got the honor of choosing which flavor Pop-Tart was to be sacrificed in a giant toaster.

"There's only one," Becht said. "Cinnamon roll."

Ward passed for three touchdowns in his final college game, while Damien Martinez rushed for a career-high 179 yards for Miami (10-3), which dropped its sixth straight bowl game and lost three of four games to end the season — those three losses by a combined 10 points.

"Disappointed that we couldn't pull out a victory," Miami coach Mario Cristobal said. "These guys have always fought and always competed and this was no exception. ... It's painful. It's as painful as it gets when you don't win. But there's a lot to build on."

Martinez and Mark Fletcher Jr. rushed for scores for Miami, which was seeking its first 11-win season since 2003. Elijah Arroyo, Jojo Trader and Jacolby George had TD catches for the Hurricanes.

Iowa State put together a 15-play, 84-yard drive for the winning score.

"Just a great team win," Hansen said. "And it was great to see that confetti fall."

The first half was wild. Miami fumbled the ball away on the game's first snap. And the next eight drives all ended with touchdowns, neither team able to stop the other.

Ward breaks career record for TD passes

Miami quarterback Cam Ward threw a record-breaking 156th touchdown pass of his college career Saturday, connecting with Jacolby George for a 4-yard score with 4:12 left in the first quarter of the Pop-Tarts Bowl. That broke the Division I — FBS and FCS — record, one more than Houston's Case Keenum threw for from 2007 through 2011. Ward finished with three TD passes, pushing his record total to 158, before sitting out the second half.

Associated Press

BOWL ROUNDUP

BYU stymies Colorado stars in Alamo victory

Associated Press

SAN ANTONIO — L.J. Martin rushed for 93 yards and two touchdowns, Jake Retzlaff passed for 151 yards, and No. 17 BYU beat 20th-ranked Colorado 36-14 in the Alamo Bowl on Saturday night.

"Understanding that they have great players on the other side of the field," Martin said. "Just knowing the stage is set for us to go out there and try to show (what they can do). No one expected us to win or dominate like we did."

BYU (11-2) scored in every quarter in rolling to its second straight bowl victory and third in its past four appearances after failing to advance last season.

"It started back in January," Cougars center Connor Pay said. "Not playing in a bowl game is a bad taste in your mouth. You want to change that. That brings a grit and a fire to our offseason. That's where it began."

Colorado (9-4) was held to 210 total yards with only two net yards rushing. The Buffaloes had 90 yards in the fourth quarter with the Cougars leading by 29 points.

"We started to identify and we started with the rhythm of things, but we just wasn't connecting overall," Colorado quarterback Shedeur Sanders said. "That's what stopped us overall, was ourselves."

Sanders was sacked three times and threw two interceptions before a sellout crowd of 64,261. He threw for 208 yards and two touchdowns while completing 16 of 23 passes.

The Cougars gave 17 looks defensively in the first half in an effort to confuse Sanders and the Buffaloes' prolific passing game.

Heisman Trophy winner Travis Hunter had four receptions for 106 yards, including a 43-yard touch-

down from Sanders with 6:14 remaining in the third quarter.

Fenway Bowl

UConn 27, North Carolina 14: Joe Fagnano threw for 151 yards and two touchdowns to help UConn beat North Carolina, embarrassing Bill Belichick's new team in his old backyard.

Belichick was not spotted in Fenway Park, home of the Boston Red Sox, about an hour north of the stadium where he and Tom Brady hung six Super Bowl championship banners. Interim coach Freddie Kitchens took over when Mack Brown was fired and handled the bowl preparations.

Mel Brown rushed for 96 yards for the Huskies.

The Tar Heels (6-7) scored on Chris Culliver's 95-yard kickoff return but had no real offense until running back Caleb Hood, who is not listed as a quarterback on the depth chart, took over in the fourth quarter. He ran five times for 64 yards before throwing a 17-yard touchdown pass to John Copenhaver that made it 27-14.

Skyler Bell caught three passes for 77 yards for UConn (9-4), including a 38-yard touchdown that gave the Huskies a 10-0 first-quarter lead. Culliver took the ensuing kickoff back for the score, but that would be Carolina's only production in the first half.

Pinstripe Bowl

Nebraska 20, Boston College 15: Dylan Raiola passed for 228 yards and a touchdown as the Cornhuskers built an 18-point lead through three quarters and hung on to beat the Eagles in New York for their first bowl victory since 2015.

