

FACES

This week: Swift film, new 'Grey's Anatomy,' fresh Timberlake album
Page 14



NATION

President: Never intended to keep classified papers
Page 9



COLLEGE BASKETBALL

South Carolina-LSU fight gives bad look to growing women's game
Page 24

Pentagon ends ban on IVF for unmarried and same-sex couples >> Page 3

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Marines see need for speed

VINCENT PHAM/U.S. Marine Corps

Lance Cpl. Luis SanchezMateo, with Headquarters and Support Battalion, 3rd Marine Division, fires an M4 service rifle during the Marine Corps Marksmanship Competition Far East on Camp Hansen, Okinawa.

Corps marksmanship requirements change for 1st time in over century

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

MARINE CORPS BASE QUANTICO, Va. — Changes announced Monday to scoring and shooting standards for Marine Corps marksmanship requirements will better account for the speed at which a Marine shoots at a target, not just accuracy, according to service officials behind the decision.

The changes allow for a magazine-supported shooting posture and require higher scores to complete annual requirements at the pre-qualification phase of rifle training, according to an announcement sent to Marines.

For Marines who qualify on a pistol the first three qualification stages are becoming more

difficult to better prepare Marines for the final two.

"This is about increasing lethality," said Col. Gregory Jones, commander of the Weapons Training Battalion, part of Training Command at Marine Corps Base Quantico in Virginia. "This is not your granddad's rifle range."

He spoke last week about the changes alongside Chief Warrant Officer 4 Joshua Grayek, director of marksmanship in the battalion. Both described the overhaul as the largest since 1907.

"The rifle range in 1907, it's not bad or good. It's what we had when we had ... a 1903 Spring-

SEE SPEED ON PAGE 6

Navy 2025 budget bill focuses on warfighting

By GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

The Navy will cut its purchase of Virginia-class submarines and F-35C Lightning II carrier-based fighter jets in fiscal 2025 amid uncertainty over budget constraints, including the 2024 defense appropriation stalled in Congress.

Navy and Defense Department officials presenting the service's \$203.9 billion budget proposal for fiscal 2025 said they face a double squeeze.

Congressional infighting has stalled the allocation of 2024 funds even as plans for 2025 are unveiled. Conflicts in the Red Sea and Ukraine and heightened tensions in the Indo-Pacific region has drained operations and munitions budgets.

"The Navy is carrying the brunt of those costs," said Michael McCord, the undersecretary of defense comptroller and chief financial officer.

Adm. Christopher Grady, Joint Chiefs of Staff vice chairman, said Monday that the result is a budget that emphasizes current needs and the ability to respond to China in the Indo-Pacific, even if it means risking investments in future technologies and weapons.

"We're ready to fight tonight," he said.

The Navy proposed a pivot on its shipbuilding plans and wants to retire vessels that service officials believe do not match the profile of

SEE BUDGET ON PAGE 5

SERVICE BUDGETS

- Army **Page 4**
- Air Force **Page 5**
- Space Force **Page 5**
- Marine Corps **Page 6**



ROSE L. THAYER/Stars and Stripes

A Marine Corps marksmanship qualification range March 5, at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va.

BUSINESS/WEATHER

IRS launches program for free online tax filing

Associated Press

NEW YORK — After weeks of testing, an electronic system for filing returns directly to the IRS is now available for taxpayers from 12 selected states.

The new system, called Direct File, is a free online tool.

Taxpayers in the selected states who have very simple W-2s and claim a standard deduction may be eligible to use it this tax season to file their federal income taxes.

The program will also offer a

Spanish version.

The Treasury Department estimates that one-third of all federal income tax returns filed could be prepared using Direct File and that 19 million taxpayers may be eligible to use the tool this tax season.

“Direct File will offer millions of Americans a free and simple way to file their taxes, with no expensive and unnecessary filing fees and no upselling, putting hundreds of dollars back in the pocket of working families each

year, consistent with President Biden’s pledge to lower costs,” said National Economic Advisor Lael Brainard.

Certain taxpayers in Florida, New Hampshire, Nevada, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Washington, Wyoming, Arizona, Massachusetts, California and New York can participate.

Direct File can only be used to file federal income taxes, taxpayers from states that require filing state taxes will need to do so separately.

EXCHANGE RATES			
Military rates			
Euro costs (March 13)	\$1.07	Switzerland (Franc)	.8787
British pound (March 13)	\$1.25	Thailand (Baht)	35.73
Japanese yen (March 13)	143.00	Turkey (NewLira)	32.0503
South Korean won (March 13)	1277.00	(Military exchange rates are those available to customers at military banking facilities in the country of issuance for Japan, South Korea, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. For nonlocal currency exchange rates (i.e., purchasing British pounds in Germany), check with your local military banking facility. Commercial rates are interbank rates provided for reference when buying currency. All figures are foreign currencies to one dollar, except for the British pound, which is represented in dollars-to-pound, and the euro, which is dollars-to-euro.)	
Commercial rates		INTEREST RATES	
Bahrain (Dinar)	.3769	Prime rate	8.50
Britain (Pound)	1.2763	Interest Rates Discount rate	6.00
Canada (Dollar)	1.3506	Federal funds market rate	5.33
China (Yuan)	7.1801	3-month bill	5.38
Denmark (Krone)	6.8331	30-year bond	4.26
Egypt (Pound)	48.8031		
Euro	.9164		
Hong Kong (Dollar)	7.8240		
Hungary (Forint)	365.23		
Israel (Shekel)	3.6584		
Japan (Yen)	147.79		
Kuwait (Dinar)	.3072		
Norway (Krone)	10.5181		
Philippines (Peso)	55.41		
Poland (Zloty)	3.93		
Saudi Arabia (Riyal)	3.7508		
Singapore (Dollar)	1.3327		
South Korea (Won)	1313.20		

WEATHER OUTLOOK



TODAY
IN STRIPES

American Roundup	17
Classified	13
Comics	15
Crossword	15
Faces	14
Opinion	16
Sports	18-24

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MILITARY

Dockworkers strike after US stops at Japan port

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

TOKYO — Dockworkers went on strike in protest Monday when a U.S. Navy guided-missile destroyer visited a civilian port on the southern Japanese island of Ishigaki, according to local news reports.

The USS Rafael Peralta, based south of Tokyo at Yokosuka Naval Base, stopped for rest and replenishment allowed under the Japan-U.S. status of forces agreement, Japanese national broadcaster NHK reported that evening. SOFA outlines the rights and responsibilities of U.S. military forces in Japan.

Local officials had granted permission for the visit, but dockworkers began a strike at the port Monday afternoon, citing concerns about the impact on logistics, the broadcaster reported.

The Rafael Peralta is scheduled to depart 9 a.m. Wednesday, the Ryukyu Shimpo newspaper reported Tuesday. The strike will continue until it departs, according to the Okinawa Times.

Ishigaki, part of Okinawa prefecture, is 160 miles east of Taiwan. It is a popular tourist destination and the site of Camp Ishigaki, a Japan Ground Self-Defense

Force base armed with anti-ship and surface-to-air missiles that opened in March 2023.

The island is one of three where Japan plans to install an upgraded version of its Type-12 surface-to-ship missile by 2026 to counter perceived threats from China and North Korea.

The Ishigaki port call was part of routine operations and training in the region, a spokesman for Destroyer Squadron 15, Navy Lt. j.g. Ronan Williams, said by email Tuesday.

Local officials refused a Navy request to use a cruise ship berth at the port because the draft is too shallow, but approved a request to anchor offshore, Ishigaki Mayor Yoshitaka Nakayama posted on X Monday.

“I believe it is a regular use since the purpose is rest and replenishment,” he told reporters Monday, according to NHK. “Ishigaki port is open internationally and it can be used as long as it is applied based on the status of forces agreement, so I see no issues.”

Okinawa prefecture on Friday had asked the Navy to cancel the visit, a spokeswoman for the prefecture’s military base affairs division said by phone Tuesday. Some Japanese government officials may speak to the press only

on condition of anonymity.

“It’s Okinawa prefecture’s consistent policy for U.S. military to refrain from the use of civilian ports except in case of emergency,” she said. “It is extremely regrettable that the ship came even though the prefecture asked them not to.”

Okinawa Gov. Denny Tamaki made similar remarks to reporters Monday. The Navy “should refrain from its vessels using civilian ports, so there is no need to conduct strikes,” he said.

Okinawa officials made similar complaints in September when the USS Pioneer, a mine countermeasures ship based at Sasebo Naval Base, Japan, stopped overnight on Ishigaki, marking the Navy’s first visit to the island in over a decade.

The U.S. military benefits from access to as many ports as possible, according to Grant Newsham, a retired Marine colonel and senior researcher with the Japan Forum for Strategic Studies in Tokyo.

“And it’s important to use them in so-called ‘phase zero’ — peacetime, or at least before the shooting starts,” he said in an email Tuesday.

Port calls make military personnel familiar with a location and op-



DEVIN MONROE/U.S. Navy

Ensign Julia Olson stands watch from the bridge of the guided-missile destroyer USS Rafael Peralta near the Luzon Strait, on March 1.

erating environment, so they don’t need to figure things out on the fly in an emergency, he added.

More ports and airfields make U.S. forces a harder target and gives them better odds of surviving an attack on their main base, Newsham said.

“By treaty, the Japanese government is obligated to provide such access to facilitate the operations of U.S. forces in Japan —

and the U.S. forces are in fact operating to defend Japan,” he said. “It’s important that the Americans get over their self-imposed restraint on doing what’s necessary to both protect Japan and also increase their own odds of survival. These need to be regular visits.”

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Pentagon ends ban on IVF for unmarried, same-sex couples

By **LINDA F. HERSEY**
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Service members and veterans will be allowed to access in vitro fertilization treatment regardless of their marital status or sexual orientation, the Departments of Defense announced.

Defense officials on Friday said they would end a policy requiring service members to be legally married and able to produce the necessary gametes — the sperm and eggs — for a pregnancy to have a child.

The policy had effectively kept same-sex couples, unmarried couples and single adults from receiving IVF treatment to have a child.

The VA said Monday that the agency also would end the restrictions on IVF treatments to align with the Defense Department.

Under the expansion of care, the Defense Department and VA will offer IVF benefits to eligible service members and veterans regardless of marital status and for the first time allow the use of donor eggs, sperm and embryos.

“We are grateful to the Defense



RODNEY JACKSON/U.S. Army

The Department of Defense has approved IVF treatments for couples who are unmarried or of the same sex.

Department and overjoyed for the service members who, through this policy change, will now be able to access the reproductive health care so desperately needed in order to build their families,” said Sonia Ossorio, director of the New York City chapter of the National Organization for Women.

NOW-NYC, the Veterans Legal Services Clinic and the Reproductive Rights and Justice Project filed a lawsuit in August in federal

court in New York City that challenged the policies for IVF treatment by the Veterans Affairs and Defense departments as discriminatory.

Air Force veteran Ashley Sheffield, who served in the military for 20 years, had filed a second lawsuit in Massachusetts federal court on behalf of a proposed class of veterans excluded from IVF treatment.

Sheffield said in her lawsuit that exposure to jet fuel affected her reproductive system and ability to have children. She also claimed she was exposed to polyfluoroalkyl and perfluoroalkyl substances, known as PFAS, which are chemicals in fire-fighting foam that has been linked to infertility, the lawsuit stated.

Sheffield, who retired from the military in 2021, said she was denied IVF treatment because of discriminatory VA policies. She said her constitutional rights were violated.

“In 2021, Ms. Sheffield married her wife,” according to the lawsuit. “They live in Massachusetts and hope to conceive a child of their own and share their passion

for serving others with that child.”

Her lawsuit included a letter to Sheffield from the VA that reads “if [you’re] in a same-sex marriage or if the sperm is donated from someone other than a male spouse” she was disqualified from the treatment.

“LGBTQ+ veterans like Ashley Sheffield who have bravely sacrificed for our country deserve equal treatment when they seek the medical benefits they have earned,” according to the lawsuit. “VA must end its blatant and willful discrimination of veterans in same-sex marriages and provide Ms. Sheffield, and all other veterans denied IVF because of sex and sexual orientation, the health care they have earned.”

VA, under the new policy, will provide IVF treatment to veterans using donated sperm or eggs, which is “a critical step toward helping veterans unable to produce their own sperm or eggs due to service-connected injuries and health conditions,” the VA said Monday in announcing the rule change.

But the Defense Department and the VA will continue to re-

quire that an illness or injury must precipitate coverage for IVF treatment.

Attorneys in the NOW-NYC case said they will continue to press for IVF coverage regardless of whether an individual has a service-connected disability or injury that caused infertility.

Lindsay Church, a Navy veteran represented in the NOW-NYC lawsuit, had said in the lawsuit that her injuries were not directly related to the infertility that she was experiencing. Church had served as a petty officer 2nd class working as a cryptologic linguist from 2008-12.

“My service came with severe injuries, leaving me disabled and unable to carry a child due to extensive damage to my ribs, sternum, spine and torso,” Church said.

“Despite my service-connected disability, my spouse and I do not have access to vital fertility treatments, such as IVF, because my disabilities are not to my reproductive system, and we are in a same-sex marriage.”

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MILITARY

Army budget focuses on barracks, pay raise

\$185.9B proposal includes improving poor living conditions, recruiting sag

By **MATTHEW ADAMS**
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Improving poor living conditions for soldiers and military families, overcoming a sag in recruiting, a pay increase for military personnel and investing in the Indo-Pacific region to challenge China are focuses in the Army's proposed budget for fiscal 2025.

The proposed budget of \$185.9 billion, a 0.2% increase from last year, comes as the Defense Department continues operating under short-term spending bills as Congress continues to wrangle over spending for fiscal 2024, which started Oct. 1. The Pentagon's overall proposed budget for 2025 is \$849.8 billion.

The budget includes \$935 million for nine new barracks projects, more than three times last year's budget request of nearly \$288 million.

The military services have come under scrutiny from lawmakers and others to help improve the poor living conditions for service members and military families so troops can focus on warfighting.

Housing projects for active-duty troops are scheduled at Fort Johnson, La.; Fort Leonard Wood, Mo.; Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash.; Joint Base Myers-Henderson Hall, Va.; Smith Barracks in Baumholder, Germany; and Barton Barracks in Ansbach, Germany, according to Maj. Gen. Mark Bennett, director of the Army budget with the service's assistant secretary for financial management and comptroller. There are two Reserve projects also planned, one at Parks Reserve Air Forces training area in California and another at Fort Buchanan, Puerto Rico.

Barracks sustainment is also funded to 100% for the first time in

recent history at \$680 million, Undersecretary of the Army Gabe Camarillo told reporters at the Pentagon.

The Army also provides a 4.5% basic pay increase, 3.9% basic allowance for housing increase and 3.4% basic allowance for subsistence increase.

After the service missed out on its recruiting goals for two consecutive years, it remains a key focus for the Army.

"It's not borne by the Army alone. All the military services are facing some significant multiyear-recruiting headwinds," Camarillo said. "We've been taking this challenge head on."

The Army projects an end-strength of about 442,300 active-duty soldiers, 325,000 National Guard members and 175,800 reservists by the end of fiscal 2025, he said.

The service implemented a series of new recruiting jobs styled after talent-acquisition models used by private businesses.

The Army opened jobs on Jan. 3 for sergeants through master sergeants and warrant officers 1 through chief warrant officers 3 to become full-time talent acquisition technicians, or 420T. The position will work to standardize operations and advise staff on recruiting, retention, operations, marketing and analytics, according to the Army.

Service officials had previously said the recruiting goal for 2024 year is 55,000 new troops. Gen. Randy George, the Army chief of staff, recently said the service is ahead of where it was last year.

The service proposed budget allots \$1.1 billion for marketing and advertising, an increase of 10% from 2024, Camarillo said. While the Army will continue to make investments in national advertisements, the service will look to in-



MARIAH AGUILAR/U.S. Army

Army soldiers coaching at the Talisman Saber 23 exercise talk with a German soldier at the tactical operations center on July 26, during the Joint Pacific Multinational Readiness Center rotation at Townsville Field Training Area in Australia.

vest in local and regional marketing campaigns.

He did point out that working under a stopgap spending measure, also known as a continuing resolution, is a problem.

"I'll tell you one thing that we certainly found that doesn't work. It's being in a CR environment where we can't really plan some of the media buys early enough in the year has been a real challenge for us because it forces us to buy inefficiently," Camarillo said.

The war in Ukraine and China, which is viewed by defense officials as the top pacing challenge for the U.S. military, also remain areas of focus for the Army. Camarillo said the service alternated in recent years between funds for Europe and the Pacific. Since fiscal 2024, they are no longer doing that.

The Army's budget request includes \$1.5 billion for the Pacific Deterrence Initiative, a program designed to develop advanced ca-

pabilities, new operational concepts and build a more resilient force posture in the Indo-Pacific. The service also requested more than \$461 million for Operation Pathways for 11 exercises in the Pacific, a 200% increase from last year.

Similar to the Pacific deterrence, the Army includes an allotment of \$2.1 billion for the European Deterrence Initiative. This initiative looks to build up a deterrent in the face of Russian aggression, while funding the Army's posture in the region and enabling rapid force buildup.

"There is a determined push to ensure that we are funding exercises as part of our NATO assurance mission in Europe, but also significantly investing in Pacific pathways," the undersecretary said. "All of those nations in the Pacific, they all have armies, and they appreciate the opportunity to train with us."

Here are some Army priorities

from the service's budget request for fiscal 2025:

- \$70.7 billion in military personnel funding to account for increases in basic pay, housing and subsistence.

- \$675 million for enlistment across the active-duty, Reserve and National Guard.

- \$14.1 billion for research, development, test and evaluation, or RDT&E.

- \$24.4 billion in procurement for ammunition, weapons and tracked combat vehicles, aircraft and missiles.

- \$4.5 billion in shifts of funding for the aviation rebalance strategy. This includes upgrades of \$465 million for CH-47 Block II helicopters and \$25 million for UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters.

- \$447 million for drones.

- \$625.6 million in NATO support.

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VA's \$369B budget anticipates increased disability payments

By **LINDA F. HERSEY**
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Department of Veterans Affairs is proposing a \$369.3 billion spending plan for fiscal 2025 that is about 12% higher than last year and includes nearly \$25 billion for a toxic exposures fund that compensates veterans diagnosed with medical conditions from contact with burn pits, radiation and other environmental hazards.

The 2025 budget provides "robust funding" for VA Secretary Denis McDonough's top priorities, the VA said when it released

the blueprint Monday afternoon.

