Eight years after he graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, Geoffrey Easterling remains astonished by the Confederate history still memorialized on the storied academy’s campus — the 6-foot-tall painting of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee in the library, the barracks dormitory named for Lee and the Lee Gate on Lee Road.

As a Black student at the Army academy, he remembers feeling “devastated” when a classmate pointed out the slave also depicted in the Lee painting. “How did the only Black person who got on a wall in this entire humongous school — how is it a slave?” he recalls thinking.

As a diversity admissions officer, he later traveled the country recruiting students to West Point from underrepresented communities. “It was so hard to tell people like, ‘Yeah, you can trust the military,’ and then their kids Google and go ‘Why is there a barracks named after Lee?” he said.

The nation’s military academies provide a key pipeline into the leadership of the armed services and, for the better part of the last decade, they have welcomed more racially diverse students each year. But beyond blanket anti-discrimination policies, these federally funded institutions volunteer little about how they screen for extremist or hateful behavior, or address the racial slights that some graduates of color say they faced daily.

Although racism in the general military population has been spotlighted by active-duty service members, a significant number of the academy’s students have a similar experience. For many, it’s a daily challenge.

By Aaron Morrison, Helen Wiefening and Noreen Naser
Associated Press

United States Military Academy graduating cadets sit during their graduation ceremony of the U.S. Military Academy class of 2021 at Michie Stadium on May 22 in West Point, N.Y.

Institutional issue
Racism plagues US military academies despite diversity gains

By Heather Hollingsworth
Associated Press

While all eyes are on the new and little-understood omicron variant that is popping up around the country, the delta form of the coronavirus isn’t finished wreaking havoc in the U.S., swamping hospitals with record numbers of patients in the Midwest and New England.

“Omicron is a spark that’s on the horizon. Delta variant is the fire that’s here today,” said Dr. Nirav Shah, director of the state Center for Disease Control and Prevention in Maine, where an unprecedented 334 people were in the hospital with COVID-19 as of midweek.

The U.S. recorded its first confirmed omicron infection on Wednesday, in a Californian who had been to South Africa, where the variant was first identified a week ago. Several more cases were reported Thursday — five in the New York City area and one each in Minnesota, Hawaii and Colorado — under circumstances suggesting the variant has begun spreading within the U.S.

But there is much that is unknown about omicron, including

SEE ACADEMIES ON PAGE 4
SEE VARIANT ON PAGE 6
RELATED
Vaccine holdouts in Navy, Marines hit around 19,000
OPEC, allies to stick to modest output boost

Associated Press

NEW YORK — OPEC and allied oil-producing countries decided Thursday to stick to their plans to boost oil production even as the new omicron variant cast a shadow of uncertainty over the global economic recovery from the coronavirus pandemic.

Officials from OPEC countries, led by Saudi Arabia, and their allies, led by Russia, voted to deliver steady, modest monthly increases in oil releases — a pace that frustrated the United States and other oil-consuming nations as gasoline prices have risen. The OPEC+ alliance approved an increase in production of 400,000 barrels per day for the month of January.

The variant led countries to impose travel restrictions when it emerged last week. In a worst-case scenario, lockdowns triggered by omicron could cut oil demand by nearly 3 million barrels per day in early 2022, according to projections by Rystad Energy. Positive news about drugs to treat the variant or the vaccines’ effectiveness against it could improve that outlook. But even with positive news, a decrease in oil demand is likely because “the distribution of these remedies may not actually reach all markets with extreme immediacy, which would still necessitate the lockdowns in much of the developing world,” said Louise Dickson, senior oil markets analyst for Rystad. The decision by OPEC+ to stay the course sends a signal that “the group does what it says and that they will continue their policy on their own terms,” Dickson said.

EXCHANGE RATES

Military rates

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

INTEREST RATES

Prime rate 3.25
Interest Rates Discount rate 0.75
3-month bill 0.25
30-year bond 1.75

The weather is provided by the American Forces Network Weather Center, 2nd Weather Squadron at Offut Air Force Base, Neb.
UK and Estonia send troops to Poland to assist with migrant crisis

**BY JOHN VAN DIVER**
*Stars and Stripes*

STUTTGART, Germany — Troops from the United Kingdom and Estonia have deployed to Poland to help contend with a migrant crisis on its border.

The move involves contingents of about 150 soldiers from each country. They will provide engineering and reconnaissance support, Poland’s National Security Bureau said.

The U.S. Army leads a battle group in northeastern Poland, roughly 50 miles from the Russian military exclave of Kaliningrad.

The U.S. Army and Estonia have sent troops to Poland to help the country deal with a migrant crisis on its border.

Amid the mounting tensions, Putin’s foreign affairs adviser Yuri Ushakov noted that during the Kremlins in Stockholm to dealing with, while Russia has warned that any presence of NATO troops and weapons on Ukrainian soil would cross “a red line.”

Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov told lawmakers Friday that the number of Russian troops near Ukraine and in Russia-annexed Crimea is estimated at 94,300, warning that a “large-scale escalation” is possible in January.

The contamination has left many pointing to a history of leaks from the nearby Red Hill fuel storage facility.

Navy identifies, isolates Hawaii well tainted by petroleum products

**BY WYATT WOLSON**
*Stars and Stripes*

FORT SHAFTER, Hawaii — The Navy on Hawaii has identified the well contaminated with petroleum products that prompted outcry from thousands of military households and left them without a water supply, the deputy commander of the Pacific Fleet said Thursday.

Two tests done by the Navy since Sunday confirmed that the Red Hill well appeared to be contaminated, Rear Adm. Blake Converse said Thursday.

The contamination in the well has left residents among rough-

“The Red Hill well was isolated on Sunday, and it’s remained iso-

The Navy system.

With the wells already isolated, the task now is to restore potable
tanks hold about 110 million gallons of fuel.

Critics have long called for the U.S. to permanently close the site because the service maintains that it is essential to national se-

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lighted, less attention has been paid to the premier institutions that produce a significant portion of the services' officer corps — the academies of the U.S. Army, the U.S. Navy, the U.S. Air Force, the Merchant Marine Academy, the U.S. Coast Guard, and the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy.

Some graduates of color from the nation's top military schools who graduated decades ago have sung their praises and told the nation's top military schools that the stereotype of the angry Black man. But off the field, he said, he and other Black classmates too often were treated like the stereotype of the angry Black man.

"I was repeatedly in trouble or being corrected for infractions that were not actually infractions," he said. "It was a very deliberate choice to dig and to push on certain individuals compared with other cadets — white cadets."

Some students of color have pointed to what they see as systemic discrimination at the academies by creating Instagram accounts — "Black at West Point," "Black at USAFA" and "Black at USNA" — to relate their personal experiences.

In response to the AP's findings, a spokesman for the Department of Defense, Maj. Charlie Dietz, said the academies make it a policy to offer equal opportunities regardless of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, gender identity or sexual orientation. He said the DOD formed a team in April to advance progress on diversity, equity and inclusion across the entire department, including the academies.

The 2020 annual defense spending bill mandated that the Defense Department survey all its institutions for systemic racism. According to data supplied to the AP by the four schools, the Naval Academy, Air Force Academy, Merchant Marine Academy and Coast Guard academies have generally become less white over the past two decades. West Point did not provide full data, but said it is increasingly welcoming diverse students, with 37% of the class of 2024 identifying as non-white, compared to about 25% a decade ago.

While the number of Hispanic cadets increased in the past two decades at the Coast Guard and Naval academies, Black cadets showed no noticeable increase during that time. In the class of 2000, there were 73 Black midshipmen in the Naval Academy and just 77 in 2020. At the Coast Guard Academy, there were 15 Black cadets in the 2001 class. And in 2021? Merely 6%.

According to the data provided to the AP, graduation rates between racial groups at the Naval and Coast Guard academies continued to show gaps. At the Naval Academy, for example, Black midshipmen still had the lowest graduation rate of any racial group at 74%, compared to the 2020 school-wide rate of 87% and the Black graduation rate of 65% at the Coast Guard Academy between 2011 and 2020 lagged about 20 percentage points behind other racial groups.

Two of the five academies — West Point and the Air Force Academy — have revised their admissions processes to make it easier for Black candidates to be selected.

"They truly are reaching out because they don't have anywhere else to turn," she said. "This isn't about cadets just whining and complaining. They're going against a very powerful institution."
Vaccine holdouts in Navy, Marines hit 19K

By ALEX HORTON  The Washington Post

As many as 19,000 active-duty Marines and Navy sailors chose not to get vaccinated against the coronavirus by their shared Nov. 28 deadline, a dilemma for military leaders who have threatened to expel personnel refusing to comply with the Biden administration’s mandate.

In both services, the number of holdouts is around 9,500, according to recent official data. And while the Marines’ margin of 5% unvaccinated had been anticipated, it was an unexpected outcome for the Navy, which in announcing its final tally this week acknowledged that officials had uncovered last-minute “discrepancies” with its data-tracking system that revealed a larger pool of unvaccinated sailors than had been projected. As recently as last week, official data showed that 99.8% of sailors had at least one shot by last Sunday’s deadline. The true number is just over 97%.

These personnel now join more than 8,000 in the Air Force who declined to get vaccinated. In all three services, many are awaiting decisions on exemption requests, though officials have emphasized the number of permanent waivers granted was likely to be nominal. Army data shows 4% of its active force — about 19,000 soldiers — have not received any vaccine dose, with the compliance deadline of Dec. 15 now less than two weeks away.

While overall, the vast majority of service members have complied with the Pentagon’s vaccination mandate, even a few percent of the military’s 2.1 million troops translates to tens of thousands of people. Officials have said that those who are unvaccinated are not deployable, underscoring the challenge ahead not only for unit-level commanders facing workforce challenges, but for senior officials in Washington and beyond responsible for setting the U.S. military’s protection profile and maintaining an adequate presence across the world.

David Lapan, a retired Marine Corps officer and former communications chief for the service, said the Navy and Marine Corps must pursue answers as to why the order, issued in August by Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, overstepped his constitutional authority by subjecting the military members to mandatory vaccination, a decision that has lessened the severity of their losses, said a Navy official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the service’s ongoing evaluation.

While there is no short-term impact to readiness due to unvaccinated sailors, we are constantly evaluating the long-term impact to the force,” DeGarmo said. “The health and safety of the force is our top priority to sustain mission readiness.”

Some leaders have expressed confidence that the vaccine refusers are well distributed and not concentrated in one community or another, like pilots or engineers. If true, that would lessen the severity of their losses, said a Navy official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the service’s ongoing evaluation.

Thousands of troops have filed religious exemptions across the Defense Department, but none have been approved so far, according to defense officials. The Navy and Marine Corps have not approved any religious waivers for any vaccine for the last 7 and 10 years, respectively.

The Marine Corps is the Defense Department’s least-vaccinated service. Marines who were not fully vaccinated by Sunday or did not have a pending exemption request soon will face administrative separation, Wood said. Commanders could punish still retain some small percentage of personnel in circumstances, such as a Marine who missed the deadline but now is on a path to becoming fully vaccinated.

A senior commander, typically a one-star general, will decide who is separated or retained, Wood said, noting that senior officials recognize the reality the service needs experienced, trained Marines ready to deploy at any moment. The deadline has not ended the push to get more vaccinations, he said.

“While the Navy showed potential to achieve the highest vaccination rate in the military, including reports last week of reaching 99.8% of sailors with one shot, the service acknowledged errors in their reports. Those discrepancies, including redundant entries, were “appropriately corrected,” DeGarmo said in a statement. “We strive to provide the most accurate and timely information to maintain transparency regarding the Navy’s effort to fight covid-19.”

The Navy has established some of the most stringent timelines for separation due to vaccine refusal. Sailors must start vaccination within five days in cases of denied exemptions, the Navy said last month.

