



VIDEO GAMES

The PlayStation has smashed status quo, only to become it
Page 18

MILITARY

NATO urges public to demand increase in defense spending
Page 6

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

Army, Navy headed to postseason but only focused on each other
Page 32



Biden commutes roughly 1,500 sentences and pardons 39 >> **Page 8**

STARS AND STRIPES

stripes.com

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CONTINGENCY EDITION

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 13, 2024

Free to Deployed Areas



Outpaced by China

ADAM FERRERO/U.S. Navy

Pre-Commissioning Unit John F. Kennedy in the dry dock area in Newport News, Va., on 2019. Experts see a lag in U.S. Navy shipbuilding capabilities compared to the Chinese navy.

US shipbuilding capabilities dwarfed by Beijing's navy numbers

By DIDI TANG
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. severely lags behind China in shipbuilding capacity, lawmakers and experts have warned, as the Biden administration tries to build up the country's ability to develop and produce weapons and other defense supplies to fend off war.

Speaking at a congressional hearing last week, Rep. John Moolenaar, the Republican chair of the House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party, said

“Decades of underinvestments and consolidation had seriously eroded our defense industrial base.”

Jake Sullivan
national security adviser

the country lacks the capacity to “deter and win a fight” with China and called for action.

“Bold policy changes and significant resources are now needed to

restore deterrence and prevent a fight” with China, Moolenaar said.

China's navy is already the world's largest, and its shipbuilding capacity, estimated to be 230

times larger, dwarfs that of the U.S.

Rep. Raja Krishnamoorthi, the ranking Democratic member of the committee, told Fox News that “for every one oceangoing vessel that we can produce, China can produce 359 in one single year.”

The U.S. government has come to see China as its “pacing challenge,” and officials have warned that Beijing is pursuing the largest peacetime military buildup in his-

SEE OUTPACED ON PAGE 5

House OKs defense bill with historic pay boost

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The House approved a \$895 billion defense policy bill Wednesday that will provide a historic pay raise for junior enlisted troops while also limiting treatment for transgender children of service members.

A provision barring Tricare — the military's health care program — from covering all gender-affirming care for minors had threatened to tank the annual National Defense Authorization Act, with Democrats voting en masse against it.

But the bill ultimately passed the Republican-controlled House in a 281-140 vote.

The legislation otherwise garnered widespread support for giving E-1 to E-4 troops a 14.5% pay raise and all other troops a 4.5% pay bump. The bill was also lauded for its investments in housing, child care, health care, spousal support and other quality-of-life improvements.

“No service member should have to live in squalid conditions. No military family should have to rely on food stamps to feed their children and no one serving in the military should have to wait to see a doctor. But that's exactly what many of our service members are experiencing, especially junior enlisted personnel,” said Republican Rep. Mike Rogers of Alabama, the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee. “This bill goes a long way to fixing that.”

The bill now moves to the Senate, where it is also expected to pass, and is set to become law by the end of the year.

Lawmakers traditionally show bipartisan support for the must-pass authorization legislation,

SEE HOUSE ON PAGE 5

BUSINESS/WEATHER

EPA gives Calif. grant to phase out diesel big rigs

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — The Environmental Protection Agency is awarding \$135 million in grants to fund 13 projects in California to help the state wean off fossil fuels and phase out big rigs that run on diesel.

The money will go to the state transportation department, cities and school districts, among others, to purchase 455 zero-emission vehicles to replace diesel-powered trucks, school buses and other large vehicles. It is part an

EPA program that provides a total of \$735 million to 70 projects across the country, officials announced Wednesday.

The grants are paid for by the 2022 climate law approved by congressional Democrats. The law, officially known as the Inflation Reduction Act, includes nearly \$400 billion in spending and tax credits to accelerate the expansion of clean energy such as wind and solar power, speeding the nation's transition away from the oil, coal and natural gas

that largely cause climate change.

The funds, to be delivered in early 2025, "will reduce air pollution, improve health outcomes in nearby communities, and advance the campaign to tackle climate change," EPA Pacific Southwest Regional Administrator Martha Guzman said in a statement.

California and local agencies will have the next two to three years to implement the grants for zero-emission trucks.

EXCHANGE RATES

Military rates		Commercial rates	
Euro costs (Dec. 13)	0.93	Bahrain (Dinar)	0.3771
British pound (Dec. 13)	\$1.24	Britain (Pound)	1.2734
Japanese yen (Dec. 13)	147.00	Canada (Dollar)	1.4163
South Korean won (Dec. 13)	1396.00	China (Yuan)	7.2679
		Denmark (Krone)	7.0899
		Egypt (Pound)	50.8401
		Euro	0.9506
		Hong Kong (Dollar)	7.7757
		Hungary (Forint)	388.80
		Israel (Shekel)	3.5680
		Japan (Yen)	152.25
		Kuwait (Dinar)	0.3075
		Norway (Krone)	11.0939
		Philippines (Peso)	58.24
		Poland (Zloty)	4.06
		Saudi Arabia (Riyal)	3.7579
		Singapore (Dollar)	1.3439
		South Korea (Won)	1430.62
Switzerland (Franc)	0.8873		
Thailand (Baht)	33.91		
Turkey (NewLira)	34.8699		

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

INTEREST RATES	
Prime rate	7.75
Interest Rates Discount rate	4.75
Federal funds market rate	4.58
3-month bill	4.37
30-year bond	4.48

WEATHER OUTLOOK

FRIDAY IN THE MIDDLE EAST



FRIDAY IN EUROPE



SATURDAY IN THE PACIFIC



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

TODAY IN STRIPES

- American Roundup 21
- Comics 22-23
- Crossword 22-23
- Faces 20
- Opinion 24
- Sports 25-32

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MILITARY

Hegseth visits Sen. Collins seeking vote

BY MARY CLARE JALONICK
AND MATT BROWN
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Pete Hegseth, President-elect Donald Trump's nominee to lead the Defense Department, said he had a "wonderful conversation" with Maine Sen. Susan Collins on Wednesday as he pushed to win enough votes for confirmation. He said he will not back down after allegations of excessive drinking and sexual misconduct.

Collins said after the hourlong meeting that she questioned Hegseth about the allegations amid reports of drinking and the revela-

tion that he made a settlement payment after being accused of a sexual assault that he denies. She said she had a "good, substantive" discussion with Hegseth and "covered a wide range of topics," including sexual assault in the military, Ukraine and NATO. But she said she would wait until a hearing, and notably a background check, to make a decision.

"I asked virtually every question under the sun," Collins told reporters as she left her office after the meeting. "I pressed him both on his position on military issues as well as the allegations against him, so I don't think there was any-

thing that we did not cover."

The meeting with Collins was closely watched as she is seen as more likely than most of her Republican Senate colleagues to vote against some of Trump's Cabinet picks. She and Alaska Sen. Lisa Murkowski, a fellow moderate Republican, did not shy from opposing Trump in his first term when they wanted to do so and sometimes supported President Joe Biden's nominees for the judicial and executive branches.

And Hegseth, an infantry combat veteran and former "Fox & Friends" weekend host, is working to gain as many votes as he can

as some senators have expressed concerns about his personal history and lack of management experience.

"I'm certainly not going to assume anything about where the senator stands," Hegseth said as he left Collins' office. "This is a process that we respect and appreciate. And we hope, in time, overall, when we get through that committee and to the floor that we can earn her support."

Hegseth met with Murkowski on Tuesday. He has also been meeting repeatedly with Iowa Sen. Joni Ernst, a military veteran who has said she is a survivor of

sexual assault and has spent time in the Senate working on improving how attacks are reported and prosecuted within the ranks. On Monday, Ernst said after a meeting with him that he had committed to selecting a senior official to prioritize those goals.

Republicans will have a 53-49 majority next year, meaning Trump cannot lose more than three votes on any of his nominees.

On Thursday, Hegseth plans to meet with a Democrat — Pennsylvania Sen. John Fetterman. Fetterman did not say whether he was considering supporting Hegseth or what he planned to discuss.

Christmas comes early for Pacific islanders courtesy of Santa 41

BY ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

EAURIPIK, Federated States of Micronesia — Inhabitants of this remote atoll rushed onto a beach Wednesday as a U.S. Air Force plane prepared to drop crates filled with much-needed supplies and some Christmas cheer.

The C-130J Super Hercules from Yokota Air Base, Japan — call sign Santa 41 — looped above the island several times before dropping four crates, decorated with drawings and holiday greetings, from an altitude of about 300 feet.

Green parachutes drifted the payload gently into the water just off the coast of Eauripik, an atoll about 475 miles south of Guam.

Santa 41, part of Yokota's 36th Airlift Squadron, made a second drop to another island, Ifalik, shortly after. The five-hour sortie delivered eight bundles to the two atolls, both part of the Caroline chain in the Federated States of Micronesia.

After each drop, the loadmasters — Senior Airman Juan Lucero, of Wahiawa, Hawaii, and Staff Sgt. Dario Dominguez, of Ruidoso, N.M. — stood on the cargo ramp to wave at the islanders as the atolls disappeared on the horizon.

Wednesday's sortie was just one of dozens this week, part of the Defense Department's longest-running humanitarian-aid mission, Operation Christmas Drop.

The bundles, each decorated by donors and volunteers, carried critical supplies such as food, water, diving and fishing gear, clothing and — in the spirit of Christmas — toys.

An annual event since 1952, Operation Christmas Drop has become a means of supplying the outlying islands and a way for airmen from the United States and partner nations to get real-world supply drop experience.

"It feels different from our usual work and training," Lucero, a loadmaster with the 36th Airlift Squadron, told Stars and Stripes after Wednesday's mission. "I get to see a result; I see the people and how much they appreciate what we do. It feels great."

While each island favors certain landing zones for the airdrops, those spots can change from year to year, adding another level of complexity for the operation's pilots.

Communication between the aircraft, coordinators at Andersen Air Force Base, Guam, and individual islands is critical, said Santa 41's commander, Capt. Alex Dillenbeck.

"We have to identify where they want the bundles," Dillenbeck, of Memphis, Tenn., said from the cockpit. "They might use anything to signal it — rafts, tarps, life vests — and they communicate with us with marine handheld radios."

All eight of Santa 41's bundles landed securely, he added.

For the aircraft's co-pilot and instructor, Maj. Zeb "Spades" Kimball, the sight of the apprecia-



PHOTOS BY ALEX WILSON/Stars and Stripes

Senior Airman Juan Lucero, left, and Staff Sgt. Dario Dominguez prepare to drop supplies to a remote island in the Federated States of Micronesia, on Wednesday. Their C-130J Super Hercules was called Santa 41 during the Operation Christmas Drop mission.



The commander of Santa 41, Air Force Capt. Alex Dillenbeck, confirms a successful Operation Christmas Drop.

tive islanders is what makes Operation Christmas Drop so special.

"It's been the same pretty much every time," Kimball, of Colorado Springs, Colo., said of his other sorties this week. "And that definitely doesn't get old — it kind of fills you up every single time."

This year's operation, which be-



Senior Airman Juan Lucero, a loadmaster with the 36th Airlift Squadron at Yokota Air Base, Japan, watches Operation Christmas Drop bundles drift to islanders.

gan Dec. 2 and concludes Dec. 16, delivered 220 bundles to 60 islands in Micronesia and Palau. Also participating this year are Australia, Canada, Japan and South Korea.

The operation ultimately deliv-

ers around 82,000 pounds of supplies to over 42,000 islanders while covering approximately 1.8 million square miles of airspace, according to a Dec. 10 news release from Yokota's 374th Airlift Wing.

Correction

A story in Thursday's edition of Stars and Stripes about potential mold at Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, should have said Sebille Manor houses senior enlisted airmen and field-grade officers.

MILITARY

Air Force Academy sued over admissions policies

BY SUSAN SVRLUGA
The Washington Post

A group that opposes the use of racial preferences in college admissions has sued the U.S. Air Force Academy and the Defense Department, continuing its drive to end the practice at all institutions of higher education in the wake of a landmark Supreme Court ruling last year.

The group, Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA), argues that the academy has no legal justification for its admissions policies.