The overall budget is \$33 billion more than the current year's spending plan and prioritizes increased funding and resources for health care, disability compensation and upkeep at VA facilities, McDonough said.

The VA spending plan anticipates a reduction in VA staff in 2025. The administration's request is for 448,170 full-time employees, which is 10,000 fewer workers than 2024 estimates.

Most of the staffing decreases are expected to be in the Veterans Health Administration. The

spending plan identified decreases in areas that include medical services, medical support and medical facilities, among others.

The VA did not provide estimates on how salaries and wages will be affected by the decrease in staffing levels.

But it is projecting that its total cost to deliver medical care in 2025 will be \$138.6 billion, down from the 2024 estimated cost of \$142.5 billion. The projected cost includes mandatory and discretionary spending, the VA said.

The budget also requests \$2.8 billion for updating and improving

VA health care facilities, including some hospitals that are more than 50 years old.

Two-thirds of the VA's \$369 billion budget is for mandatory funding, which is government spending required by law.

For the VA, mandatory funding spans health care, disability compensation payouts and pensions, housing and insurance programs, as well as medical facility leases for a total of \$210 billion.

The toxic exposures fund adds another \$25 billion — or \$5 billion more than the 2024 request — for delivering health care services

and payouts to affected veterans, as mandated by the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics Act, or PACT Act, which became law in August 2022.

"VHA is working to treat more veterans affected by military environmental exposure, conduct additional research on military environmental exposures, and implement the authorities included in the act to ensure VA hires and retains the best staff possible to treat affected veterans," McDonough said in his statement on the budget.

MILITARY

2025 Air Force budget request holds steady

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

A stagnant Air Force budget proposal for fiscal 2025 led the service to make tough decisions on funding procurement while meeting increased costs for personnel pay and the rising price of flight hours and munitions.

The service's budget request for fiscal 2025, which begins Oct. 1, is \$217.5 billion — up about 1.1% from the previous year's request and does not keep up with inflation, Kristyn Jones, interim undersecretary of the Air Force, said Friday.

"It costs roughly a billion dollars more to maintain parity for readi-

ness, compared to [2024] in our weapon systems sustainment and flying hours," she said. "Even though we're just keeping it even, it costs about a billion dollars more. Same thing with our military pay, given the 4.5% increase for military pay and the other benefits, it's costing about a billion dollars more for our military personnel."

That meant tough decisions on procurement, such as spending the same amount of money on munitions as last year but buying less.

"You'll see the dollars are the same, but in some cases, we're getting fewer quantities," Jones said Friday during a preview of the budget release Monday.

The budget expects the number of airmen to hold steady from 2024 at 320,000 troops.

"Overall, I consider this to be an acceptable budget, I can defend it," Air Force Secretary Frank Kendall said Friday. "It moves forward on the things that we prioritize. Again, I'd like to be able to move faster, but we do have constraints."

Of the total department budget, \$188.1 billion will go to the Air Force and \$29.4 billion to the Space Force. That's about a \$3 billion increase for the Air Force and a \$5.6 billion decrease for the Space Force.

Service officials said the Air

Force will remain strategy-driven to provide the joint force with the capabilities it needs while accepting some risk to modernization to achieve essential near-term readiness.

The service will again ask to retire the F-22 fighter jet, despite Congress's previous opposition to approve the move. It first asked to do so in 2022.

Divesting from it entirely would save about \$2 billion, said Maj. Gen. Mike Greiner, the deputy assistant secretary for budget. Past divestments from the F-22 have gone straight into its replacement, known currently as the Next-Generation Air Dominance fighter, or

NGAD. The proposed 2025 budget adds \$815 million for NGAD development and testing of air vehicle and mission systems for a total of \$3.4 billion to augment current and future aircraft.

Other funding highlights include \$1.3 billion to support increased pay and benefits for personnel, \$1.6 billion for recruiting and retention, \$1.5 billion for quality-of-life improvements for mission facilities, family housing, dormitories and child care centers, and \$451 million in resilience and well-being programs.

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Space Force budget decreases

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

The Space Force budget proposal for fiscal 2025 dropped 2% from last year despite the service adding 400 new guardians to its force, according to Air Force officials.

The Air Force requested \$29.4 billion for the military's 4-year-old service branch for fiscal 2025, which begins Oct. 1. That's roughly \$3 billion less than the 2024 Space Force budget, which has yet to be approved by Congress. Yet the budget expects the Space Force to have 9,800 guardians, up from 9,400 in 2024.

The main factor driving the decrease is a drop in the number of launches planned for next year,

Air Force Secretary Frank Kendall said Friday when he and service officials previewed the Department of Air Force budget request, which includes Space Force.

"The area which I'm most concerned about risk and trying to move forward as quickly as I can is space," Kendall said. "China has fielded a combination of anti-satellite capabilities and space-based targeting capabilities. So they're threatening our space assets, and they're threatening our joint force. We've got to respond to that."

As in previous years, most of the Space Force budget — roughly 63% — is dedicated to research, development and testing. That in-

cludes \$2.1 billion for the Next-Generation Overhead Persistent Infrared satellite program and \$1.7 billion for space technology development and prototyping.

"We're not moving as fast there as we would like to, but we didn't have any place to make any adjustments," Kendall said of research and development.

Other spending includes an additional \$413 million for satellite communications for space development and production, \$267 million more to spend on missile warning and tracking, and increases tactical satellite communication spending by \$237 million.

To convince guardians to stay in Space Force, the proposed budget increases bonus payouts by about



KELLY GOONAN/U.S. Air Force

A 920th Rescue Wing HC-130J Combat King II aircraft sits on the flight line at Patrick Space Force Base, Fla.,

\$4.5 million to \$25 million with selective retention bonuses and initial enlistment bonus pay, said Maj. Gen. Mike Greiner, deputy assistant secretary for budget.

There's an additional \$5.7 mil-

lion for assignment incentive pay as well.

These funds will help "to get the right folks on the team and then to retain them and keep them long term," Greiner said.

Budget: Navy opts to reduce attack sub request from 2 to 1

FROM PAGE 1

current and near future conflicts.

The fiscal 2025 budget calls for \$43.1 billion in shipbuilding, including six new "battle force" additions to the fleet: One Virginia-class attack submarine, one Constellation-class guided missile frigate, two Arleigh Burke-class destroyers, one San Antonio-class amphibious transport dock, and one medium landing dock.

The budget would continue funding for the USS Enterprise and USS Doris Miller, the third and fourth of the new-generation Ford-class aircraft carriers. The ships are expected to enter service in the early 2030s.

The Navy also wants to start work on the USS Wisconsin, the second of the new Columbia-class ballistic missile submarines that also are scheduled to debut in the next decade.

The budget would allow the service to maintain 31 amphibious ships to carry Marines and other troops to conflicts. It would also

meet the congressional mandate to maintain 11 aircraft carriers, a number that would go to 12 next year with the arrival of the USS John F. Kennedy, the second Ford-class aircraft carrier.

"This is a strategy-driven budget that reflects the nation's priorities," said Erik Raven, undersecretary of the Navy.

The Navy opted to reduce its planned request on the attack submarines from two to one and use \$3.4 billion on the Pentagon's Submarine Industrial Base plan to streamline and upgrade the supply chain of 15,000 companies in 50 states involved in submarine production.

"We need to get to a better, healthier dynamic," McCord said of the Virginia-class production delays.

The decision drew immediate pushback from Rep. Joe Courtney of Connecticut, the top Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee's subpanel on seapower and projection forces. His dis-

trict includes General Dynamics Electric Boat, the submarine builder in Groton.

"The Navy's plan to cut a submarine that has already been partially paid for and built makes little or no sense," Courtney said Monday. "This hard rudder turn by the Navy demands the highest scrutiny by the Congress."

To offset the costs of operations and new ships and submarines, the Navy wants to retire 10 ships that have yet to reach their projected end-of-service age. The list includes two Ticonderoga-class cruisers, four expeditionary transports, two littoral combat ships, and one expeditionary transport dock ship.

Another procurement casualty would be the Lockheed-Martin F-35C Lightning II aircraft slated to replace the McDonnell-Douglas F/A-18 Hornet as the Navy's main carrier-launched fighter and attack aircraft. The Navy will buy 13 F-35Cs, which Navy or Marine squadrons can fly off aircraft carriers.

ers.

McCord said the new plane's development issues, including software problems, were affecting deliveries. He said just as the Virginia submarine program could get back on track with a production slowdown, a longer delivery runway for the F-35C could allow for a catch-up between demand and supply.

Raven said allowing the Navy to make the choices was critical as congressionally mandated limits constrain future budgets.

"We're moving into a capped environment," he said. "We looked at our own programs and made trades with a clear understanding of the risks we are taking."

If the Navy shipbuilding and retirement plan is approved, the service would drop from 296 ships now to 287 in 2025. The fleet would include 11 aircraft carriers and 67 nuclear-powered attack and ballistic-missile submarines.

Personnel would also remain essentially flat under the budget.

The Navy wants 332,300 active-

duty sailors, up from its current 331,221. As with the other military services, the Navy has fallen short of recruiting goals. The Navy remains below its 2024 authorized force size of 337,800 personnel. The service also wants to increase the Reserve in 2025 from 55,979 to 57,700.

The budget did not include money needed to replenish missiles and other ammunition expended in operations in the Middle East. The Defense Department and Navy plan to submit a supplemental budget to cover the costs of current conflicts.

Rear Adm. Ben Reynolds, deputy assistant secretary of the Navy for budget, said the service needed a return to annual budgets with funds matching costs. The current short-term funding measures and caps aren't sustainable.

"It can cause lasting and profound damage to the Navy and Marine Corps," he said.

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MILITARY

Marine budget seeks \$53.7B to modernize

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Marine Corps is asking for more than \$50 billion to support its ongoing transformation into a more modernized force and improve living conditions for Marines.

The service’s \$53.7 billion budget request is part of the Navy’s \$257 billion overall proposed spending plan for fiscal 2025, which begins Oct. 1. The total budget for the services represents a funding increase of 0.7% from last year’s request, which has yet to be approved by Congress.

“This budget prioritizes our people and our readiness to deploy and operate today and respond in this decade if called to,” said Rear Adm. Ben Reynolds,

deputy assistant secretary of the Navy for budget. “The budget delivers the resources necessary to operate and build a lethal naval force to defend our nation and our way of life.”

The Marine Corps’ spending plan would support a force of 204,800 active-duty Marines and Reserve members, several hundred less than the projected end strength for fiscal 2024.

The Navy and Marine Corps are boosting investment in personnel, including a 4.5% pay raise for sailors and Marines and expanded opportunities to enroll in community college or pursue other education.

There is also additional funding for the restoration and maintenance of barracks, family housing and child development centers.

“As we looked [at the budget], we said the first thing and most important is just to make sure that our sailors and Marines are safe and they have a good place to live,” Reynolds said.

Something as simple as providing Wi-Fi access can go a long way toward making troops feel at home, as well as ensuring basics such as working doors with locks, he said.

The Marine Corps is in the midst of inspecting every barracks facility in its inventory and hopes to bring them all up to standard by 2030, Reynolds said. The service’s deferred maintenance backlog stands in excess of \$15.8 billion, according to budget documents.

Much of the Marine Corps’ bud-

get request is committed to implementing its Force Design 2030 program, a long-term plan for the service to modernize and adapt for future marine warfare environments. The service is asking for nearly \$14 billion in weapons and systems procurement — a 5.2% increase from the fiscal 2024 request.

“This budget is focused on delivering resources to ensure America’s maritime forces — our Navy and Marine Corps team — are ready, resilient, flexible and forward-deployed to do our nation’s tasking, whether that’s supporting naval diplomacy, crisis response, building partnerships, or protecting the world’s global economy, which floats on seawater,” said Erik Raven, undersecretary of the

Navy. Here are other figures from the Marine Corps’ budget request for fiscal 2025:

■ \$364 million for major construction supporting relocation of Marines from Okinawa, Japan, to Guam and Darwin, Australia.

■ \$3 billion for research and development, a \$600 million drop from fiscal 2024.

■ \$18.1 billion for military personnel, including increases in pay and housing compensation.

■ Procurement of 123 Javelin missiles, 674 joint light tactical vehicles, and 12 Medium-Range Intercept Capability, or MRIC, missiles.

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Cold weather delays sleeves-up ritual for some Pacific Marines

By JONATHAN SNYDER
Stars and Stripes

MARINE CORPS AIR STATION IWAKUNI, Japan — It’s no joke; some Marines in Japan and South Korea can keep their sleeves down until April Fools’ Day.

The annual gun-unholstering ritual, like swallows to Capistrano, signifies the coming of spring for Marines in the loose-fitting, green camouflage-patterned combat utility uniform.

The signal for sleeves down in the fall or sleeves up in the spring follows daylight saving time, which took place Sunday in the United States.

But cooler-than-usual weather has spurred some Marine bases in Japan and South Korea to postpone the mandatory sleeves-up order until April 1.

These include MCAS Iwakuni, south of Hiroshima, base spokes-

man 1st Lt. Aaron Ellis said by email Tuesday.

“In order to account for expected cooler temperatures, [Marine Corps Installations Pacific] delayed the seasonal uniform change,” he wrote.

Such seasonal delays are not uncommon; last year’s change took place on April 9 at MCAS Iwakuni for the same reason, Ellis said.

“Certain regions don’t follow these guidelines as strictly but rather work more with the changing of weather,” Marine Corps Installations Pacific spokeswoman 2nd Lt. Kelsey Enlow told Stars and Stripes by email Monday.

Sleeves are slated to go up March 31 at Combined Arms Training Center Camp Fuji and on April 1 at Camp Mujuk in South Korea, Enlow said. Marines at Yokosuka Naval Base south of Tokyo were also still in long sleeves Monday.

Sleeves went up on schedule at Marine bases on Okinawa, the southernmost Japanese prefecture, she said. Marines on Hawaii wear their sleeves up year-round.

Spring and summer sleeves on the Marines’ combat utility uniform should look “tight and professional,” Sgt. Maj. Enrique Gato, of the 2nd Combat Readiness Regiment, said in a video posted Feb. 8 on the Defense Visual Information Distribution System.

Gato demonstrates how to properly roll the tunic sleeves into a Marine-worthy bicep cuff. Using two-points of contact — index finger and thumb — he rolls the sleeve high enough to rest comfortably above his elbow.

Marines stopped rolling their sleeves up in 2011 until the Corps reinstated the practice in 2014.

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ADAM KOROLEV/U.S. Marine Corps

Marines stopped rolling up their sleeves in 2011 until the Corps reinstated the practice in 2014.

Speed: How fast target is shot will be taken into account as well now

FROM PAGE 1
field [rifle], which was an 1890s technology,” Jones said. “Now we have an M-16A4. The test is not as true a measure of lethality as it was when we had older, outdated technology.”

The Marine Corps began reevaluating its marksmanship standards after a 2018 combat-based lethality assessment found skill gaps in the ability of Marines to shoot on the move or at a moving target at unknown distances.

With that in mind, Training Command evaluated how to better train and score Marines in how effectively they can shoot to kill with their weapons, and the command

will use a \$34 million program to score troops on shooting speed and accuracy. The Joint Marksmanship Assessment Program, or JMAP, provides detailed data that can then be used to create individual training programs to help Marines improve their skills.

Under the previous system, a Marine had two minutes to shoot 30 rounds at targets at the required distances. The final score was an aggregate that showed nothing of how quickly the Marine hit the targets or which distances proved most difficult. It also did not differentiate between body hits and fatal shots.

“With the new data redefining

lethality, we can find out that he’s shooting 50 seconds faster than I am,” Grayek said, pointing to Jones. “That means he’s killing three or four bad guys in the time it takes me to kill one. He’s more lethal now, so that was the big paradigm shift.”

Each year, Marines must do a prequalification and a qualification on their rifle. In the past, the prequalification score could be accepted for both if it passed the standards at any of the three acceptable levels of marksman, sharpshooter or expert. Now, for a prequalification score to be accepted, it must be expert — the highest level available.

“You’re going to have to go back and try to better yourself,” Grayek said. “It’s a forcing function to make them not accept less than the best.”

Entry-level shooters can now support their rifle on the magazine while shooting, something that was previously banned. Jones credited better magazines for being able to allow the supported position that is acceptable in many civilian-shooting events.

“This is common in all our advanced marksmanship courses, and it’s common in high-end civilian marksmanship competitions. This is the start of experimenting with and permanently changing

some of the ways we do it at entry-level marksmanship,” Jones said. “We hope it’s not overly emotional, because it shouldn’t be. There’s logical, functional reasons for why we’re making this change.”

Staff Sgt. Austin Hill, chief instructor of the Advanced Marksmanship Training Program at Quantico, said he’s seen the Corps turn marksmanship upside down to improve the ability of Marines.

“We are trying to pull the best that we can be so that we can further the force as a whole and continue to move forward,” he said.

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PACIFIC

Alaska on-base school may be shuttered

Budget shortfalls could force Eielson to close in May

By JONATHAN SNYDER
Stars and Stripes

A school on Eielson Air Force Base in Alaska may close its doors at the end of the school year due to budget shortfalls.

The Fairbanks North Star Borough School District, which administers Ben Eielson Junior-Senior High School, is considering closing the school as it finalizes its fiscal year 2025 budget.

The district's final decision is expected Monday, according to an Air Force news release Feb. 23.

The district is facing a budget deficit of between \$16 million and \$29 million, depending on how much funding it receives from the state and borough, district superintendent Luke Meinert said in a Feb. 7 news release.

The base, 26 miles from Fairbanks in Alaska's interior, is home to one F-16 Aggressor squadron and two F-35A Lightning II squadrons.

It's lone high school has 365 students and employs 44 faculty and staff, Ben Eielson's school liaison program manager, Earnest Kincade, said by email Friday.

Closing Ben Eielson, which teaches grades six through 12,

would save the school district \$2 million a year and \$13.9 million in needed facility repairs, according to an Alaska Public Media report last month.

Ben Eielson students would transfer to North Pole Middle School and High School, according to the report.

"Some parents have expressed that they will not send their children to a school off-base," Kincade said. "They have expressed that they are considering homeschool options."

For some parents, including Lt. Col. John Gillard, deputy director of the 354th Medical Group clinic, homeschooling is not an option.

The North Pole school lacks the Air Force Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps program available at Eielson, Gillard told Stars and Stripes in an email Friday.