Governor, AG sue Defense Department over vaccine requirement for Guard

Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY — Oklaho- ma’s Republican governor and the state attorney general filed a fed- eral lawsuit on Thursday, chal- lenging the Defense Depart- ment’s COVID-19 vaccination mandate for the Oklahoma Na- tional Guard.

In a statement, Gov. Kevin Stitt argued that the Biden administra- tion’s defense secretary, Lloyd Austin, overstepped his constitu- tional authority by subjecting the National Guard to the mandate, which applies to active-duty mil- itary members.

“This week, Secretary of De- fense Lloyd Austin declared his intention to proceed with uncon- stitutional punishment that indi- viduals targets Oklahoma Na- tional Guard soldiers and airmen, including withholding their pay,” Stitt said.

The Pentagon couldn’t immedi- ately be reached for comment Thursday on the lawsuit.

Stitt had asked Austin to sus- pend the mandate for the Oklaho- ma National Guard and directed his new adjutant general to assure members that they would not be punished for not being vaccinated.

However, Austin rejected that exemption and said any National Guard members not vaccinated against COVID-19 would be barred from federally funded training and drills required to maintain their Guard status.

Stitt said that although National Guard members are paid by the federal government, he remains his commander in chief under federal and state constitutional and statutory law unless the presi- dent orders their mobilization.

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Governor, AG sue Defense Department over vaccine requirement for Guard
Virus Outbreak

Omicron variant found in several states

By Michelle L. Price and Bobby Caina Calvan
Associated Press

NEW YORK — The omicron variant of COVID-19, which had been undetected in the U.S. before the middle of this week, had been discovered in at least five states by the end of Thursday, showing yet again how variations of the virus can circumnavigate the globe with speed and ease.

Just a day after the first known U.S. case was found in California, tests showed the omicron variant had infected at least five people in the New York City metropolitan area, plus a man from Minnesota who had attended an anime convention in Manhattan in late November.

A Colorado woman who had recently traveled to southern Africa, a Hawaii resident with no recent travel history and another Californian resident who traveled to South Africa last month also were infected by the variant, officials said.

Much remains unknown about omicron, including whether it is more contagious, as some health authorities suspect, whether it can thwart vaccines and whether it makes people as sick as the original strain.

Health officials in each state said there was no cause for undue alarm. But the spread of the cases, some involving people who hadn’t been away from home recently, meant the variant was likely already circulating domestically in some parts of the U.S.

“We gotta assume there’s a lot more behind that and that it has been here for a meaningful amount of time,” New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio said at a news conference with Gov. Kathy Hochul.

The infected New Yorkers included a 67-year-old woman on Long Island who had recently traveled to South Africa, residents of Brooklyn and Queens and another case possibly linked to travel. At least one person had received a dose of a COVID-19 vaccine but officials did not have details about the vaccination status of the four other cases.

In Minnesota, health officials said a man who had not traveled outside the U.S. began experiencing symptoms the day after attending the Anime NYC 2021 convention in New York City. Minnesota Health Commissioner Jan Malcolm said it’s likely the man contracted COVID-19 at the convention, but officials did not know for sure.

President Joe Biden is expected to take up a general vaccine mandate for federal workers during his weekend trip to Joint Base Andrews, Maryland.

“In the big picture, I think we’re going to get there,” Malcolm said. “So I’m very confident that as of today, we’ll have a new mandate.”

Biden’s visit comes amid a growing political debate about how the federal government should deal with the omicron variant.

The variant, first discovered in South Africa, has spread quickly around the world, with cases now reported in more than 50 countries. It has been linked to a number of recent outbreaks, including in parts of the U.S.

In a statement, the Biden administration said it was committed to protecting the public health and maintaining economic and social activities.

“Today we are announc"...

FROM PAGE 1

whether it is more contagious than what we’re seeing now? What will that do to our health system? What will that do to our hospitals?’’

Two years into the outbreak, COVID-19 has killed over 780,000 Americans, and deaths are running at about 900 per day.

COVID-19 cases and deaths in the U.S. have dropped by about half since the delta peak in August and September, but at about 86,000 new infections per day, the numbers are still high, especially heading into the holidays, when people travel and gather with family.

With the onset of cold weather sending more people indoors, hospitals are feeling the strain.

“Delta is not subsiding,” said Dr. Andre Kalil, an infectious-disease physician at the University of Nebraska Medical Center. Nebraska on Tuesday reported 555 people in the hospital with COVID-19 — the highest number since last December, when the vaccine rollout was just beginning.

Dr. Natasha Bhuyan family physician in Phoenix

its highest daily number of COVI-19 cases at 604, two days after the hospital caseload hit a pandemic-high of 84. New Hampshire, once an early vaccination leader, is now second only to Michigan in the most new cases per capita over the past two weeks.

In Minnesota, which ranks third in new cases per capita, the Pentagons sent medical teams last month to two major hospitals to relieve doctors and nurses, and another team is set to arrive this weekend.

“This fourth wave, I can pretty clearly state, has hit Minnesota harder than any of the previous ones,’’ said Dr. Timothy Johnson, president of the Minnesota chapter of the American College of Emergency Physicians.

He said hospitals are struggling because of a combination of a lack of nurses, fatigue and patients undergoing treatments that had to be postponed earlier in the crisis.

“Now those chickens are coming home to roost a little bit,” he said.

At Hemmepin County Medical Center in Minneapolis, where one of the military teams was sent, the number of COVID-19 patients has doubled since September, although it remains below pandemic highs. A spokesperson for Christine Hill said.

“It’s just hard because it does feel like that we are actually going backwards in time, even though we have these vaccines.”

Prestedias pass a COVID-19 testing tent on 42nd Street, Thursday, in the Manhattan borough of New York.

Officials in New York said they were working to trace attendees of the convention, which was held Nov. 19-21 and drew about 50,000 people, according to even organizers. Attendees were required to wear masks and show proof of having received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine.

City Health Commissioner Dave Chokshi urged people who attended the event to get tested.

The Minnesota man began experiencing mild symptoms Nov. 22. He had been vaccinated and received a booster shot in early November, according to health officials in his home state.

Nov. 22 was the same day the person infected in the first California case returned to the U.S. from South Africa. The California traveler, who was vaccinated, developed mild symptoms and tested positive Monday. The second person in the state didn’t need medical care and was also vaccinated.

The unvaccinated adult infected with the variant in Hawaii had gotten COVID-19 a year ago. The person isn’t currently hospitalized and had “mild-to-moderate” symptoms including headache, body aches and cough. Hawaii Epidemiologist Dr. Sarah Kemble said.

She wouldn’t identify the patient other to say the person lives on the island of Oahu.

For now, the extra-contagious delta variant accounts for practically all cases in the U.S. and continues to inflict misery at a time when many hospitals are struggling with nurse shortages and a backlog of patients undergoing procedures that had been put off early in the pandemic.

The fear is that omicron will foist even more patients, and perhaps sicker ones, onto hospitals.

“For me, it’s really just, I can’t imagine,” said Dr. Natasha Bhuyan, a family physician in Phoenix, which has also been hit hard. “Are we going to see another surge in cases that’s even higher than what we’re seeing now? What will that do to our health system? What will that do to our hospitals?”

While about three dozen countries worldwide have reported omicron infections, including India on Thursday, the numbers are small outside of South Africa, which has confirmed over 170 cases.

The delta variant is still causing deep turmoil in Europe, too, including Germany and Austria. South Korea is also seeing a delta-driven surge that has pushed hospitalizations and deaths to record highs.

On Thursday, Germany, where new COVID-19 infections topped 70,000 in a 24-hour period, barred the unvaccinated from nonessential stores and cultural and recreational venues. Lawyers are expected to take up a general vaccine mandate in the coming weeks. Austria, meanwhile, extended its lockdown.
Senate passes stopgap funds, avoids shutdown

By Kevin Freking and Lisa Mascaro
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Senate has passed a stopgap spending bill that avoids a short-term shutdown and funds the federal government through Feb. 18 after leaders defused a partisan standoff over federal vaccine mandates. The measure now goes to President Joe Biden to be signed into law.

Earlier Thursday, congression- al leaders announced they had fi- nally reached an agreement to keep the government running for 11 more weeks, generally at cur- rent spending levels, while adding $7 billion to aid Afghanistan evacuees.

Once the House voted to ap- prove the measure, senators soon announced an agreement that would allow them to vote on it quickly.

“I am glad that in the end, cooler heads prevailed. The government will stay open and I thank the members of this chamber for walking us back from the brink of an avoidable, needless and costly shutdown,” said Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y.

The Senate approved the mea- sure by a vote of 69-28.

The Democratic-led House passed the measure by a 221-212 vote. The Republican leadership urged members to vote no; the lone GOP vote for the bill came from Illinois Rep. Adam Kinzinger.

Lawmakers bemoaned the short-term fix and blamed the op- posing party for the lack of pro- gress on this year’s spending bills. Rep. Rosa DeLauro, chair of the House Appropriations Commit- tee, said the measure would, how- ever, allow for negotiations on a package covering the full budget year through September.

“Make no mistake, a vote against this continuing resolution is a vote to shut government down,” DeLauro said during the House debate.

Before the votes, Biden said he had spoken with Senate leaders and he played down fears of a shutdown.

“There is a plan in place unless somebody decides to be totally er- ratic, and I don’t think that will happen,” Biden said.

Some Republicans opposed to Biden’s vaccine rules wanted Con- gress to take a hard stand against the mandated shots for workers at larger businesses, even if that meant shutting down federal of- fices over the weekend by block- ing a request that would expedite a final vote on the spending bill.

Trump faces flurry of investigations beyond Jan. 6 probe

Associated Press

NEW YORK — As Donald Trump’s lawyers try to block the White House from releasing re- cords to the congressional com- mittee investigating the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection, the former president faces a flurry of other investigations that could come to a head in the coming weeks and the new year.

That includes two major state criminal investigations — one in New York and one in Georgia — and lawsuits concerning sexual assault allegations, a fight over an inheritance and questions of whether he should be held person- ally liable for inciting the insur- rection.

Trump has long dismissed the investigations as nothing more than a politically motivated “witch hunt” that began with the probe into Russian meddling in the 2016 election. But while Trump has spent most of his life dodging legal consequences, he is no longer shielded by the protec- tions against indictment enjoyed by sitting presidents. And any charges — which would be the first against a former president in the nation’s history — could affect both his businesses and his future political prospects as he mulls running for a second term.

Here’s the latest on where the cases stand:

■ New York

New York prosecutors are in- vestigating the former president’s business dealings and recently convened a new grand jury to hear evidence after the previous pan- el’s term ran out.

The Manhattan district attor- ney’s office is weighing whether to seek more indictments in the case, which resulted in tax fraud charg- es in July against Trump’s compa- ny, the Trump Organization, and its longtime chief financial officer, Allen Weisselberg. They are ac- cused of cheating tax authorities through lucrative, untaxed fringe benefits.

Weisselberg is due back in court in July 2022. Separately, Trump is facing scrutiny over properties he owns in the New York City suburbs. The New York Times reported in Octo- ber that Westchester County Dis- trict Attorney Mimi E. Rocah sub- poenaed records from both the Trump National Golf Club in Westchester and the town of Os- sining as it investigates whether Trump’s company misled officials to cut taxes for a golf course there.

■ Georgia

In Atlanta, Fulton County Dis- trict Attorney Fani Willis opened an investigation in January into possible attempts to interfere with the administration of the state’s 2020 election, which Trump nar- rowly lost.

In letters sent in February to top elected officials in the state — in- cluding Gov. Brian Kemp and Secretary of State Brad Raffen- sperger — Willis instructed them to preserve all records related to the election, particularly those that may contain evidence of at- tempts to influence election offici- als.

The investigation includes a Jan. 2 phone call between Trump and Raffensperger in which Trump repeatedly and falsely as- serts that the Republican secreta- ry of state could change the certi- fied results of the presidential election.