The Air Force Academy “is one of the American military’s premier institutions and the most prestigious source of commissioned officers in the Air Force,” the group argues in its complaint, filed Tuesday in the U.S. District Court for the District of Colorado. “It is also one of the last remaining universities to expressly consider race as a factor in admissions.”

The lawsuit comes just days af-

ter a judge’s ruling allowing the U.S. Naval Academy to continue to use race-conscious admissions policies.

In that case in U.S. District Court in Baltimore, also brought by SFFA, Senior District Judge Richard D. Bennett held that the Naval Academy’s limited consideration of race “further the government’s compelling national security interests.”

The group has said it will file an appeal to an appellate court and, if necessary, the Supreme Court.

Over the past few decades, SFFA President Edward Blum said, “the Air Force Academy and our other military academies have strayed from their former color-blind, merit-based admissions policies and now focus on race and ethnicity — factors that do not contribute to the qualifications of applicants.” Blum argued that because the Supreme Court ruling last year “expressly forbids all institutions of

higher education from using race in admissions decisions, it must follow that the Air Force Academy must end their race-based policies as well.”

Spokespeople for the Air Force Academy and the Defense Department said Wednesday their organizations do not comment on pending litigation.

The Supreme Court rejected race-conscious affirmative action in college admissions this past year, ruling in cases brought by SFFA against Harvard and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. That ruling — which overturned decades of legal precedent — not only changed the way highly sought-after colleges consider applicants for admission but accelerated legal challenges to diversity programs at government agencies and private companies.

The decision in *Students for Fair Admissions v. President & Fellows of Harvard College* held that Har-



ANDREW HARNIK/AP

Cadets stand during the 2023 United States Air Force Academy Graduation Ceremony at Falcon Stadium in June 2023 at the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colo.

vard and UNC’s admissions programs violated the Constitution’s guarantee of equal protection.

But it included a notable exception for the country’s military academies, with a footnote that mentioned “the potentially distinct interests that military academies may present.”

For many years and over multiple administrations, Defense Department leaders have maintained that a racially diverse officer corps, one that reflects the fighting

force, is important to national security; a lack of diversity historically led to dangerous tensions, including race riots, that threatened military preparedness. And Solicitor General Elizabeth B. Prelogar had argued to justices in the Harvard case that it is not possible to achieve a diverse officer corps without affirmative action in the military academies.

SFFA quickly challenged that exception to the Supreme Court decision.

US, S. Korean airpower display will return over Osan

BY LUIS GARCIA
Stars and Stripes

OSAN AIR BASE, South Korea — After six long years, Air Power Days are returning to the home of the 7th Air Force and its U.S. fighter and attack squadrons.

The aerial performances last seen at Osan in September 2019 are scheduled again for May 10-11, along with static displays of U.S. and South Korean military hardware, the 51st Fighter Wing announced in a recent news release.

Among the expected highlights are performances by the Pacific Air Forces’ F-16 Viper Demonstration Team out of Misawa Air Base in northeastern Japan.

“We will give the audience an exhilarating display of the F-16’s capabilities,” Capt. Ethan Smith, the Viper Demo Team commander and pilot, said in a statement relayed by wing spokesman Maj. Kippun Sumner. “This is going to be a spectacular display of speed, power, and agility — just a glimpse into the full potential of this incredible multi-role fighter.”

Other featured aircraft include the F-16 Fighting Falcon, A-10 Thunderbolt II and U-2 Dragon Lady. The event will mark one of the final public displays of the A-10 in South Korea before its scheduled departure in October, according to the wing.

The event’s theme, “Respect the Past, Forge the Future,” pays

homage to the A-10, the 25th Fighter Squadron and the 25th Fighter Generation Squadron while celebrating the strength and longevity of the American and South Korean alliance, according to the release.

“Air shows at Osan Air Base are typically only held every 2-3 years. This is to balance the efforts that come with planning a large-scale public event like Osan Air Power Days with our mission and training requirements,” Sumner said in a follow-up email Wednesday. “There were COVID-19 restrictions in place during the past several years that also restricted the types of public events that we could hold.”

Planning such an event includes addressing logistics, transportation and security, Sumner said. The wing is working with local city officials and Korean National Police to ensure it is safe and accessible.

“We are hosting weekly meetings with all the responsible agencies to ensure a safe and enjoyable weekend for everyone that comes out to the air show,” he wrote.

Osan officials are focusing on accessibility and cultural inclusivity for the event, Sumner added. There will be bilingual announcements and translators available to assist visitors.

“The goal is for [Air Power Days] to be an event for both our on- and off-base audiences to en-



GREG NASH/U.S. Air Force

South Korea’s 53rd Demonstration Group, also known as the Black Eagles, perform on Air Power Day at Osan Air Base, South Korea, Sept. 21, 2019.

joy together,” he wrote.

The last Air Power Days featured performances by the South Korean air force Black Eagles and various U.S. aircraft, according to the release.

The two-day air show and open house will be free and open to the public, including the local South Korean community, Sumner wrote. All personnel will need a valid form of identification on them to enter the base.

There are no plans for pre-registration or identification checks for general off-base attendees, he added.



RAMON ADELAN/U.S. Air Force

An F-16 with Pacific Air Force’s Viper Demonstration Team performs during Air Power Day at Osan Air Base.

MILITARY

Outpaced: Ship gap could invite aggression, congressman alleges

FROM PAGE 1

tory, raising concerns about how the U.S. would respond and ensure victory in case of a conflict in the Indo-Pacific, where tensions are high in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea.

Krishnamoorthi warned that a weak military industrial base could invite aggression and argued that strengthening it is necessary to avoid war with China.

"History tells us we need a healthy defense industrial base now to deter aggression and make sure the world's dictators think again before dragging the U.S. and the world into yet another disastrous conflict," Krishnamoorthi said.

National security adviser Jake Sullivan called it a "generational project" to fix the problem after the "bottom fell out" of the American shipbuilding industry in the early 1980s.

"Part of it is we don't have the backbone of a healthy commercial shipbuilding base to rest our naval shipbuilding on top of," Sullivan said at the Aspen Security Forum in Washington. "And that's part of the fragility of what we're contending with and why this is going to be such a generational project to fix."

The challenge in shipbuilding has been "especially immense," stemming from the hollowing-out of the U.S. manufacturing base where its workforce shrank and suppliers left, Sullivan said.

And it is part of the broader problem of a weakened U.S. military industrial base, as manifested in the weeks after Russia invaded Ukraine, Sullivan said, when Kyiv in eight weeks "burned through a year's worth of U.S. 155-millimeter artillery production."

"Decades of underinvestments and consolidation had seriously eroded our defense industrial base, and there was no way around it," Sullivan said.

The head of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, Adm. Samuel Paparo, warned last month that the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East were eating away at critical U.S. weapons stockpiles and could hamper the military's ability to respond to China should a conflict arise.

He said providing or selling billions of dollars worth of air defenses to both Ukraine and Israel were hampering U.S. ability to respond to threats in the Indo-Pacific.

"It's now eating into stocks, and to say otherwise would be dishonest," he told an audience at the Brookings Institution in Washington on Nov. 19.

Several researchers at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies said China's rapid military buildup could allow the country to prevail over the U.S., especially in case of a prolonged conflict.

"China's massive shipbuilding industry would provide a strategic advantage in a war that stretches beyond a few weeks, allowing it to



ADAM FERRERO/U.S. Navy

The aircraft carrier John F. Kennedy is in dry dock while under construction at Huntington Ingalls Industries-Newport News Shipbuilding.

repair damaged vessels or construct replacements much faster than the United States," the researchers wrote in June.

Last week, the congressional panel heard suggestions from experts who said it would take time

to rebuild the defense industrial base, but for quicker fixes, the U.S. could innovate to make low-cost and autonomous systems and tap resources of its allies.

"We need to look at co-production of whether it's munitions in

Australia or shipbuilding in Korea," said William Greenwalt, a non-resident senior fellow at the Washington-based think tank American Enterprise Institute.

"We need to get numbers as fast as we can," he said.

House: Provision regarding transgender treatment sparks resistance

FROM PAGE 1

which sets policies for the Pentagon, but Democrats began withdrawing their endorsements earlier this week over the transgender provision.

The provision bars coverage of treatments "that could result in sterilization" for underage dependents who are suffering from gender dysphoria. An estimated 4,000 minor children of service members are receiving gender-affirming care.

Rep. Adam Smith of Washington, the top Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee, said he would oppose passage of the defense bill due to the provision, arguing it could be used to target access to puberty blockers and hormone treatment therapy.

He blamed House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., for forcing the provision into the defense bill in a move that he said upended congressional norms and politic-

ized a typically bipartisan process.

"The inclusion of this harmful provision puts the lives of children at risk and may force thousands of service members to make the choice of continuing their military service or leaving to ensure their child can get the health care they need," Smith said.

Johnson has defended the provision as a "critical and necessary step" to protect children from "radical gender ideology and experimental drugs." Other Republicans have also come out in favor of the measure.

"Our veterans and active-duty military struggle to get their own necessary medical costs covered, and Tricare was expected to foot the bill for gender-affirming abuse?" Rep. Nancy Mace, R-S.C., wrote on X. "This should have never even been on the table."

Rep. Austin Scott, R-Ga., on Monday lashed out at lawmakers

who boycotted the defense bill and said they were exaggerating the intended reach of the transgender care provision.

"We are saying that we are not going to allow a surgical procedure on [children] that could result in sterilization," he said. "These are permanent and irreversible procedures and they should not be allowed."

But Democrats succeeded in blocking other culture war provisions in the bill. Measures previously approved by the House to end the Pentagon's abortion travel policy, gut diversity, equity and inclusion offices and bar Tricare coverage of gender-transition procedures were all dropped.

The legislation retains a hiring freeze for diversity-related positions at the Defense Department and bars military academies from teaching critical race theory, an academic concept that argues racism is systematic.

It also maintains the registration process for Selective Service without expanding it to women and does not expand access to in vitro fertilization for service members and their families.

Quality-of-life issues are the focus of much of the legislation after the House Armed Services Committee convened a special panel earlier this year to find solutions for high living costs, substandard military housing, limited access to child care, long wait times for medical care and spousal unemployment.

The panel made 32 recommendations and 29 of them were included in the final authorization bill.

They include the large pay raise specifically for junior enlisted service members, expanded access to the basic needs allowance, investments in new barracks and family housing, improved pay for child care staff and direct access

to specialty medical providers without referrals.

The bill also allows military spouses to transfer professional licenses between states, authorizes the construction of more Defense Department schools and child care centers, and makes it easier for government service employees of the military to stay in their overseas jobs past a five-year term limit.

Lawmakers on Wednesday said they will continue to seek further improvements to troop morale and quality of life but the approved defense bill marked a significant leap forward.

"This is the most consequential and important piece of legislation of the entire 118th Congress," said Rep. Chrissy Houlahan, D-Pa. "With this bill in law, our nation will be more secure, our servicemen and women more resolved to face the global challenges of tomorrow."

MILITARY

NATO chief urges boost in spending

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

The top official in the U.S.-led NATO alliance issued a direct appeal Thursday to residents of countries in the bloc, asking them to demand big increases in defense spending in the face of Russia's aggression.

Secretary-General Mark Rutte's comments amount to the most forceful and direct call from a NATO leader in years to ramp up spending on the military. They come as allies prepare for President-elect Donald Trump's return to the White House.

Trump has blasted NATO repeatedly over the years for falling short on defense spending and has made increased expenditures the focal point of his approach to the bloc.

"Citizens living in NATO countries, especially in Europe and Canada, it's you I'm talking to. It's your support I need," Rutte said, adding that the security situation is "undoubtedly the worst" in his lifetime.



Rutte

While war with Russia is not imminent, the Kremlin's military build-up and transition to a wartime economy have Russia outpacing allies in Europe and putting NATO at risk, Rutte added.

"Danger is moving towards us at full speed," he said in his speech in Brussels. "We must not look the other way. We must face it."

Allies need to get back to a Cold War mentality of spending more than 3% of gross domestic product on defense, he said. A level of 2% of GDP has been the alliance's long-standing benchmark.

But many member states have regularly missed even the 2% threshold. In 2014, the number that hit the target was just three. Currently, about 20 of the bloc's 32 members spend at least that much.