"Our eighth-grader is heavily involved in JROTC, which is a unique opportunity for 8th graders here at Eielson because of the joint middle and high school building," he said. "It has been an incredible opportunity for her to quickly make friends and also develop her own path within military

culture."

The local schools offer courses that the Eielson school does not, including wood shop, small engines, auto mechanics, culinary arts and welding, Kincade said.

Ben Eielson is the second school on the air base marked for closure in recent years.

In 2022, the district closed the on-base Anderson Elementary School and moved kindergarten and first grade to Crawford Elementary, also on base and with classes up to fifth grade.

The school district receives approximately 60% of its funding from the state through a per student allocation that has not seen a meaningful increase since 2017, Meinert said in the district's release.

"My office has been working hard to help fund the school district shortfall by passing a comprehensive funding package," state Rep. Frank Tomaszewski of Fairbanks told Stars and Stripes by email Wednesday.

The measure, Senate Bill 140, raises the allocation by 11.5% or \$680 per student, he said. Gov. Mike Dunleavy has indicated his opposition to the measure, which



JOSEPH SWAFFORD/U.S. Air Force

Air Force JROTC cadets from Ben Eielson Junior-Senior High School at Eielson Air Force Base, Alaska, in December 2014.

would still leave the school district \$21 million short.

"We need to fix a couple of things in that bill," Dunleavy said in a Feb. 29 post on X, formerly Twitter. "If it's just going to be about money and nothing else, I'm not interested in having this bill become law."

For parents at Eielson, quality of life is a big worry, Gillard said.

"I'm concerned that this will negatively impact our families and ultimately the mission of the

base," he said. "It might lead to logistical challenges for parents, increased stress, and potentially impact the retention of personnel due to decreased quality of life."

His own children can thrive because of the Eielson school, Gillard said. "This closure would disrupt the small bit of stability we were able to provide here on base."

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Crash kills US soldier on Okinawa days after Marine died in motorcycle accident

By HANA KUSUMOTO, KELLY AGEE AND JONATHAN SNYDER
Stars and Stripes

A U.S. soldier assigned to Kadena Air Base died Saturday morning when his vehicle crashed into trees alongside a highway on Okinawa, according to Japanese police.

Spc. Ro David Ganzon's vehicle flipped along Route 75 in Uruma city, an Okinawa Prefectural Police spokesman told Stars and Stripes on Monday.

Ganzon, 22, was with the 1st Battalion, 1st Air Defense Artillery Regiment, 38th Air Defense Artillery Brigade, according to an email Tuesday from U.S. Army Japan spokesman Maj. Devon Thomas.

The soldier's car crossed the centerline, crashed and flipped onto its side at 4:08 a.m., the prefectural police spokesman said.

A Japanese doctor declared Ganzon dead at the scene, an Uru-



Steingold

ma police spokesman said by phone Monday.

The accident happened on a long, downhill stretch that curves left by the Tengan Pier near Camp Courtney, the city police spokesman said. The accident is under investigation.

Ganzon's death followed a motorcycle collision Thursday on Okinawa that killed Marine Sgt. Hayden Steingold, 24, assigned to Camp Foster.

Steingold, of Greenacres, Fla., was attached to the 5th Air Naval Gunfire Liaison Company, 3rd Marine Expeditionary Force Information Group, Capt. Alejandro Arteaga, a spokesman for III Marine Expeditionary Force, said by email Monday.

Steingold was southbound on Route 58 in Ginowan city around 6:50 p.m. when he collided with another vehicle turning right at a T-junction, a prefectural police spokesman said by phone Friday. The other driver was not injured.

Some government spokespeople in Japan may speak to the media only on condition of anonymity.

S. Korea expects safe return of man detained in Russia on spying charges

By DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

SUWON, South Korea — Russian authorities for the first time detained a South Korean citizen on espionage charges earlier this year, according to a report Tuesday from Moscow's state-run news service Tass.

The South Korean, identified as Baek Won-soon, was detained in Vladivostok on Russia's eastern coast earlier this year and in February moved to a prison in Moscow, where his detention was extended until June 15, Tass reported, citing an unnamed law enforcement source.

Baek is alleged to have leaked information deemed "top secret" to foreign intelligence agencies, according to Tass.

South Korea has been "providing consular assistance as soon as it became aware of the arrest," a Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokeswoman told Stars and Stripes by phone Tuesday.

No additional information was provided; South Korean officials regularly speak to the media on a customary condition of anonymity. The government "expects our people to return safely ... as soon

as possible" and declined to elaborate, citing the safety of the individual in custody, Foreign Affairs Ministry spokesman Lim Soo-suk during a news conference in Seoul on Tuesday.

Baek was a missionary assisting North Korean loggers working in Vladivostok, an unnamed South Korean official based in Russia said in a Chosun Ilbo report Tuesday. Baek's wife was also arrested but later released, according to the newspaper.

Diplomatic ties between Seoul and Moscow have frayed over their respective policies on North Korea and the two-year war in Ukraine. Since 2022, China and Russia, permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, have sided with North Korea and vetoed U.S.-sponsored resolutions to strengthen and impose new sanctions against Pyongyang.

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, South Korea provided Kyiv with military supplies, such as body armor and helmets, and joined the U.S.-led effort in levying sanctions against Moscow's exports.

South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol in September pledged

over \$2.3 billion in help to Ukraine in the form of humanitarian aid and low-interest loans.

Yoon last year visited Bucha, the Ukrainian city where the U.N. Human Rights Office said it found evidence of summary executions of hundreds of civilians.

"I feel a greater responsibility as [South Korea's] first head of state to visit Ukraine at this grave time," Yoon said at a news conference with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on July 15. "If we fight together with strong solidarity under the spirit of those seeking death shall live and those seeking life shall die, we can surely protect our freedom and democracy."

On March 7, 2022, Moscow designated South Korea as a foreign country "involved in unfriendly activity toward Russia," according to a Kremlin news release.

Speaking to South Korea's sanctions during a news conference in Moscow on Dec. 27, Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said, "We reserve the right to retaliate, and not necessarily in a symmetrical way," according to a Tass report at the time.

EUROPE

Blast at barracks apartment displaces families

By JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

KAISERSLAUTERN, Germany — A contractor was hospitalized and 13 families were evacuated Monday following an explosion that caused flooding at Smith Barracks apartments in Baumholder, Army officials said.

The “minor explosion” likely was triggered by the ignition of airborne dust, U.S. Army Garrison Rheinland-Pfalz said. The incident remains under investigation.

The explosion occurred around noon while a contractor was sanding a floor in an empty apartment in Building 8025, a family housing unit built on the Army post in the 1950s, said Tammy Muckenfuss, a garrison spokeswoman.

The residence on the fourth floor was being refurbished and prepared for new occupants, work that includes painting, flooring and cleaning, Muckenfuss said in a statement Monday night.

The contractor, who is employed by a local company, was transported to a burn unit in Ludwigshafen am Rhein, Muckenfuss said. The extent of the contractor’s injuries wasn’t available Tuesday. No one else was

reported injured.

The 13 evacuated families are staying in off-post hotels at the Army’s expense, Muckenfuss said.

People reported seeing a lot of shattered glass in the area Monday, according to comments posted to a local Facebook group page. The explosion broke some water lines in the building, causing flooding from the top floors down, Muckenfuss said.

A broken window has been boarded up, and work to address the flooding and assess damages is ongoing, she said.

Four other nearby buildings lost heat and hot water periodically following the explosion, officials reported on the garrison’s Facebook page Monday night. Heating was lost in buildings 8024, 8026, 8028 and 8029, because Building 8025 serves as a heating hub for those units.

Public works personnel got the steam system working for those buildings at about 10 p.m. Monday, officials said.

Representatives of base support agencies including the Red Cross, finance, the chaplain’s office, housing and Army Emergency Relief met with displaced families Tuesday morning, officials said.



FACEBOOK/Baumholder Military Community

An explosion occurred during work in an upper-floor apartment in a family housing unit on Smith Barracks in Baumholder, Germany, on Monday. A contractor was injured and transported to a local hospital.

The Red Cross is providing comfort kits, the USO is offering meals and the Baumholder Community Spouses Club Thrift Shop is making essential items available for free while extending its hours. The thrift store, in Building 8667, is open Tuesday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., according to the

shop’s Facebook page.

“U.S. Army Garrison Rheinland-Pfalz is working diligently to ensure that affected families receive full support,” Muckenfuss said.

Military families that need assistance may call the family housing office directly at 0964-170-531-2981.

About 400 new housing units will be built at Baumholder, and other residences are being renovated as the Army goes forward with about \$500 million in construction projects there, according to service officials.

Many of the buildings, like the one in Monday’s incident, date back to the 1950s. U.S. Special Operations Command Europe is expecting to move to Baumholder in 2026 and is among multiple expansions.

Across the service, families and soldiers have complained of poor living conditions in outdated housing. The Army’s proposed 2025 budget includes \$935 million for nine new barracks projects, including one at Smith Barracks, according to service budget documents.

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Asbestos removal part of teardown at base

By BRADLEY LATHAM
Stars and Stripes

WIESBADEN, Germany — Demolition work involving several residential buildings in the Army’s Crestview neighborhood includes a dose of asbestos mitigation, as borne out by the trash bags spotted recently by some folks living in service-owned residences there.

Asbestos was once common in industrial and commercial projects as a result of its durability and heat-resistant properties. But it has long been banned from building projects in the United States and Europe; inhaling its microscopic fibers creates a risk of diseases such as lung cancer, asbestosis and mesothelioma.

Appropriate mitigation measures are being taken during demolition of the buildings, which date from the 1950s.

“The bags you see onsite are the final, third layer of containment used for transporting any material found to the proper disposal site,” garrison spokeswoman Audra Calloway said Monday.

The garrison plans to turn the sites into parking lots for neighborhood residents. Traffic and congestion have become a problem at Crestview since family housing units were converted into living spaces for single soldiers.

Options for green space and recreation areas are also under consideration, garrison commander Col. David Mayfield said during a recent community meeting.

The approximately \$2 million project in the off-base military housing community began in late fall.

Contractors have already demolished one of seven buildings in the project. The command expects the Crestview demolition work to be finished by September.

Asbestos inhalation is generally not a concern unless the material is disturbed and becomes airborne during activities



PHOTOS BY BRADLEY LATHAM/Stars and Stripes

Workers position an excavator to demolish a building section in the Army’s Crestview neighborhood in Wiesbaden, Germany, on Monday.

such as sanding, renovation or construction.

The substance was used extensively in Germany from the early 20th century until a 1993 ban, according to Federal Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.

Two other buildings, one in Crestview and one in the Aukamm neighborhood, also were slated to be torn down, but budget constraints curtailed their demolition, Calloway said.



Construction waste bags marked with asbestos warnings are seen in the demolition area. Seven buildings are being torn down to make way for parking lots.

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Polish leaders talk defense, to visit with Biden

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden is hosting Poland’s president and prime minister for White House talks on Tuesday with the Polish leaders looking to press Washington to break its impasse over replenishing funds for Ukraine at a critical moment in the war in Europe.

Ahead of the visit, President Andrzej Duda called on other members of the NATO alliance to raise their spending on defense to 3% of their GDP as Russia puts its own economy on a war footing and pushes forward with its plans to conquer Ukraine. Poland already spends 4% of its own economic output on defense, double the current target of 2% in NATO.

“The war in Ukraine has clearly shown that the United States is and should remain the leader in security issues in Europe and the world,” Duda said in an address to Poland on Monday. “However, other NATO countries must also take greater responsibility for the security of the entire alliance and intensively modernize and strengthen their troops.”

In a Washington Post opinion piece to spotlight his call for greater NATO spending, Duda argued that Russia was switching its economy to “war mode,” allocating close to 30% of its annual budget to arm itself.

The Biden administration suggested Duda’s call to raise the defense spending target for NATO countries may be, at least for the time being, overly ambitious.

“I think the first step is to get every country meeting the 2% threshold, and we’ve seen improvement of that,” State Department spokesman Matthew Miller said. “But I think that’s the first step before we start talking about an additional proposal.”

Biden invited Duda and Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk for meetings to mark the 25th anniversary of Poland’s accession to NATO.

NATION

Hearing on Biden docs turns into campaign battle

BY ZEKE MILLER
COLLEEN LONG AND
FARNOUSH AMIRI
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Lawmakers turned a Tuesday hearing on President Joe Biden's handling of classified documents into a proxy battle between the Democratic president and Republican front-runner Donald Trump, as a newly-released transcript of Biden's testimony last fall showed that he repeatedly insisted he never meant to retain classified information after he left the vice presidency.

Special counsel Robert Hur, testifying before the House Judiciary Committee, stood steadfastly by the assessments in his 345-page report that questioned Biden's age and mental competence but recommended no criminal charges for the president, who's 81.

"What I wrote is what I believe the evidence shows, and what I expect jurors would perceive and believe," Hur said. "I did not sanitize my explanation. Nor did I disparage the president unfairly."

The transcript of hours of interviews between Biden and the special counsel released Tuesday provide a more textured picture of the roughly yearlong investigation, filling in some of the gaps left by Hur's and Biden's accounting of the exchanges. But there was no guarantee the hearing or transcript would alter preconceived notions about the president, the special counsel who investigated him, or Trump, particularly in a hard-fought election year.

While Biden was adamant that he treated classified information seriously, the transcript shows that he was at times fuzzy about dates and details and said he was

unfamiliar with the paper trail for some of the sensitive documents he handled.

The hearing played out as both Biden and Trump were on the cusp of claiming their parties' nominations, and the party lines calcified almost immediately over which leader meant to hang on to classified documents, or rather, who "willfully" retained them — and who didn't. And Hur was the rare witness vilified all around, by Republicans angry over his decision not to charge the president, and by Democrats for his unflattering commentary about Biden.

Republicans argued Biden was being given a pass by his own Justice Department and that Trump had been unfairly victimized by prosecutors. Democrats stressed Biden's cooperation in the investigation and strongly contrasted that with the separate criminal case against Trump, who refused to return classified documents requested by the National Archives that he had at his Florida estate.

Democrats started off their questioning by hitting hard at the contrast between Biden and Trump, focusing more on the latter's criminal case. Rep. Jerry Nadler of New York, the ranking Democrat, asked whether Biden's willingness to comply with investigators and turn over documents contributed to the decision not to charge him.

"That was a factor in our analysis," Hur said.

But the Democrats quickly bored into Hur, who was hand-picked by Biden's own attorney general, suggesting he was a political partisan doing Republican bidding via his written slights about Biden's age and memory. Hur took issue with the character-



NATHAN HOWARD/AP

Special Counsel Robert Hur listens to recorded remarks of President Joe Biden during a hearing of the House Judiciary Committee in the Rayburn Office Building on Capitol Hill in Washington, Tuesday.

ization.

"Politics played no part whatsoever in my investigative steps, my decisions and the words that in I put in my report," Hur responded.

Republicans, meanwhile, insisted Trump was being unfairly singled out and vilified, questioning how the two cases were really all that different.

Rep. Tom McClintock, R-Calif., called it a "glaring double standard."

"Donald Trump's being prosecuted for exactly the same act that you documented Joe Biden committed," he told Hur.

But there were major differences between the two probes. Biden's team returned the documents after they were discovered, and the president cooperated with the investigation by voluntarily sitting for an interview and consenting to searches of his homes. Trump, by contrast, is accused of enlisting the help of aides and lawyers to conceal the documents from the government and seeking to have potentially incriminating evidence destroyed.

Hur's report cited evidence that Biden willfully held on to highly classified information and shared it with a ghostwriter, based on au-

dio of the conversations between the two men in which Biden said he had just come across some classified documents at his home.

According to the transcript, Biden said he did not recall the exchange, or that he had actually discovered any documents. He said if he had discussed anything questionable with the ghostwriter, it was in referring to a 20-page sensitive memo he had written to then-President Barack Obama in 2009 arguing against surging troops in Afghanistan that he wanted to ensure didn't make it into publication.

Hur said he was aware of the need to explain in great detail why he'd decided not to charge the president and why the case didn't meet the standard for criminal charges. Such explanations are common but usually kept confidential.

But there's a tradition at the Justice Department to release such documents publicly and so as Hur was working on his report, he almost certainly would have understood that the document was going to see the light of the day.

"The need to show my work was especially strong here," Hur said. "The attorney general had appointed me to investigate the ac-

tions of the attorney general's boss, the sitting president of the United States. I knew that for my decision to be credible, I could not simply announce that I recommended no criminal charges and leave it at that. I needed to explain why."

He added that "the evidence and the president himself put his memory squarely at issue."

In his interviews, Biden repeatedly told prosecutors that he did not know how classified documents ended up at his home and former Penn Biden Center office in Washington.

"I have no idea," he said. He also insisted that had he known they were there, he would have returned them to the government.

The president did acknowledge that he intentionally held on to his personal diaries — which officials said contained classified information. Biden insisted were his own property, a claim also asserted by previous presidents and vice presidents, and that he had a right to keep them.

He also acknowledged that he was "never that organized," as prosecutors pressed him on why some of the documents were located in different places.

Astronauts from four countries return to Earth after 6 months in orbit

Associated Press

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — Four astronauts from four countries caught a lift back to Earth with SpaceX on Tuesday to end a half-year mission at the International Space Station.

Their capsule streaked across the U.S. in the predawn darkness and splashed into the Gulf of Mexico near the Florida Panhandle.

NASA's Jasmin Moghbeli, a Marine helicopter pilot, led the returning crew of Denmark's

Andreas Mogensen, Japan's Satoshi Furukawa and Russia's Konstantin Borisov.

They moved into the space station last August. Their replacements arrived last week in their own SpaceX capsule.

"We left you some peanut butter and tortillas," Moghbeli radioed after departing the orbiting complex on Monday. Replied NASA's Loral O'Hara: "I miss you guys already and thanks for that very generous gift."

O'Hara has another few weeks at the space station before leaving aboard a Russian Soyuz capsule.

Before leaving the space station, Mogensen said via X, formerly known as Twitter, that he couldn't wait to hear "birds singing in the trees" and also craved crunchy food.

NASA prefers multiple travel options in case of rocket trouble. Boeing should start providing astronaut taxi service with a two-pilot test flight in early May.



JOEL KOWSKY/AP

From left, Konstantin Borisov, Andreas Mogensen, Jasmin Moghbeli and Satoshi Furukawa are seen inside the SpaceX Dragon Endurance spacecraft on Tuesday.

NATION

Consumer prices' rise an ominous inflation sign

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Consumer prices in the United States picked up last month, a sign that inflation remains a persistent challenge for the Federal Reserve and for President Joe Biden's re-election campaign, both of which are counting on a steady easing of price pressures this year.