■ Washington

The attorney general for the District of Columbia, Karl Racine, said early this year that district prosecutors were investigating Trump’s role in the Jan. 6 insur- rection and considering whether to charge him under a local law that criminalizes statements that motivate people to act violently.

There has been no indication, however, that that is likely. If Trump were to be charged, it would be a low-level mideemeanor, or with a maximum sentence of six months in jail.

■ Lawsuits

In addition to the criminal probes underway, Trump also faces a number of civil suits, from scorned business investors, to his estranged niece, to Democratic lawmakers and Capitol Police of- ficers who blame him for inciting the violence on Jan. 6.

In October, Trump was ques- tioned behind closed doors under oath in a deposition for a lawsuit brought by protesters who say his security team assaulted them out- side Trump Tower in the early days of his presidential campaign in 2015.

Trump is also facing a defama- tion case brought by columnist E. Jean Carroll, who says Trump raped her in the mid-1990s in an upscale Manhattan department store. Trump has said that Carroll is “totally lying” and that she is “not my type.” The 2nd U.S. Cir- cuit Court of Appeals is set to hear oral arguments in the case Friday.

National Christmas Tree lit up

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden helped light the National Christmas Tree on Thursday while remembering those lost to the COVID-19 pandemic and crediting the American people for his optimism.

Biden also paid tribute to service members, thank- ing them for their sacrifices.

“We are a great nation because of you, the Amer- ican people,” Biden said, joined on stage by his wife, first lady Jill Biden. “You’ve made me so optimistic.”

It was Biden’s first time participating in the nearly 100-year-old tradition in the nation’s capital. Vice President Kamala Harris and her husband, Doug Emhoff, joined the Bidens.

Singer-actor LL Cool J hosted the program, which featured performances by Billy Porter, Chris Staple- ton, H.E.R., Kristin Chenoweth, Patti LaBelle and Howard University’s gospel choir.

The evergreen tree on the Ellipse, just south of the White House, was lit up in red and white lights. It is surrounded by smaller trees representing every U.S. state and territory and the District of Columbia. Stu- dents from across the country made the ornaments used to decorate the trees.

The first National Christmas Tree lighting was held on Christmas Eve in 1923.
Suspect’s parents charged in Mich. school shooting

By COREY WILLIAMS

Associated Press

PONTIAC, Mich. — A prosecutor in Michigan filed involuntary manslaughter charges Friday against the parents of a boy who is accused of killing four students at Oxford High School, after saying earlier that their actions went “far beyond negligence.”

Jennifer and James Crumbley were charged with four counts of involuntary manslaughter. Under Michigan law, an involuntary manslaughter charge can be pursued if prosecutors believe someone contributed to a situation where the chance of harm or death was high. If convicted, they could face up to 15 years in prison.

“The parents were the only individuals in the position to know the access to weapons,” Oakland County Prosecutor Karen McDonald said Thursday. The gun “seems to have been just freely available to that individual.”

Ethan Crumbley, 15, has been charged as an adult with two dozen crimes, including murder, attempted murder and terrorism, for the shooting Tuesday at Oxford High School in Oakland County, roughly 30 miles (50 kilometers) north of Detroit. Fourteen students were killed and seven more people were injured. Three were in hospitals in stable condition Friday.

The semi-automatic gun was purchased legally by Crumbley’s father last week, according to investigators.

“Parents in the U.S. are rarely charged in school shootings involving their children, even as most minors get guns from a parent or relative’s house, according to experts.

“There’s no Michigan law that requires gun owners keep weapons locked away from children. McDonald said it’s often suggested there’s more to build a case on.

“All I can say at this point is that there are no discipline records and there was no small behavior go far beyond negligence,” she told WJR-AM. “We obviously are prosecuting the shooter to the fullest extent. There are other individuals who should be held accountable.”

Later at a news conference, McDonald said she hoped to have an announcement “in the next 24 hours.” She had firmly signaled that Crumbley’s parents were under scrutiny when she filed charges against their son Wednesday.

Sheriff Mike Bouchard disclosed Wednesday that the parents met with school officials about their son’s classroom behavior, just a few hours before the shooting.

McDonald said information about what had troubled the school “will most likely come to light soon.”

Crumbley stayed in school Tuesday and later emerged from a bathroom with a gun, firing at students in the hallway, police said.

The superintendent for the district late Thursday posted a YouTube video where he said the teenager was called to the office before the shooting but “no discipline was warranted.”

Tim Throne, superintendent of Oxford Community Schools, said the high school looks like a “war zone” and won’t be ready for weeks. But he repeatedly credited students and staff for how they responded to the violence.

“I want you to know that there’s been a lot of talk about the student who was apprehended, that he was called up to the office and all that kind of stuff. No discipline was warranted,” Throne said. “There are no discipline records at the high school. Yes this student did have contact with our front office, yes, his parents were on campus Nov. 30.”

Baldwin: ‘Someone is responsible’ for shooting on set, but ‘not me’

Actor-producer Alec Baldwin, left, sits during an interview with “Good Morning America” co-anchor George Stephanopoulos about the fatal shooting on the set of Baldwin’s film “Rust.”

LOS ANGELES — Alec Baldwin said he feels incredible sadness and regret over the shooting that killed a cinematographer on a New Mexico film set, but not guilt.

“Someone is responsible for what happened, and I can’t say who that is, but it’s not me,” Baldwin said in an ABC interview with George Stephanopoulos that aired Thursday night, the first time the actor has spoken in depth on screen about the Oct. 21 shooting on the set of the Western “Rust.”

“He’s like my godfather, if I felt I was responsible, I might have killed myself.”

Baldwin said it is essential for investigators to find out who put the bullet in the gun he fired, that was supposedly to be empty, that killed cinematographer Halyna Hutchins and injured director Joel Souza.

“There’s only one question to be resolved, and that’s where did the live round come from?” Baldwin said.

Baldwin said in a clip from the interview released a day earlier that “I didn’t pull the trigger. I would never point a gun at anyone and pull the trigger at them. Never.”

He said it was Hutchins herself who asked him to point the gun just off camera and toward her armpit before it went off.

Baldwin said at Hutchins’ direction he pulled the hammer back. “I let go of the hammer and ‘bang’ the gun goes off,” he said.

When Stephanopoulos told Baldwin that many say you should never point a gun directly at someone on a set, he responded, “unless the person is the cinematographer who was directing me where to point the gun for her camera angle.”

Baldwin said it was 45 minutes to an hour before he began to understand that a live round had been in the gun, and didn’t know it for sure until he was being interviewed hours later. He thought Hutchins might have been hurt by a blank at close range or had a heart attack.

“The idea that somebody put a live bullet in the gun was not even in reality.”

He had one of several tearful moments when he described Hutchins, saying she was “somebody who was loved by everybody and admired by everybody who worked with her.”

Baldwin said he was doing the interview to counter public misperceptions about the shooting and to make it clear that “I would go to any lengths to undo what happened.”

“Someone is responsible”

Baldwin said “I want to make sure that I don’t come across like I’m the victim because we have two victims here.”

Investigators have described “some complacency” in how weapons were handled on the “Rust” set. They have said it is too soon to determine whether charg- es will be filed, amid independent civil lawsuits concerning liability in the fatal shooting.

Baldwin said he met with the film’s armorer Hanna Gutierrez Reed for a gun training session before the shoot, and she appeared capable and responsible.

“I assumed because she was there and she was hired that she was up to the job,” he said.

Gutierrez Reed has been the subject of much of the scrutiny in the case. Her attorney has said she did not put the round in the gun, and believes she was the victim of sabotage. Authorities say they’ve found no evidence of that.

CDC research suggests 1 in 44 US children affected by autism

Associated Press

New autism numbers released Thursday suggest more U.S. children are being diagnosed with the developmental condition and at younger ages.

In an analysis of 2018 data from nearly a dozen states, researchers at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that among 8-year-olds, 1 in 44 had been diagnosed with autism. That rate compares with 1 in 54 diagnosed with autism in 2016.

U.S. autism numbers have been on the rise for several years, but experts believe that reflects more awareness and wider availability of services to treat the condition rather than a true increase in the number of affected children.

A separate CDC report released Thursday said children were 50% more likely to be diagnosed with autism by age 4 in 2018 than in 2014.

“There is some progress being made and the earlier kids get identified, the earlier they can access services that they might need to improve their developmental outcome,” said CDC researcher and co-author Kelly Shaw.

Geraldine Dawson, director of Duke University’s Center for Autism and Brain Development, said the new estimate is similar to one found in research based on screening a large population of children rather than on those already diagnosed. As such, she said it may be closer to reflecting the true state of autism in U.S. children than earlier estimates.

The CDC reports are based on data from counties and other communities in 11 states — some with more urban neighborhoods, where autism rates tend to be higher. The rates are estimates and don’t necessarily reflect the entire U.S. situation, the authors said.
US adds sluggish 210K jobs in November

BY CHRISTOPHER RUGABER
Associated Press
WASHINGTON — America’s employers slowed the pace of their hiring in November, adding 210,000 jobs, the fewest in nearly a year.

Friday’s report from the Labor Department also showed that the unemployment rate fell to 4.2% from 4.6%. That is a historically low level though still above the pandemic jobless rate of 3.5%.

Overall, the November jobs figures point to an economic recovery that looks resilient though under threat from a spike in inflation, shortages of workers and supplies and the potential impact of the omicron variant of the coronavirus.

Little is definitively known about the variant, and widespread business shutdowns are considered unlikely. Still, omicron could discourage some Americans from traveling, shopping and eating out in the coming months and potentially slow the economic rebound.

For now, though, Americans are spending freely, and the economy is forecast to expand at a 7% annual rate in the final three months of the year, a big rebound from the 2.1% pace in the previous quarter, when the delta variant hobbled growth.

Beneath the headline figures on hiring and unemployment, though, lurks a potentially even more consequential question: Are more people who lost jobs to the pandemic recession finally coming off the sidelines to look for work again? Many more job-seekers are needed to help companies fill their open jobs and sustain the economy’s growth.

It’s also a critical question for the Federal Reserve. If the proportion of people who either have a job or are looking for one doesn’t rise much, it would suggest that the Fed is nearing its goal of maximum employment.

With inflation at a three-decade high and far above the Fed’s 2% annual target, reaching its employment mandate would heighten pressure on Chair Jerome Powell to raise interest rates sooner rather than later. Doing so would make loans more expensive for many individuals and businesses.

Even as the jobless rate has steadily declined this year, the proportion of Americans who are working or looking for work has barely budged. A shortage of job-seekers tends to limit hiring and force companies to pay more to attract and keep employees.

Higher pay can help sustain spending and growth. But it can also feed inflation if businesses raise prices to offset their higher labor costs, which they often do.

One result is that there are now 4.7 million fewer people with jobs than there were before the pandemic. Yet only about 1.7 million of them are actively looking for work and are classified as unemployed. The remaining 3 million are no longer job-hunting and so aren’t counted as unemployed.

The government classifies people as unemployed only if they’re actively seeking work.

About half the 3 million who have dropped out of the workforce have retired. The other half includes parents, mostly mothers, who stayed home to care for children during closings of schools and day cares.

For some of these women, child care remains unavailable or unaffordable. Some other people have become self-employed. And others continue to delay their job hunts for fear of contracting COVID-19.

Few want Roe v. Wade overturned, though abortion opinions vary

BY HANNAH FINGERHUT
Associated Press
WASHINGTON — Arguments before the Supreme Court this week signaled that the conservative-leaning bench may dramatically limit abortion rights in the United States.

The decision whether to uphold Mississippi’s 15-week abortion ban will determine the fate of the court’s 1973 Roe v. Wade decision legalizing abortion and its 1992 ruling in Planned Parenthood v. Casey, which reaffirmed Roe.

In 2020, AP VoteCast showed 69% of voters in the presidential election said the Supreme Court should leave the Roe v. Wade decision as is; just 29% said the court should overturn the decision.