Sweden and Finland joined NATO in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. There have been more than 1 million casualties collectively in a war that is a day's drive from alliance headquarters in Brussels, Rutte said.

"How many more wake-up calls do we need?" he said.

The public's views on increasing defense spending vary across the alliance, with members closer to Russian territory the most bullish on ramping up.

Poland has said it will spend 5% of GDP on defense in the coming year. And the Baltic states also are top spenders per capita, along with the United States. But many western members of the alliance fall short, including Italy, Spain and Portugal.

Germany finally hit the 2% mark this year after a long history of paltry defense spending. It's unclear whether Berlin is prepared to sustain that level or go higher. However, there are signs of domestic public support for pushing beyond the benchmark.

In November, a survey in Germany found that 65% of respon-

dents support an expenditure of at least 3% of GDP on defense.

Meanwhile, Russia will spend about 8% of GDP on its military this year, enabling it to produce larger numbers of tanks, armored vehicles and ammunition.

"What Russia lacks in quality, it makes up for in quantity," Rutte said. "With the help of China, Iran and North Korea, this all points in one clear direction: Russia is preparing for long-term confrontation with Ukraine and with us."

While Europe's defense industrial base has been hollowed out, Russian arms factories are churning out war equipment around the clock, he said.

Rutte urged allies in Europe to press banks and pension funds to invest in defense industries, something they don't do now.

Parsons takes over Navy on Okinawa

By BRIAN McELHINEY
Stars and Stripes

CAMP SHIELDS, Okinawa — A flight officer with several previous deployments to Okinawa took charge Thursday of Navy operations on the island, a unique command that encompasses naval aviators and ocean-going sailors.

Capt. Joseph Parsons relieved Capt. Patrick Dziekan, an E-2 Hawkeye pilot, as commander of Fleet Activities Okinawa, a collection of personnel and installations, including White Beach Naval Facility, during a ceremony at the Crow's Nest Club on Camp Shields.

About 230 sailors, family, friends and guests from across the U.S. and Japanese militaries on island attended the ceremony.

Rear Adm. Ian Johnson, commander of U.S. Naval Forces Japan and Navy Region Japan, praised Dziekan, who took charge in December 2021.

"Your team supported uninterrupted fleet operations across multiple domains, executed hundreds of vessel movements and sorties while ensuring seamless logistics and operational readiness," Johnson said at the ceremony.

He specifically cited the command's support of exercises Keen Sword in November and Citadel Pacific in July. It also received Navy Installations Command's excellence award in 2023, the first given to an overseas installation,



BRIAN McELHINEY/Stars and Stripes

Capt. Joseph Parsons is pinned with the command ashore insignia Thursday by his wife, Rosa Parsons, alongside their son, also named Joseph Parsons, at Camp Shields, Okinawa.

Johnson said.

Dziekan called Parsons "the right person for this job" during his brief remarks right before relinquishing command.

Okinawa's Navy command, headquartered at Kadena Air Base, traces its roots on the island to 1951, according to its website. It also has a presence on four other installations on Okinawa, including White Beach, the staging area for Marines headed out to sea.

Task Force 76 at White Beach is its primary tenant command, with multiple missions, including expeditionary and amphibious warfare and humanitarian relief efforts.

On the aviation side, it maintains two UC-12F Huron aircraft to support logistics flights throughout the Indo-Pacific, and its shore basing division supports deployed aviation units, according to the command's website.

Parsons is the rare nonpilot to take command of Navy operations on Okinawa. He told Stars and Stripes he will draw on his experience as a flight officer on P-8 Poseidon and P-3 Orion surveillance

aircraft in charge of large crews to lead an organization that encompasses 32 tenant commands and thousands of sailors and civilians.

"On a P-3 we had a crew of about 11; on a P-8 it's about nine for a standard mission," he said Tuesday at Navy headquarters on Kadena. "Every one of those positions is critical to the mission in its own way."

Parsons said he looks forward to working with the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force and teased bilateral training in late February on a "simulated aircraft mishap."

He most recently served as Maritime Operations Center director and deputy chief of staff for Theater Anti-Submarine Warfare at Submarine Group 7, Task Force 74 and Task Force 54 at Yokosuka Naval Base, south of Tokyo.

A native of Dryden, N.Y., Parsons was designated a naval flight officer in 2004, according to his official Navy biography. He served his first deployment on Okinawa in 2005, he said.

Dziekan is headed to Joint Region Marianas on Guam to serve as chief of staff.

Army slashes payouts in credentialing program as it boosts tuition assistance

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

The Army this week announced sharp cuts to a program that gives financial assistance to soldiers obtaining industry credentials while giving a boost to its tuition assistance initiative.

The new guidance, issued Tuesday, includes an increase of \$500 and two semester hours for tuition assistance but halves the annual cap for the credentialing assistance program.

Launched in 2020, the credentialing program allows troops to pursue education in hundreds of fields ranging from private pilot licenses for single-engine aircraft to security, personal training and technical trades.

The decrease in support for credentialing programs from a maximum cap of \$4,000 to \$2,000 annually was prompted by concerns that it was becoming financially unsustainable, the Army said in a statement Tuesday.

"When you have a program increase exponentially over a four-year period, you are eventually going to blow your budget to the point where it won't be available to anyone," Christine Traugott, a policy manager at the Army's office for manpower and reserve affairs, said in the statement.

The cost of the credentialing program has nearly doubled every year, Traugott said.

The average cost of a credential is \$1,700 and soldiers take an

average of 1.5 credentials a year, according to the Army.

Regarding tuition assistance, the annual cap goes from \$4,000 to \$4,500 and increases the annually allowed semester hours from 16 to 18.

Soldiers who took to social media to comment on the changes said the reduction could make it more difficult to get some sought-after credits, such as those needed by mechanics seeking Automotive Service Excellence certificates.

Other critics questioned whether scaling the popular program back would hurt recruitment and retention efforts inside the Army.

Next year, the Army will formalize the changes with a new regulation, which will exclude commissioned officers from using credentialing assistance and require command approval for both tuition and credentialing assistance requests.

In addition, soldiers will be limited to one credential a year and a maximum of three in 10 years. They will have to take the exam associated with the credential or recoup the cost of the course. Aviation credentials will max out at \$1,000 per year for all Army components.

The changes will bring the Army into closer alignment with the other services and preserve the benefits for soldiers who need them the most, Traugott said.

The average cost of a credential is \$1,700 and soldiers take an average of 1.5 credentials a year.

NATION



ALEX BRANDON / AP

President-elect Donald Trump speaks during a Time magazine Person of the Year event at the New York Stock Exchange, Thursday.

President-elect is named Time's Person of the Year

BY MICHELLE L. PRICE
AND DAVID BAUDER
Associated Press

NEW YORK — President-elect Donald Trump rang the opening bell Thursday at the New York Stock Exchange after being recognized for the second time by Time magazine as its person of the year.

The honors for the businessman-turned-politician are a measure of Trump's remarkable comeback from an ostracized former president who refused to accept his election loss four years ago to a president-elect who won the White House decisively in November.

Before he rang the opening bell

at 9:30 a.m., a first for him, Trump spoke at the exchange and called it "a tremendous honor."

"Time Magazine, getting this honor for the second time, I think it like it better this time actually," he said.

He talked up some of the people he has named to his incoming administration, including Treasury pick Secretary Scott Bessent, and some of his announced policies, including a promise this week that the federal government will issue expedited permits, including environmental approvals, for projects and construction worth more than \$1 billion.

Sam Jacobs, Time's editor in

chief, announced on NBC's "Today" show that Trump was Time's 2024 Person of the Year. Jacobs said Trump was someone who "for better or for worse, had the most influence on the news in 2024."

"This is someone who made an historic comeback, who reshaped the American presidency and who's reordering American politics," Jacobs said. "It's hard to argue with the fact that the person who's moving into the Oval Office is the most influential person in news."

Trump was also Time's Person of the Year in 2016, when he was first elected to the White House.

Trump invites Xi to inauguration

Associated Press

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — President-elect Donald Trump has invited Chinese President Xi Jinping to attend his inauguration next month — extending a diplomatic olive branch even as Trump threatens to levy massive tariffs on Chinese goods.

Trump's incoming press secretary, Karoline Leavitt, confirmed on Thursday that Trump invited Xi, but said it was "to be determined" if the leader of the United States' most significant economic and military competitor would attend.

"This is an example of President Trump creating an open dialogue with leaders of countries that are not just our allies, but our adversaries and our competitors too," Leavitt said in an appearance on Fox News.

"We saw this in his first term. ... He is willing to talk to anyone and he will always put America's interest first."

CBS News first reported the invitation to Xi.

Leavitt said that other foreign leaders have also been invited, but did not provide any details.

Every country's chief of mission to the United States will also be invited, according to a Trump Inaugural Committee official who was not authorized to comment publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity.

The invitation comes as Trump has vowed to enact massive tariffs on Canada, Mexico and China to get those countries to do more to reduce illegal immigration and the flow of illegal drugs such as fentanyl into the United States.

He has said that, on his first day

in office in January, he would impose 25% tariffs on all goods imported from Mexico and Canada and that China could be hit with even higher tariffs.

China produces precursor chemicals used in the production of fentanyl, but Beijing has stepped up efforts over the last year to crack down on the export of the chemicals.

Xi during a meeting with President Joe Biden last month in Beijing urged the United States not to start a trade war.

"Make the wise choice," Xi cautioned. "Keep exploring the right way for two major countries to get along well with each other."

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has also pushed back on Trump's threats, warning such a tariffs move would be perilous for the U.S. economy as well.

FBI director to resign before inauguration day

BY ERIC TUCKER
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — FBI Director Christopher Wray told bureau workers Wednesday that he plans to resign at the end of President Joe Biden's term in January, an announcement that came a week and a half after President-elect Donald Trump said he would nominate loyalist Kash Patel for the job.

Wray said at a town hall meeting that he would be stepping down "after weeks of careful thought," roughly three years short of the completion of a 10-year term during which he tried to keep the FBI out of politics even as the bureau found itself entangled in a string of explosive investigations, including two that led to separate indictments of Trump last year as well as inquiries into Biden and his son.

"My goal is to keep the focus on our mission — the indispensable work you're doing on behalf of the American people every day," Wray told agency employees. "In my view, this is the best way to avoid dragging the bureau deeper into the fray, while reinforcing the values and principles that are so important to how we do our work."

The intended resignation was not unexpected considering that Trump had settled on Patel to be director and had repeatedly aired his ire at Wray, whom he appointed during his first term. But his departure is nonetheless a reflection of how Trump's norm-breaking style has reshaped Washington, with the president-elect yet again flouting tradition by moving to replace an FBI director well before his term was up and Wray resigning to avert a collision with the incoming administration.

"It should go without saying, but I'll say it anyway — this is not easy for me," Wray said. "I love this place, I love our mission, and I love our people — but my focus is, and always has been, on us and doing what's right for the FBI."

Wray received a standing ovation following his remarks before a standing-room-only crowd at FBI headquarters and some in the audience cried, according to an FBI official who was not authorized to discuss the private gather-

"In my view, this is the best way to avoid dragging the bureau deeper into the fray."

FBI Director Christopher Wray

ing by name and spoke on condition of anonymity to The Associated Press.

Trump applauded the news on social media.

If confirmed by the Senate, Patel would herald a radical leadership transformation at the nation's premier federal law enforcement agency. He has advocated shutting down the FBI's Washington headquarters and called for ridding the federal government of "conspirators," raising alarms that he might seek to wield the FBI's significant investigative powers as an instrument of retribution against Trump's perceived enemies.

Patel said Wednesday that he was looking forward to "a smooth transition. I will be ready to serve the American people on day one."

It's extremely rare for FBI directors to be ousted from their jobs before the completion of their 10-year terms, a length meant to insulate the agency from the political influence of changing administrations. But Trump has done it twice, placing Wray in the job in 2017 after firing Director James Comey amid an investigation into ties between Russia and the Republican president's campaign.

Despite having appointed Wray, Trump had telegraphed his anger with the FBI director on multiple occasions throughout the years, including as recently as the past week.

In an interview with NBC's "Meet the Press" that aired Sunday, Trump said, "I can't say I'm thrilled with him. He invaded my home," a reference to the FBI's 2022 search of Trump's Florida property, Mar-a-Lago, for classified documents from Trump's first term as president.