Prices rose 0.4% from January to February, higher than the previous month's figure of 0.3%, the Labor Department said Tuesday. Compared with a year earlier, consumer prices rose 3.2% last month, faster than January's 3.1% annual pace.

Excluding volatile food and energy prices, so-called "core" prices also climbed 0.4% from January to February, matching the previous month's increase and a faster pace than is consistent with the Fed's 2% target. Core inflation is watched especially closely because it typically provides a better read of where inflation is likely headed.

Pricier gas pushed up overall inflation, with pump prices rising 3.8% just from January to February. Grocery prices, though, were unchanged last month and are up just 1% from a year earlier. The cost of clothing, used cars and rent also increased in February, raising the inflation figure.

Despite February's elevated figures, most economists expect inflation to continue slowly declining this year. At the same time, the uptick last month may underscore the Fed's cautious approach toward interest rate cuts.

Overall inflation has plummeted from a peak of 9.1% in June 2022, though it's now easing more slowly than it did last spring and summer. The prices of some goods, from appliances to furniture to used cars, are actually falling after clogged supply chains during the pandemic had sent prices soaring higher. There are more new cars on dealer lots and electronics on store shelves.

By contrast, prices for dental care, car repairs, and other services are still rising faster

than they did before the pandemic. Car insurance has shot higher, reflecting rising costs for repairs and replacement. And after having sharply raised pay for nurses and other in-demand staff, hospitals are passing their higher wage costs on to patients in the form of higher prices.

Voter perceptions of inflation are sure to occupy a central place in this year's presidential election. Despite a healthy job market and a record-high stock market, polls show that many Americans blame President Joe Biden for the surge in consumer prices that began in 2021. Though inflationary pressures have significantly eased, average prices remain about far above where they stood three years ago.

In his State of the Union speech last week, Biden highlighted steps he has taken to reduce costs, like capping the price of insulin for Medicare patients. The president also criticized many large companies for engaging in "price gouging" and so-called "shrinkflation," in which a company shrinks the amount of

product inside a package rather than raising the price.

"Too many corporations raise prices to pad their profits, charging more and more for less and less," Biden said.

Fed Chair Jerome Powell signaled in congressional testimony last week that the central bank is getting closer to cutting rates. After meeting in January, Fed officials said in a statement that they needed "greater confidence" that inflation was steadily falling to their 2% target level. Since then, several of the Fed's policymakers have said they believe prices will keep declining. One reason, they suggested, is that consumers are increasingly pushing back against higher prices by seeking out cheaper alternatives.

Most economists expect the Fed's first rate cut to occur in June, though May is also possible. When the Fed cuts its benchmark rate, over time it reduces borrowing costs for mortgages, car loans, credit cards and business loans.

Trump's team said to be slashing RNC staff amid takeover

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Just days after installing his new leadership team at the Republican National Committee, Donald Trump's lieutenants are cutting dozens of staff across key departments in an aggressive move that further cements the former president's takeover of the GOP's political and fundraising machinery.

More than 60 people were fired in all, including senior staff in the political, data and communications departments inside the committee's Washington headquarters. The cuts also included staff that ran the committee's celebrated community centers, which were focused on building relationships with minority groups in some Democratic-leaning states.

The sweeping overhaul was confirmed by multiple people with direct knowledge of the cuts who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the moves publicly.

Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, R-Ga., celebrated news of the staffing cuts, suggesting they send a clear message about the direction of the GOP.

"MAGA is now in control of the Republican Party!!" Greene wrote on X, referencing Trump's "Make America Great Again" movement. "We will continue to need everyone's help all the way across the finish line! Do



MICHAEL WYKE/AP

Newly-elected Chairman Michael Whatley, left, and Co-Chair Lara Trump greet attendees at the Republican National Committee Spring Meeting on Friday, in Houston.

not grow weary."

Trump's lieutenants telegraphed major changes late last week as Republican National Committee members gathered in Houston to approve his hand-picked leadership team, which includes his daughter-in-law Lara Trump as the committee co-chair. Michael Whatley, a former North Carolina GOP chair-

man, replaced Ronna McDaniel as the chair.

The cuts are designed to eliminate duplication as the Trump campaign and the RNC work to become essentially one organization, said Chris LaCivita, a Trump campaign senior adviser who took over as the RNC chief of staff after Friday's vote.

"This is Republicans streamlining," La-

Civita said Monday night.

Staffers were notified of the cuts in an email Monday afternoon from the committee's new chief operating officer, Sean Cairncross, who offered people an opportunity to reapply for their jobs.

The email, obtained by The Associated Press, indicated that those who choose not to reapply for their jobs would need to leave by the end of March. Some staffers were told to leave their positions immediately on Monday afternoon, however.

"Chairman Whatley is in the process of evaluating the organization and staff to ensure the building is aligned with his vision of how to win in November," Cairncross wrote in the email.

News of the shakeup was first reported by Politico.

The Trump campaign and the RNC have worked closely in past elections, but the new overhaul marks an unprecedented level of integration between the former president's campaign and the GOP's formal political and fundraising apparatus, which is tasked with helping Republicans win elections up and down the ballot.

Aware of internal concerns about the level of the committee's commitment to Trump, LaCivita said last week that "not a penny of the RNC's money" would go to pay Trump's mounting legal fees.

House Republicans schedule TikTok vote despite Trump's take

Associated Press

NEW YORK — House Republicans are moving ahead with a bill that would require Chinese company ByteDance to sell TikTok or face a ban in the United States even as former President Donald Trump is voicing opposition to the effort.

House leadership has scheduled a vote on the measure for Wednesday. A Republican congressional aide not authorized to speak publicly said that's still the plan and there has not been significant pushback to the bill from lawmakers.

A vote for the bill would represent an unusual break with the former president by

House Republicans, but Speaker Mike Johnson and others have already forcefully come out in favor of the bill, and dropping it now would represent a significant reversal. "It's an important bipartisan measure to take on China, our largest geopolitical foe, which is actively undermining our economy and security," Johnson declared last week.

Trump said Monday that he still believes TikTok poses a national security risk but is opposed to banning the hugely popular app because doing so would help its rival, Facebook, which he continues to lambast over his 2020 election loss.

"Frankly, there are a lot of people on Tik-

Tok that love it. There are a lot of young kids on TikTok who will go crazy without it," Trump said in a call-in interview with CNBC's "Squawk Box." "There's a lot of good and there's a lot of bad with TikTok. But the thing I don't like is that without TikTok you're going to make Facebook bigger, and I consider Facebook to be an enemy of the people, along with a lot of the media."

Trump has repeatedly complained about Facebook's role during the 2020 election, which he still refuses to concede he lost to President Joe Biden. That includes at least \$400 million that its founder, Mark Zuckerberg, and his wife donated to two nonprofit

organizations that distributed grants to state and local governments to help them conduct the 2020 election at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

TikTok, a video-sharing app, has about 170 million users in the U.S., most of whom skew younger — a demographic that both political parties are desperately trying to court ahead of November's general election.

Biden's 2024 campaign officially joined TikTok last month, even though he has expressed his own national security concerns over the platform, banned it on federal devices and on Friday endorsed the legislation that could lead to its ban.

NATION



Emergency personnel work the scene of a crash Monday, in Rushville, Ill. A Schuyler-Industry Schools bus was traveling eastbound when it crossed the center line on U.S. Route 24 into westbound lanes and into the path of a semitruck carrying sand, killing both drivers and three children, Illinois State Police said.

Illinois police ID 5 people killed when school bus, semi collide

Associated Press

RUSHVILLE, Ill. — Authorities have identified the five people killed in a fiery crash, including both drivers and three children, when a school bus and a semitruck collided along a highway in western Illinois.

The eastbound bus from Schuyler-Industry Schools crossed the center line “for an unknown reason” Monday into westbound U.S. Route 24 and into the path of a semitruck carrying sand, Illinois State Police said, citing preliminary findings.

Both vehicles “became engulfed in flames” when the truck slammed into the bus around 11:30 a.m. in Rushville, a Schuyler County community of about 3,000

roughly 60 miles west of Springfield, state police said. All four people aboard the bus — three children and the driver — were killed, as was the semitruck driver.

The three children were identified by the Schuyler County coroner as 5-year-old Maria Miller, 3-year-old Andrew Miller and 3-year-old Noah Driscoll, all from Rushville, state police said. The school bus driver was identified as Angela Spiker, 57, of Rushville, and the truck driver as David Coufal, 72, of Browning, Ill.

The county coroner said autopsies would be performed on the victims’ bodies in Springfield.

Schuyler County Sheriff Bill Redshaw told reporters Monday that the tragedy had hit the small,

close-knit community particularly hard.

“There’s not really words at this time that can be said,” he said. “When you have a loss of life like this, it’s devastating.”

Schuyler-Industry Schools canceled classes Tuesday and Wednesday because of the crash.

“It is with a heavy heart that we announce our school community has lost both staff and students in the traffic incident involving one of our school buses this morning,” the school district said in a statement.

The cause of the crash is under investigation by a National Transportation Safety Board team and state police, the Illinois agency announced.

NAACP to athletes: Factor in DEI cuts at Florida colleges

By MARK LONG
Associated Press

GAINESVILLE, Fla. — Black student-athletes should reconsider attending public colleges and universities in Florida, the NAACP said in a letter to NCAA President Charlie Baker on Monday.

The letter was in response to the University of Florida and other state schools that have eliminated their diversity, equity and inclusion programs. It was also addressed to current and prospective student-athletes.

“This is not about politics,” the letter read. “It’s about the protection of our community, the progression of our culture, and most of all, it’s about your education and your future.”

The letter was signed by NAACP National Board of Directors Chairman Leon W. Russell and NAACP President and CEO Derrick Johnson.

Last year, Republican Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis signed a bill prohibiting the use of state funds for any DEI programs. The University of Florida responded in March by closing the Office of the Chief Diversity Officer, eliminating 13 full-time DEI positions and 15 administrative appointments, and ending DEI-focused contracts with outside vendors.

Other state schools like North Florida and Florida International also have shut down DEI programs.

“While it is our duty to spread

awareness and encourage action around these egregious assaults, we also recognize that protest can come at a price,” the letter read. “The sad reality is, for many Black student-athletes, collegiate sports may be their sole opportunity at achieving the upward mobility necessary to propel them into their rightful places in society.”

It’s unclear how awareness of the debate over DEI might affect current or prospective student-athletes who are considering powerhouses like Florida and Florida State — especially at a time when name, image and likeness deals have become so integral to building rosters — but a growing campaign could hinder those schools’ recruiting efforts.

Florida great and Pro Football Hall of Famer Emmitt Smith asked minority athletes at his alma mater to “be aware and vocal” about the decision.

Johnson took it a step further Monday.

“Florida’s rampant anti-Black policies are a direct threat to the advancement of our young people and their ability to compete in a global economy,” Johnson said in a statement. “Diversity, equity, and inclusion are paramount (to) ensuring equitable and effective educational outcomes.

“The value Black and other college athletes bring to large universities is unmatched. If these institutions are unable to completely invest in those athletes, it’s time they take their talents elsewhere.”

Warden ousted as FBI again searches California women’s prison

Associated Press

The warden of a troubled federal women’s prison in California has been ousted months into his tenure as FBI agents on Monday hauled boxes of evidence from the facility in an apparent escalation of a years-long investigation that put a former warden and other employees behind bars for sexually abusing inmates.

Government lawyers said in court papers Monday that Art Dulgov was removed as warden of FCI Dublin in the wake of allegations that his staff had retaliated against an inmate who testified in January in a lawsuit against the prison. The inmate was transferred to a different prison despite the judge’s order not to transfer any witnesses without court approval, filings in the case show.

The federal Bureau of Prisons

confirmed the leadership shakeup, saying in a statement that “recent developments have necessitated new executive employees be installed” at the low-security Bay Area facility. The agency did not specify what the developments were and declined to comment on the FBI search.

Deputy Regional Director N.T. McKinney will replace Dulgov on an interim basis effective immediately, Bureau of Prisons spokesperson Randilee Giamusso said. McKinney is at least the fourth person to be put in charge of FCI Dublin since former warden Ray Garcia was placed on administrative leave after the FBI raided his office and vehicle in July 2021.

An associate warden and prison captain working under Dulgov were also removed from their positions, along with an executive assistant

who oversaw the prison’s minimum-security satellite camp, government lawyers said.

A message seeking comment was left with Dulgov.

More than a dozen FBI agents searched FCI Dublin on Monday, seizing computers, documents and other evidence and seeking to interview employees, a person familiar with the matter told the Associated Press. The person was not authorized to speak publicly and did so on the condition of anonymity.

FBI spokesperson Cameron Polan confirmed that agents were there conducting “court-authorized law enforcement activity,” but declined to give details.

Monday’s search came days after a new wave of civil lawsuits alleging abuse at FCI Dublin and as a federal judge weighs appointing a special master to oversee the prison’s oper-

ations. The prison, about 21 miles east of Oakland, has been known as the “rape club” because of years of rampant staff-on-inmate sexual abuse.

An AP investigation in 2021 found a culture of abuse and cover-ups that had persisted for years at the prison, which currently has more than 650 inmates. That reporting led to increased scrutiny from Congress and pledges from the Bureau of Prisons that it would fix problems and change the culture at the prison.

Last August, eight FCI Dublin inmates sued the Bureau of Prisons, alleging the agency had failed to root out sexual abuse. Amaris Montes, a lawyer for the plaintiffs, said inmates continued to face retaliation for reporting abuse, including being put in solitary confinement and having belongings confiscated.

Since 2021, at least eight FCI Du-

blin employees have been charged with sexually abusing inmates. Five have pleaded guilty. Two were convicted. Another case is pending.

All sexual activity between a prison worker and an inmate is illegal. Correctional employees enjoy substantial power over inmates, controlling every aspect of their lives from mealtime to lights out, and there is no scenario in which an inmate can give consent.

Garcia was convicted in 2022 of molesting inmates and forcing them to pose naked in their cells. Prosecutors said he tried to keep his victims quiet with promises that he’d help them get early release and told one victim he was close friends with a prison official responsible for investigating staff misconduct and couldn’t be fired.

Garcia is serving a six-year prison sentence.

Haiti PM says he'll resign as gangs rampage

Iran, Russia, China show off ships in joint naval drill in Gulf of Oman

Russia reports Ukrainian drone strikes deep inside its territory

MIDEAST

Aid ship sets sail to Gaza as thousands still face starvation

Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — An aid ship loaded with some 200 tons of food set sail for Gaza on Tuesday in a pilot program for the opening of a sea corridor to the territory, where the 5-month-old Israel-Hamas war has driven hundreds of thousands of Palestinians to the brink of starvation.

The food was gathered by World Central Kitchen, the charity founded by celebrity chef José Andrés, and is being transported by the Spanish aid group Open Arms. The ship departed from the eastern Mediterranean island nation of Cyprus and is expected to arrive in Gaza in two to three days.

The United States has separately announced plans to construct a sea bridge near Gaza in order to deliver aid, but it will likely be sev-

eral weeks before it is operational. President Joe Biden's administration has provided crucial military aid for Israel while urging it to facilitate more humanitarian access.

The war, triggered by Hamas' Oct. 7 attack on Israel, has killed over 30,000 Palestinians and driven most of Gaza's 2.3 million people from their homes. A quarter of Gaza's population is starving, according to the United Nations, because they cannot find enough food or afford it at vastly inflated prices.

The United States, Qatar and Egypt had tried to broker a ceasefire and hostage release ahead of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which began on Sunday. But the talks stalled last week as Hamas demanded that any tempor-



PETROS KARADJIAS/AP

A ship belonging to the Open Arms aid group departs from the port of the southern city of Larnaca, Cyprus, on Tuesday.

ary pause in the fighting come with guarantees for ending the war.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed to expand the offensive into the southern city of Rafah, where half of Gaza's population has sought refuge, and to keep fighting until Hamas has been completely dismantled and all the captives it is holding have been returned.

The war threatens to spill over across the Middle East as Iran-backed groups allied with Hamas

trade fire with U.S. and Israeli forces. The Israeli military said around 100 projectiles were launched into Israel from Lebanon on Tuesday, one of the biggest barrages since the start of the war in Gaza.

There were no reports of injuries or damage from the attack, which appeared to be in response to Israeli airstrikes deep inside Lebanon the day before. Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah militant group have traded fire nearly every day since the war began.

No one hurt as Houthis target ship in Red Sea

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Yemen's Houthi rebels targeted a Liberian-flagged container ship in the Red Sea with missiles, producing an explosion near the vessel but causing no damage, authorities said.

The master of the vessel reported the explosion Monday and said no one was hurt, the British military's United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations center said. The UKMTO later identified the vessel as the Pinocchio, managed by a Singaporean firm.

The Houthis used two anti-ship ballistic missiles in the attack, the U.S. military's Central Command said.

Houthi military spokesman Brig. Gen. Yahya Saree claimed the attack early Tuesday, claiming the Pinocchio was an American ship without offering evidence to support the assertion.

He said the Houthis would continue their attacks, aimed at pressuring an end to the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip.

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FACES

This week: Music from JT, Musgraves; even more Eras

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

Music

■ With each new album, Kacey Musgraves demonstrates to listeners that there are no boundaries in her creative process. Fans who found her on the celebratory country-as-heck LGBTQ+ anthem "Follow Your Arrow," from 2013's "Same Trailer Different Park," followed her through psychedelic-disco-pop pastures on 2018's "Golden Hour," the album that took home the top prize at the 2019 Grammys. Then she pivoted again with 2021's "star-crossed," a meditation on divorce and autonomy, with an uncanny ability to break hearts in less than 15 words. Which brings us to "Deeper Well." Musgraves' is once again paving her own path: Her country has become folk; her songs are pretty and delicate with lyrics that find profundity in mundanity. It is soft and classic sounding, with hyper-specific language of the current moment. Maybe it dates these songs, maybe it plants them firmly in Musgraves' reality. Whatever the case, they are affecting.