Even so, polling suggests Americans have nuanced attitudes on the circumstances under which abortion should be allowed.

Americans likely won’t know the high court’s ruling until June. Overall, when asking Americans whether abortion should be legal or illegal, a majority of Americans side with abortion rights. In June, a poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research showed 57% of Americans saying abortion should be legal in all cases or in most cases, while 43% said it should be illegal in all cases or most cases.

The June AP-NORC poll asked Americans whether abortion should be allowable if the woman’s health or the child’s health is seriously endangered, or if the pregnancy is a result of rape or incest. Most Americans say abortions should be allowed in all of those circumstances, including majorities of conservatives.

The Mississippi law makes few allowances in the case of medical emergencies or “a severe fetal abnormality.”

But support for abortion rights declines significantly for a woman who does not want to be pregnant “for any reason.” About half of Americans think abortion should be possible in that case.

Precedent established by the court has given states the ability to restrict abortion rights after the point where a fetus may be viable outside of the womb, about 23 weeks. But in Wednesday’s arguments, Chief Justice John Roberts called a 15-week ban “not a dramatic departure from viability,” saying “if it really is an issue about choice, why is 15 weeks not enough time?”

Similar to support for abortion rights in general, the June AP-NORC poll showed a clear majority — 61% — saying abortion in the first trimester should be legal in all or most cases; only 16% said abortion should always be illegal.

The June AP-NORC poll showed Americans were closely divided over whether the federal government or state governments should have the larger role in making laws related to abortion, but leaned slightly toward national governance, 52% to 45%.

There are clear differences in abortion attitudes by partisanship and age. The poll finds 69% of Democrats but only 27% of Republicans say an abortion should be possible for a woman who does not want to be pregnant for any reason. Among Republicans, 43% of moderates and liberals say abortion should be allowable in that case; only 14% of conservatives do.

More than dozen arrested in smash-and-grab robberies in LA

Associated Press
LOS ANGELES — Authorities in Los Angeles on Thursday announced more than a dozen arrests in recent smash-and-grab thefts at stores where nearly $340,000 worth of merchandise was stolen, part of a rash of organized retail crime in California.

Fourteen people were arrested in connection with 11 brazen robberies between Nov. 18 and 28, and all are out of custody, police Chief Michel Moore said. Most bailed out or met no-bail criteria, and one is a juvenile, he said.

At a joint news conference, both Moore and Mayor Eric Garcetti called for an end to a no-bail policy for some defendants aimed at reducing overcrowding at Los Angeles County jails during the coronavirus pandemic.

Garcetti said with the pandemic easing, it’s time to make room again in lockups for criminals who commit violent acts and put store employees in danger.

“We need the help of our criminal justice system, of our judges, of our jailing,” Garcetti said. “We have opened up one of the cities because we’re in a better place with COVID. We should be able to also open up our jails, and we should be able to have judges that put people behind those bars.”

A statewide policy of imposing $0 bail for misdemeanors and lower-level felonies ended last year, but it was kept in place in California and across the nation in which groups of individuals shoplift en masse from stores or smash and grab from display cases. Single operators have also been a growing problem for retailers who say the thieves face little consequence.
Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan — The Taliban decreed Friday that they are banning the forced marriage of women in the war-torn country, in what appears to be a move to address criteria that developed nations consider a precondition to recognize their government and restore aid.

The move announced by Supreme Leader Hibatullah Akhunzada came as poverty is surging in Afghanistan, following the religious militia's takeover in August that is surging in Afghanistan, following the religious militia's takeover in August that is surging in Afghanistan, following the religious militia's takeover in August that is surging in Afghanistan, following the religious militia's takeover in August that is surging in Afghanistan, following the religious militia's takeover in August that is surging in Afghanistan, following the religious militia's takeover in August that is surging in Afghanistan, following the religious militia's takeover in August that is surging in Afghanistan, following the religious militia's takeover in August.

Forced marriages have become more commonplace in the poor, conservative country, as the internally displaced married off their young daughters in exchange for a bride-price that can be used to pay debts and feed their families.

The announced decree did not mention a minimum age for marriage, which previously was set at 16 years old.

"Both (women and men) should be equal," said the decree, adding that "no one can force women to marry by coercion or pressure." Women’s rights improved markedly over the past two decades of international presence in Afghanistan, but are seen as under threat with the return of the Taliban, whose earlier rule in the 1990s saw them virtually cloistered.

Women in Afghanistan for decades were treated like property — as an exchange taken for blood money or ending disputes or tribal feuds. The Taliban now state they are against the practice. They also said a widow will now be allowed to re-marry 17 weeks after her husband's death, choosing her new husband freely.

"Longstanding tribal traditions have held it customary for a widow to marry one of her husband's brothers or relatives in the event of his death. The Taliban leadership says it has ordered Afghan courts to treat women fairly, especially widows seeking inheritance as next of kin. The group also says it has asked government ministers to spread awareness of women’s rights across the population.

Friday’s announcement comes as thousands of girls from grades seven to 12 are still not allowed to attend school, and a majority of women are banned from returning to their jobs since the Taliban takeover.

Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng speaks at a forum with experts arranged for foreign journalists in Beijing, on Thursday.

China, US tussle over Biden’s latest ‘Summit for Democracy’

By Ken Moritsugu

BELING — China and the United States are tussling over President Joe Biden’s upcoming democracy summit, which the ruling Communist Party sees as a challenge to its authoritarian ways.

The party maintains China has its own form of democracy and plans to issue a report titled “China: Democracy That Works” on Saturday, five days before the opening of Biden’s two-day virtual meeting with about 110 other governments.

The White House pushed back Thursday against Chinese criticism of Biden’s “Summit for Democracy,” after a senior Chinese official said that it divides countries and points fingers at others.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said that the participants would discuss how to work together to stand up for democracy around the world.

“That’s nothing we’re going to apologize for,” she said.

She was responding to opening remarks by Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng at an expert forum on the topic held by the government for foreign journalists in Beijing.

“It claims it’s doing this for democracy,” Le said, without naming the United States. “But this is in fact the very opposite of democracy. It will do no good to global solidarity, no good to cooperation and no good to development.”

Biden has made a competition between democracies and autocracies such as Russia and China a central theme of his presidency, saying democracies must prove they can deliver. Neither Russia nor China are invited to his summit.

The Communist Party has responded by saying its system serves the country’s people, citing its rapid development into a middle-income country and relative success in limiting the number of deaths from COVID-19. Officials regularly highlight failings of American democracy, from gun violence to the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol after the last presidential election.

Bonnie Glaser, a China expert who is director of the Asia Program at the German Marshall Fund of the United States, said the Chinese are correct in viewing the summit as a pushback against autocracy and China’s political system.

“The Chinese Communist Party likely feels threatened by the Biden democracy narrative and feels compelled to reaffirm that it puts the people first,” she said in an email. “Of course, the people come after the party and the preservation of its role, but that is left unsaid.”

The U.S. also angered China by including Taiwan in the summit. China claims the self-governing island as part of its territory and objects to it having any contact on its own with foreign governments.

France signs weapons mega-deal with UAE as Macron tours Gulf

By Barbara Surk

NICE, France — France announced the signing Friday of a $18 billion armaments mega-contract for the sale of 80 of its upgraded Rafale warplanes to the United Arab Emirates.

The French Defense Ministry said the deal was France’s largest-ever weapons contract for export.

It came as French President Emmanuel Macron is in the Emirates on the first stop of a two-day visit to the Persian Gulf. There was no immediate confirmation of the signing from Emirati officials.

Manufacturer Dassault Aviation said the UAE is buying the upgraded F4 version of its multi-role combat aircraft. That will make the Emirates Air Force the first Rafale F4 user outside of France, it said.

The deal offers a shot in the arm for France’s defense industry after the collapse of a $66 billion contract for Australia to buy 12 French submarines.

Dassault Aviation boss Eric Trappier called the sale “a French success story” and “excellent news for France and for its aeronautical industry.”

The purchase marks a sizeable step up for the UAE’s military capabilities in the oil- and gas-rich region. Charles Forrester, a senior analyst at Janes, said the fighter “will significantly upgrade the UAE’s airpower capabilities in terms of strike, air-to-air warfare, and reconnaissance.”

Dassault said the Rafale will give the UAE “a tool capable of guaranteeing sovereignty and operational independence.”

Macron and Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, were present at the contract signing, it said.

French defense officials were jubilant. The defense minister, Florence Parly, said the deal “directly contributes to regional stability.”

France has deep ties to the United Arab Emirates, a federation of seven sheikdoms on the Arabian Peninsula, particularly since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. The UAE opened a French naval base in 2009 at Abu Dhabi’s Port Zayed. French warplanes and personnel are also stationed at Al-Dhafra Air Base, a major facility outside the Emirati capital of Abu Dhabi that’s also home to several thousand American troops.

A senior French presidency official who spoke to reporters ahead of the trip on customary condition of anonymity said Macron will “continue to push and support the efforts that contribute to the stability of the region, from the Mediterranean to the Gulf.”

Gulf tensions will be discussed, the official said, in particular the revived talks about Iran’s nuclear deal with world powers, following the US move from the agreement by President Donald Trump. Gulf countries have long been concerned by Iran’s nuclear ambitions and influence across the region, particularly in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.

“Is this a hot topic,” the French official said, adding that Macron discussed the issues in a phone call Monday with Iran’s president. He will talk about the call and the issues — including the nuclear deal talks in Vienna — with Gulf leaders, who are “directly concerned by this subject, like all of us but also because they are (Iran’s) neighbors,” the official said.

France, along with Germany and the U.K., thinks the 2015 nuclear agreement — with minor tweaks endorsed this week by both Iran, analysts say. The UAE and Saudi Arabia have bitterly opposed the West’s negotiated deal with Iran.
**AMERICAN ROUNDUP**

**MO** St. Louis — A St. Louis County man has pleaded guilty to helping Nigerian romance scammers bilk women in 25 states out of hundreds of thousands of dollars in cash and electronics.

The St. Louis Post-Dispatch reports that Bonmene Sibe, 43, of Jennings pleaded guilty Wednesday to a federal conspiracy charge. He was one of three people indicted last year. All three have now pleaded guilty.

One of them, Ovuoke Frank Offoro, said in his July guilty plea that co-conspirators in Nigeria and the U.S. stole the identities of U.S. military officers or created fictitious officers’ identities before tricking women into sending cash or electronics.

Offoro said Sibe’s role was to find people who would open post office boxes and send the cash and electronics. His plea says victims lost between $350,000 and $1,500,000.

**Police fatally shoot armed man firing guns**

**IL** Buffalo Grove — Suburban Chicago police officers fatally shot an armed man early Thursday after he refused to comply with officers’ orders as he walked toward them while firing two handguns, police said.

Buffalo Grove police said the man in his 20s called 911 and when officers arrived about 12:30 a.m. he had two handguns he was firing in the air as he walked toward the officers in a vacant parking lot. Buffalo Grove Deputy Police Chief Mike Sosz said officers ordered the man to stop and, when he continued toward them, the officers opened fire, striking him.

The officers began providing the man with first aid but he was pronounced dead at the scene in the village located about 30 miles northwest of downtown Chicago, police said.

**Man whose car stopped at ledge rescued after fall**

**CA** Thousand Oaks, Calif. — A helicopter crew rescued a man who tumbled down a steep Southern California hillside after his car ended up teetering on the ledge, authorities said.

After stopping his car just short of the slope, the man got out, lost his balance and fell about 200 feet into Bell Canyon, the Ventura County Star reported.

Multiple agencies including fire and sheriff’s departments and the California Highway Patrol assisted with the rescue in the area on the border of Ventura and Los Angeles counties.

The man didn’t appear to have life-threatening injuries, officials said. He was taken to a hospital to be checked out.