That search, and the recovery of boxes of sensitive government records, paved the way for one of two federal indictments against Trump. The case, and another one charging him with plotting to overturn the 2020 election, have both been dismissed by the Justice Department special counsel that brought them in light of Trump's November victory.



Wray

NATION

Biden commutes 1,500 sentences and pardons 39

By COLLEEN LONG
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden is commuting the sentences of roughly 1,500 people who were released from prison and placed on home confinement during the coronavirus pandemic and is pardoning 39 Americans convicted of nonviolent crimes. It's the largest single-day act of clemency in modern history.

The commutations announced Thursday are for people who have served out home confinement sentences for at least one year after they were released. Prisons were uniquely bad for spreading the virus and some inmates were released in part to stop the spread. At one point, 1 in 5 prisoners had COVID-19, according to a tally kept by The Associated Press.

Biden said he would be taking more steps in the weeks ahead and would continue to review clemency petitions. The second largest single-day act of clemency was by Barack Obama, with 330, shortly before leaving office in 2017.

"America was built on the promise of possibility and second chances," Biden said in a state-

ment. "As president, I have the great privilege of extending mercy to people who have demonstrated remorse and rehabilitation, restoring opportunity for Americans to participate in daily life and contribute to their communities, and taking steps to remove sentencing disparities for non-violent offenders, especially those convicted of drug offenses."

The clemency follows a broad pardon for his son Hunter, who was prosecuted for gun and tax crimes. Biden is under pressure from advocacy groups to pardon broad swaths of people, including those on federal death row, before the Trump administration takes over in January.

He's also weighing whether to issue preemptive pardons to those who investigated Trump's effort to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election and are facing possible retribution when he takes office.

Clemency is the term for the power the president has to pardon, in which a person is relieved of guilt and punishment, or to commute a sentence, which reduces or eliminates the punishment but



SUSAN WALSH / AP

President Joe Biden on Thursday made the largest single-day act of clemency in the U.S. when he commuted sentences of about 1,500 people and pardoned 39 American convicted of nonviolent crimes.

doesn't exonerate the wrongdoing. It's customary for a president to grant mercy at the end of his term, using the power of the office to wipe away records or end prison terms.

Those pardoned Thursday had been convicted of nonviolent crimes such as drug offenses and turned their lives around, White House lawyers said.

They include a woman who led emergency response teams during natural disasters; a church deacon who has worked as an addiction counselor and youth counselor; a doctoral student in molecular biosciences; and a decorated military veteran.

The president had previously issued 122 commutations and 21 other pardons. He's also broadly pardoned those convicted of use and simple possession of marijuana

on federal lands and in the District of Columbia, and pardoned former U.S. service members convicted of violating a now-repealed military ban on consensual gay sex.

Rep. Jim McGovern, D-Mass., and 34 other lawmakers are urging the president to pardon environmental and human rights lawyer Steven Donziger, who was imprisoned or under house arrest for three years because of a contempt of court charge related to his work representing Indigenous farmers in a lawsuit against Chevron.

Others are advocating for Biden to commute the sentences of federal death row prisoners. His attorney general, Merrick Garland, paused federal executions. Biden had said on the campaign trail in 2020 that he wanted to end the death penalty but he never did.

Wholesale inflation up in November

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Wholesale costs in the United States picked up sharply last month, signaling that price pressures are still evident in the economy even though inflation has tumbled from the peak levels it hit more than two years ago.

The Labor Department reported Thursday that its producer price index — which tracks inflation before it reaches consumers — rose 0.4% last month from October, up from 0.3% the month before. Measured from 12 months earlier, wholesale prices climbed 3% in November, the sharpest year-over-year rise since February 2023.

Excluding volatile food and energy prices, so-called core producer prices rose 0.2% from October and 3.4% from November 2023.

Higher food prices pushed up the November wholesale inflation reading, which came in hotter than economists had expected. Surging prices of fruits, vegetables and eggs drove wholesale food costs up 3.1% from October. They had been unchanged the month before.

The wholesale price report comes a day after the government reported that consumer prices rose 2.7% in November from a year earlier, up from an annual gain of 2.6% in October.



BRIAN GLENN, TMX/AP

Multiple drones are seen over Bernardsville, N.J., last week. The state has reported dozens of nighttime drone flights since last month.

Senator: Shoot down drones

Associated Press

A U.S. senator has called for mysterious drones spotted flying over sensitive areas in New Jersey and other parts of the Mid-Atlantic region to be "shot down, if necessary," as it remains unclear who owns them.

"We should be doing some very urgent intelligence analysis and take them out of the skies, especially if they're flying over airports or military bases," Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., said Thursday as concerns about the drones spread across Capitol Hill.

People in the New York region are also concerned that the drones may be sharing airspace with commercial airlines, he said.

"The Biden administration ought to be acting more aggressively against these drones that have been reported. If only to tell the American people who owns them, who's flying them, what they are. The lack of information is absolutely unacceptable," Blumenthal said.

Gov. Phil Murphy and law enforcement officials have stressed

that they don't appear to threaten public safety. The FBI has asked residents to share any videos, photos or other information they may have.

The number of sightings has increased in recent days, though officials say many of the objects seen may have been planes rather than drones. It's also possible that a single drone has been reported more than once.

The worry stems partly from the flying objects initially being spotted near the Picatinny Arsenal, a U.S. military research and manufacturing facility; and over President-elect Donald Trump's golf course in Bedminster.

In a post on the social media platform X, Assemblywoman Dawn Fantasia described the drones as up to 6 feet in diameter and sometimes traveling with their lights switched off.

Drones are legal in New Jersey for recreational and commercial use but are subject to local and Federal Aviation Administration regulations and flight restrictions. Operators must be FAA certified.

Most, but not all, of the drones spotted in New Jersey were larger than those typically used by hobbyists.

Sen. Cory Booker, D-N.J., said he was frustrated by the lack of transparency, saying it could help spread fear or misinformation.

"We should know what's going on over our skies," he said Thursday.

Fantasia, a Morris County Republican, was among lawmakers who met with state police and Homeland Security officials to discuss the spate of sightings that range from the New York City area through New Jersey and westward into parts of Pennsylvania.

Two Republican Jersey Shore-area congressmen, U.S. Reps. Chris Smith and Jeff Van Drew, have also called on the military to shoot down the drones. Smith said a Coast Guard commanding officer briefed him on an incident over the weekend in which a dozen drones followed a motorized Coast Guard lifeboat "in close pursuit" near Barnegat Light and Island Beach State Park.

NATION

Weather to help in California blaze battle

Associated Press

MALIBU, Calif. — Cooler temperatures, calmer winds and a chance of rainfall in Southern California this week are forecast to help firefighters as they battle a wind-driven blaze in steep, rugged terrain that's driven thousands, including celebrities, from their homes in Malibu.

The weather improved so much Wednesday that meteorologists said all red flag warnings, which indicate conditions for high fire danger and the notorious Santa Ana winds, were discontinued. The conditions allowed firefighters to have "a lot of success" despite the nearly inaccessible terrain, CalFire Assistant Chief Dusty Martin said.

Still, some 20,000 residents remained under evacuation orders and warnings Wednesday evening from the blaze, dubbed the Franklin Fire, which was only 7% contained over 6 square miles.

It's unclear how the blaze started. Officials said nine structures had been destroyed and at least six others had been damaged, though crews had only surveyed about 25% of the affected area, said Deputy Chief Albert Yanagisawa of the Los Angeles County Fire Department.

Much of the devastation occurred in Malibu, a community of about 10,000 people on the western edge of Los Angeles known for its stunning bluffs and Zuma Beach, which features in many Hollywood films.

Flames burned near horse farms, celebrities' seaside mansions, and Pepperdine University, where students were forced to



DAMIAN DOVARGANES/AP

A resident sifts through their property after the Franklin Fire swept through on Wednesday in Malibu, Calif.

shelter in place on campus for a second night Tuesday.

Faculty members are determining how best to complete the semester, which ends at Pepperdine this week. Final exams were postponed or canceled, depending on the class, university spokesperson Michael Friel said. An early analysis showed little to no damage to structures on campus, the university said.

Lonnie Vidaurri's four-bedroom home in the Malibu Knolls neighborhood is one of those destroyed. After evacuating to a hotel in Santa Monica with his wife and two young daughters, a neighbor

called to tell Vidaurri that firefighters would need to break into his house.

"It's pretty torched all around," Vidaurri said. He expects that the family's pet bunnies did not survive the fire, and that they lost most of their things. "My girls cried, obviously, but it could have been worse."

Mimi Teller, a Red Cross spokesperson who worked in the Pacific Palisades neighborhood, said many people arrived in their pajamas and were "definitely in shock."

"Nobody even had a backpack, it was, 'Get out now,'" Teller said.

"One lady didn't even have a leash for her dog, she just scooped them up."

Shawn Smith said he was asleep early Tuesday when someone knocked on his RV at 3 a.m. to wake him up to evacuate the Malibu RV Park.

"You could see the fires rolling in, in over the canyon," he said. "It was like 'Holy crap, this is real.'"

He returned Wednesday to find that the RV park had been saved — firefighters stopped the flames just before they entered the area.

"We got lucky," he said.

Dick Van Dyke, one of many celebrities with homes in Malibu,

said in a Facebook post that he and his wife, Arlene Silver, evacuated as the fire swept in. And Cher evacuated from her Malibu home when ordered and is staying at a hotel, her publicist, Liz Rosenberg, said Tuesday.

The fire erupted shortly before 11 p.m. Monday and swiftly moved south, jumping over the famous Pacific Coast Highway and extending all the way to the ocean. It was propelled by Santa Ana winds, with gusts that reached 40 mph. Santa Anas are notorious seasonal winds that blow dry air from the interior toward the coast, pushing back moist ocean breezes.

Alec Gellis stayed behind Monday night to save his home in Malibu's Serra Retreat neighborhood from the flames. He used pumps in the home's swimming pool to help spray water over the house and surrounding vegetation, turning the lush area "into a rainforest."

Gellis said there were flames within 5 feet of the home on all sides. "The whole canyon was completely lit up."

Utilities preemptively shut off power to tens of thousands of homes and businesses, starting Monday night, to mitigate the impacts of the Santa Ana winds, whose strong gusts can damage electrical equipment and spark wildfires.

As of Wednesday afternoon, electricity was still out for roughly 600 Southern California Edison customers, and the majority of those were in Los Angeles County, said utility spokesperson Gabriela Ornelas.

"We have been making significant progress," she said.

East Coast storm brings strong winds along with deluge of rain

Associated Press

PORTLAND, Maine — Colder weather began to return Thursday after a storm that swept up the East Coast delivered a blow to New England, packing powerful gusts that knocked out power along with a deluge of rain and warming temperatures that washed away snow and dampened ski resorts.

An atmospheric river transported moisture northward from the tropics and brought heavy rain Wednesday.

The city of Portland, Maine, got 2.33 inches of rain Wednesday, breaking a record of 2.01 inches for the date set in 1887, the National Weather Service said.

Utility workers were deployed to handle power outages after winds peaked Wednesday night into Thursday. Nearly 90,000 customers in Maine had lost power as of Thursday morning, according to

poweroutage.us.

A deepening low pressure system was responsible for winds that lashed the region, said Derek Schroeter, a forecaster with the National Weather Service. Some areas in Maine had wind gusts of over 50 mph.

Forecasters were concerned about bombogenesis, or a "bomb cyclone," marked by a rapid intensification over a 24-hour period.

"Is that what they're calling it?" said Jen Roberts, co-owner of Onion River Outdoors sporting goods store in Montpelier, Vt. She lamented that a five-day stretch of snowfall that lured ski customers into the store was being washed away, underscoring the region's fickle weather. "But you know, this is New England. We know this is what happens."

Ski resort operators called it bad luck as the holidays approach.

"We don't say the 'r-word' around here. It's a forbidden word," said Jamie Cobbett, marketing director at Waterville Valley Resort in New Hampshire, which was pelted by rain on Wednesday. "We're getting some moist wet weather today. We'll put the mountain back together."