■ On "Man of the Woods," Justin Timberlake's last solo album released in 2018, JT looked to Americana sounds to find his next musical development. It was widely viewed as a critical misstep — a shallow attempt at innovation, mining familiar images of rural country life to mirror his new reality as a father. On "Everything I Thought It Was," JT does a 180. He's returned to the '00s R&B-pop sounds that made him a superstar. That was evident from the first singles that were released: the moody "Selfish," and the dreamy reverb of "Drown,"

strengthened by Timberlake's idiosyncratic falsetto.
— AP Music Writer
Maria Sherman

Movies

■ Taylor Swift's concert film "The Eras Tour" comes to Disney+ on Thursday, a day earlier than first announced. The streaming cut features five additional songs, including "Cardigan." "Taylor Swift: The Eras Tour" was a phenomenon at the box office, grossing more than \$262 million worldwide in a groundbreaking deal with AMC Theaters, which released the film instead of a traditional Hollywood studio.

■ Film editor Carla Gutiérrez ("RBG") makes her directorial debut with "Frida," an evocative portrait of artist Frida Kahlo told in the artist's own words. Gutiérrez used Kahlo's diary entries, letters, essays and paintings to drive the narrative, which delves into her childhood, her marriage, her style, her accident and, of course, her art. It debuts on Prime Video on Thursday.

■ Nicolas Cage stars in Kristoffer Borgli's "Dream Scenario" as Paul Matthews, an average college professor, husband and father whose life is turned upside down when millions of strangers start seeing him in their dreams. In her AP review Jocelyn Noveck wrote that "Borgli, the Norwegian writer-director making his English-language debut here, is aiming for a broader statement about the nature of fame. And while the topic, which he's broached before, may not be original, it's ripe for exploration in the right hands — especially with an actor as inventive and unpredictable as Cage." It begins streaming Friday on Max. For the kids, "Trolls Band Together" arrives Thursday on Peacock.
— AP Film Writer
Lindsey Bahr



Right: Justin Timberlake returns to the '00s R&B-pop sounds that made him a superstar on his new album. Above, from left: Kacey Musgraves' "Deeper Well" and Timberlake's "Everything I Thought It Was" are among the new music releases this week.

Television

■ Over the years, the characters on ABC's "Grey's Anatomy" have seen medical breakthroughs, crisis situations, office romances, staffing shake-ups and three hospital name changes. We'll see what's in store for Season 20 when the popular medical drama returns Thursday after filming was delayed because of the Hollywood strikes. This season, Ellen Pompeo — who plays Dr. Meredith Grey — will not be a series regular but will appear periodically. Shonda Rhimes' other ABC show, the firefighter drama "Station 19," also returns Thursday for its seventh and final season. Both shows stream next day on Hulu.

■ Another Liane Moriarty novel has gotten the TV treatment. In Peacock's "Apples Never Fall," Annette Bening plays a wife and mother who goes missing, leaving her adult kids suspicious of their father (played by Sam Neill). The cast also includes Jake Lacy and Alison Brie. All episodes of the limited series drop Thursday.

■ The comedy "Girls5Eva" has jumped from Peacock to Netflix for its third season. The musical comedy is about a girl group from the '90s who achieved a tiny bit of



fame and are hoping to revive their celebrity status decades later. The show is executive produced by Tina Fey and stars Sara Bareilles, Renée Elise Goldsberry, Paula Pell and Busy Philipps. All six episodes of Season 3 stream Thursday. Seasons 1 and 2 are also available on Netflix.
■ An Apple TV+ limited series called "Manhunt" has made the assassination of Abraham Lincoln by John Wilkes Booth into a political thriller. Tobias Menzies stars as Edwin Stanton, former secretary of war, who led the search for Booth after Lincoln's murder. The show is based on the book "Manhunt: The 12-Day Chase for Lincoln's Killer" by James L. Swanson. It premieres Friday.
■ Just in time for this election year, a new dramedy follows fe-

male reporters embedded on a presidential campaign. "The Girls on the Bus" stars Melissa Benoist ("Supergirl") as Sadie McCarthy, a newspaper reporter who is enamored of old school journalism and idolizes Hunter S. Thompson. She travels the country by bus with a seasoned print reporter (Carla Gugino), a broadcast reporter (Christina Elmore) and a young journalist (Natasha Behnam), who embraces new media and uses Substack, sponsors and social media to reach an audience. It debuts Thursday on Max.
■ Cozy staple "Call the Midwife" returns for its 13th season on Sunday on PBS. The period drama will also stream to PBS station-branded PBS platforms, including PBS.org and the PBS App.
— Alicia Rancilio



Chris Pizzello, Invision/AP
Ryan Gosling, left, performs "I'm Just Ken" during the Oscars on Sunday in Los Angeles.

Oscars get 'Barbenheimer' bump, but it's no blockbuster

Associated Press
"Barbenheimer" brought a bump, but not a boom, to Oscars ratings.
An estimated 19.5 million people watched Sunday night's 96th Academy Awards ceremony on ABC. That's the biggest number drawn by the show in four years.
But that upward trend comes from an all-time low during the pandemic, and is up only 4% from last year's estimated audience of 18.7 million, according to numbers released Monday by ABC.
The Academy experimented

with scheduling this year's show an hour earlier, and for the first time in years had many nominations for huge hit movies that viewers had actually seen — "Barbie" and "Oppenheimer."
Viewership peaked in the final half hour, when Ryan Gosling performed "I'm Just Ken" from "Barbie," Cillian Murphy won best actor, Christopher Nolan won best director and "Oppenheimer" was awarded the best-picture Oscar.
A major star, Emma Stone, also won best actress during the final stretch in the the night's most

competitive race over Lily Gladstone, and nearly 22 million people saw her do it.
Last year's big Oscar winner, "Everything, Everywhere All at Once," was hardly a slouch at the box office, bringing in \$143 million globally. But that's nothing like the "Barbenheimer" juggernaut, with "Oppenheimer" approaching a billion global dollars and "Barbie" surpassing it.
But they didn't yield the same ballooning numbers for the show that the Academy and ABC might have hoped for.

Other news

■ Nile Rodgers, co-founder of the influential disco band Chic, and Finnish classical music composer and conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen have won the 2024 Polar Music Prize, a Swedish award. The award panel said Tuesday of the American guitarist, composer and producer that "there are few in history, if any, who have composed dance music as sophisticated and subtly arranged as Nile Rodgers" who "turned disco and funk into an art."

Bizarro



Loose Parts



Eugene Sheffer Crossword

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- ACROSS
- 58 Many coll. applicants
- 23 Mil. address
- 24 Farm squealer
- 25 Travel, sci-fi style
- 27 Drench
- 29 Spy org.
- 30 Beer barrel
- 32 Bank clerks
- 34 Concert extras
- 37 Conk out
- 39 Talk up
- 42 Annual athletic awards
- 44 "Hogwash!"
- 45 Apple computers
- 46 Jai —
- 48 Hit the bottle
- 49 Different
- 50 Homeowner's document
- 53 Poetic contraction
- DOWN
- 1 Carton sealer
- 2 Composer Stravinsky
- 3 Continental currency
- 4 Tattered
- 5 Church officials
- 6 Coffee vessel
- 7 Ibsen's Gabler
- 8 "Excellent!"
- 9 Globetrotter's document
- 10 Small snack
- 11 Santa's ride
- 16 Pride member
- 20 TGIF part

Answer to Previous Puzzle

Z	O	R	A		P	T	A		N	E	A	P
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Frazz

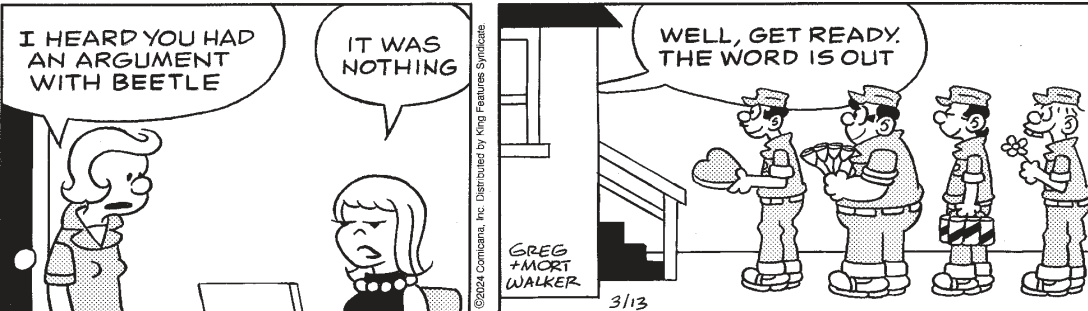
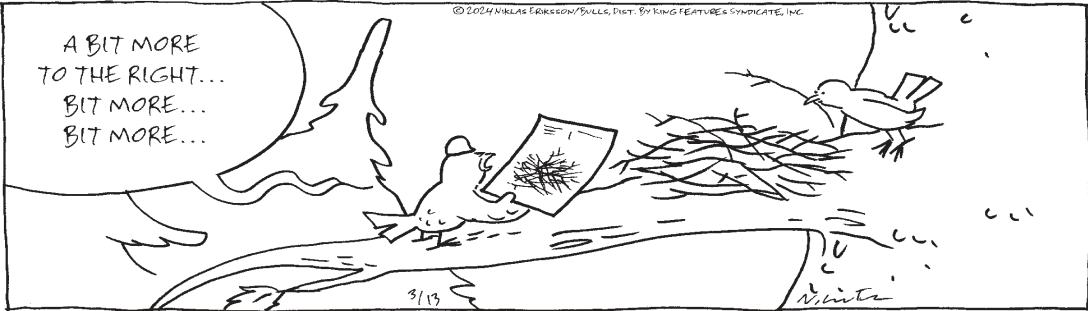
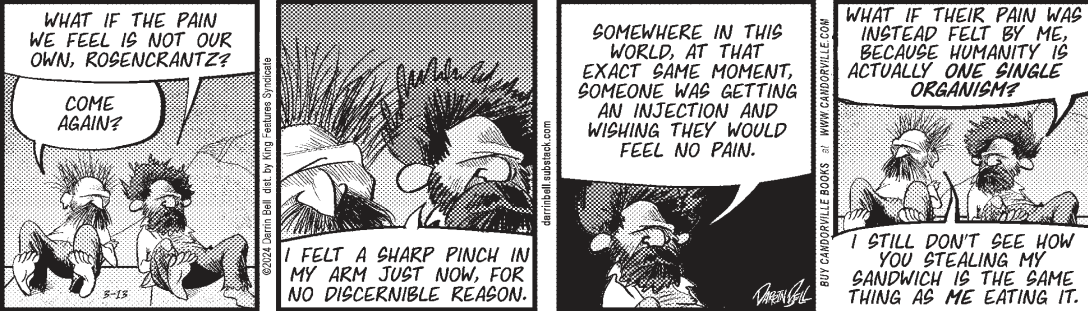
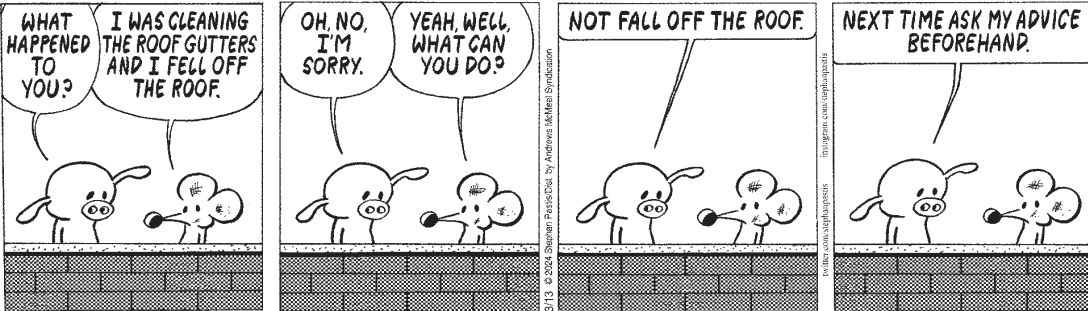
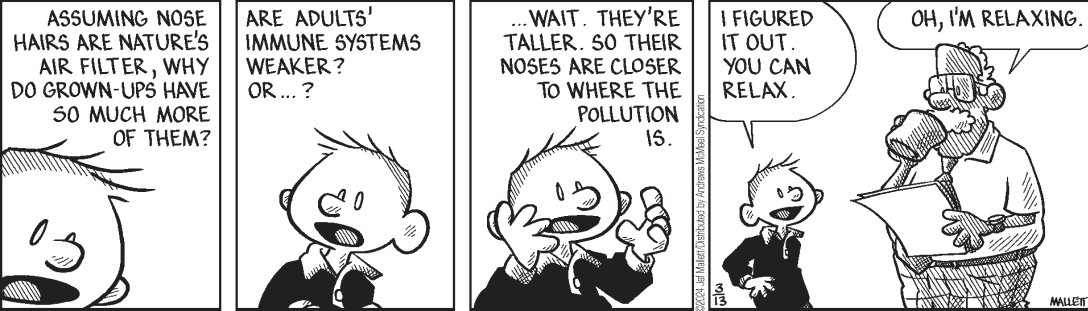
Pearls Before Swine

Non Sequitur

Candorville

Carpe Diem

Beetle Bailey



3-13

CRYPTOQUIP

QPCT HGKCDGZF SH UW WPC
AFK DNW SH GTVF HWUTZSTA
WPCJC LSVVSTA WSKC, SW'H
TGW QGJLSTA GNW.
Yesterday's Cryptoquip: IF SMALL, FROSTED BAKED GOODS ARE IN SHAPES RESEMBLING CUTE YOUNG DOGS, ARE THEY PUP-CAKES?
Today's Cryptoquip Clue: P equals H



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OPINION

Europe bickers while the Russian threat grows

By LEE HOCKSTADER
Special to The Washington Post

PARIS
Nothing could have delighted Vladimir Putin more than a recent series of unforced errors by top European leaders, which dovetailed neatly with Kremlin propaganda, exposed rifts in the Western coalition backing Ukraine and culminated with French President Emmanuel Macron warning his allies “not to be cowards” in confronting Moscow.

In the resulting fallout, German, French and British officials took turns skewering each other for ill-considered comments. The trouble is that in dwelling on minor gaffes, the recriminations missed Europe’s far deeper strategic problems, including frail fighting forces and anemic military production, as it faces the most dangerous threat since the Cold War.

That threat, the specter of further Russian aggression, is prompting sharp defense spending increases and a rethink of the Continent’s reliance on the United States and other far-flung arms suppliers.

But even as European members of NATO scramble to meet the alliance’s spending target of 2% of total economic activity on defense, Putin has earmarked more than 7% of Russian GDP for military outlays this year. And sober analysts across the Continent believe a direct showdown with Russian forces could come before the end of this decade.

That chilling scenario, coupled with Washington’s growing preoccupation with China, should provide a bracing moment for European unity. Instead, it seems to be prompting squabbles — a sneak preview, perhaps, of what to expect if the United States scales back its principal role in NATO after seven decades as the bloc’s undisputed leader.

The headline-grabbing slips began last month when German Chancellor Olaf Scholz

defended his fuzzy-minded refusal to send his country’s most powerful long-range missiles to Ukraine. In doing so, he intimated that the British and French, who have shipped their own missiles, have also sent military personnel to help Kyiv target Russian forces precisely — a move he said was out of the question for Germany.

The reaction to Scholz’s remark was furious in London, muted in Paris and gleeful in Moscow, where the remark, along with a leaked recording of German air force officers discussing the use of missiles against Russian targets, was used to buttress Russia’s specious narrative that NATO’s aggression triggered its invasion of Ukraine.

That same day, Macron infuriated his European partners by urging that they consider deploying troops to Ukraine to help fend off Russian advances in the absence of sustained U.S. arms supplies. It was the ensuing uproar over what most allies regarded as a broken taboo that prompted him to say, “Europe clearly faces a moment when it will be necessary not to be cowards,” adding that people “never want to see the tragedies that are coming.”

The French president has a point — not that Europe should put boots on the ground in Ukraine (it shouldn’t, at least not in combat) but that it has not fully come to terms with Moscow’s menace.

In Europe’s most militarily formidable countries, the gaps are enormous between the peril they perceive and the preparations they are making.

In Brussels, European Union leaders have proposed subsidizing a major shift to joint weapons procurement that would prioritize purchases from homegrown arms-makers. The goal would be spending half of EU defense budgets within the bloc by 2030, and 60% by 2035.

But the EU cannot defend Europe on its

own. As NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg pointed out last month, 80% of the alliance’s military expenditures come from non-EU allies, meaning the United States and a handful of others.

A major weak point is Germany. Scholz responded to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine by establishing a \$108 billion special fund to rebuild Germany’s depleted armed forces, along with major arms shipments to Kyiv. But there is no plan or realistic prospect to sustain the new spending once it runs out in 2028.

The reason is the German constitution’s draconian limit on borrowing, which means a long-term military buildup could be financed only through a major tax increase or massive cuts in health, welfare and climate programs.

Neither is politically feasible. Yet there is no serious debate about scrapping the debt limit despite years of infrastructure underinvestment that has sapped the German economy.

France poses a different problem, which is that Macron has allowed the perfect strategy — as he sees it — to be the enemy of a good one.

He has insisted that Europe beef up its homegrown defense industries, not least French ones, a sensible goal given the swelling tide of isolationism among U.S. Republicans. Yet under the banner of what he terms Europe’s “strategic autonomy,” he has spurned a Czech-led plan for Europe to buy 800,000 artillery shells for Kyiv from sources outside the EU, even as Ukraine runs short on ammunition.

The sniping among European leaders is a sideshow that obscures the bigger challenge, one that the Continent is rising too slowly to face. Putin will be sure to notice.

Lee Hockstader has been The Washington Post’s European Affairs columnist, based in Paris, since 2023. Previously he was a member of the Post editorial board; a national correspondent, a foreign correspondent, and a local reporter.

Collaboration key to correcting online misinformation

By MADELYN SANFILIPPO
The Fulcrum

Deepfakes of celebrities and misinformation about public figures might not be new in 2024, but they are more common and many people seem to grow ever more resigned that they are inevitable.

The problems posed by false online content extend far beyond public figures, impacting everyone, including youth.

New York Mayor Eric Adams in a recent press conference emphasized that many depend on platforms to fix these problems, but that parents, voters and policymakers need to take action. “These companies are well aware that negative, frightening and outrageous content generates continued engagement and greater revenue,” Adams said.

Recent efforts by Taylor Swift’s fans, coordinated via #ProtectTaylorSwift, to take down, bury and correct fake and obscene content about her are a welcome and hopeful story about the ability to do something about false and problematic content online.

Still, deepfakes (videos, photos and audio manipulated by artificial intelligence to make something look or sound real) and misinformation have drastically changed social media over the past decade, highlighting the challenges of content moderation and serious implications for consumers, politics and public health.