Authorities didn’t immediately say how the motorist ended up off the road at the edge of the canyon.

**Man accused of killing black bear and cub**

**FL** Sebring — A Florida man is accused of fatally shooting a black bear and one of her cubs, officials said.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission said in a news release sent Tuesday that the 43-year-old man shot the bears in the Sun ‘n Lake community in Sebring on Oct. 26.

He faces four charges, wildlife officials said. The state attorney’s office is prosecuting the case.

Biologists with the agency were able to trap one uninjured bear cub in the community and release it in a more suitable habitat, officials said. They saw another cub in the area but were not able to capture it.

**Free tire collection events coming up in 3 locations**

**WV** Charleston — Free tire collection events are coming up in three West Virginia locations.

The West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection said the first event is from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Saturday in Clay County at the IGA Parking Lot on Route 15. Another event will be from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. Wednesday in Clarksburg at the Nathan Goff Armory. On Dec. 12, a collection will take place from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. in Preston County at the former Kingwood Hospital.

Up to 10 tires per person will be taken. Tires must be off the rim, and only car and light truck tires will be accepted.

**Charter school leaders allegedly stole thousands**

**TN** Nashville, Tenn. — Former top officials at a Memphis charter school stole hundreds of thousands of dollars over several years, according to the Tennessee comptroller’s office and the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation.

Investigators said Wednesday that former executive director Cory Johnson, former finance director Robert Williams and former nutritional services director Michael Jones misappropriated funds while working at Memphis Academy of Health Sciences charter school between July 2015 and February 2021.

Officials allege Johnson stole at least $537,955.13 on personal purchases including Las Vegas trips, NBA tickets and a hot tub.

All three men have been fired. A Shelby County grand jury has since indicted Johnson on one count of theft over $250,000 and one count of theft over $10,000. Meanwhile, Williams has been indicted on one count of theft over $250,000, and Jones faces one count of theft over $10,000 and one count of theft over $2,500.

**Partnership aims to help recruit poll workers**

**KY** Frankfort — Kentucky’s secretary of state has teamed up with an organization to promote efforts to recruit poll workers and register young people to vote.

Secretary of State Michael Adams announced the partnership with the Kentucky YMCA Youth Association on Wednesday.

“We can’t have an election without election workers,” Adams said. “Our base of volunteer poll workers is aging out, and this partnership will help us find new ones as we prepare for the 2022 elections.”

Beth Malcom, CEO and president of Kentucky YMCA Youth Association, said the partnership will increase “teen civic activity” across the state while giving students more opportunities to be involved with state government.

Under the state’s election law, any registered voter is eligible to serve as a poll worker.

Besides recruiting poll workers, the secretary of state’s office and the Kentucky YMCA Youth Association will hold high school voter registration drives and conduct voter education training, Adams’ office said.

**3 arrested in connection with fentanyl-laced pot**

**VT** Brattleboro — Three people have been arrested in Brattleboro in connection with marijuana laced with the powerful opioid fentanyl, police said.

Last month, Brattleboro police responded to a report of an overdose and revived the patient using naloxone.

The person told police that they had smoked marijuana and had not taken any opioids. Officers tested the patient’s marijuana and found it contained fentanyl, prompting them to warn the public.

Police searched a residence in Brattleboro on Tuesday and said they found several containers of what they believed to be marijuana laced with fentanyl, the Brattleboro Reformer reported. The marijuana was sent to a lab for testing, police said in the statement. Three people were arrested for possession of fentanyl.

**THE CENSUS**

The high degree of Farenheit in Phoenix on Wednesday, breaking the daily heat record of 83 F set in 1949, according to the National Weather Service. The city had 80-plus degree weather for the first 22 days of last month, topping out at 91 F on Nov. 5. The 25 days of temperatures of at least 80 degrees broke Phoenix’s November record of 24 such days, also set in 1949.

**Plenty of horn**

Helmut Fricker plays an alpine horn at the Beaver Creek ski resort Wednesday in Beaver Creek, Colo. The ski resort is hosting men’s World Cup downhill ski races Thursday through Sunday.
‘Get Back’ dispels, confirms Beatles myths

Disney+ documentary series created from nearly 60 hours of mostly unseen film, 150 hours of audio recordings

By David Bauder

For 50 years, the fixed narrative had the Beatles’ “Let It Be” recording session as a miserable experience with a band where members were sick of each other, sick of their work and in the process of breaking up.

The nearly 8-hour, Peter Jackson-produced documentary culled from film and recording outtakes of those sessions instead reveal a self-aware band with a rare connection and work ethic that still knew how to have fun — yet was also in the process of breaking up.

The “Get Back” series unspooled over three days starting on Thanksgiving on Disney+

Produced by a Beatlemaniac for fellow Beatlemaniacs, it can be an exhausting experience for those not in the club. But the club is pretty big. Beyond the treats it offers fans, “Get Back” is a fly-on-the-wall experience for those not in the club. But we looked each other. We had a few rows with each other — that’s what people do. But musically, every time we would count in — one, two, three, four — we were into being the best we could be.”

Jackson follows the sessions day by day and intersperses them into a decision on a live concert. The morning he does, the film shows he was a control freak. That moment unfolded after a morning where Harrison watched, silently stewing, as Lennon and McCartney displayed their tight creative connection working on “Two of Us” as if the others weren’t there. When a lunch break came, Harrison had something more permanent in mind.

“My leaving the band now,” he says, almost matter-of-factly, before walking out.

After a few days, and a couple of band meetings, Harrison was coaxed to return. The morning he does, the film shows him and Lennon reading a false newspaper report that they had come to blows, and faced off in boxing stances to mock it.

Jackson’s project dispels and reinforces pieces of conventional wisdom that have solidified through the years.

Myth No. 1: McCartney was a control freak

Verdict: Partly true. The film shows Harrison visibly chafing at McCartney giving him and other band members instructions on how to play and cajoling them into a decision on a live concert. The band had been somewhat aimless since the 1967 death of manager Brian Epstein. McCartney had taken on the “daddy” role, and isn’t entirely comfortable with it.

“I’m scared of me being the boss, and I have been for a couple of years,” he says. “I don’t get any support.”

Myth No. 2: Yoko Ono broke up the Beatles

Verdict: Not true. She’s there at virtually every recording session, but mostly as a benign force sitting next to Lennon. The other Beatle spouses all show up in the studio, although not as often. At one point, McCartney even makes a prescient joke...
Truth: Band breakup not as contentious as originally thought

FROM PAGE 12

about her.

“It’s going to be such an incredible com- ic thing in 50 years time — they broke up because Yoko sat on an amp,” he says.

The afternoon after Harrison left, the remaining Beatles clearly take out their frustration with some aggressive, atonal music, and Ono takes over his microphone — a spellbinding moment.

Myth No. 3: They essentially turned into 4 solo artists

Verdict: Not true. They’re constantly collaborating, seeking and taking advice. At one point, Harrison confesses to Len- no that he’s being having trouble complet- ing the line that became “attracts me like no other lover” in “Something.” Lennon suggests using a nonsense phrase — “at- tracts me like a cauliflower” — until some- thing better emerges.

Through the film, viewers can see how the song “Get Back” emerged from McCartney working out a riff on the side, to he and Lennon trading lyrical suggesti- on and throwing out an idea to make it a song criticizing anti-immigrant sentiment, to the full band working out the arrange- ment. Pleased with the final result, it’s Harrison who suggests immediately re- leasing it as a single.

“A glimpse of them working together is an enormously important artifact, not just for Beatles fans but for anybody who is creative,” said Bob Spitz, author of “The Beatles: The Biography,” published in 2005.

Myth No. 4: Filming showed the Beatles breaking up

Verdict: Essentially true. It becomes clear that Lennon and Harrison’s enthusiasm for being Beatles is waning. Lennon is clearly in command. One McCartney tells Harrington and Starr that if it ever came down to a choice between her and the Beatles, Lennon would go with her.

Harrison, growing creatively, is becom- ing uncomfortable with his secondary role. He talks with Lennon about doing a solo album because he has enough songs writ- ten to fill his “quota” on Beatles albums for another decade. As if to prove his point, the Beatles rehearse Harrison’s majesty “All Things Must Pass,” but de- cide to record it.

In the film, Lennon and Starr also dis- cuss a meeting with Rolling Stones man- ager Allen Klein about taking over the Beatles’ business, foreshadowing a bitter split with McCartney.

“The whole thing is full of mini-stories,” Jackson said.

Jackson, who had been expected to make a conventional documentary, said he was nervous taking his much longer final product back to McCartney, Starr and the families of Lennon and Harrison.

“But they came back and said, “great; don’t change a thing,” he said.

James Stewart, as George Bailey, hugs actor Karolyn Grimes, who plays his daughter Zuzu, in 1946’s “It’s a Wonderful Life.”

By Rodney Ho
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

“It’s a Wonderful Life,” Frank Capra’s story about redemp- tion and a life fulfilled, provided a lifeline for the film’s living cast members reflect on its impact more than 7 decades later.

The movie, though, was just a footnote in their lives until the late 1970s.

“I started hearing more about it then,” said Hawkins in a recent Zoom interview with The Atlanta Journal-Constitution to promote the 75th anniversary Blu-Ray DVD release, which came out Nov. 16.

“People were holding trivia parties. I thought, Wow! This suddenly got big!”

He remained an actor in the 1950s and 1960s and worked with Reed on “The Donna Reed Show” from 1958 to 1966.

Grimes got out of show business in her teens after her mother died from early-onset Alzheimer’s disease and her father was killed in a car accident. Her life was suffused with tragedy. Her first husband died in a hunting accident. One of her children committed suicide. And her sec- ond husband died of cancer. She didn’t even see “It’s a Wonderful Life” until she was 40 years old.

“I was enthralled with the messages from that movie when I first saw it,” Grimes said. “I knew then why it was very special and I could understand why I started getting fan mail and people wanted to have interviews with me.”

Back in 1980, she had no idea how jour- nalists even tracked her down because her name had changed and there was no Go- ogle back in the day. But the publicity en- abled her to reunite with Stewart and Reed, and Grimes became the unofficial ambassador of the movie.

Over the past four decades, she has attended countless screenings, benefits and conventions. She helped create a mu- seum for the film and returns each De- cember to Seneca Falls, N.Y., the model for the movie’s small-town Bedford Falls, for the “It’s a Wonderful Life” Festival.

For Grimes, the film’s message is time- less: “How each person’s life touches another and we’re given an opportunity to make a difference. That’s so important.”

She even likes the colorized version, which is available on the DVD. “You can see so much more in the back- ground you can’t see in the black-and- white version,” she said. “Paramount makes it really crisp and beautiful.”

“Some people don’t like black-and- white, so whatever it takes to get the mess- age out, that’s fine,” Hawkins added.

Hawkins said people have come up to both of them and said watching the film kept them from killing themselves. And even at age 79, he said he feels like he’s four all over again when he thinks about the movie.

“When people ask us questions about being on the set, you click back into it,” Hawkins said. “It’s so vivid. It seems like a million years ago or just yesterday.”

The movie itself is pretty dark on mul- tiple levels and Grimes thinks people, coming out of World War II, weren’t quite ready for it yet.

Stewart himself wasn’t sure he wanted to even act again after flying naval planes over Germany but, as Hawkins said, actor Lionel Barrymore, who plays the miserly Mr. Potter in the film, convinced Stewart to do it.

“The film is like the cream in the cof- fee,” Hawkins said. “It just rises to the top.”
Is Battlefield 2042 worth playing now?

By Gieson Cacho
The Mercury News

W hen perusing a game on the shelves or a digital shop, players face three decisions: They can buy it, forget it or wait on it. Few titles are worth the immediate purchase, and plenty more can be ignored altogether. The last category is more complicated, and that’s where Battlefield 2042 sits.