Skier Marcus Caston was waterlogged but shrugged it off. "The conditions are actually pretty good. The rain is making the snow nice and soft. It's super fun," he said while skiing at Vermont's Sugarbush.

More seasonal low temperatures suitable for snowmaking were returning Thursday.

New England wasn't the only region experiencing wild weather. Heavy lake-effect snow was expected through Thursday in parts of Michigan, along the Lake Michigan shoreline, and dangerous cold



CHARLES REX ARBOGAST/AP

A man carries blankets as an Arctic blast brings single-digit temperatures with wind chills below zero on Thursday in Chicago.

enveloped parts of the Upper Midwest. In New York, Gov. Kathy Hochul on Wednesday declared a state of emergency in several counties in anticipation of heavy snowfall expected off of Lake Erie and Lake Ontario into Thursday.

But New England's weather

brought the biggest variety, with the storm bringing a little bit of everything. It started early Wednesday with freezing rain. Then came a deluge of regular rain and warming temperatures — topping 50 degrees Fahrenheit in Portland, for example.

NATION

Descendant a voice for village invaded in WWII

Chief's kin seeks more from Japan for residents of island in Alaska

By MARK THIESSEN
AND MARI YAMAGUCHI
Associated Press

ANCHORAGE, Alaska — Helena Pagano's great-grandfather was the last Alaska Native chief of a remote island in the Bering Sea, closer to Russia than North America. He died starving as a prisoner of war after Japanese troops invaded during World War II, wresting the few dozen residents from their village, never to return.

Pagano has long believed Japan should pay more restitution for what its soldiers did to her great-grandfather and the other residents of Attu Island.

But her demand was sparked anew this summer by her first visit to the island. She went alongside Japanese officials who, as part of a redoubled effort to recover the remains of World War II soldiers killed abroad, unearthed the bones of two people from the tundra.

The Attuans "lost their homeland, they lost their family members," Pagano said. "This story was never told, and the Japanese have never really helped us in that regard."

Attu Island is the most westerly of Alaska's Aleutian chain. It was one of the few U.S. territories, including Guam, the Philippines and the nearby island of Kiska, to be captured during the war.

Japanese landed on Attu on June 7, 1942, killing the radio operator. The residents were kept in their homes for three months, then taken to Japan.

U.S. forces waged a bloody campaign amid hurricane-force winds, rain and dense fog in 1943 to retake Attu Island in what became known as the war's "forgotten battle." More than 2,500 Japanese soldiers died in combat or by suicide, and American forces lost about 550 soldiers.

Of the 41 residents interned on Japan's Hokkaido Island, 22 died from malnutrition, starvation, tuberculosis or other ailments over the next two-plus years, including Pagano's great-grandfather, Mike Hodikoff, the last chief. Hodikoff and his son both died in 1945, suffering from food poisoning after being reduced to scrounging through rotting garbage for sustenance.

After the war, surviving Attuans were not allowed to return to the island because the U.S. military said it would be too expensive to rebuild. Most were sent to Atka



MARK THIESSEN/AP

Helena Pagano, the great-granddaughter of the last chief of Alaska's Attu Island, in August was likely the first Attuan to spend a night on the island since the residents were forcibly removed 82 years ago.



U.S. ARMY/AP

A U.S. squad closes in on Japanese holdouts entrenched in dugouts during World War II on Attu Island in June 1943.



LISA HUPP, U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE/AP

An artillery monument sits above Massacre Bay on Attu Island.

Island, about 200 miles away. The last surviving Attu residents that were held in captivity died last year.

In 1951, six years after the end of the war, Japan did offer the Attuans who survived about \$4,000 a year — more than the average U.S. annual salary at the time — for three years, Pagano said. Nearly all accepted, but her grandmother refused, suggesting the treatment the POWs endured was too awful to be compensated with money.

The Japanese never compen-

sated the families for the deaths of prisoners or for the loss of land and damage to Attuan culture and language, said Pagano, who runs Atux Forever, a nonprofit devoted to Attuan culture. The historical trauma still weighs on the 300 or so Attuan descendants remaining in the U.S., she said.

Besides restitution, she'd like to see the Japanese government invest in a cultural center for Attuans somewhere in mainland Alaska and to work with the U.S. government on an environmental

cleanup of Attu Island, including the removal of old anti-aircraft guns and steel planking that was used for temporary airstrips, along with a peace memorial she said Japan erected there without the input of Attuans or U.S. veterans who served in the battle.

Officials at Japan's Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry and the Foreign Ministry said they have not received requests for additional restitution from Attuans.

There have been compensation demands for brutality against POWs, wartime Korean forced laborers and "comfort women" from across Asia who were forced into prostitution for Japanese soldiers. But the Japanese government has insisted that all compensation issues were settled under a 1951 treaty in San Francisco, whose signatory members had waived their rights, or other treaties, said Yoshitaka Sato, an official at the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry. Japan had set up funds for the women in 1995 and 2015 as exceptions.

Pagano says the 1951 treaty would not bar additional restitution.

The island is part of the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge. In August, Pagano made her first trip to Attu, on a ship operated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which manages the refuge.

She said she didn't know ahead of time that the Japanese officials would be exhuming any remains, and she considered it disrespectful, saying the bones could have been those of Attu residents or U.S. soldiers.

Jeff Williams, deputy manager of the refuge, said the exhumation plans weren't approved until just before the trip.

The former Attu village site, where the bones were unearthed, is owned by the Aleut Corp. — one

of several regional, for-profit corporations set up to benefit Alaska Natives.

In an email, spokesperson Kate Gilling said the Aleut Corp. "recognizes the significant historical trauma endured by the Attuan people during and after World War II" and that it was aware of Atux Forever's call for reparations.

"We believe greater partnership between all entities in the Aleutian and Pribilof Island region will help advance solutions that are comprehensive and inclusive," she said.

As war veterans and their relatives age, the Japanese government has faced growing calls to speed the recovery of remains and has done so, including more use of DNA testing. Of about 2.4 million Japanese troops who died in the war outside Japan, the remains of a little more than half have been recovered.

Japan conducted its first reclamation of remains on Attu in 1953 and recovered those of about 320 Japanese soldiers, which were taken to Japan and stored at the Chidorigafuchi National Cemetery. The remains of the others on Attu are unaccounted for.

Sato, the Japanese government official, said the U.S. government controls what areas Japan can survey for remains and requires Japan to take necessary environmental protection measures.

Japanese efforts to recover remains on Attu had long been on hold, largely due to U.S. environmental concerns, Sato said. In 2009, the U.S. government required environmental assessment that led to further delay of more than a decade.

Prior to the August visit to Attu, the U.S. proposed a survey without digging, but later allowed shoveling inside of a small piece of land, Sato said. Under the supervision of U.S. officials, the remains of two suspected Japanese soldiers were unearthed.

The remains were sent to Anchorage for temporary storage pending a preliminary evaluation by Japanese experts to be dispatched by the end of March. If their analysis determines the remains are very likely Japanese, samples will be sent to Japan for DNA testing, Sato said.

During the August visit, Pagano spent two days on the island, collecting water samples from a creek to check for lingering environmental contamination.

While others returned to the ship to sleep at night, she camped out — likely the first Attuan to spend a night on the island since the residents were forcibly removed 82 years ago.

"I did feel really calm and peaceful and complete as a human being," Pagano said.

WORLD

Yoon defends martial law amid continued impeachment calls

By DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol on Thursday defended his failed attempt 10 days ago to impose martial law, just as a poll shows most of his country's citizens favor his impeachment.

Yoon declared martial law on Dec. 3, he said in a televised speech Thursday, to "protect the nation" from the main opposition Democratic Party, a group he called "a monster that destroys the constitutional order of free democracy."

Yoon survived an impeachment vote Saturday when members of his People Power Party, the ruling conservatives, boycotted a parliamentary vote. Another vote is scheduled this coming Saturday, and the party chair voiced his support Thursday for removing Yoon

from office.

Nearly 80% of respondents surveyed Tuesday said they agreed with impeaching Yoon while 20% said they were against removing him from office, according to a poll by the Seoul-based Embrain Public polling agency for South Korean media outlet News1. The results were released Thursday.

The poll consisted of 1,005 South Korean adults and had a margin of error of 3.1%, according to the agency's filings with the National Election Survey Deliberation Commission.

Nearly 70% said Yoon should be immediately arrested and investigated, 13% said a potential arrest should come after an investigation and 10% said an investigation is unnecessary, the results said.

Only 13% of respondents said they believed Yoon should complete his five-year term that began

May 10, 2022. Fifty-seven percent said the National Assembly ought to pursue impeachment charges against the president and 20% said he should resign on his own accord.

Yoon declared martial law citing a growing number of political scandals and the Democratic Party's efforts to impeach his government appointees.

National Assembly lawmakers opposed to the declaration immediately went to parliament to overrule it as special forces soldiers stormed the building to block their progress.

Enough lawmakers successfully convened and voted in favor of ending Yoon's declaration after six hours.

The incident has spurred calls for his impeachment, waves of resignations from government officials and suspensions of high-



SOUTH KOREAN PRESIDENTIAL OFFICE

South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol gives a televised speech at the presidential office in Seoul, South Korea, on Thursday.

ranking military officers.

People Power Party leader Han Dong-hoon said he would back the impeachment effort after listening to the president's speech Thursday.

Yoon must be suspended "through impeachment" to "protect the democratic republic," Han told reporters at a press conference in Seoul.

Yoon loyalists jeered Han at a party meeting after he called Yoon's televised statement "a confession of rebellion," according to The Associated Press.

At least 200 votes are required from the 300-member parliament to suspend Yoon's duties until South Korea's Constitutional Court determines the validity of his presidency.

Russia edges closer to key eastern Ukraine city in 'intense' fighting

By ILLIA NOVIKOV
Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Fighting around the key eastern Ukraine city of Pokrovsk is "extremely intense" after a monthslong Russian push, Ukraine's top military commander said, with analysts estimating Russian forces are now within just a few miles of the city.

Ukrainian troops repelled nearly 40 Russian attempts to

storm defenses around Pokrovsk over the previous 24 hours, the General Staff said in a battlefield report Thursday.

"Russian occupiers are throwing all available forces forward, attempting to break through the defenses of our troops," Ukrainian army chief Gen. Oleksandr Syrskyi said in a Facebook post late Wednesday. His forces are outnumbered, he said.

Ukraine's stretched defenses in

Donetsk have been creaking since early this year under a fierce Russian drive to capture its neighbor's entire eastern Donbas region. Russian forces are trying to overwhelm Ukraine's battlefield defenses with sheer numbers of troops and powerful glide bombs that blast fortifications to smithereens.

Pokrovsk, which had a population of about 60,000 before Russia's full-scale invasion in Febru-

ary 2022, is one of Ukraine's main defensive strongholds and a key logistics hub in the Donetsk region.

Its capture would compromise Ukraine's defensive abilities and supply routes and would bring Russia closer to its stated goal of seizing the entire Donetsk region.

But Ukraine's dogged resistance and Western military aid have rendered the gains costly for the Kremlin in losses of troops

and armor.

A major worry for the Kyiv government is that tens of billions of dollars of key U.S. military support to hold Russia at bay may dry up under President-elect Donald Trump.

The Institute for the Study of War estimated late Wednesday that Russian forces have moved to within just under 4 miles of Pokrovsk, approaching from the south.

Mobile



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Web



STARS AND STRIPES

UNBIASED NEWS WHATEVER WAY YOU WANT IT.

MIDEAST

In Syria, closest ally to US is losing ground

BY JOSEPH KRAUSS
Associated Press

The jihadi rebels who toppled Syrian President Bashar Assad say they want to build a unified, inclusive country. But after nearly 14 years of civil war, putting that ideal into practice will not be easy.

For Syria's Kurdish minority, America's closest ally in the country, the struggle for a new order is entering a potentially even more challenging phase.

Over the course of Syria's civil war, Kurdish fighters have fended off an array of armed factions, partnered with the U.S. to rout the Islamic State and carved out a largely autonomous region in the country's oil-rich east.

But the gains of the non-Arab Kurds are now at risk. The ascendance of the Sunni Arab rebels who overthrew Assad — with vital help from Turkey, a longtime foe of the Kurds — will make it hard for the Kurds to find a place in the new Syria and could prolong the conflict.