At the same time, generative AI — with

ChatGPT at the forefront — changes the scale of these problems and even challenges digital literacy skills recommended to scrutinize online content, as well as radically reshaping content on social media.

The transition from Twitter to X — which has 1.3 billion users — and the rise of TikTok — with 232 million downloads in 2023 — highlight how social media experiences have evolved as a result.

From colleagues at conferences discussing why they’ve left LinkedIn and students asking if they really need to use it, people recognize the decrease in quality of content on that platform (and others) due to bots, AI and the incentives to produce more content.

LinkedIn has established itself as key to career development, yet some say it is not preserving expectations of trustworthiness and legitimacy associated with professional networks or protecting contributors.

In some ways, the reverse is true: User data is being used to train LinkedIn Learning’s AI coaching with an expert lens that is already being monetized as a “professional development” opportunity for paid LinkedIn Premium users.

Regulation of AI is needed as well as enhanced consumer protection around technology. Users cannot meaningfully consent to use platforms and their ever changing terms of services without transparency about what will happen with an individual’s engagement data and content.

Not everything can be solved by users. Market-driven regulation is failing us.

There needs to be meaningful alternatives and the ability to opt out. It can be as simple as individuals reporting content for moderation. For example, when multiple people flag content for review, it is more likely to get to a human moderator, who research shows is key to effective content moderation, including removal and appropriate labeling.

Collective action is also needed. Communities can address problems of false information by working together to report concerns and collaboratively engineer recommendation systems via engagement to deprioritize false and damaging content.

Professionals must also build trust with the communities they serve, so that they can promote reliable sources and develop digital literacy around sources of misinformation and the ways AI promotes and generates it. Policymakers must also regulate social media more carefully.

Truth matters to an informed electorate in order to preserve safety of online spaces for children and professional networks, and to maintain mental health. We cannot leave it up to the companies who caused the problem to fix it.

Madelyn Sanfilippo is an assistant professor in the School of Information Sciences at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and book series editor for Cambridge Studies on Governing Knowledge Commons. She is a public voices fellow of The OpEd Project.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Man who shot, killed mom thought she was intruder

MO OLIVETTE— A 25-year-old Missouri man has been charged with shooting and killing his mother as she tried to enter the back door of their home.

Jaylen Johnson's attorney, William Goldstein, told the St. Louis Post-Dispatch that Johnson believed his mother was an intruder when she tried to enter the home in the St. Louis suburb of Olivette around 7:30 a.m. Thursday.

Olivette police said 56-year-old Monica McNichols-Johnson died at the house even though Johnson's girlfriend tried to help her after she was shot. Goldstein said the 25-year-old Johnson immediately called 911 after he shot his mother, and he has been distraught ever since.

Prosecutors charged Johnson with manslaughter and armed criminal action, and his bail was set at \$100,000.

State saw big increase in incidents of bias in 2023

NJ TRENTON — Reports in New Jersey of incidents of bias — like antisemitism and anti-Black behavior among others — climbed by 22% last year, according to preliminary data released Thursday by the attorney general.

Attorney General Matt Platkin's office released the unofficial data for 2023 that saw reports to law enforcement climb to 2,699 from 2,221 the year before along with an analysis for 2022 and 2021 that showed an increase of 17% year over year.

The number of incidents recorded in 2022 is the highest the state has seen since record keeping began about 30 years ago.

The data reflects reports members of the public make to police across the state, including state police, alleging hate crimes or other incidents of bias against protected classes under the law, including race, religion and gender. The incidents include racially discriminatory graffiti, threats or actual physical harm.

Sperm whale dies after beaching along coast

FL VENICE — A sperm whale that became famous after beaching itself on a sandbar along Florida's Gulf Coast died Monday, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission said in a statement.

Police and wildlife officials began trying to free the male whale from the shallow sandbar off the beach in Venice on Sunday morning. They had estimated it to be about 70 feet long. Biologists confirmed Monday that it was actually 44 feet long, the agency said.

By Sunday evening, the whale suffered from labored breathing and died around 3 a.m. Monday. The biologists had a difficult time



NAM Y. HUH/AP

Here comes the sun

A customer enjoys sunshine while he waits at a restaurant in Chicago on Monday. Daylight saving time brings far different sunrise and sunset times in Chicago, where May-level temperatures return this week.

helping it Sunday because of water conditions.

Biologists will collect samples to determine the cause of death, which could take several weeks.

Teen fatally shot after rushing at sheriff's deputy

CA APPLE VALLEY — A 15-year-old California boy armed with a bladed garden tool was fatally shot when he charged at a sheriff's deputy responding to a report of an assault underway at a residence, authorities said.

The shooting occurred Saturday afternoon in Apple Valley, a Mojave Desert city northeast of Los Angeles.

Family said in a 911 call that the teen was "actively assaulting family members and damaging property at the residence," the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department said in a statement.

The department's statement made no mention of mental illness being a factor, but a separate statement by Sheriff Shannon Dicus indicated that it was involved.

Executions set to resume following 4-year pause

GA ATLANTA — An execution scheduled for next week would be the first in Georgia in more than four years. The state is trying to move past an agreement made amid the coronavirus pandemic that effectively halted lethal injections.

Willie James Pye, 59, is set to be put to death March 20. He was convicted of murder and other crimes in the November 1993 killing of his former girlfriend, Alicia Lynn Yarbrough.

Georgia last carried out an execution in January 2020. In April 2021, the state attorney general's office entered into an agreement with attorneys for death row prisoners to suspend executions for a certain group of prisoners and to establish conditions under which they could resume.

Woman pleads guilty to manslaughter of husband

CT HARTFORD — A 76-year-old Connecticut woman who was accused of killing her husband, hiding his body for months and collecting his paychecks pleaded guilty to manslaughter Monday, a state prosecutor said.

Linda Kosuda-Bigazzi was arrested in February 2018 in the death of her husband, Dr. Pierluigi Bigazzi, a professor of laboratory science and pathology at UConn Health. The body of the 84-year-old man was found in the basement of the couple's home in Burlington, Conn., when police came over for a wellness check.

The medical examiner said Dr. Bigazzi died of blunt trauma to the head. Investigators said they believe he died sometime in July 2017 and that UConn Health paychecks were deposited into the couple's joint checking account from the

time of his death until February 2018.

Prosecutors pursuing a murder case against Kosuda-Bigazzi claimed she left his body wrapped in plastic in their home for months while she continued to collect his salary.

Kosuda-Bigazzi had claimed self-defense in the killing.

Hartford State's Attorney Sharmese Walcott said Monday that Kosuda-Bigazzi pleaded guilty to first-degree manslaughter and first-degree larceny.

"This case has been pending for six years so we are thankful we were able to reach a resolution today," Walcott said in a prepared release.

Sentencing is scheduled for June 28.

Some fans at frigid Chiefs game had amputations

MO KANSAS CITY — Some of the people who attended the near-record cold Kansas City Chiefs playoff game in January had to undergo amputations after suffering frostbite, a Missouri hospital said Friday.

Research Medical Center didn't provide exact numbers, but said in a statement that it treated dozens of people who had experienced frostbite during an 11-day cold snap in January. Twelve of those people — including some who were at the Jan. 13 game — had to undergo amputations involving mostly fingers and toes. And the hospital said more surgeries are

expected over the next two to four weeks as "injuries evolve."

The University of Kansas hospital said it also treated frostbite victims after the game, but didn't report any amputations.

The temperature for the Dolphins-Chiefs wild-card playoff game was minus 4 degrees Fahrenheit, and wind gusts made for a windchill of minus 27 degrees F. That shattered the record for the coldest game in Arrowhead Stadium history, which had been 1 degree F, set in a 1983 game against Denver and matched in 2016 against Tennessee.

Authorities: Remote plane crash leaves 'no survivors'

OR MADRAS — A plane crash in a remote area of central Oregon killed everyone on board, local authorities said Monday.

The Jefferson County Sheriff's Office said a 911 call around 7:40 p.m. Sunday reported the crash outside the city of Madras, and deputies found the site with the help of power company officials.

Authorities did not specify the type of plane nor the number of passengers. The sheriff's office said it won't release the names of the victims until identities are confirmed and families are notified.

The National Transportation Safety Board and the Federal Aviation Administration will investigate, the sheriff's office said.

NHL scoreboard

Eastern Conference									
Atlantic Division									
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA		
Florida	65	44	17	4	92	217	153		
Boston	67	38	14	15	91	223	184		
Toronto	64	37	19	8	82	231	201		
Tampa Bay	65	34	25	6	74	224	219		
Detroit	64	33	25	6	72	221	211		
Buffalo	65	30	30	5	65	189	195		
Montreal	64	24	30	10	58	180	229		
Ottawa	62	25	33	4	54	200	220		
Metropolitan Division									
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA		
N.Y. Rangers	64	42	18	4	88	213	173		
Carolina	64	39	19	6	84	216	177		
Philadelphia	65	33	24	8	74	192	194		
N.Y. Islanders	64	29	21	14	72	197	209		
Washington	63	30	24	9	69	170	197		
New Jersey	65	31	30	4	66	212	227		
Pittsburgh	63	28	27	8	64	180	184		
Columbus	64	22	32	10	54	192	232		
Western Conference									
Central Division									
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA		
Dallas	66	40	17	9	89	242	199		
Winnipeg	64	41	18	5	87	196	153		
Colorado	65	40	20	5	85	241	197		
Nashville	66	37	25	4	78	211	201		
St. Louis	65	33	29	3	69	184	200		
Minnesota	65	31	27	7	69	204	215		
Arizona	65	26	34	5	57	192	218		
Chicago	65	17	43	5	39	138	233		
Pacific Division									
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA		
Vancouver	66	42	17	7	91	234	178		
Edmonton	63	39	21	3	81	222	180		
Los Angeles	64	33	20	11	77	197	171		
Vegas	64	34	23	7	75	207	191		
Seattle	63	28	24	11	67	174	179		
Calgary	64	31	28	5	67	200	206		
Anaheim	64	23	38	3	49	167	229		
San Jose	63	16	40	7	39	139	250		

Note: Two points for a win, one point for overtime loss. Top three teams in each division and two wild cards per conference advance to playoffs.

Monday's games

N.Y. Rangers 3, New Jersey 1
St. Louis 5, Boston 1
Winnipeg 3, Washington 0
Los Angeles 3, N.Y. Islanders 0

Tuesday's games

Columbus at Montreal
Detroit at Buffalo
N.Y. Rangers at Carolina
Pittsburgh at Ottawa
San Jose at Philadelphia
Arizona at Minnesota
Florida at Dallas
Anaheim at Chicago
Colorado at Calgary
Vegas at Seattle

Wednesday's games

Los Angeles at St. Louis
Nashville at Winnipeg
Washington at Edmonton
Colorado at Vancouver

NHL ROUNDUP

First-place Rangers top Devils again

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Mika Zibanejad and Erik Gustafsson scored in the second period as the New York Rangers beat the New Jersey Devils 3-1 on Monday night.

Vincent Trocheck also scored and Jonathan Quick made 20 saves as the first-place Rangers won their second straight after losing three of four. New York is 14-3-2 in its last 19 games and beat New Jersey for the third straight time this season after the Devils won their first-round series in seven games last spring.

“They came out hard. I thought we generated good chances and held them pretty much in check in the second, and I thought Quickie was excellent,” Rangers coach Peter Laviolette said.

Devils defenseman Simon Nemec spoiled Quick’s shutout bid with 2:34 remaining. Kaapo Kahkonen finished with 23 saves in his New Jersey debut after he was acquired from San Jose last Friday.

The Devils lost for the eighth time in 11 games and for the third time in four games under interim coach Travis Green, who replaced Lindy Ruff on March 4.

“We didn’t convert on some really good chances,” Green said. “It was a tough loss against a good team.”

Quick improved to 14-5-2 this season with his 389th career victory. The 38-year-old tied Dominik Hasek for 15th in league history and moved within two wins of Ryan Miller for the most triumphs among American-born goalies.

Jets 3, Capitals 0: Connor Hellebuyck stopped 23 shots for his fourth shutout of the season as host Winnipeg beat Washington.

Hellebuyck improved to 30-



SETH WENIG/AP

New York Rangers goaltender Jonathan Quick defends the net during the third period against the New Jersey Devils on Monday in New York. Quick made 20 saves in the Rangers’ 3-1 victory.

14-3, becoming the fourth goalie this season to reach the 30-win mark. He accomplished the feat for the fifth time in his career. It was Hellebuyck’s 36th career shutout.

Neal Pionk, Alex Iafallo and Kyle Connor scored for the Jets, who were coming off a 5-0 shutout loss to Vancouver on Saturday that Winnipeg coach Rick Bowness described as the worst game “by far” the team had played in his two-year tenure. The Jets have won eight of their last 11.

Kings 3, Islanders 0: David Rittich stopped 26 shots for his sixth career shutout, Adrian Kempe reached the 20-goal mark for the third straight season and host Los Angeles snapped New York’s six-game winning streak.

It was the Kings’ fifth shutout this season and the second for Rittich. The Czech-born goalie made 26 saves in a 4-0 victory over Edmonton on Feb. 10, which was Jim Hiller’s first game as interim coach.

Trevor Moore had a goal and an assist and Phillip Danault also scored for the Kings, who went 3-1-1 during their five-game homestand. Los Angeles is third in the Pacific Division with 77 points.

Blues 5, Bruins 1: Kasper Ka-

panen and Robert Thomas each scored in the first period, Joel Hofer stopped 36 shots and visiting St. Louis beat Boston.

Entering the night eight points out of a wild-card spot and tied for 10th in the Western Conference with two other teams, the Blues snapped a three-game losing streak and completed a five-game road trip (2-3) with a solid win.

Kevin Hayes, Brandon Saad and Alexey Toropchenko also scored for St. Louis, which totaled just three goals during its losing streak. It was the Blues’ highest goal total since a 6-3 victory over Edmonton at home on Feb. 15.

Cousins, Barkley deals mark busy 1st day of free agency

By ROB MAADDI
Associated Press

Kirk Cousins is heading to the Falcons. Saquon Barkley is joining the Eagles. Brian Burns is going to the Giants.

The first day of the NFL’s legal tampering period was a free-for-all frenzy with teams making one big move after another, highlighted by Cousins’ decision to leave Minnesota for Atlanta.

The four-time Pro Bowl quarterback and the Falcons agreed on a \$180 million, four-year deal with \$100 million guaranteed and a \$50 million signing bonus, according to a person with knowledge of the terms who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because the deal can’t be signed until the new league year begins on Wednesday.

Barkley bolted New York for NFC



Cousins

East rival Philadelphia, agreeing on a three-year, \$37.75 million deal with \$26 million guaranteed, a person familiar with the contract told the AP.

Hours after losing Barkley, the Giants made a splash on the defensive side. They’re sending a 2024 second-round pick and a 2025 fifth-rounder to Carolina for Burns, who is getting a five-year contract worth up to \$150 million with \$87.5 million in guarantees, according to a person with knowledge of the terms.

Barkley, a two-time Pro Bowl running back, joins an all-star offensive cast in Philly and replaces D’Andre Swift, who is heading to the Chicago Bears.

It was a busy day for running backs, who have been undervalued by NFL teams in recent years.

Josh Jacobs, a 2022 All-Pro, is leaving Las Vegas for Green Bay. Tony Pollard is going from Dallas to Tennessee, Austin Ekeler from the Los Angeles Chargers to Washington, Devin Singletary from Houston to the Giants, Gus Edwards from Baltimore to the Chargers, Antonio Gibson from the Commanders to New England and Zack Moss from Indianapolis to Cincinnati.

Like the Giants, the Raiders made a major splash on defense after losing their starting running back. Las Vegas and defensive tackle Chris-

tian Wilkins agreed to a four-year, \$110 contract with \$84.75 million guaranteed, agent David Mulugheta said.

The Raiders are also bringing in quarterback Gardner Minshew, who went 7-6 filling in for Anthony Richardson in Indianapolis last season.

Detroit is getting edge rusher Marcus Davenport and acquiring cornerback Carlton Davis from Tampa Bay in a trade. The Lions are also re-signing guard Graham Glasgow.

The Vikings are adding edge rushers Jonathan Greenard and Andrew Van Ginkel and inside linebacker Blake Cashman.

In addition to Pollard, the Titans are getting cornerback Chidobe Awuzie and center Lloyd Cushenberry.

The Packers bolstered their defense by agreeing on a deal with safety Xavier McKinney. Green Bay released Aaron Jones to make way for Jacobs.

Jacksonville, which is acquiring quarterback Mac Jones to back up Trevor Lawrence, is adding wide receiver Gabe Davis, safety Darnell Savage, kick returner Devin Duvernay and cornerback Ronald Darby.

The Commanders, who have the most salary cap space in the league, raided division rival Dallas for defensive end Dorance Armstrong and center Tyler Biadasz. Washington is also bringing in linebacker Frankie Luvu and kicker Brandon McManus.

The Texans are snatching punter Tommy Townsend, a 2022 All-Pro, away from two-time defending Super Bowl champion Kansas City.

MLB/TENNIS

SPRING TRAINING ROUNDUP

Yanks' Cole to get MRI; Red Sox lose Giolito indefinitely

Associated Press

The pitching staffs of longtime rivals New York and Boston are hurting as the regular season approaches.

Yankees ace Gerrit Cole will have an MRI of his right elbow after experiencing issues recovering following spring training starts while Red Sox right-hander Lucas Giolito was set for surgery Tuesday and will be out indefinitely.

Both Cole and Giolito have been durable in their careers.

Cole, the 2023 AL Cy Young Award winner, has made at least 30 starts in each of the last six full regular seasons. The 29-year-old Giolito, who agreed to a \$38.5 million, two-year deal with the Red Sox during the offseason, has pitched at least 160 innings in five of the last six seasons.

The Yankees had been bringing the 33-year-old Cole along slowly this spring, having him throw fewer pitches during his outings than the rest of the rotation. Still, Cole reported feeling a higher level of fatigue than usual between starts.

"He described it as his recovery, leading into his next start, has been more akin to what he feels in the season when he's making 100 pitches," Yankees manager Aaron Boone said Monday. "He usually doesn't have the recovery issues he's having. It's been more of a challenge, more taxing. So we're going to get an MRI to see what we're dealing with here."

Giolito reported discomfort in his elbow after getting tagged during a spring training appearance on March 1. He traveled to Alabama last week to get a second opinion from Dr. Jeffrey R. Dugas before opting for surgery, the extent of

which is still uncertain.