It’s clearly not a finished project with the bugs and glitches that have plagued the early access period of its launch, but that’s expected for Electronic Arts’ military shooter. The past few iterations have never been complete on release day, but DICE and the other developers behind the series tend to improve on the title so that it ends up being the game they envisioned.

Near-future warfare

Battlefield 2042 takes place in the near future in a world devastated by climate change. Sandstorms have taken over Doha, Qatar. Container ships have been abandoned for scrap along the coast of Alang, India. Even Antarctica has become a battleground as the warmer climate has made the continent more inhabitable and exploitable for resources.

In this dire landscape, players take on the role of non-patriated people or No-Pats. These are refugees from collapsed nations where extreme weather has created famine and other catastrophes. These are people without a country and they become mercenaries aligned with either the U.S. or Russia as the two superpowers engage in another conflict.

It’s a different take on World War III, and one that acts as a strong scaffolding for the multiplayer-only game. First off, players choose from 10 No-Pat specialists who have a unique perk and a gadget. Their characteristics make them suited for different roles in a fight. Assault classes are built to attack and outflank opponents. Engineers specialize in defense and controlling areas. Recon acts as scouts, spotting advancing enemies and weakening them from the shadows. Support specialists bolster the squad, resupplying or healing them.

These are general roles, with each specialist having a unique way of fulfilling their niche. Players can further customize the specialists by configuring them with different weapons, grenades and tools. It’s possible to create an assault trooper who has explosives or a support medic who can also repair vehicles.

Initially, players have access to a limited number of specialists, weapons and vehicles, but as they level up by playing matches, they earn more options and gain access to more characters. The progression feels balanced so that players will earn several pieces of gear over an hour-long session.

Bigger than ever

What makes Battlefield different from other military shooters is the size and scale of the battles. Competitors such as Call of Duty and Halo have a more arcade-like flow to the confrontations. Matches are fast-paced with threats constantly around the corner. On the other hand, Battlefield 2042 has enormous maps, ones that now accommodate 128 players. With so much space and so many players, you often have to travel to the action and approach objectives from different angles. It takes a few matches to adjust to the combat loop and constantly changing conflict.

Taken altogether, Battlefield 2042 matches are 85% chaos. That’s made worse by the lack of voice chat at launch. Helicopters will fire down on squads holding a capture point. Trucks will roar through the battlefield, running over friends and foes alike. Explosions will erupt unexpectedly as players rush a building. Ten percent of matches (it could be higher depending on the diverse battlegrounds) will be gunfights in close quarters. It’s the type of fighting that Call of Duty fans will be familiar with.

Chaotic serendipity

The other 5% are the “what the heck” moments. Every so often, players will see that attack chopper explode and its flaming wreck fall on a squad creating an ovary of death. Other times a tank rushing to a control point can crush enemies after falling off a cliff. These emergent gameplay moments are what the franchise is built on, and Battlefield 2042 tries to expand on that by introducing weather-fueled moments to the maps.

Players will find tornadoes tear through the landscape in India. They cut out communications and introduce more chaos as players try to avoid the natural disasters. In Hourglass, sandstorms reduce visibility and force players to take cover.

Last squad standing

This all-out warfare is the foundation of Battlefield 2042. DICE also incorporated a new mode called Battlefield Hard Zone, which is comparable to a battle royal rule set. Players jump into a four-member squad and they’ll have to compete against eight other units. The group will have to collect intel and survive together until they can extract that data. Rival squads are also going after the data and players will have to battle them. If a squad is wiped out, they’re out.

Battlefield 2042 has the same tense moments as a battle royal, as the number of squads go down and players have to use teamwork to survive. If allies go down, they can still be resurrected by redeployment machines scattered on the map or purchased beforehand. Hard Zone as a mode has potential but again it’s hamstrung by an incomplete game that lacks voice chat and polish.

Lastly, Battlefield Portal is an option that lets players create their own rule set using assets and maps from different franchise eras. Players won’t get a huge number of options, but this lets players who want a trip down memory lane to experience older maps through new lenses. The same shooting and mechanics from Battlefield 2042 stick around but players can create interesting scenarios such as VIP Fiesta, where one team has to eliminate the mark on the rival team. In a twist, dying gives players a different gear set each time.

Like the rest of Battlefield 2042, this mode has potential but players will have to wait and see if this mode and the rest of the game pans out.

Platforms: PC, Xbox One, Xbox Series X/S, PlayStation 4, PlayStation 5

Online: ea.com/games/battlefield/battlefield-2042
Are bidets better?

Health expects weigh in on pros, cons of the cleaning devices, particularly popular during the COVID-19 toilet paper shortage

By Angela Haupt
Special to The Washington Post

Carrin Verrocchio has a theory: Once you go bidet, you never go back. She’s smitten with the toilet attachment that sprays water to clean your bum that her family had one installed in each of their four bathrooms — and they’re shopping for a travel bidet, a water-bottle-sized contraption to use when they’re on the road.

Where to start on the appeal? “It’s a gentle experience,” says Verrocchio, 55, a motivational speaker who lives in Binghamton, N.Y. “You know how when you go to the bathroom, you have to wipe a zillion times with dry paper? You don’t do that with the bidet. It literally just rinses it off, puts it in the toilet and you pat dry. I wish we’d done it years ago.”

Nikki Webster, 47, a writer from the United Kingdom who now lives in Florida, similarly considers her bidets essential. “When you wipe, you’re basically wiping what can be reached,” she says. “When you spray, you get into every nook and cranny, which leaves you way cleaner.”

Indeed, health experts generally agree that bidets elevate the bathroom hygiene experience, at least when used properly. What’s less clear is whether they serve any medical purpose beyond that. While there’s some indication that they could, for example, be helpful for those with hemorrhoids or mobility issues, research isn’t conclusive, and there are concerns that bacteria could fester on the device; plus, users could be scalded if the water gets too hot.

Even if they’re not a medical necessity, bidets exploded in popularity in the United States during the pandemic — and they’ve long been common in Japan, which leaves you way cleaner.

The pros

- “From a hygiene perspective, it just clearly makes sense. You’re able to get rid of any extra residue that’s there. The bidet has always been part and parcel to anal hygiene.” — Evan Goldstein

- “Wiping might not be entirely conclusive, and there are concerns that bacteria could fester on the device; plus, users could be scalded if the water gets too hot.” — Nikki Webster

- “The pros

  - Washing instead of wiping is, in many ways, a no-brainer, says Evan Goldstein, an anal surgeon in New York City and founder of Bespoke Surgical. He regularly recommends bidets to his patients.

  - From a hygiene perspective, it just clearly makes sense,” he says. “You’re able to get rid of any extra residue that’s there. The bidet has always been part and parcel to anal hygiene.”

  - Less wiping: Goldstein says Americans have a tendency to over-wipe: Desperate to be clean, we rub toilet paper against our posterior again and again, irritating the skin and sometimes even causing tiny cuts or bleeding. While toilet paper can be abrasive, a bidet delivers a more soothing stream of water to sensitive areas.

  - Wiping might not be entirely eliminated, though: Goldstein notes that it’s still important to “wet” yourself after using the toilet. “It’s personal preference,” he says.

The cons

- “It was one of those experiences where the glass shatters and you can’t put it back together,” she says.

  - After a decade of diligently selling the devices, orders suddenly skyrocketed during the pandemic, when paper products became scarce. “To say there was a spike is an understatement,” he says. “Sales increased by 20, 30 times over the course of a few weeks, to the point where you couldn’t buy a bidet if you really wanted to. Everyone was out of stock.”

- Inventory is now back to normal, he reports, though interest remains high.

- As Lin puts it, those who discover the bidet “can’t shut up about it — they tell their neighbors and friends and all that.”

- Here’s a look at what health experts say about the pros and cons of bidets:

  - The pros

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    - “The cons

      - It’s a gentle experience. And people with proctitis say the technical term for itchy anus, are often cautioned to avoid toilet paper, leading them to bidets.

      - “There have been clear anecdotal reports of people with hemorrhoids where the bidet helps,” says John Swartzberg, a clinical professor emeritus in the School of Public Health at the University of California, Berkeley. But beyond those testimonials and a pool of preliminary studies, there’s “not a lot of evidence to support” the impassioned claims of bidet lovers, he says. For example, some advocates believe bidets prevent urinary tract infections, but Swartzberg says there’s no evidence of that.

    - The cons

      - Concern about bacteria: A bidet isn’t a slam-dunk better toileting experience: Some research raises concerns. One large study, for example, indicated that regularly using a bidet altered the good bacteria in a woman’s vagina.

      - “The reality is that most people, when they switch to a bidet, they’re mad at themselves that they didn’t use it earlier, and they consider it a game changer,” Goldstein says. “It’s hygiene at its finest.”

      - Good if you have problems with mobility: Bidets are often particularly helpful for people with mobility issues, including those with arthritis, morbid obesity or Parkinson’s disease, says Christine Lee, a gastroenterologist at the Cleveland Clinic. The device minimizes the need to use your wrist to get to difficult spots on your underside.

      - “If you can’t reach out — or if you have a spinal cord injury, and you have less sensation, so you’re not quite sure where you’re wiping — well, those kinds of things can decrease the quality of hygienic practices,” she says.

      - The bidet is a convenient way to guarantee a thorough cleaning. Plus, Lee says, some seniors with poor hand-eye coordination who aren’t able to trim their nails accidentally cut themselves while wiping, leading to pain and infection. Indeed, a study published in Gerontologist found that bidets improved “comfort in toileting and cleanliness” among nursing home residents ages 75 and up.

      - Helpful if you have issues in that area: There’s limited research on bidets, but a few studies suggest potential health benefits. Using one might make sense for those with hemorrhoids and anal fissures, since it reduces pressure in the rectum and is a relatively gentle experience. And people with pruritus ani, the technical term for itchy anus, are often cautioned to avoid toilet paper, leading them to bidets.

      - “There have been clear anecdotal reports of people with hemorrhoids where the bidet helps,” says John Swartzberg, a clinical professor emeritus in the School of Public Health at the University of California, Berkeley. But beyond those testimonials and a pool of preliminary studies, there’s “not a lot of evidence to support” the impassioned claims of bidet lovers, he says. For example, some advocates believe bidets prevent urinary tract infections, but Swartzberg says there’s no evidence of that.
By Kathleen Parker

The Washington Post

It’s just a guess, but I’m willing to bet the kit and caboodle that most Americans aren’t shedding tears over President Joe Biden’s ban on travelers from nations affected by COVID-19’s latest variant. You’ve got to hand it to the virus: Unlike most of its human incubators, COVID-19 knows what it’s doing. No matter how many defenses we concoct, or how many vaccines we invent, the virus adapts and reconfigures, each time improving its chances for survival. This time, the victim is the Republic of South Africa, where vaccines have been in short supply. Thus far, scientists worry that omicron is more transmissible than the delta variant. As a result, several countries are closing their borders to most travelers from eight countries: South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Lesotho, Eswatini, Mozambique and Malawi. The ban is in response to the fact that omicron, as the virus spreads and because it is possible, I hear, to fly somewhere else before catching a plane to the United States. Some African leaders called the travel bans an overreaction, but we have already tried underreacting. As I recall, that didn’t go so well. The World Health Organization has warned against imposing travel restrictions and urged a “risk-based and scientific approach” — whatever that means. South African Health Minister Joe Phahala has said the restrictions are unjustified. How does he know anyone anything — yes? They don’t, and that’s the point. Hence the travel bans.

The relative risk of widespread infection from travelers may be statistically insignificant, but why take a chance? If you ask whether my conscience is burdened by the ban’s effect on a relative few, my honest answer may put unwoke readers in mind of Gone With The Wind’s Butler’s words to Woodstock’s Country Joe and The Fish: “I’m dating myself, I realize, so I will spell it out: I don’t give a damn.”

The economic collapse of any of these eight countries, due to short-term travel restrictions, isn’t merely sensible to try to stem dissemination of the variant for a few weeks until we know more about its transmissibility and the extent of its existing vaccine coverage.