The jihadi rebels who rode into Damascus over the weekend have made peaceful overtures to the Kurds. But the rebels violently drove Kurdish fighters out of the eastern city of Deir al-Zour days after government forces abandoned it.

To the north, a separate opposition faction backed by Turkey that has been battling the Kurds for years seized the town of Manbij. And Turkey carried out airstrikes on a Kurdish convoy it said was carrying heavy weapons looted from government arsenals.

The Kurds have long counted on U.S. aid in the face of such challenges. Around 900 American troops are in eastern Syria, where they partner with Kurdish forces to prevent an Islamic State resurgence. But the future of that mission will be thrown into doubt under president-elect Donald Trump, who has long been skeptical about U.S. involvement in Syria.



BADERKHAN AHMAD/AP

Kurdish-led fighters backed by the U.S. stand guard in Raqqa, Syria, in February 2022.

Here's a closer look at the predicament the Kurds find themselves in.

■ Who are the U.S.-allied Kurdish fighters in Syria?

The Kurds are among the largest stateless ethnic groups in the world, with some 30 million concentrated in a territory straddling Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. They are a minority in each country and have often suffered persecution, which has fueled armed Kurdish uprisings.

In Syria, they carved out an autonomous enclave early in the civil war, never fully siding with the Assad government or the rebels seeking to topple him.

When Islamic State seized a third of the country in 2014, Kurdish fighters — who are secular and include women in their ranks — proved their mettle in early battles against the extremists, earning support from the U.S.-led coalition.

They formed a group known as the Syrian Democratic Forces,

which also includes Arab fighters, and drove Islamic State out of large areas of Syria with help from U.S.-led airstrikes and American special forces. In 2017, these Kurdish-led forces captured Raqqa, the capital of the extremists' self-styled caliphate.

■ Why is Turkey fighting the Kurds?

Turkey has long viewed the SDF as an extension of the decades-old Kurdish insurgency within its own borders. It considers the main Kurdish faction a terrorist group on par with the Islamic State and has said it should have no presence in the new Syria.

In recent years, Turkey has trained and funded fighters known as the Syrian National Army, helping them wrest control of territory from the Kurds in northern Syria along the border with Turkey. These Turkish-backed fighters have portrayed themselves as part of the opposition against Assad, but analysts say they are largely driven by opportunism and hatred

of the Kurds.

The Kurds have focused on battling the SNA in recent years. But the new leadership in Damascus, which also has longstanding ties to Turkey, could open another, much longer front.

■ How do the Syrian rebels view the Kurds?

The main rebel faction is led by Ahmad al-Sharaa, formerly known as Abu Mohammed al-Golani, a former al-Qaida militant who cut ties with the group eight years ago and says he wants to build a new Syria free of dictatorship that will serve all its religious and ethnic communities.

Nawaf Khalil, head of the Germany-based Center for Kurdish Studies, said the early signs were positive. He said the rebels steered clear of two SDF-controlled enclaves of Aleppo when they stormed the city two weeks ago at the start of their rapid advance across the country.

"It is also positive that they did not speak negatively about the Syr-

ian Democratic Forces," he said.

It remains to be seen if those sentiments will endure. After sweeping into Deir al-Zour this week, a fighter from al-Sharaa's group posted a video saying they would soon advance toward Raqqa and other areas of eastern Syria, raising the possibility of further clashes with the Kurds.

The rebels could still seek some kind of agreement with the Kurds to incorporate them into the post-Assad political order, but that would likely require accepting a degree of Kurdish autonomy in the east. It would also risk angering Turkey, which now appears to be the chief power broker in Syria.

■ Will the Trump administration support the Kurds?

The top U.S. military commander for the Middle East, Army Gen. Erik Kurilla, met with SDF forces in Syria on Tuesday, in a sign of the Biden administration's commitment to the alliance post-Assad.

But things could change on Jan. 20.

Trump has provided few details about his Middle East policy, aside from saying he wants to end the region's wars and keep the United States out of them.

In a social media post shortly before Assad was overthrown, Trump wrote that "Syria is a mess, but is not our friend, & THE UNITED STATES SHOULD HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH IT. THIS IS NOT OUR FIGHT."

During his previous term, in 2019, Trump abandoned the Kurds ahead of a Turkish incursion, casting it as the fulfillment of a campaign promise to end U.S. involvement in the region's "endless wars."

The move prompted heavy criticism, including from prominent Republicans who accused him of betraying an ally. Trump backtracked weeks later, approving a wider mission to secure oil fields in the east. The troops remained where they were and the alliance endured.

EU countries double down on halt to Syrian asylum claims

Associated Press

BRUSSELS — Some European Union countries on Thursday doubled down on their decision to rapidly halt asylum procedures for Syrian migrants in Europe, but said that it was too early to consider sending any of the hundreds of thousands of people who have fled since 2011 back home.

Austria, Belgium, Germany, Greece, Finland, Ireland, Sweden and non-EU country Norway suspended asylum applications from Syrians in the wake of Bashar Assad's fall. France is weighing whether to take similar action, at least until Syria's new leadership

and security conditions become clearer.

The decisions do not mean that Syrian asylum-seekers will be deported. The EU's executive branch, the European Commission, has said that currently "the conditions are not met for safe, voluntary, dignified returns to Syria."

"We need to wait a few more days to see where Syria is heading now," German Interior Minister Nancy Faeser said. "What is the situation? What about the protection of minorities? What about the protection of the people? And then, of course, there could be repatriation."

Asked by reporters whether it would make sense to organize repatriations at an EU level, Faeser said "it would be very expedient to organize this together."

But she stressed that Syrians who work in Germany and abide by its laws are welcome to stay. Over 47,000 asylum claims by Syrians are pending in Germany, a main destination in Europe for those who have fled since 2011.

"This is not a long term pause as far as I'm concerned," Irish Justice Minister Helen McEntee told reporters. "It's really positive that the Assad regime has come to an end. At the same time, we can all

see that it's not clear what will happen next."

The arrival in Europe in 2015 of well over 1 million refugees — most fleeing the conflict in Syria — sparked one of the EU's biggest political crises as nations bickered over who should host them and whether other countries should be forced to help. Those tensions remain even today.

Almost 14,000 Syrians applied for international protection in Europe this year up to September, according to the EU's asylum agency. Around 183,000 Syrians applied for asylum in all of last year. On average, around one in three

applications are accepted.

Already on Monday, despite deep uncertainty about the country's future, hundreds of Syrian refugees gathered at two border crossings in southern Turkey, eagerly anticipating their return home following the fall of Bashar Assad's government.

In the days since Assad's abrupt fall, rebel leader Ahmad al-Sharaa, formerly known as Abu Mohammed al-Golani, has sought to reassure Syrians that the group he leads — Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS — does not seek to dominate the country and will continue government services.

HEALTH & FITNESS

The science of superior facial processing

Researchers seek to better understand why some can recognize faces more easily

By RICHARD SIMA
The Washington Post

Do you remember the face of any strangers who passed by you today?

You probably can't, but super-recognizers can. These rare individuals can identify unfamiliar faces after a brief glimpse. And by studying them, researchers hope to understand how we recognize that a face belongs to someone we know — an important ability for a social species such as ours.

"The face is the most important visual stimulus for humans in their environment, probably throughout evolution," said David White, associate professor of psychology and lead investigator of the Face Research Lab at the University of New South Wales, Sydney. "We're a social species, and the information contained in the face is vital to behave rationally in a social environment."

We don't, for example, usually need to identify specific chairs, because knowing "it's just a chair" is enough, said Meike Ramon, an assistant professor and head of the Applied Face Cognition Lab at the University of Lausanne. "But for faces, it matters who each unique individual face belongs to."

Face processing on a spectrum

Our ability to recognize faces is part of a spectrum.

At one end are the 2 to 3% of people with face blindness — or developmental prosopagnosia — who have trouble recognizing faces that should be familiar to them, including those of loved ones or even their own.

At the other end are super-recognizers, first reported on in 2009, who excel at identifying or matching faces, even those that are unfamiliar to them — whether they are flipped upside-down, low resolution or presented at a different angle.

They have a "unique ability to derive a three-dimensional representation of a face, even when they see only one 2D image of the person," Ramon said. Super-recognizers are rare, though how rare is hard to estimate because there is no single agreed-upon method for categorizing them.

Most people's ability to process faces lies somewhere in between, where recognizing familiar faces is easy but deciphering unfamiliar ones is challenging.

What makes these super-recognizers super

Super-recognizers are drawn to faces. Even when they are presented with random pictures of everyday life, super-



iStock

The super-recognizer ability to process faces may simply reflect how good they are at processing all visual information. Conversely, people with face blindness not only struggle with faces but may also have difficulties processing other types of visual information.

recognizers spend more time looking at faces, Ramon and her colleagues reported in one 2022 study.

Their eyes are also drawn immediately to the face, regardless of where that face is in the photo — and most closely near the optimal place for identification, below the eyes.

"It seems like faces are extremely salient for super-recognizers for reasons that we still don't know," Ramon said.

Their brains also respond differently to visual images less than a second after seeing them.

In a 2024 study, Ramon and her colleagues recorded brain activity from 16 super-recognizers and 17 control participants using EEG while they viewed a variety of pictures, such as of plants, animals, scenes and faces. Even just 65 milliseconds after an image pops up — faster than the blink of an eye — their brains already start responding differently than neurotypical brains.

Interestingly, super-recognizers exhibited this difference in neural activity regardless of what they were looking at, which suggests that their brains process visual information differently in general.

Other research suggests that super-recognizers have broader activation of the brain's face-processing networks, even when looking at unfamiliar faces.

The super-recognizer ability to process faces may simply reflect how good they are at processing all visual information. And conversely, people with face blindness not only struggle with faces but may also have difficulties processing other

types of visual information.

Curiously, however, super-recognizer abilities may extend beyond the visual domain. A 2021 study of 529 participants reported that super-recognizers were also much better at identifying unfamiliar and familiar voices, despite having merely average pitch discrimination, which may point to a "common basis for person identity processing abilities" across different senses, White said.

Still, super-recognizers have weaknesses. Just like typical recognizers, super-recognizers also find it more difficult to distinguish between the faces of people of ethnicities different from their own.

Getting better at recognizing faces

Identifying unfamiliar faces is tricky, even for experienced professionals such as forensic examiners and customs agents. Unfortunately, it is not possible to train people to become super-recognizers, which appears to be a natural ability.

When White and his colleagues pit super-recognizers against trained forensic examiners, the differences in their process for face identification were clear, though they achieved equivalent accuracy.

Super-recognizers were more intuitive and made their judgments quicker with great accuracy after just two seconds. They looked at faces more, but there was no clear pattern in where they were looking, the 2023 study reported.

Forensic examiners, by contrast, were much more methodical and systematic. They took longer to make their decisions,

requiring up to 30 seconds, but picked up on facial clues that most people would not pay attention to.

"What super-recognizers are doing is more of a black box," White said. "It's more of an automatic processing."

The growing recognition of super-recognizers has increased interest in using their powers to aid policing and security work, though there appears to be no formal, systematic approach for identifying and deploying them. Ramon has worked with Berlin Police and White has worked with the New South Wales Police Force to identify super-recognizers.

But super-recognizers aren't perfect, White said.

In White's research, when super-recognizers and professionals made errors, super-recognizers maintained a high confidence, while professionals were less confident.

So far, lessons on how to improve our facial processing come from trained experts.

In a 2021 study, White and his colleagues taught novice participants some of the tricks used by professional examiners, such as focusing on the ears, scars, freckles and blemishes. After just a six-minute training, the novices got somewhat better — an improvement of 6% in accuracy.

But more research on super-recognizers could help solve the mystery of how an unfamiliar face becomes a recognizable and familiar face. The fact that super-recognizers are able to do so well with unfamiliar faces may give us clues in how the brain makes that change, White said.

TELEVISION



Lucasfilm Ltd.

From left: Ryan Kiera Armstrong, Kyriana Kratter, Ravi Cabot-Conyers and Robert Timothy Smith star in “Star Wars: Skeleton Crew.”