Seoul series set

It will be Tyler Glasnow against Yu Darvish when the Los Angeles Dodgers and the San Diego Padres meet in the Seoul Series opener in South Korea later this month.

Glasnow, acquired by the Dodgers in the offseason and signed to a \$136.5 million, five-year contract, will make the second opening day start of his career when the series begins on March 20. The 6-foot-8 right-hander went 10-7 with a 3.53 ERA last season while pitching for Tampa Bay.

Darvish will make the fourth opening day start of his career. The 37-year-old right-hander struggled at times last season, going 8-10 with a 4.56 ERA — the second-highest ERA of his 11-year career — before being shut down in August due to concerns about his right elbow.

Braves prospect optioned

The Atlanta Braves optioned top prospect AJ Smith-Shawver to Triple-A Gwinnett on Monday, moving closer to settling on their pitching staff for opening day.

The move slows — for now anyway — the 21-year-old's rapid rise through Atlanta's system. Smith-Shawver began last season at Class A Rome before finishing on the big league roster for the NL Division Series.

In three starts during the exhibition season, he showed glimpses of his massive potential, recording 11 strikeouts in 7⅓ innings. He also gave up 12 hits, seven earned runs and two homers. The decision leaves Bryce Elder and Reynaldo López as the top candidates for the final spot in Atlanta's starting rotation.



CHARLIE NEIBERGALL/AP

Yankees starter Gerrit Cole, left, has been one of the most durable pitchers in the majors. The reigning AL Cy Young Award winner has made at least 30 starts in each of the last six full regular seasons.



MARK J. TERRILL/AP

Luca Nardi, of Italy, returns a shot against Novak Djokovic, of Serbia, at the BNP Paribas Open tennis tournament Monday in Indian Wells, Calif. No. 123 Nardi had a huge upset win over the top-ranked Djokovic.

Nardi stuns boyhood idol Djokovic in upset victory

Associated Press

INDIAN WELLS, Calif. — Luca Nardi used a combination of poise and power to stun his boyhood idol and top-seeded Novak Djokovic with a 6-4, 3-6, 6-3 win Monday night in the third round of the BNP Paribas Open.

Nardi, who's ranked No. 123, closed out his huge upset over the No. 1 player in the rankings with an ace. The 20-year-old from Italy dropped his racket and brought his hands to his face almost in disbelief before greeting Djokovic at the net.

"This is a miracle," Nardi said in an interview after the match on the Tennis Channel. "I'm a 20-years-old guy, 100 in the world, and beating Novak. So, crazy. Crazy."

Setting the tone early with his hard-hitting shots, Nardi frustrated Djokovic all evening. There was a moment when Nardi was surprised by an "in" call and casually hit the ball back over the net. It resulted in a winner and led to Djokovic complaining to the official about a potential hindrance.

To think, Nardi was nearly on his way home. He got into the field as a "lucky loser," which is a player who stumbled on the final hurdle in qualifying but made it into the main draw as a replacement for an injured player who pulled out before the first round.

In Nardi's case, he stepped in for No. 30 Tomas Martin Etcheverry and received a bye through the opening round.

He went on to become the lowest-ranked player to beat Djokovic in a Grand Slam or ATP Masters 1000 level event, surpassing No. 122 Kevin Anderson in 2008 in Miami.

Using a combination of aggressiveness and finesse, Nardi had Djokovic, the 24-time Grand Slam singles champion from Serbia he grew up watching, smiling and shaking his head at times in a mixture of surprise and shock.

Nardi was far from intimidated, either, answering Djokovic's well-placed shots with well-placed returns of his own.

"Before this night, no one knew me," said Nardi, who will face American Tommy Paul in the round of 16. "I hope now the crowd enjoyed the game. I'm super happy with this one."

Djokovic certainly didn't know that much about Nardi, only what he gleaned watching him play. He knew Nardi had a strong baseline game, especially with the forehand, and moved well.

"He got in as a 'lucky loser' to (the) main draw, so he really didn't have anything to lose. So he played great," Djokovic said. "Deserved to win. I was more surprised with my level. My level was really, really bad."

No. 4 Daniil Medvedev's was just good enough, as he edged No. 29 Sebastian Korda 6-4, 5-7, 6-3 and will face No. 13 Grigor Dimitrov.

Earlier in the day, Coco Gauff gave herself an early birthday present by beating Lucia Bronzetti 6-2, 7-6 (5) in the third round. Gauff, who turns 20 on Wednesday, struggled early but found a way to hold her serve by saving 10 of 11 break points. She closed out the match with a serve into the body that Bronzetti couldn't return. It extended Gauff's winning streak in the United States to 18 matches, a run that includes winning the title at last year's U.S. Open.

Bronzetti had a chance to force a third set when she took a 5-4 lead in the tiebreaker. Gauff won the next three points.

These days, Gauff is finding ways to win when she doesn't necessarily have all her shots tuned in.

"The mentality is the reason why I'm playing and the reason why I'm being successful," said Gauff, who won a doubles match with partner Jessica Pegula later Monday.

Gauff will face Elise Mertens in the round of 16. Mertens held off Naomi Osaka 7-5, 6-4. Osaka played in the fifth tournament of her return after her maternity leave in 2023.

NBA/COLLEGE BASKETBALL

NBA scoreboard

Eastern Conference				
Atlantic Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Boston	50	14	.781	—
New York	37	27	.578	13
Philadelphia	36	28	.563	14
Brooklyn	26	39	.400	24½
Toronto	23	42	.354	27½
Southeast Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Orlando	37	28	.569	—
Miami	35	29	.547	1½
Atlanta	29	35	.453	7½
Charlotte	16	49	.246	21
Washington	11	53	.172	25½
Central Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Milwaukee	42	23	.646	—
Cleveland	41	24	.631	1
Indiana	36	29	.554	6
Chicago	31	34	.477	11
Detroit	11	53	.172	30½
Western Conference				
Southwest Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
New Orleans	39	25	.609	—
Dallas	37	28	.569	2½
Houston	29	35	.453	10
Memphis	22	43	.338	17½
San Antonio	14	51	.215	25½
Northwest Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Oklahoma City	45	19	.703	—
Denver	45	20	.692	½
Minnesota	44	21	.677	1½
Utah	28	36	.438	17
Portland	18	46	.281	27
Pacific Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
L.A. Clippers	41	22	.651	—
Phoenix	38	27	.585	4
Sacramento	36	27	.571	5
L.A. Lakers	36	30	.545	6½
Golden State	34	30	.531	7½
Monday's games				
Detroit 114, Charlotte 97				
Phoenix 117, Cleveland 111				
Dallas 127, Chicago 92				
Golden State 112, San Antonio 102				
Denver 125, Toronto 119				
Boston 121, Portland 99				
Tuesday's games				
Philadelphia at New York				
Indiana at Oklahoma City				
Washington at Memphis				
Houston at San Antonio				
Boston at Utah				
Milwaukee at Sacramento				
Minnesota at L.A. Clippers				
Wednesday's games				
Brooklyn at Orlando				
Toronto at Detroit				
Chicago at Indiana				
Denver at Miami				
Charlotte at Memphis				
Cleveland at New Orleans				
Golden State at Dallas				
Atlanta at Portland				
L.A. Lakers at Sacramento				

NBA ROUNDUP

Doncic, Mavericks dominate Bulls

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Luka Doncic came through with yet another triple-double. About the only thing he didn't do was keep his record streak going.

Doncic had 27 points, recording another triple-double but doing so without scoring 30 for the first time in seven games, and the Dallas Mavericks rolled over the Chicago Bulls 127-92 on Monday night.

Doncic finished with 14 assists and 12 rebounds, but exited the blowout midway through the fourth quarter to end his NBA-record streak of 30-point triple-doubles at six.

"It's about winning to him," coach Jason Kidd said. "Numbers, I don't know if they really mean anything to him today. But when he does retire, he'll look back to see the game that he was playing was at a different level than anybody else."

Former Bulls center Daniel Gafford made all nine field goals, extending his run of consecutive made shots to 28—seven shy of the NBA record. Wilt Chamberlain made 35 in a row for the Philadelphia 76ers from Feb. 17 to Feb. 28, 1967.

"My philosophy for sure is just being consistent, having a mindset of just going to finish everything no matter if there's somebody in front of you or if there isn't somebody in front of you," Gafford said. "At the end of the day, either dunking it or putting it in the rim."

Doncic set the tone as Dallas outscored Chicago by 28 in the first quarter. The Mavericks gave up a season low in points while handing the Bulls their most lopsided loss.

Suns 117, Cavaliers 111: Kevin Durant scored 37 points and Devin Booker had 27 in his return from a right ankle sprain, rallying visiting Phoenix over injury-depleted Cleveland.



Chicago Bulls center Andre Drummond, right, guards against Dallas Mavericks guard Luka Doncic during the first half Monday in Chicago. Doncic scored 27 points for another triple-double in the Mavs' 127-92 win.

Durant also had eight rebounds and six assists for the Suns, who are one game ahead of Sacramento for sixth place in the Western Conference. Booker had missed four games with his injury, but played 38 strong minutes and had seven assists and six boards.

Phoenix trailed 63-44 midway through the second quarter, but answered with a 43-15 run that ended deep in the third. Booker later put the Suns ahead for good at 106-104 by scoring in transition with seven minutes remaining.

Warriors 112, Spurs 102: Jonathan Kuminga scored 21 points, Klay Thompson added 20 and visiting Golden State overcame a sluggish start to beat San Antonio.

San Antonio rookie Victor Wembanyama had 27 points and 14 rebounds in his return from a one-

game absence after spraining his right ankle in the first half of Tuesday's loss in Houston. Spurs coach Gregg Popovich said he is unsure if Wembanyama will play against Houston on Tuesday.

Devin Vassell added 17 points and Keldon Johnson had 16 points for the Spurs.

Nuggets 125, Raptors 119: Jamal Murray scored 12 of his 26 points in the fourth quarter, and visiting Denver rallied from 21 points down in the third quarter to beat depleted Toronto.

Murray added 12 assists to go along with Nikola Jokic's 21st triple-double of the season. Jokic finished with 35 points, 17 rebounds and 12 assists to help Denver improve to 9-1 since the All-Star break.

Celtics 121, Trail Blazers 99:

Jaylen Brown scored 27 points, Jayson Tatum added 26 and visiting Boston beat Portland despite the absence of two key starters.

Jrue Holiday and Kristaps Porzingis were sidelined with injuries for the Eastern Conference-leading Celtics, who have already clinched a playoff spot with 18 games remaining in the season.

Pistons 114, Hornets 97: Cade Cunningham scored 12 of his 22 points in the first quarter to help host Detroit build a double-digit lead and he finished with eight assists in a win over Charlotte.

Cunningham reached 1,200 points and 400 assists in his 54th game, getting those totals in a season quicker than any player in franchise history, one game faster than Hall of Famer Isiah Thomas did during the 1984-85 season.

CONFERENCE CHAMPIONSHIPS

Samford holds off E. Tennessee State for Southern title

Associated Press

ASHEVILLE, N.C. — Achor Achor had 25 points and nine rebounds, Jermaine Marshall scored 23 and top-seeded Samford held off seventh-seeded East Tennessee State 76-69 to win the Southern Conference Tournament championship Monday night and earn an automatic berth in the NCAA Tournament.

Bulldogs coach Bucky McMillan, who had never coached above the high school level, has Samford dancing four years after taking over the 321st-ranked program.

Samford is making its first trip to the Big Dance since 2000 and just its third overall.

The Bulldogs (29-5) extended the school record for victories by beating the Buccaneers (19-16), who were playing in the title game for the 13th time. ETSU was trying to advance to the NCAA tourney for a ninth time by winning four games in four days.

Achor had a three-point play and a dunk as Samford jumped out to an 11-2 lead. The Bucs missed 4 of 5 shots and turned the ball over three times in falling behind.

There were seven lead changes and seven ties by halftime. Achor had 17 points, Marshall scored 11 and the Bulldogs clung to a 40-38 advantage. ETSU was whistled for 16 fouls, Samford had 12 and that led to 38 free throws in the first 20 minutes. The Bulldogs sank 13 of 21, while the Buccaneers made 11 of 17. Just five Samford players scored while ETSU had nine—led by Ebby Asamoah's nine points.

Sun Belt

PENSACOLA, Fla. — Xavier Brown scored a career-high 21

points to go with 10 rebounds and No. 2 seed James Madison eased by No. 4 seed Arkansas State 91-71 on Monday night to claim the Sun Belt Conference Tournament championship and earn its first NCAA Tournament bid since 2013.

The Dukes (31-3), who outlasted Texas State in the semifinals to notch the first 30-win season in program history, extended their winning streak to 13 games. James Madison began the season on a 14-game winning streak, starting with an overtime victory over

then-No. 4 Michigan State.

The Red Wolves (18-16), in their first Sun Belt championship game appearance since 2007, were seeking their first NCAA Tournament berth since 1999.

Brown, averaging 6.1 points per game, scored 19 points in the opening 14 minutes, including 13 straight Dukes points, to help build a 30-23 lead. He made his first seven shots before missing a 3-pointer with 5:22 left. Brown finished the half with 21, topping his previous best scoring total of 17 against Hampton on Dec. 16.

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Big week ahead for bubble teams

By DAVE SKRETTA
Associated Press

There were plenty of teams sitting on the NCAA Tournament bubble that saw Drake beat Indiana State for the Missouri Valley title on Sunday and did not know whether that was a good thing.

Had the Sycamores done enough to earn at at-large bid? Would the Bulldogs have done enough if they lost?

As more conference tournaments get going this week, the focus will be just as much on those teams trying to play their way into the field of 68 as those ranked in the Top 25. And each day that passes, teams precariously on the bubble will be watching results around the nation and trying to decipher where exactly they stack up.

“The guys have been watching all these conference tournaments,” Kansas State coach Jerome Tang said, “and you see teams — Who was it? East Tennessee State was down 20 and came back and sent it to overtime and ended up winning? And you see the guys from Chattanooga, you know? They’re crying, right? The season’s over. The finality of it.”

For the Wildcats (18-13), who have three wins over top-10 teams after beating Iowa State on Saturday, that could mean winning at least a couple of games as the No. 10 seed. They open the Big 12 tourney against Texas on Wednesday.

Also on the bubble out of the Big 12 is Oklahoma (20-11), which will play TCU earlier Wednesday in a second-round game.

“That’s what makes the Big 12 so great,” Tang said. “Every game is like an (NCAA) Tournament game, and I think every team right now — doesn’t matter who you are — is playing like it’s your last game, because it just means so much to you.”

ACC: There are a slew of teams in the ACC that are in the same bucket — Pittsburgh, Wake Forest, Clemson and Syracuse — in that they should feel good about their NCAA chances but would feel a whole lot better with a win or two in Washington, D.C.

Virginia Tech is the team that is in desperation mode. The Hokies (18-13) play Florida State in a second-round game Wednesday and probably need to make a run to the championship game to have any chance of stealing an at-large berth.

Big East: There are few hotter teams in the nation than St. John’s, that bunch that coach Rick Pitino bemoaned not too long ago. The Red Storm (19-12) have won five straight to climb onto the NCAA bubble heading into a brutally tough Big East tourney as the No. 5



CHARLIE RIEDEL/AP
Kansas State’s David N’Guessan celebrates in Saturday’s win over Iowa State. The Wildcats face Texas in the Big 12 tournament.

seed, which means a second-round game against fourth-seeded Seton Hall — another bubble team — on Thursday.

Along with St. John’s and Seton Hall (20-11), No. 7 seed Providence (19-12) will be trying to work its way into the field this week.

Big Ten: Purdue and Illinois know they’re going to the dance. Everyone else? Starting with third-seeded Nebraska, there are eight teams with at least 18 wins, and each of them can earn an NCAA berth this week.

Northwestern and Michigan State, along with the Huskers, should feel good about their chances already. But their hopes could get a little dicey if conference rivals such as Indiana, Iowa, Ohio State and Minnesota can string together some wins.

Pac-12: Utah (18-13) put its at-large NCAA hopes in peril with a pair of losses last week, dropping the Utes to the No. 6 seed and a first-round game against Arizona State in the final Pac-12 Tournament as it has been known. One more slip-up could be all Oregon (20-11) or Colorado (22-9) need to feel much more comfortable about its own NCAA aspirations.

SEC: While the Big 12 has rightfully earned a reputation as the nation’s toughest league, the SEC has not been far behind this season, and that could be reflected in the NCAA tourney. Tennessee, Kentucky, Auburn, Alabama, South Carolina and Florida are locks heading to Nashville, while Mississippi State (19-12), Ole Miss (20-11) and Texas A&M (18-13) could give the league up to nine bids.

Other teams that could merit at-large bids if they fail to win their league tourneys include McNeese State (28-3) out of the Southland; Princeton (24-3) from the Ivy League; and Grand Canyon from the WAC.

James Madison (31-3) did all the bubble teams a favor by winning the Sun Belt title Monday night.