Yes. Of course. Biden has called the U.S. ban a “precautionary measure” until we know more about the new strain. But omicron is mimicking bar-tenders by shaking and then testing vials filled with a mixture of vaccinated human blood and the omicron variant, as CNN medical correspondent Sanjay Gupta explained the process. It’s difficult to overstate how much these assessments give the Pentagon unparalleled freedom to push their policy beliefs.

Even President Joe Biden has complained about the travel ban, which was a campaign promise. By pre- senting Biden was reportedly furious at generals trying to push the White House into committ ing additional troops to Afghanistan when President Barack Obama was looking to phase down U.S. involvement there.

As president, Biden confronted his own quarter-century Italian-American civil-military relations when he asked to intervene in the civil war in Afghanistan. He tried to persuade him to ignore his predecessor’s peace deal with the Taliban and keep a modest American presence in the country. Biden rightly ignored that recommendation, but after the chaotic U.S. exit, top generals, looking to protect their image, publicly contradicted him by revealing they advised him against completely leaving Afghanistan.

A Pentagon without an independent policy agenda would have minimized any differences they had with their commander-in-chief. But these officers came under little scrutiny for distancing themselves from Biden in this remarkable way indicates the focus on an apolitical military has obscured where its real influence lies. Although these breaches of civil-military relations were harmful and erode Americans’ trust in their governing institutions, they belie the reality that the military is actually an entrenched part of the American political establishment and has a long history of trying to use that to its advantage.

During World War II, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, frustrated with British intransigence to open a second front in Western Europe, outwardly tried to pressure Franklin D. Roosevelt into abandoning the British-led European global military strategy by switching its primary focus from the European to the Pacific War. Their gambit was an attempt to force Roosevelt’s hand, but it amounted to a group of unelected officials attempting to limit their elected leader and force him to make the policy decision they desired.

After the war, this behavior continued. As President Harry Truman pursued unification of the armed forces, many military leaders forcefully resisted it in a bid to jealously guard their own prerogatives and independence. To prevent Truman from succeeding, they attempted to build a coalition of senior civilian political officials and members of Congress to raise the pressure on the president. Dozens of top uniformed officers testified before Congress to warn of the dangers unification might pose to military readiness. But there was nothing inherently partisan about their arguments, but this episode displayed that when Pentagon leaders held divergent views from their civilian counterparts, they would prioritize their own and use their influence to push their agenda.

Unlike other powerful special interests, the military has the advantage of being embattled in the executive branch, which gives it additional means to influence policy debates. This includes greater access to senior administration officials, the routine opportunity to testify during congressional appearances and shape understanding of foreign policy issues, and the ability to build strong ties and relationships on Capitol Hill.

It is difficult to overstate how much these assessments give the Pentagon unparalleled freedom to push their policy beliefs.
ACROSS

1 Satchels (Abbbr.)
5 Rebuff
9 YouTube upload
12 Nevada neighbor
13 Colada
14 Epoch
15 Actor’s quest
16 Race place
17 Jamie Foxx biopic
18 Oscar-winner Moreno
19 Old Oldsmobile
20 Cookouts, briefly
21 Bikini half
23 Outback bird
25 Training book
28 Lustrous
32 Singer Travis
33 Valuable violin
34 Lessened
36 Coffers
37 Before
38 Corn serving
39 Swerve
42 Bank account amt.
44 Pyramid part
48 Director DuVernay
50 Make — for it (flee)
51rench
52 French perfume brand
53 Schreiber of “Ray Donovan”
54 Golfer Ernie
55 Catch sight of
56 Indolent

DOWN

1 Duelist Aaron
2 Yours (Fr.)
3 John in “Atlas Shrugged”
4 Skin moisturizer
5 Helix shape
6 Prime-time hour
7 Cancels
8 Inlet
9 Part of speech
10 Baghdad’s land
11 Calendar squares
20 Turkey brand
22 Critic, often
24 “Three Sisters” sister
25 1959 Kingston Trio hit
26 Wall St. whiz
27 Long of “Soul Food”
29 Tax-collecting org.
30 D.C. baseballer
31 Gridiron stats
35 Rubbish
36 Bloody Mary garnish
39 Smoke an e-cig
40 Satan’s forte
41 Vittles
43 At the summit of
45 Opera house solo
46 Canal zone
47 Jealousy
49 Citric beverage

Answer to Previous Puzzle

CANDIDATE

12-4

CRYPTOQUIP

D V N R H U L Q V H F E U N S X E ’ R
M K E S K B E N X H D L K J H K
O K F E Y Y E K Q W H F O U V R V K R V E B
Yesterday’s Cryptoquip: WHEN ACTORS CRUISE AND HANKS WERE KIDS, WHAT COULD YOU HAVE OBVIOUSLY CALLED THEM? TOM BOYS.
Today’s Cryptoquip Clue: S equals W
Thursday's men's scores

Tennis

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Thursday's women's scores

Tennis

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PGA Tour

PGA Tour Q-Series

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LPGA Q-Series

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By Joe Reedy  
Associated Press

Those looking for a photo of Mike Trout or highlights of Atlanta’s Game 6 win in the World Series won’t find them on Major League Baseball’s official website.

Shortly after the sport’s first work stoppage in 26 years began Thursday at 12:01 a.m., MLB removed all current player photos and highlights off MLB.com. Major League Baseball said in an email to The Associated Press that “every action we are taking is at the advice of legal counsel per the National Labor Relations Act.”

By removing players names, images or likenesses, owners hope to avoid running afoul of federal labor laws or the instigation that any visuals would be for commercial or promotional purposes to make money during a labor dispute.

Player photos have been replaced with generic silhouettes, while the headline queues have been filled with features about retired players or historic videos.

The same goes beyond that. The Los Angeles Angels announced their promotional schedule last month, including a bobblehead commemorating Shohei Ohtani’s AL MVP season on April 8. The schedule now lists only a “historic season bobblehead” on that date.

On MLB Network, experts focused Thursday on the upcoming reveal of the Era Committees’ Hall of Fame selections, with clips of long-retired stars Gil Hodges and Tony Oliva but no highlights from any 2021 games.

In Philadelphia, a banner celebrating Bryce Harper winning the NL MVP was taken down at Citizens Bank Park.

Union head Tony Clark and Bruce Meyer, the players’ chief lawyer, said that MLB scrubbed images on their own, and that they had no input.

Players, like New York Mets pitcher Taijuan Walker, have taken one step further and removed images from their own Twitter profiles.

Jeff Katz, the chief product and strategy officer for FanAI, said leagues do not have an offseason when it comes to promotion, especially in the age of social media. FanAI tracks how fans are watching sports and consumer spending.

“It will be difficult for MLB to do sponsored posts because they can’t share video clips or highlights. The impact on them is likely to be worse than other leagues because the NBA and others that have embraced social media have a healthy amount of content shared outside the league,” Katz said.

The challenges are even greater considering some fans still have not been back to ballparks for the two seasons since the COVID-19 pandemic started. Marketing data has also become more measured and can quickly assess the marketplace.

“If they can wrap up in a timely fashion and not have too much pied in their face, they can brush off. If it becomes a stand still for months and starting the season on time is in jeopardy, not many businesses are going to put up with it,” Katz said. “The sponsorship business is at a crossroads. With digital coming so far over last 5-10 years and tracking results, more brands are going to demand to see results of investments, especially if they perceive extracting value is in jeopardy. They are not going to sit on the sidelines for long. They will insist on results.”

Notre Dame promotes Freeman to replace Kelly

Associated Press

SOUTH BEND, Ind. — Notre Dame has completed a whirlwind coaching search that never seriously left campus, promoting defensive coordinator Marcus Freeman to coach of the Fighting Irish on Friday.

The second-year coach would not discuss the specifics of Jones’ injury, saying the decision to rule him out was solely for this week. Judge said it is uncertain at this point when Jones will be cleared to play.

Jones, who has been the Giants’ starter since early in his rookie season of 2019, will be evaluated next week when the team trains in Tucson, Ariz., for a game against the Chargers in Los Angeles on Dec. 12.

Elliott wrapped up his time in Fort Collins with a 4-12 record.

Elliott most popular driver again

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Chase Elliott held on to one of his NASCAR titles: Thursday night when fans voted him most popular driver for the fourth consecutive year.

Elliot was both the reigning Cup champion and most popular driver this season, but he was ultimately beaten by new Hendrick Motorsports teammate Kyle Larson for the Cup title. At the season-ending awards ceremony at the Music City Center, the National Press Association declared Elliott winner of the fan-decided most popular award.

Elliott began his run as NASCAR’s most popular driver in 2018, the first year of Dale Earnhardt Jr.’s retirement.
**James cleared to return after false positive**

**Associated Press**

LOS ANGELES — LeBron James was cleared to return to the Los Angeles Lakers after missing one game under the NBA’s health and safety protocols.

The league said Thursday that James is not positive for COVID-19 after a series of tests that produced conflicting results earlier this week. Additional testing Tuesday, but those tests returned one negative result and one clinically inconclusive result, according to the league.

James subsequently had two negative PCR tests conducted more than 24 hours apart, meeting the criteria necessary to return to play.

**Los Angeles Lakers forward LeBron James missed one game under the NBA’s health and safety protocols.**

James said earlier in the season that he is vaccinated. A clear positive test likely would have kept James away for 10 days or more.

James has missed 12 of the Lakers’ 23 games this season, with 10 due to injuries. He also missed one game while serving the first suspension of his 19-year NBA career for an altercation with Detroit’s Isaiah Stewart.

James is the third-leading scorer in NBA history with 35,651 points. He is averaging 25.8 points, 6.8 assists and 5.2 rebounds in his 11 games this season.

The Lakers are 5-7 without James and 7-4 with him. They began Thursday in sixth place in the Western Conference despite their thoroughly overhauled roster around James and Anthony Davis, along with significant injury problems for several expected regulars.

At least 17 players have entered the NBA’s health and safety protocols since the start of the season. Philadelphia’s Joel Embiid and Milwaukee’s Jrue Holiday are among the big names who have missed significant playing time while dealing with the expected controversies.

The Lakers’ first meeting of the season Friday with their Staples Center rivals was moved off ESPN earlier in the week in the expected absence of both James and injured Kawhi Leonard, who hasn’t played this season. Both Los Angeles teams have been hovering near the .500 mark after beginning the year with championship aspirations.

**Grizzlies rout Thunder, set record for win margin**

**Associated Press**

MEMPHIS, Tenn. — The Memphis Grizzlies broke the NBA record for margin of victory Thursday night, beating the Oklahoma City Thunder 132-108.

The 73-point spread easily topped the previous mark, which was Cleveland’s 68-point win over Miami. The Cavaliers beat the Heat 148-80 on Dec. 17, 1991.

Memphis used 12 players and nine of them reached double figures in scoring, with Jaren Jackson Jr.’s 27 points leading the way for the Grizzlies. Memphis was without its best player, injured guard Ja Morant.

It was 72-36 at halftime and the Grizzlies just kept adding to the lead, eventually pulling ahead by as many as 78 points.

The Grizzlies set a franchise record for shooting, making 62.5% of their shots. De’Anthony Melton scored 19 points, Santi Aldama had 18 and John Konchar added 17 for the Grizzlies.

The sample was retested twice, producing one positive and one negative result. According to the NBA, the Los Angeles Lakers were notified after they were cleared to play when James subsequently had two negative PCR tests conducted more than 24 hours apart, meeting the criteria necessary to return to play.

**Los Angeles Lakers forward Brandon Clarke (15) is defended by Oklahoma City Thunder forward Daniel Gafford during the second half of Thursday’s game in Memphis, Tenn.**

**Scoreboard**

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**Leaders**

Through Dec. 2

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Chicago Blackhawks goaltender Marc-Andre Fleury stops a shot by Capitals right wing Tom Wilson during overtime Thursday in Washington. The Blackhawks won 4-3 in a shootout.