‘Skeleton Crew’ keeps Lucas’ style alive

Showrunners approach ‘Star Wars’ TV spinoff with eye to capturing ‘vibe and aesthetic’ of original 1977 film

BY HERB SCRIBNER
The Washington Post

Jude Law was a little taken aback when he first donned his Jedi robe and stepped onto the set of “Skeleton Crew,” the latest “Star Wars” television spinoff.

The world-renowned actor, who has headlined a Marvel film, two Harry Potter movies and a slew of other blockbusters, was surprised to learn that “Star Wars” filmmaking had its own unique craft and style. There was a “language” to the process, he said — something that harked back to George Lucas’ original 1977 film.

In fact, Law recalled one director telling him specifically that they couldn’t film a shot a certain way because it wasn’t quite “Star Wars-y” enough.

“It required a whole different approach to the filmmaking process,” Law said. “It’s not that there’s a rule book, but a lot of it does relate back to what Lucas did all those years ago.”

Law stars in Disney+’s “Skeleton Crew,” an eight-part “Goonies”-meets-“Star Wars” series about a group of younglings who get lost in space. Law plays Jod Na Nawood, who claims to be a Jedi (though he’s a bit of a nerf herder) and says he wants to help the lost kids get home.

The show opens with scenes of the kids — including Ravi Cabot-Conyers’ Wim and Robert Timothy Smith’s elephantine alien Neel — being normal younglings in the “Star Wars” galaxy (their hometown is a cross between middle America and Disney’s ill-fated Galactic Starcruiser hotel). When they accidentally leave their home via a hidden spaceship, they find themselves tangling with pirates, an owl-like mentor and Law’s Nawood.

Showrunners Jon Watts and Chris Ford, who worked on Marvel’s “Spider-Man: Homecoming,” wanted to turn back the clock to the Lucas days for “Skeleton Crew.” It’s been well-documented that the director gained inspira-

tion for “Star Wars” from westerns as well as Akira Kurosawa’s samurai films. So Watts and Ford rewatched old spaghetti westerns, throwback pirate serials and some 1930s films to replicate that experience.

“You don’t want to try to just copy ‘Star Wars’ directly,” Ford said. “You want to try to re-create the processes that George Lucas employed to create ‘Star Wars.’”

Creating a show in the “Star Wars” universe also requires making sure it looks like “Star Wars.” Watts and Ford said they worked with Lucasfilm design artists consistently to create the proper aesthetic. They also said they used stop-motion animation, which they said felt more like “Star Wars” than CGI.

“It’s not like there’s a series of rule books and like, someone comes down from Lucasfilm and is like, ‘Oh, you broke it,’” Watts said. “It’s more like trying to capture the vibe and aesthetic of ‘Star Wars’ is a little bit of, like, an intangible thing. And it goes back to just what feels right and what doesn’t feel right.”

“It’s an emotional thing,” Watts added. “It’s, like, a feeling. How do you make something feel like ‘Star Wars’ is something that we talked about a lot.”

Ford agreed. “It’s not about rules. It’s more like upholding a tradition.”

To help make sure they were making the right choices, Watts and Ford heeded the advice of longtime “Star Wars” collaborators Dave Filoni and Jon Favreau, both of whom executive produced “The Mandalorian,” to get the feel of Lucas’ universe. Similarly, Bryce Dallas Howard, who worked on episodes of “The Mandalorian,” directed one of the episodes for “Skeleton Crew,” which gave them added support.

Watts and Ford said there are certain aspects of a “Star Wars” show that are unique to “Star Wars” — as opposed to a Marvel project, which can stretch in all sorts of directions.

Law, who played Yon-Rogg in 2019’s “Captain Marvel,” is familiar with how Marvel’s filmmaking process is different than “Star Wars.” In his time with the franchise, he witnessed wide shots where characters soared through the air and moments when the camera spun around the room.

“When it comes to space flight, you don’t see shots where they kind of pull out through the glass or whizzing around,” Law said of “Star Wars” films. “That’s more Marvel.” With “Star Wars,” he said, “you’re either inside or you’re outside. And again, I think that relates to the language that Lucas developed.”

Law said on-set “gatekeepers” instructed actors on how to keep their scenes consistent with Lucas’ original vision and with subsequent “Star Wars” projects. Similarly, various directors explained shots that were or were not permissible.

Though some may consider such strictures frustrating, Law doesn’t.

“I’m actually quite a fan of limitations on a film set,” he said. “You’ve got, you know, too much money, too much time and too many toys — I don’t know that you make good decisions. I quite like the idea of — these are the parameters; stick within them. I certainly never felt frustrated.”

Part of this is because Law, Ford and Watts all recognize that Lucas himself had constraints when he filmed “A New Hope” in 1977. That’s why they worked to mimic the cinematography and style of the original trilogy, which included moments where viewers see wide shots of the Tatooine desert and flat pan shots of the Death Star hanging in empty space. You don’t see too many close-ups and zoom-ins on “Star Wars” characters.

“You wouldn’t do, like, a snap zoom-in to, like, a close-up of Jude Law as he’s looking around the room,” Watts said. “That wouldn’t feel like ‘Star Wars.’”

LIFESTYLE



Mandy Ewurs photos

John Reichart's holiday decorations light up the night in Indianola, Iowa. To make his wife Joan, who has Alzheimer's disease, happy, he not only decorated their own yard but also got permission to decorate their neighbors' as well.

Labor of love lights up homes, faces

Marine veteran, 74, spends thousands of dollars to decorate Iowa neighborhood for his wife, who has dementia

BY CATHY FREE
The Washington Post

About three months ago, John Reichart was relaxing in the living room when his wife Joan suddenly asked, "Where are all of the Christmas decorations?"

Joan Reichart, 72, was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease four years ago. In 2022, the couple moved back to their hometown of Indianola, Iowa, so some of their relatives could help with her care.

"We got engaged on Christmas Eve in 1970, and she's always loved Christmas," said John Reichart, 74, noting that he and his wife have been married for almost 54 years.

"I hadn't done much holiday decorating since we moved back because I'd been working so hard to look after her and keep her happy," he said. "But when she wondered about the decorations, I thought she deserved to see some Christmas lights this year."

Reichart thought about it for a few days, then came up with a plan: He would try to make a winter wonderland for his wife.

He knew from prior years that most people on his street didn't decorate their homes, so he decided to ask the neighbors in all 18 homes on his block if he could put lighted trees in their front yards.

"When I got permission for that, I also decided to ask for permission to put up LED lighting on the soffits of their houses," he said. "Then after that, I decided I'd buy large lawn ornaments like snowmen and tin soldiers for every house. I got a little carried away."

Only a few of the neighbors had put up decorations in recent years because the subdivision is new and many residents don't have children, often a motivator to hang lights and other fun decorations, said Frank Ewurs, who lives at the end of Reichart's street.

"I have two kids, and I like to put up inflatables in the yard, but for the most part, there aren't many Christmas decorations," Ewurs said. "A lot of the neighbors don't know each other very well, so everyone was really taken aback by John's offer."

Ewurs said he became emotional after he walked down to Reichart's house and heard his story.

Reichart, a Marine who served during the Vietnam War and is now disabled, told him how he'd met Joan on a blind date in 1970 after his service overseas. Married in 1971, the couple raised one daughter and lived for about four decades in Missouri, where John Reichart ran a fire

protection sprinkler business until his retirement.

Now that they were back in Indianola, Reichart had a little trouble getting around due to a foot injury, Ewurs said. But he was determined to take care of his wife at home for as long as possible.

"I sat there with him and he told me all of this, and I could sense that he got a little lonely at times," Ewurs said. "Here he was, putting together all of these decorations and setting them up. I felt he shouldn't have to take on everything on his own, so I offered to help."

Reichart's neighbor across the street, Donna Bahun, said she also wanted to lend a hand.

"I started seeing John in his garage a lot, so I went over to see what he was doing, and he said he was putting

together 9-foot, lighted trees for everyone in the neighborhood," said Bahun, 70.

The artificial trees, made of strands of light, secure into the ground to form a cone shape.

"One of his nieces would come over and



John, 74, and his wife Joan, 72

help him assemble them," she added. "I was stunned at the effort he was going to."

Bahun said she worried about Reichart injuring himself, so she carried the finished trees to nearby homes, including her own, and Reichart secured them to the ground.

For houses that were farther away, Reichart hooked up a small trailer to his mobility scooter to easily haul the trees and lawn ornaments. He then hired a lighting company to install the house lights he'd purchased for everyone, Bahun said.

"It probably took a month to get everything up," she said, noting that each house was fully decorated by mid-November. "It was nice to get to know John, and I was touched to watch him care for Joan. He's just a wonderful man."

Reichart said he spent thousands of dollars from his savings on the decorations, but he declined to give an exact amount. He said it was worth it to see his wife's face light up.

"Every dime was well spent," he said. "I'll do anything to make her happy. It breaks my heart to see the change in her, so it's nice to do something uplifting."

"Joan doesn't speak much now, but she tells me the lights are pretty," Reichart added. "Now that they're up, I turn up the heat in the garage and we sit out there most nights, waving at all the cars that drive by to see the decorations."

Reichart also hands out cups of hot chocolate to everyone who visits the street, which neighbors have nicknamed Christmas Wish Lane. KCCI News of Des Moines was among the local media outlets that covered his holiday decorating spree.

Reichart's spirit of giving has been contagious, Ewurs said.

"I went out and bought a Santa suit, and I'm now passing out candy canes when people come by my house," he said.

Reichart decided to have some fun with that, Ewurs said.

"I was in the Air Force, and when I told John what I was doing, he told me, 'Now, I'm going to have to get a Santa suit and hand out candy bars with my hot chocolate because I can't have the Air Force outdoing me,'" he said.

Ewurs started a card campaign after Reichart told him the only thing he wanted in return for his efforts was a Christmas card. He is asking people to mail cards to John Reichart, care of Frank Ewurs, at P.O. Box 133, Indianola, Iowa, 50125.

Ewurs and his wife, Mandy Ewurs, also started a GoFundMe, hoping to raise enough funds for Reichart to buy a shed to store the neighborhood's new decorations.

"It's a labor of love for him, but we don't want him to keep spending his money," said Mandy Ewurs. "He's been generous enough already, and he's brought a lot of our neighbors together."

"I'm so touched by it — it's like a movie you'd see on the Hallmark Channel," she added.

For Frank Ewurs, something else comes to mind.

"It's like Clark Griswold came to our neighborhood," he said, referring to the holiday classic movie "National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation."

"We now have one bright street," he added. "John even put light-up dogs in the yards of everyone on the street who has a dog."

Reichart said he plans to continue his new tradition for as long as he's able.

"Seeing my wife's reaction to all of this warms me up," he said. "Even when she's gone, I'd like to continue doing this in her memory. Every Christmas, I want to see the whole block light up."

MUSIC

Lone wolf

Lauren Mayberry steps out of synth-pop band Chvrches for a solo album showing her influences

BY ELISE RYAN

Associated Press

The birth of Lauren Mayberry as a solo artist should be marked by something like a wolf cry. And that's exactly what it sounds like.

The vocalist and percussionist from the Scottish pop band Chvrches has punctuated her debut album with a playful howl while telling off an ex-lover on the song "Crocodile Tears."

"This moment in time is exactly the chapter where I get to howl like a wolf in a song if I want to. And I don't have to feel weird about it," she says.

Mayberry, 37, is enjoying the freedom to create whatever she likes, away from the synth-pop of the band she has been with since her early 20s.

"It's a mission statement of all things that you like, and you just go in and write the song that feels like it wants to be written on that day, which was quite refreshing," she says.

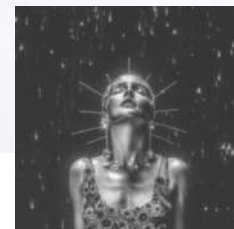
The 12 tracks of "Vicious Creature," released Dec. 6 on Island, veer from the coffee house folk of "Anywhere But Dancing" to the punky "Punch Drunk," the dance-pop of "Change Shapes" and stuttering glam of "Sorry, Etc."

If Chvrches — with members Iain Cook and Martin Doherty — usually works first with melodies and production

SEE LONE ON PAGE 17

Lauren Mayberry poses for a portrait on Sept. 30 in New York.