After Nebraska built a 13-2 lead in the first half on scoring runs by



ERIC GAY/AP

BYU running back Sione I Moa hands the ball to an official after scoring a touchdown against Colorado during the second half of the Alamo Bowl on Saturday in San Antonio. BYU won 36-14.

Rahmir Johnson and Kwinten Ives, Raiola hit Emmett Johnson with a 13-yard TD pass on fourth down with 3:02 remaining in the third quarter for a 20-2 edge and the Cornhuskers (7-6) held on for the win.

Raiola completed 23 of 31 passes in front of a sizable Nebraska crowd that celebrated the team's first bowl win since topping UCLA in the 2015 Foster Farms Bowl and first winning season since 2016.

Raiola completed passes to 10 receivers, including Jahmal Banks, who finished with four receptions for 79 yards.

Grayson James finished 25-for-40 for 296 yards as Boston College (7-6) fell to 0-3 in Pinstripe Bowl games.

New Mexico Bowl

TCU 34, Louisiana-Lavayette 3: At Albuquerque, N.M., Josh Hoover passed for four touchdowns to help the Horned Frogs beat the Ragin' Cajuns.

Hoover was 20 for 32 for 252 yards with an interception. Eric McAlister had eight catches for 87 yards and a TD for TCU (9-4).

TCU's defense also had a solid day, holding Louisiana-Lafayette (10-4) to 209 yards, including 61 on the game's final possession.

Arizona Bowl

Miami (Ohio) 43, Colorado State 17: At Tucson, Ariz., Kevin Davis had a career-high 148 yards rushing and two touchdowns on just nine carries and Jordan Brunson also ran for two TDs to help the RedHawks (9-5) beat the Rams (8-5).

Davis scored on a 4-yard run with 12:35 left in the third quarter, Matt Salopek forced a fumble that was recovered by Silas Walters and quarterback Brett Gabbert's first rushing touchdown of the season made it 22-3 about 2 minutes later.

After the Rams failed to convert a fourth-and-4 from the 5, Davis took a handoff up the middle and raced untouched for a 97-yard touchdown to give the RedHawks a 26-point lead with 6:45 remaining in the third quarter. George Swarn's 98-yard TD against Western Michigan in 1984 is the longest run in RedHawks history.

Scoreboard

Bowl glance

Dec. 23
Myrtle Beach Bowl
UTSA 44, Coastal Carolina 15
Potato Bowl
N. Illinois 28, Fresno St. 20 20T
Dec. 24
Hawai'i Bowl
South Florida 41, San Jose St. 39, 50T
Dec. 26
GameAbove Sports Bowl
Toledo 48, Pittsburgh 46, 60T
Rate Bowl
Kansas State 44, Rutgers 41
68 Ventures Bowl
Arkansas State 38, Bowling Green 31
Dec. 27
Las Vegas Bowl
Southern Cal 35, Texas A&M 31
Liberty Bowl
Arkansas 39, Texas Tech 26
Holiday Bowl
Syracuse 52, Washington St. 35
Armed Forces Bowl
Navy 21, Oklahoma 20
Birmingham Bowl
Vanderbilt 35, Georgia Tech 27
Dec. 28
Fenway Bowl
UConn 27, North Carolina 14
Pinstripe Bowl
Nebraska 20, Boston College 15
New Mexico Bowl
TCU 34, Louisiana 3
Pop-Tarts Bowl
Iowa St. 42, Miami 41
Arizona Bowl
Miami (Ohio) 43, Colorado State 17
Military Bowl
ECU 26, NC State 21
Alamo Bowl
BYU 36, Colorado 14
Independence Bowl
Army 27, Louisiana Tech 6
Dec. 30
Musica City Bowl
Missouri vs. Iowa
Dec. 31
ReliaQuest Bowl
Michigan vs. Alabama
Sun Bowl
Louisville vs. Washington
Citrus Bowl
Illinois vs. South Carolina
Texas Bowl
Baylor vs. LSU
College Football Playoff Quarterfinals
Dec. 31
Fiesta Bowl
Penn St. vs. Boise St.
Jan. 1
Rose Bowl
Ohio St. vs. Oregon
Peach Bowl
Texas vs. Arizona State
Sugar Bowl
Notre Dame vs. Georgia

COLLEGE FOOTBALL



JULIO CORTEZ/AP

Oklahoma running back Gavin Sawchuk, top, is tripped up by Navy linebacker Mbiti Williams Jr. during the first half of the Armed Forces Bowl on Friday in Fort Worth, Texas. Navy won 21-20.