**NHL round-up**

Associated Press

WASHINGTON—Marc-Andre Fleury stopped Alex Ovechkin in the shootout after Seth Jones tied it, and Fleury got some assistance from his goalposts to prevent Washington from scoring.

Fleury stopped Alex Ovechkin in overtime to hand host New York its ninth straight loss. Fleury made 24 saves, and Victor Antti Niemi made 26 shots over the first two periods.

Fleury's shutout was his first in the NHL this season and third of the regular season. His only loss with three straight wins. Then, just when the critics thought he wasn't expected to accept a pay cut and change his identity as a team.

Fleury was named the third star of the game.

- ***Sharks 2, Islanders 1***
  - Erik Karlsson scored 39 seconds into overtime to hand host New York its ninth straight loss.
  - Nick Biondo also scored and Ti-Mo Meier had two assists for the Sharks, who have won three straight and five of six. Adin Hill made 24 saves.

- ***Wild 5, Devils 2***
  - Kirill Kaprizov had two goals and an assist as host Minnesota kept rolling with a win against New Jersey.
  - Ryan Hartman had a goal and two assists, and Rem Pitlick and Dmitry Kulikov also scored for Minnesota, which has won five games in a row and is the NHL's highest-scoring team since Nov. 2 with 64 goals in 15 games.

- ***Avancione 4, Canadiens 1***
  - Cale Makar scored to put his team ahead to stay late in the second period, Valeri Nichushkin had a goal and an assist, and visiting Colorado beat the Canadiens in their only loss with three straight wins.

- ***Avalanche 4, Canadiens 1***
  - Cale Makar scored to put his team ahead to stay late in the second period, Valeri Nichushkin had a goal and an assist, and visiting Colorado beat the Canadiens in their only loss with three straight wins.

- ***Flames 3, Kings 2***
  - Andre Borkovsky and Gabriel Landeskog also scored for the Avalanche, which bounced back from an ugly 8-3 loss at Toronto a night earlier.

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- ***Flames 3, Kings 2***
  - Andre Borkovsky and Gabriel Landeskog also scored for the Avalanche, which bounced back from an ugly 8-3 loss at Toronto a night earlier.
Not just AAC championship on line for No. 3 Cincinnati

BY JEFF WALLNER
Associated Press
CINCINNATI — There are larger implications for No. 3 Cincinnati — namely staying in the College Football Playoff picture — when the Bearcats meet No. 16 Houston in the American Athletic Conference championship.

But the Bearcats certainly need a win Saturday to accomplish their big objective when we walked in the door here five years ago, and it hasn’t changed. And it’s always been to play for championships, Cincinnati coach Luke Fickell said.

Bearcats quarterback Desmond Ridder has been in the program long enough to remember when winning a conference title wasn’t a realistic goal, let alone reaching the College Football Playoff picture. The Bearcats went 4-8 in Ridder’s freshman season, which also was Fickell’s first season at the helm.

“It’s something we’ve been striving for since I’ve got here,” Ridder said. “It’s something Coach Fick has preached since he got here. A national championship is on the minds of the big dogs. I’m not sure how much they care about a conference championship, but it’s one of the biggest things in our program.”

Cincinnati is ranked No. 4 in the most recent CFP rankings, putting the Bearcats in position to become the first team from a non-Power 5 conference to reach the playoff. But they need to take care of business against the Cougars, who are ranked No. 21 in the CFP.

“In my opinion they’re just another team, and they’re in our way,” Houston defensive lineman Derek Parish said. “(Rankings) are numbers made by people who watch football on a couch. We aren’t worried about that. Numbers don’t mean nothing. It matters when the ball is put down on the field.”

Houston and Cincinnati are among four FBS teams ranked in the top 10 nationally in both scoring offense and total defense. The similarities don’t stop there.

The Bearcats average 39.6 points per game, the Cougars average 38.8. Houston is ranked sixth in total defense, Cincinnati is eighth. Ridder has passed for 3,000 yards and 27 TDs. Cougars QB Clayton Tune has passed for 3,013 yards and 26 TDs. They have each thrown eight interceptions.

No respect

Despite having won 11 straight games since losing to Texas Tech in the season opener, the Cougars didn’t move into the national rankings until the end of October and didn’t join the College Football Playoff rankings until mid-November.

“Really all year we feel like we haven’t been getting the respect we deserve,” Cougars linebacker Deontay Anderson said. “I just feel like we’re disrespected, and we really have a chip on our shoulder from that.”

Experience matters

Cincinnati has 18 players who already have earned their degrees, making it the fifth straight season with 10 or more senior graduates on the Bearcats roster. Ridder has hung around long enough to amass 43 wins as a starter, third-most in college football history.

“Being old is the only way you can win in college football,” Houson coach Dana Holgorsen said.

Tough at home

The AAC championship game is played at the home stadium of the top seed. While both Cincinnati and Houston finished 8-0 in the league, the Bearcats earned a home game since they had the higher CFP ranking. The Bearcats have won 26 straight games at Nippert Stadium, the second-longest home winning streak in the nation behind Clemson (34). Houston has beaten the Bearcats just once on the road since 1972.

FROM PAGE 24

The Big 12’s defensive player of the year, as named Thursday after being voted on by league coaches, Pitre is among several players from that spring 2017 signing class now playing key roles for the ninth-ranked Bears (10-2). They play Saturday against fifth-ranked and College Football Playoff hopeful Oklahoma State (11-1) in their second Big 12 championship game in three seasons.

“I have a lot of respect, a lot of love for them,” second-year Baylor coach Dave Aranda said. “To see the growth in them has been one of my biggest and best takeaways.”

That 2017 class was the last in college football without a December signing period, so Rhule and his new staff had a little extra time to put things together.

Abram Smith is the Big 12’s second-leading rusher with 1,366 yards, do-everything back Tresstan Ebner averages 133.8 all-purpose yards a game and R.J. Sneed has 43 receptions. Torrey Bernard is Baylor’s top tackler (76 with 10 of those for losses). Pitre plays a hybrid linebacker-defensive back position, with 63 tackles and the only FBS player with at least three forced fumbles, three fumble recoveries and two interceptions.

“It’s been a journey, man. We’ve been through a lot together. We spend more time together than with our families, so it’s been fun,” Bernard said. “It’s been a great experience. Every single one of them have become my brothers and have become life-long friends.

No. 9 Baylor (10-2, 7-2 Big 12) vs. No. 5 Oklahoma St. (11-1, 8-1)
AFN-Sports
6 p.m. Saturday CET
2 a.m. Sunday JKT

It’s an experience I’ll never trade for anything.”

There was the 1-11 season in Rhule’s debut, then improving to 7-6 the next season. They won 11 games and made the Big 12 title game and Sugar Bowl in 2019 before the coach left for the NFL.

Aranda was coming off a national title as LSU’s defensive coordinator when he arrived at Baylor and the pandemic wiped out spring practice. The Bears stumbled to 2-7 last year, and now have another shot at a Big 12 title.

“A roller coaster, man. Up and down. It’s just a credit to all the guys who came in with me. They stuck it out. We fought,” Ebner said. “That’s what makes it so much better. ... We always figured it out.”

Pitre was all-in long before anybody else in that first signing class for Rhule.

And Baylor stuck with Pitre even after he had an ACL injury as a junior before he had six interceptions as a senior.

“I’ve been grateful, like with all the experiences that I’ve had and how far God has brought me,” Pitre said. “Because if in 2015 somebody would have told me that I would be in this spot where I am, and I would have done the things that I’ve done it, it would have been kind of hard for me to believe.”

BYU tight end Isaac Rex, top, is hit by Baylor safety Jalen Pitre during a game on Oct. 16 in Waco, Texas.
**Scoreboard**

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### North

### Thursday’s game

**Dallas, 27, New Orleans 17**

**Sunday’s games**

**Arizona at Chicago:**

**Indianapolis at Houston:**

**L.A. Chargers at Cincinnati:**

**N.Y. Giants at Miami:**

**Philadelphia at N.Y. Jets:**

**Tampa Bay at Atlanta:**

**Jacksonville at L.A. Rams:**

**Washington at Las Vegas:**

**Baltimore at Pittsburgh:**

**San Francisco at Seattle:**

**Denver at Kansas City:**

**Cleveland, Tennessee, Carolina, Green Bay**

### Monday’s game

**New England at Buffalo**

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**Dallas does it with defense**

**Cowboys pick off Saints QB Hill four times on way to 27-17 win**

**By Brett Martel**

Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — Dallas defensive coordinator Dan Quinn had to step in for Mike McCarthy as acting head coach and enjoyed the sideline view as the unit he normally oversees lifted the Cowboys out of their recent swoon with a slew of big plays.

CeeDee Lamb had 122 yards from scrimmage, Tony Pollard ripped off a 58-yard touchdown run and the Dallas defense produced a drive-stalling sack and three interceptions in the fourth quarter of a 27-17 victory over the New Orleans Saints on Thursday night.

The Cowboys (8-4) intercepted Saints quarterback Taysom Hill four times in all — three times in the final 6:32 of the game, including defensive tackle Carlos Watkins’ pick-6 on a screen pass that made it 27-10 with 2:52 left.

“I finally got to see his emotion and expressions down on the sideline,” Dallas rookie outside linebacker Micah Parsons said of Quinn, a former Atlanta head coach who normally calls defensive plays from a booth with Dallas. “It was good to see a smile on his face and it was good to see another win on the board.”

McCarthy and five assistants didn’t make the trip because of positive COVID-19 tests.

“I love doing hard things with a group of people and this was one of those moments,” a gratified Quinn said. “We wanted to make sure Mike and all the guys that we missed, that we got their back. Honestly, that was the only thing I was nervous about. I didn’t want to let them down.”

The Saints (5-7) gave the dual-threat Hill his first start this season also ended a Saints threat of the fourth quarter, but the Cowboys canceled out that turnover of the fourth quarter, but the Cowboys did it with defense.

Hill’s turnovers proved too much to overcome as the Saints — winners of the NFC South the previous four seasons — lost a fifth straight game for the first time since 2005, the season before Payton took over in New Orleans.

“It’s very frustrating. It’s unfamiliar territory for us,” Hill said. “This is my fifth year and I haven’t experienced anything like this since I’ve been a Saint.”

Dak Prescott passed for 238 yards and a 1-yard touchdown to Michael Gallup.

Prescott was intercepted by Marshon Lattimore in the middle of the fourth quarter, but the Cowboys canceled out that turnover when Jourdan Lewis hit Hill’s arm as he released the ball back.

That was the first of Dallas’ three late interceptions. The Saints’ next drive stalled on a pick six by Trevon Diggs, his league-leading ninth. And Watkins’ interception came on the drive after that.

When the ball was in the air, our guys went and got it,” said Parsons, whose 10th sack of the season also ended a Saints threat early in the fourth quarter. “We tried our best to contain them. I mean, he was getting outside the pocket and we were finding ways to slow him down and getting the ball back.”

Saints receiver Deonte Harris turned a short pass into a late 70-yard TD for the game’s final score.
First class
Pitre began as lone recruit for No. 9 Baylor following scandal

By Stephen Hawkins
Associated Press

Jalen Pitre stuck with his longtime commitment to Baylor while every other recruit bailed in the wake of a horrendous scandal.

He was in a class all by himself when coach Matt Rhule was hired in December 2016, six months after Art Briles was fired. Under an interim coach, the Bears had ended their regular season on a six-game losing streak and Pitre was the only recruit still verbally committed to Baylor.

“I feel like I was a little overlooked, but I was very thankful for Baylor giving me a shot,” Pitre said this week. “With that gratitude, I was sold on coming here and doing what I needed to do to become the man that I could be, and growing on and off the field. … It’s crazy to look back and see how far I’ve come.”

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