Conference tournaments

America East Conference Semifinals Tuesday, March 12 Vermont vs. New Hampshire Mass.-Lowell vs. Bryant	American Athletic Conference At Fort Worth, Texas First Round Wednesday, March 13 Wichita St. vs. Rice Temple vs. UTSA
Second Round Thursday, March 14 East Carolina vs. Tulsa Memphis vs. Wichita St.-Rice winner North Texas vs. Tulane SMU vs. Temple-UTSA winner	Atlantic 10 Conference At Brooklyn, N.Y. First Round Tuesday, March 12 Fordham vs. Davidson La Salle vs. George Washington Rhode Island vs. Saint Louis
Second Round Wednesday, March 13 George Mason vs. Saint Joseph's VCU vs. Fordham-Davidson winner St. Bonaventure vs. La Salle-George Washington winner Duquesne vs. Rhode Island-Saint Louis winner	Atlantic Coast Conference At Washington, D.C. First Round Tuesday, March 12 Notre Dame vs. Georgia Tech NC State vs. Louisville Boston College vs. Miami
Second Round Wednesday, March 13 Virginia Tech vs. Florida St. Wake Forest vs. Notre Dame-Georgia Tech winner Syracuse vs. NC State-Louisville winner Clemson vs. Boston College-Miami winner	Big 12 Conference At Kansas City, Mo. First Round Tuesday, March 12 UCF vs. Oklahoma St. Cincinnati vs. West Virginia
Second Round Wednesday, March 13 BYU vs. UCF-Oklahoma St. winner TCU vs. Oklahoma Texas vs. Kansas St. Kansas vs. Cincinnati-W. Virginia winner	Big East Conference At New York First Round Wednesday, March 13 Butler vs. Xavier Providence vs. Georgetown Villanova vs. DePaul
Quarterfinals Thursday, March 14 UConn vs. Butler-Xavier winner Seton Hall vs. St. John's Creighton vs. Providence-Georgetown winner Marquette vs. Villanova-DePaul winner	Big Sky Conference At Boise, Idaho Quarterfinals Sunday, March 10 Idaho St. 83, N. Colorado 76 Sacramento St. 74, E. Washington 69
Monday, March 11 Montana St. 91, Weber St. 82 Montana 87, Portland St. 81	Semifinals Tuesday, March 12 Montana St. vs. Sacramento St. Montana vs. Idaho St.
Big Ten Conference At Minneapolis, Minn. First Round Wednesday, March 13 Maryland vs. Rutgers Penn St. vs. Michigan	Second Round Thursday, March 14 Michigan St. vs. Minnesota Wisconsin vs. Maryland-Rutgers winner Iowa vs. Ohio St. Indiana vs. Penn St.-Michigan winner
Big West Conference At Henderson, Nev. First Round Wednesday, March 13 UC Riverside vs. CS Bakersfield UC Santa Barbara vs. CS Northridge	Quarterfinals Thursday, March 14 Hawaii vs. UCSB-CS Northridge winner Long Beach St. vs. UC Riverside-CS Bakersfield winner
Coastal Athletic Conference At Washington, D.C. Semifinals Monday, March 11 Coll. of Charleston 61, Towson 56 Stony Brook 63, Hofstra 59	Championship Tuesday, March 12 Coll. of Charleston vs. Stony Brook
Conference USA	



KATHY KMONICEK/AP
Samford’s Achor Achor, center, and teammates celebrate after their win over East Tennessee State in the Southern Conference final.

At Huntsville, Ala. First Round Tuesday, March 12 Jacksonville St. vs. FIU	Washington St. vs. California-Stanford winner Colorado vs. Utah-Arizona St. winner
Quarterfinals Wednesday, March 13 Sam Houston St. vs. Jacksonville St.-FIU winner Louisiana Tech vs. Middle Tennessee	Patriot League Championship Wednesday, March 13 Colgate vs. Lehigh
Thursday, March 14 Liberty vs. UTEP W. Kentucky vs. New Mexico St.	Southeastern Conference At Nashville, Tenn. First Round Wednesday, March 13 Arkansas vs. Vanderbilt Georgia vs. Missouri
Horizon League At Higher-Seeded Schools Semifinals Monday, March 11 Oakland 74, Cleveland St. 71 Milwaukee 82, N. Kentucky 75	Second Round Thursday, March 14 LSU vs. Mississippi St. South Carolina vs. Arkansas-Vanderbilt winner Texas A&M vs. Mississippi Florida vs. Georgia-Missouri winner
Championship Tuesday, March 12 Oakland vs. Milwaukee	Southern Conference At Asheville, N.C. Championship Monday, March 11 Samford 76, ETSU 69
Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference At Atlantic City, N.J. First Round Tuesday, March 12 Mount St. Mary's vs. Canisius Iona vs. Manhattan Niagara vs. Siena	Southland Conference At Lake Charles, La. First Round Sunday, March 10 New Orleans 78, SE Louisiana 66 Texas A&M Commerce 69, Northwestern St. 64
Quarterfinals Wednesday, March 13 Quinnipiac vs. Mount St. Mary's-Canisius winner Fairfield vs. Iona-Manhattan winner	Quarterfinals Monday, March 11 Lamar 71, New Orleans 57 Nicholls 72, Texas A&M-Commerce 51
Thursday, March 14 Marist vs. Niagara-Siena-winner Rider vs. St. Peter's	Semifinals Tuesday, March 12 McNeese St. vs. Lamar Texas A&M-Corpus Christi vs. Nicholls
Mid-American Conference At Cleveland First Round Thursday, March 14 Toledo vs. Kent St. Cent. Michigan vs. Bowling Green Akron vs. Miami (Ohio) Ohio vs. W. Michigan	Southwest Athletic Conference At Birmingham, Ala. First Round Wednesday, March 13 Alcorn St. vs. Alabama A&M Grambling St. vs. Alabama St.
Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference At Norfolk, Va. First Round Wednesday, March 13 Norfolk St. vs. Coppin St. NC Central vs. Md.-Eastern Shore	Thursday, March 14 Texas Southern vs. Jackson St. Southern U. vs. Bethune-Cookman
Thursday, March 14 Howard vs. Morgan St. SC State vs. Delaware St.	Summit League Conference At Sioux Falls, S.D. Semifinals Monday, March 11 S. Dakota St. 59, St. Thomas 49 Denver 66, Omaha 63
Mountain West Conference At Las Vegas, Nev. First Round Wednesday, March 13 Wyoming vs. Fresno St. Colorado St. vs. San Jose St. New Mexico vs. Air Force	Championship Tuesday, March 12 S. Dakota St. vs. Denver
Quarterfinals Thursday, March 14 Utah St. vs. Wyoming-Fresno St. winner UNLV vs. San Diego St. Nevada vs. Colorado St.-San Jose St. winner Boise St. vs. New Mexico-Air Force winner	Sun Belt Conference At Pensacola, Fla. Championship Monday, March 11 James Madison 91, Arkansas St. 71
Northeast Conference Championship Tuesday, March 12 Merrimack vs. Wagner	West Coast Conference At Las Vegas Semifinals Monday, March 11 Saint Mary's (Cal.) 79, Santa Clara 65 Gonzaga 89, San Francisco 77
Pac-12 Conference At Las Vegas, First Round Wednesday, March 13 Washington vs. Southern Cal UCLA vs. Oregon St. California vs. Stanford Utah vs. Arizona St.	Championship Tuesday, March 12 Saint Mary's (Cal.) vs. Gonzaga
Quarterfinals Thursday, March 14 Arizona vs. Washington-Southern Cal winner Oregon vs. UCLA-Oregon St. winner	Western Athletic Conference At Las Vegas First Round Wednesday, March 13 Utah Valley St. vs. Cal Baptist Stephen F. Austin vs. Abilene Christian
	Quarterfinals Thursday, March 14 Seattle vs. Utah Valley St.-Cal Baptist winner Texas-Arlington vs. Stephen F. Austin-Abilene Christian winner

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

COMMENTARY

After brawl, LSU's Mulkey goes even lower

Coach shows lack of class with comments

By PAUL NEWBERRY
Associated Press

Just when you think Kim Mulkey can't go any lower, the LSU coach manages to defy expectations.

After an ugly brawl broke out in the closing minutes of the Southeastern Conference Tournament championship game, Mulkey's lack of class and character revealed itself again as soon as she spoke up.

Instead of taking the high road — a route that rarely has been on Mulkey's map throughout her storied career — she essentially called out rival South Carolina for not picking on someone its own size.

Mulkey pointed out that the trouble started when LSU guard Flau'jae Johnson, listed at 5-foot-10, was shoved to the court by 6-7 Gamecocks forward Kamilla Cardoso.

"No one wants to be a part of that. No one wants to see that ugliness," Mulkey said. "But I can tell you this: I wish she would have pushed Angel Reese."

In Mulkey's opinion, that would have been more of a fair fight, since Reese is 6-3 and closer in size to Cardoso.

"Don't push a kid," Mulkey said, sounding worse with every ill-chosen word. "Don't push somebody that little. That was uncalled for, in my opinion. Let those two girls that were jawing, let them go at it."

Sorry, coach, this is college bas-

ketball, not the WWE.

The more proper response came from South Carolina coach Dawn Staley, who was downright appalled at what she had witnessed on what should've been a day of celebration for her sport.

A much-anticipated matchup between a pair of rivals that captured the last two national championships ended with six players ejected, leaving barely enough to finish the game. (Which, in case you missed it, was won by top-ranked South Carolina 79-72.)

Staley apologized profusely for her team's actions during the trophy presentation on the court and seemed to grasp far more than Mulkey what sort of impression it left for those watching.

"I just don't want the people who are tuning in to women's basketball to see that and think that is our game, because it isn't," Staley said. "Our game is a really beautiful thing. To be quite honest, this is a part of it now. So we have to fix it, and we have to move on."

Back to Mulkey, who seemed to think the root of the problem was the referees swallowing their whistles.

"Do you realize there was only one foul called on each team with two minutes to play in the fourth quarter?" Mulkey said. "Are you kidding me? That might have created some of that."

That's utter nonsense, of course, but it's hardly the first time Mul-

“Don’t push somebody that little. ... Let those two girls that were jawing, let them go at it.”

Kim Mulkey
LSU coach



LSU head coach Kim Mulkey has had a highly successful career as a coach, winning four national championships. But her comments over the years have drawn unwanted attention.

GEORGE WALKER IV/AP

key's moral compass has pointed in the wrong direction.

After all, this is a coach who — despite a glittering record that includes more than 700 wins and four national titles — has never seemed like a champion for women's sports.

She failed to publicly support perhaps the greatest player she's ever coached, Brittney Griner, after the former Baylor star was arrested on trumped-up charges in Russia and essentially used as a political pawn by President Vladimir Putin.

Maybe Mulkey was still perturbed at Griner, who is gay, for saying the then-Baylor coach told players not to be open about their sexuality because it would hurt recruiting and look bad for her program.

"The coaches thought that if it

seemed like they condoned it, people wouldn't let their kids come play for Baylor," Griner said during a 2013 interview with ESPN.

During her long tenure at the Texas university, Mulkey scoffed at two of the worst scandals in college sports history — both of which occurred at the Baptist institution.

First, there was the 2003 murder of a men's basketball player by one of his teammates, which sparked a probe into allegations ranging from rampant drug use among players to improper payments by the coaching staff.

Then, more than a decade later, the school was accused of covering up numerous cases of sexual assault involving the football team.

Mulkey could've issued a harsh rebuke of the embarrassing revelations, or at the very minimum

just kept silent about her employer.

But she found it necessary to say this after winning her 500th game as the Bears coach:

"If somebody's around you, and they ever say, 'I will never send my daughter to Baylor,' you knock them right in the face," Mulkey griped.

And this, too: "The problems that we have at Baylor are no different than the problems at any other school in America. Period. Move on. Find another story to write."

Mulkey was back to spouting more nonsense on Sunday, which only solidified what we've long known.

As a basketball coach, she's one of the best ever.

As a leader of young people, she leaves a lot to be desired.

More: South Carolina's Cardoso faces one-game suspension

FROM PAGE 24

crease on technical fouls assessed to personnel on the bench. Ejections were way up and there were at least two prominent on-court fights.

A month ago, five players were ejected during a game between Southern Miss and Arkansas State but that was an under-the-radar game. The LSU-South Carolina skirmish happened in front of 13,163 screaming fans at the Bon Secours Wellness Arena and many more watching on ESPN.

With about two minutes left in South Carolina's 79-72 victory, MiLaysia Fulwiley stole the ball from LSU's Flau'jae Johnson, who then intentionally fouled her to prevent a breakaway basket. Fulwiley's teammate, Ashlyn Watkins, walked past, yelling at Johnson, who pushed her away. Soon after, 6-foot-7 South Carolina star Kamilla Cardo-



Staley

say he jumped over the scorer's table to get involved.

Cardoso was ejected for fighting while three of her teammates were thrown out for leaving the bench, as were two LSU players. Cardoso will face a one-game suspension, per NCAA rules, and miss the Gamecocks' NCAA Tournament opener next week.

Debbie Antonelli, a North Carolina State Hall of Fame player and basketball analyst, said the game's intensity at the college level

so ran in and pushed the 5-foot-10 Johnson to the ground as both benches emptied.

Security, officials and coaches eventually calmed things down. Johnson's brother was arrested and faces charges after police

has always been high.

"I think when you step between the lines you're athletes and this is what competitive athletes do," Antonelli said Monday.

LSU coach Kim Mulkey said she thought officials did not call a tight enough game.

"Do you realize there was only one foul called on each team with two minutes to play in the fourth quarter? Are you kidding me?" Mulkey said. "That might have created some of that."

South Carolina finished off the final two minutes of the 79-72 victory and then Staley took control, apologizing to fans during the trophy ceremony and in media interviews for her team's actions.

"We talk about these things as a team, and we try as much as possible to express to them how to react in those type of situations," Staley said. "Real time is real time. I

know that anybody, Kamilla, as well as the other four or five players that were ejected, I know if they had a chance to do it all over again, they would do it differently."

Staley said LSU's Johnson apologized for her actions and Cardoso took to social media after the game's end to say she was sorry for her actions and pledged to do better.

Antonelli said there is no place for fighting in any game, men's or women's, and believes fans understand that this was unusual, not a trend.

"It's going to be a storyline when South Carolina plays the 16th seed (in the NCAA Tournament) and then we'll move past it," she said.

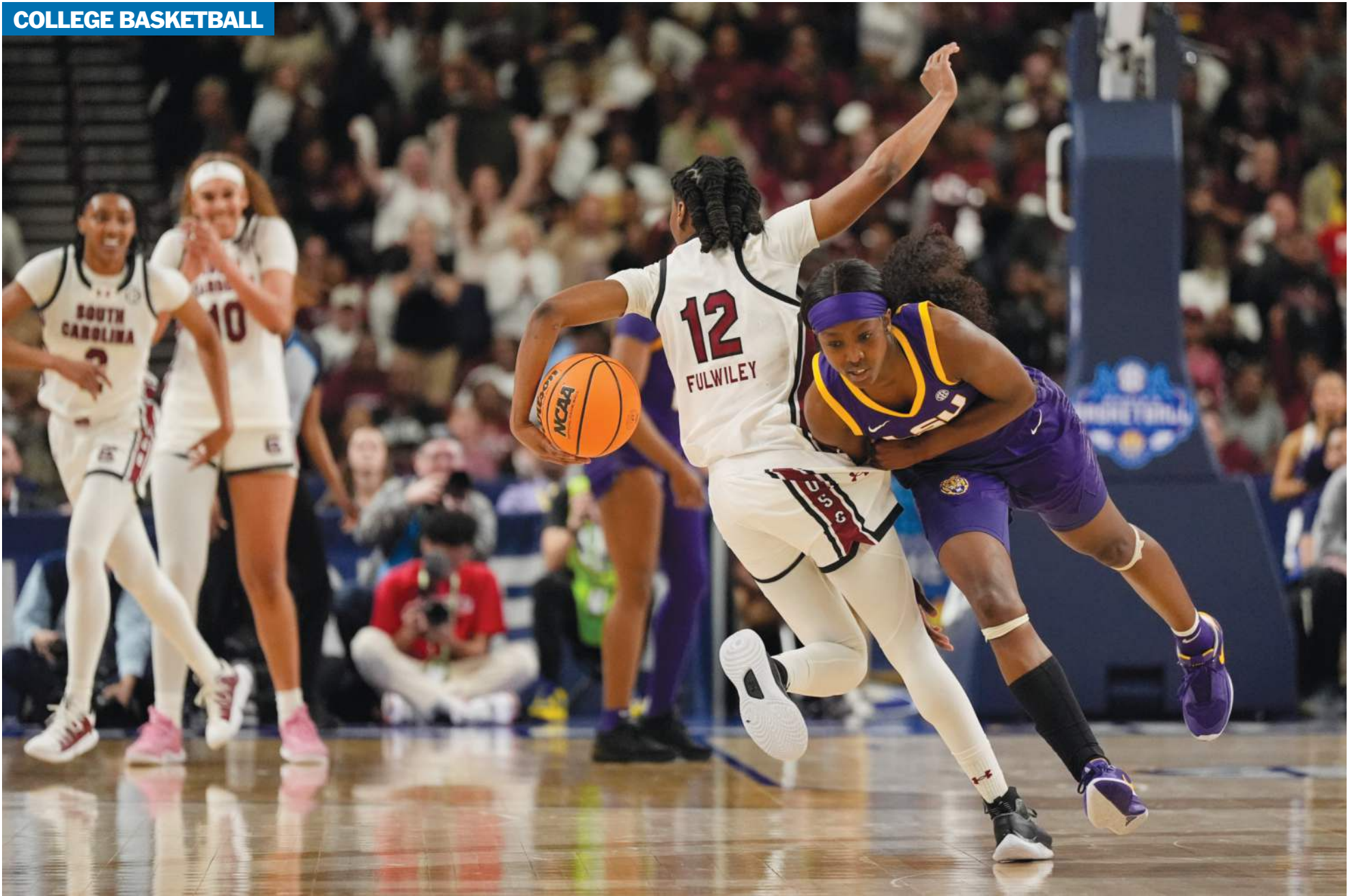
Staley hopes that's the case, too. "This is a part of it now," she said. "So we have to fix it and we have to move on."

SPORTS



Bound for Atlanta
Free agent QB Cousins agrees to deal with Falcons » **NFL, Page 19**

COLLEGE BASKETBALL



PHOTOS BY CHRIS CARLSON/AP

South Carolina guard MiLaysia Fulwiley is fouled by LSU guard Flau'jae Johnson late in the second half of Sunday's Southeastern Conference Tournament championship game.

More eyes, more scrutiny

Scrap gives growing women's game bad look

By PETE IACOBELLI
Associated Press

GREENVILLE, S.C. — More eyes, more fans and more scrutiny. The good and the bad of the game has all come into sharper focus as women's college basketball continues to grow in popularity.

What fans saw Sunday in the Southeastern Conference tournament championship was No. 1 South Carolina and LSU getting into a late-game confrontation that led to multiple ejections. Chippy play, plenty of trash talking and players thrown out — something more familiar to fans watching an NBA game.

"I just don't want the people who are tuning in to women's basketball to see that and think that is our game, because it isn't," said South Carolina coach Dawn Staley, who apologized to the crowd and in post-

game interviews. "Our game is a really beautiful thing."

Not always.

Earlier this season, Ohio State fans were criticized for a court-storming incident where Iowa star Caitlin Clark collided with a fan rushing to celebrate. Last year, Clark and LSU star Angel Reese's trash talking in the national championship game surprised fans who may not know that the women's game has plenty of that, just as it has hard fouls and rough-and-tumble play.

Last November, the NCAA said it was putting a new emphasis on sportsmanship after last season saw a 33% increase in technical fouls, including a 77% increase on techs given to head coaches and a whopping 193% in-

SEE MORE ON PAGE 23



South Carolina center Kamilla Cardoso, left, and LSU forward Angel Reese battle for the ball during the first half.

Djokovic stunned by Nardi at Indian Wells » Tennis, Page 20