Mids: Navy completes 1st winning season, 10-win season since 2019

FROM PAGE 24

that touchdown.”

Just two weeks after a dominating 31-13 win over Army for the Commander in Chief's Trophy, the Midshipmen (10-3) reached 10 wins for the sixth time. Their last 10-win season had been in 2019, which had been their last winning season.

“Well, it's the perfect ending,” second-year Navy head coach Brian Newberry said. “You're down 14-0, I think it kind of symbolizes everything that these guys have been through, especially the seniors, symbolizes how things started. Things looked bleak, things weren't going great, adversity and they kept scratching and clawing and fighting.”

Horvath's record run on a sprint down the middle of the field tied the game at 14 late in third quarter. He then put Navy ahead for the first time on his 6-yard TD run, one play after he converted a fourth-and-3 with a 16-yard pass to Eli Heidenrich.

“I thought if we go score right there, that might be the difference in the game. And it was,” Newberry said of going for it on fourth down in that 12-play, 66-yard drive that took 7½ minutes.

Horvath ran 18 times for 155 yards, and completed 7 of 12 passes for 92 yards. Alex Tecza had an 11-yard TD run for the Midshipmen.

Oklahoma went up after Gavin Sawchuk's 21-yard TD on the opening drive, when he had 37 yards after only 61 in his other eight games this season. It was 14-0 with 5:56 left in the first quarter after Hawkins rolled left, reversed field and got almost to the other side of the field before throwing to Zion Kearney for a 56-yard catch-and-run TD.

Oklahoma wrapped up its first season in the Southeastern Conference with their second 6-7 record in coach Brent Venables' three seasons.

The Sooners had a much different-looking roster

Daily: Army bounces back from loss to Navy

FROM PAGE 24

rushing and a TD on 20 carries.

Army entered the game with a nation-best 298.9 yards rushing per game and punished the Bulldogs (5-8), a late replacement for Sun Belt champion Marshall.

The Black Knights were also able to wash away some of the “bad taste” that lingered from a 31-13 loss in the Army-Navy game.

“They responded from a very emotional and difficult loss (to Navy) two weeks ago with a great effort,” Army coach Jeff Monken said.

Army set an Independence Bowl record with a 21-play drive, going 75 yards in the second quarter to take a 21-3 lead. Daily scored on an 8-yard run to end the drive that had two third-down conversions and three fourth-down conversions.

“It felt like we were out there forever,” Reed said.

Drew Henderson made field goals of 27 and 44 yards for Louisiana Tech. Tru Edwards, who has entered the transfer portal, had eight catches for 92 yards.

than the regular season. More than two dozen players went into the transfer portal, and the Sooners were also without standout linebacker Danny Stutsman and safety Billy Bowman, who bypassed playing to begin preparation for the NFL Draft.

MILITARY BOWL

Late TD run lifts ECU over NC State

BY MATTHEW ADAMS

Stars and Stripes

ANNAPOLIS, Md. — N.C. State and East Carolina each traveled more than five hours to play in the cold and rain for a different version of their in-state matchup.

Pirates fans exceeded the Wolfpack turnout, and it carried over to the field as East Carolina came back to win the Military Bowl on Saturday, 26-21, after blowing a 13-point lead in the fourth quarter.

Senior running back Rahjai Harris, who had 220 of the Pirates' 326 rushing yards, ran for an 86-yard touchdown with 1:33 remaining to give East Carolina (8-5) the lead for good.

East Carolina kicked a 42-yard field goal to end the first half and opened the second half with a 75-yard touchdown drive to extend its lead to 20-7.

Freshman quarterback CJ Bailey finally got the Wolfpack (6-7) going in the final quarter.

On fourth and 2 with pressure in his face, Bailey found junior tight end Justin Joly for a 15-yard score.

After forcing East Carolina's first punt, N.C. State put together a 60-yard TD drive to take its first lead of the game, 21-20.

The Wolfpack, who intercepted the Pirates twice, still led with 1:51 remaining.

East Carolina started the possession with two incomplete passes before Harris broke his big run to put the Pirates up 26-21. They failed on a 2-point conversion attempt.

“It's a move I do every year,” Harris said. “Big shout out to the big boys up front. They opened that thing up for me. On third down they didn't flinch. They just had that one percent mentality, one play at a time. And we finished

rounds tonight.”

East Carolina sealed the game with a late interception. However, a fight broke out toward the end of the game. Eight players from both teams were ejected before the game could finish.

“Congrats to ECU on the win, they earned it,” N.C. State coach Dave Doeren said. “I'd also like to apologize for our football team, for how that ended. I'm embarrassed as a coach and I know our players are, too. It's not how people of this program ... want anything to do with something like that.”

The schools came into the game with different mindsets. N.C. State wasn't calling it a rivalry, East Carolina did. As the game clock got closer and closer to zero, the Pirates' band started singing “back to Raleigh.” East Carolina fans were itching to storm the field after retaking the lead. The stadium security could not stop the fans from running down to celebrate.

“I don't think you can look at our fans and tell them it's not a rivalry. It's an hour and 15 minutes up the road,” East Carolina coach Blake Harrell said. “Maybe they should put us on their schedule as well. If we're gonna be looked at like stepbrothers ... that's fine. But these guys are gonna compete. They're going to take up the challenge.”

Bailey threw three TD passes for N.C. State, which won its season finale against rival North Carolina to become bowl eligible.

Harris had 17 carries for the Pirates and the TD. Sophomore quarterback Katin Houser added 84 rushing yards and two touchdowns on the ground.

The Wolfpack and Pirates will face each other to start the 2025 season. East Carolina will travel to Raleigh on Aug. 30, 2025.



ERIC KAYNE/Stars and Stripes

Rahjai Harris (47), who had 220 of the Pirates' 326 rushing yards, ran for an 86-yard touchdown with 1:33 left as East Carolina beat N.C. State in the Military Bowl on Saturday in Annapolis, Md.

SPORTS



Chargers clinch playoff spot

Herbert throws 3 touchdown passes as LA routs Patriots » **NFL, Page 21**

COLLEGE FOOTBALL



ROGELIO V. SOLIS/AP

Army quarterback Bryson Daily pitches the ball during the first half of the Independence Bowl against Louisiana Tech on Saturday night in Shreveport, La. Daily ran for three TDs — giving him an FBS-record 32 — and the Black Knights won their 12th game in a season for the first time with a 27-6 victory over the Bulldogs.

Army, Navy finish with flourish

Daily breaks FBS record for rushing TDs as Black Knights win Independence Bowl

By ROY LANG III
Associated Press

SHREVEPORT, La. — Bryson Daily broke the FBS record for touchdowns by a quarterback in a season with 32, running for three scores in No. 19 Army's 27-6 victory over Louisiana Tech in the Independence Bowl on Saturday night.

Daily ran for 127 yards on 27 carries and was 2-for-9 passing for 65 yards to help Army set a pro-

gram victory record at 12-2. Daily broke the FBS quarterback record for touchdowns in a season set by Navy's Keenan Reynolds in 2013.

"I'm really proud of this senior class, the way we came together to have this season," Daily said. "To have two six-win seasons in a row, to turn it around and get 12, just extremely proud of the guys."

Hayden Reed added 114 yards

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JULIO CORTEZ/AP

Navy quarterback Blake Horvath led the Midshipmen to a 21-20 victory over Oklahoma on Friday.

Horvath runs for school-best 95-yard TD, Mids beat Sooners in Armed Forces Bowl

By STEPHEN HAWKINS
Associated Press

FORT WORTH, Texas — Blake Horvath set a Navy record with a 95-yard touchdown run and then scored a go-ahead 6-yarder with 4:34 left as the Midshipmen overcame an early two-touchdown deficit and stopped a late 2-point conversion attempt to beat Oklahoma 21-20 in the Armed Forces Bowl on Friday.

The Sooners (6-7) got a 10-yard

touchdown pass from Michael Hawkins Jr. to Jake Roberts with six seconds left. They then went for the win, but Hawkins was sacked by Justin Reed on the conversion try.

"It was a great play that I was able to make," Reed said, quickly crediting the rest of the defense. "We just made sure that we stayed composed after them just getting

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