ANDY KROPA, INVISION/AP



Lauren Mayberry

Vicious Creature (Island)

Lauren Mayberry, frontwoman of the Scottish synth-pop band CHVRCHES, liberates herself from preconceptions on a punchy debut solo album, "Vicious Creature."

Mayberry's striking voice has been central to CHVRCHES' electro-pop since the trio started making music together in 2011. It is sharp and distinct, a key instrument used alongside Iain Cook and Martin Doherty's synths to create a sound that has endured throughout the subsequent decade. Now, her soprano voices feelings and experiences uniquely hers — adding a fire to a project all about ownership.

"Must be something in the air," she declares on the album's opening track. And later: "Too much noise might leave you on your own."

Throughout the album, she explores past relationships, family, the music industry and memory.

"I killed myself to be one of the boys," she sings on "Sorry, etc." bluntly listing the concessions she's had to make in order to succeed in the male-dominated music business. "I bit my tongue to be one of the boys / I sold my soul to be one of the boys," she continues, the chorus morphing into a confessional chant. Above drums and piercing electronic production, the song is all angst and theatrical flair — particularly on the final, whispered verse — and feels distinctly Mayberry.

On "Change Shapes," she details how and why that self-sacrificing happens. "I change shapes till I get what I want from you," she sings over a bouncy guitar and steady percussion. "Punch Drunk" is just that, a lively song atop analog crackles and loose riffs. "Mantra" uses a warbled beat to a hypnotic effect, as Mayberry takes on an enemy.

Those moments — the ones where Mayberry brawls, heard in her lyrics and the wolf howling back at the boy crying wolf in "Crocodile Tears" — are some of the album's best.

But there are dialed-back moments as well — quieter songs, the furthest from her work with CHVRCHES — and they come with their own revelations.

Those songs, like the acoustic guitar-led "Anywhere But Dancing," and piano ballads "Oh, Mother" and "Are You Awake," are anchors for the project. They serve as reminders that "Vicious Creature" was motivated by Mayberry's desire to center her storytelling as a soloist, the parts, it can be assumed, suppressed in her previous pursuits.

— Elise Ryan
Associated Press

MUSIC REVIEWS

Linkin Park

From Zero (Warner Records)

Linkin Park, the inventive American rap-rock band who wove electronica into its heavy, melodic compositions, return with their first new album in seven years, "From Zero." It's a reference to their earliest days — when the band was known as Xero — a reclamation of their angry and ascendant sound, and something else entirely.

It started in September. Linkin Park debuted their first new music since the 2017 death of lead singer Chester Bennington: a new song titled "The Emptiness Machine," with new singer Emily Armstrong of the band Dead Sara and drummer Colin Brittain, joining returning members Mike Shinoda, Brad Delson, Phoenix and Joe Hahn. (Shinoda and Armstrong share vocal duties.)

It was a surprising return; as AP wrote at the time, Armstrong's performance style comfortably continues the band's legacy. Her full-throated vocals recalled Bennington without attempting parody. That spirit continues throughout "From Zero," Armstrong stretching out a scream into the kind of raspy, vibrato-fake out immediately recognizable as a Bennington-ism.

In his absence, however, Shinoda takes more of the vocal lead. And in some points, it is to the band's detriment, like on "Cut the Bridge." Elsewhere, it's a revisitation to "Metemora"-era LP, like on the fistful "Heavy Is the Crown." Ultimately, he makes a fine solo leader.

More melodic moments may sound like the work of another band entirely when performed by Armstrong, like on "Over Each Other," but that's quickly abandoned for the nu-metal ferocity of the next track, "Casualty."

It's an easy impulse to look for Bennington on this album. One of the most rewarding moments arrives on "Two Faced": "I can't hear myself think," Armstrong speak-sings, before launching into a guttural bellow, "Stop yelling at me." It has echoes of Linkin Park's career-defining hits, like "One Step Closer." The necessary reminder to the listener, then, should be that this is the same band just in the midst of a transformation. Much is intact: The album is produced by Shinoda and it sounds it; signatures of Hahn, the band's DJ, turntablist and creative director, exist throughout.

Bennington's mother, Susan Eubanks, told Rolling Stone she had no idea the band was going to continue on without her son — and that they previously said they'd give her a heads up; they did not.

For some Linkin Park fans, it is a nonstarter. For the others who will dive into "From Zero," there are echoes of the band they loved.

— Maria Sherman
Associated Press



Rosé

Rosie (Atlantic)

Rosé, the nightingale of the massively popular Korean girl group Blackpink, has flown the nest and launched her first solo album, "Rosie." She's the first of the awesome foursome to release a full-length solo record, and in English at that. Members Jisoo and Jennie have previously released singles, and Lisa is gearing up for her own studio album in 2025.

Across "Rosie," titled after Rosé's nickname to communicate a kind of personal intimacy, the singer goes to great lengths to detach herself sonically from her band. Unlike Blackpink's high-energy electro-pop output, Rosé's solo material is that of a coffee-house dweller with a sideline in romantic drama. But don't expect finger-plucked acoustic guitar balladry exclusively — "Rosie" is reserved in some moments, full of life in others.

The album starts off chipper, with the soaring piano ballad "Number One Girl," the cool synth-pop track "Two Years," the dynamic, catchy Bruno Mars collaboration "Apt.," and the contemporary, Taylor Swift-indebted pop of "Toxic Till the End." But it invariably slows down, preferring fairly stripped-back production throughout. She's got the voice and she's flaunting it; it's her prerogative to showcase her range at the expense of a more energetic beat.

Across 12 tracks, the album studies heartache over lost loves ("It's been two years and you're still not gone / It doesn't make sense that I can't move on," she sings on "Two Years"), missed chances ("Are we lovers or friends / 'Cause it's as good as it gets" in "Call it the End") and ambivalence over situationships that probably should've been nipped in the bud but staggered along, strung by the power of lust and not much else. (That one is everywhere — particularly in the dubious boyfriends of "Toxic Till the End" and "Gameboy.") Who can't relate?

The album is an emotional rollercoaster easy to empathize with, stuffed with songs that articulate the trials and tribulations of early adult years — the search for connection and getting dragged into romances that lead nowhere. But throughout, fans of both Blackpink and Rosé might miss the spirited songs of her group. After all, your 20s are for partying, too; not just heartbreak.

— Cristina Jaleru
Associated Press



Kim Deal

Nobody Loves You More (4AD)

When the Pixies set out to make their 1988 debut studio album, they enlisted Steve Albini to engineer "Surfer Rosa," the seminal alternative record that includes the enduring hit, "Where Is My Mind?" That experience was mutually beneficial to both parties — and was the beginning of a decadeslong friendship between the prickly Albini and Kim Deal, the band's bassist at the time.

Nearly 35 years later — just before the acclaimed audio engineer died in May at age 61 — Deal turned to Albini once again for what would be their final collaboration, this time for another debut. Eight of the 11 tracks on Deal's first solo studio album, "Nobody Loves You More," were produced by both Albini and Deal — the ideal partnership of his experimentation and her musical skill.

Deal's music has always been a reflection of the rugged exterior needed to be a woman at the forefront of the '90s alternative rock scene and a tenderness that subverts the indifference often characterizing that same scene.

Those features, ostensibly at odds with one another, culminate in "Nobody Loves You More," thanks to her poignant lyricism and the unique instrumentation woven throughout the record. At its heart, this is still a rock album — one that Deal is uniquely suited to make.

The album's final track, "A Good Time Pushed," musically and lyrically captures the fine line between doom and joy. "We're having a good time," she repeats, in what is perhaps an effort to convince herself that she is.

Although the continuity is there between this album and the music of the Pixies and Deal's band The Breeders, aspects of it are unequivocally distinct.

The resounding brass instruments on the title track and "Coast," along with the orchestra featured on "Summerland," are a departure from the traditional rock instrumentation that many listeners have come to associate with the 63-year-old.

As the album title suggests, much of the songs on "Nobody Loves You More" are also lyrically earnest and romantic. "Are you mine? / Are you my baby? / I have no mind / For nothin but love," Deal croons on the doo-wop-inspired "Are You Mine?"

As a whole, "Nobody Loves You More" is varied — and as distinctly American as the myriad locations which inspired it, from the Massachusetts island of Nantucket (the breezy sounds of "Coast") to the Florida Keys ("Summerland") to Deal's hometown of Dayton, Ohio.

Fans of the Pixies and the Breeders will find a lot to enjoy here — it is both familiar and different.

— Krysta Fauria
Associated Press



Lone: Mayberry wanted songs to be focused on storytelling first

FROM PAGE 16

before lyrics, Mayberry wanted to reverse the process.

"I knew that I wanted it to be more focused on the storytelling," she says. "It was nice to be able to go into a studio with a title idea or with a concept and then work back from that."

Mayberry cites Sinead O'Connor, Tori Amos, Fiona Apple and Annie Lennox as influences. She credits the yodel inflection in her voice to having listened to so much Alanis Morissette.

"It was those influences I wanted to dig into a bit more in my own material," she says. "When I thought back to what are the key influences on me as a writer, it isn't really a lot of synth-pop stuff. So then it's interesting that that's what I became so associated with."

Mayberry worked on her new album with producers Greg Kurstin, Matthew Korma, Tobias Jesso Jr., Ethan Gruska and Dan McDougall. She started writing in spring 2022 and had studio sessions in between touring with Chvrches.

McDougall, who has previously worked with Sigrid and Jason Mraz, co-wrote and played on four tracks and says he and Mayberry went into the studio hoping to push the boundaries.

"We didn't really have one specific lane in mind for the genre we were going down," he says. "We were just being experimental, and I guess the freedom within that just brought us something a bit different."

One track — "Sunday Best" — was in part inspired by "Once In a Lifetime" by Talking Heads and by her mother's illness. "Keep thinking one day maybe I will find the beauty in goodbye," she sings. The title comes from funeral clothes.

"I thought I was finally writing a hopeful, cheerful, uplifting song, and then I was like, 'Well, still about death, isn't it?'" Mayberry says, laughing. "Maybe it's a Scottish thing. I don't know. We're just a bit morose."

On the album, Mayberry explores mortality, nostalgia, societal pressures, arrogant exes and her band ("I killed myself to be one of the boys," she sings in one song.)

"The lyrics I like least that I've written are ones that I know didn't feel very authentic to me," she says. "I think you can hear in somebody's physical voice when they're singing, whether they mean something or not. So my only brief is like, 'Does it feel fake?'"

Regardless of how the album does with critics or charts, Mayberry is proud it's out there, proof of her musicianship and confirmation that she doesn't need anyone

to make good songs.

"No matter what happens with this record, I feel like it was more about proving to myself than to anybody else. Because if you never try it, then you're never going to know."

The album ends with the somber piano-led "Are You Awake?" as Mayberry takes a hard look at her life choices. Her friends have settled down — "Been counting their babies and their diamond wedding rings" — and her career expectations are heavy: "Hometown hero is a poisoned chalice choice," she sings.

"The end of that song opens up in a way to a question mark. And I think that's kind of how I feel about what will happen after the rest of this," she says.

Mayberry isn't sure what's next for Chvrches. The three members have been working on their own projects, and the door seems open for a reunion despite Mayberry spreading her wings.

"It's hard once you've felt the wind in your hair to not enjoy that as an experience," she says. "But my hope is that the two things can coexist. I do think that everybody getting experiences outside of the band will mean that we have different things to offer each other when we come to write again."

VIDEO GAMES

Sony's precarious position

Now 30, the PlayStation, which once shattered the status quo, has become it

By GENE PARK
The Washington Post

Sony debuted the PlayStation on Dec. 3, 1994, with the expressed intent of re-creating the extravagance of big-ticket entertainment in a living room. For gaming at the time, that meant arcade machines priced around a car's down payment. But anyone who turned on their very first PlayStation game — in my case it was Ridge Racer — saw PlayStation vanish the arcade business into obsolescence.

Within just a few years, three of the platform's games defined the blockbuster video game experience: Resident Evil, Final Fantasy VII and Metal Gear Solid. Video games encompass various media (music, literature) and PlayStation helped the medium finally appropriate cinema to propel it into the future we know today. Halfway through the PlayStation 4's run as the dominant console in the 2010s, Sony's games would rival or exceed film in its lights and magic, and eventually boast the same bursting, out-of-control budgets.

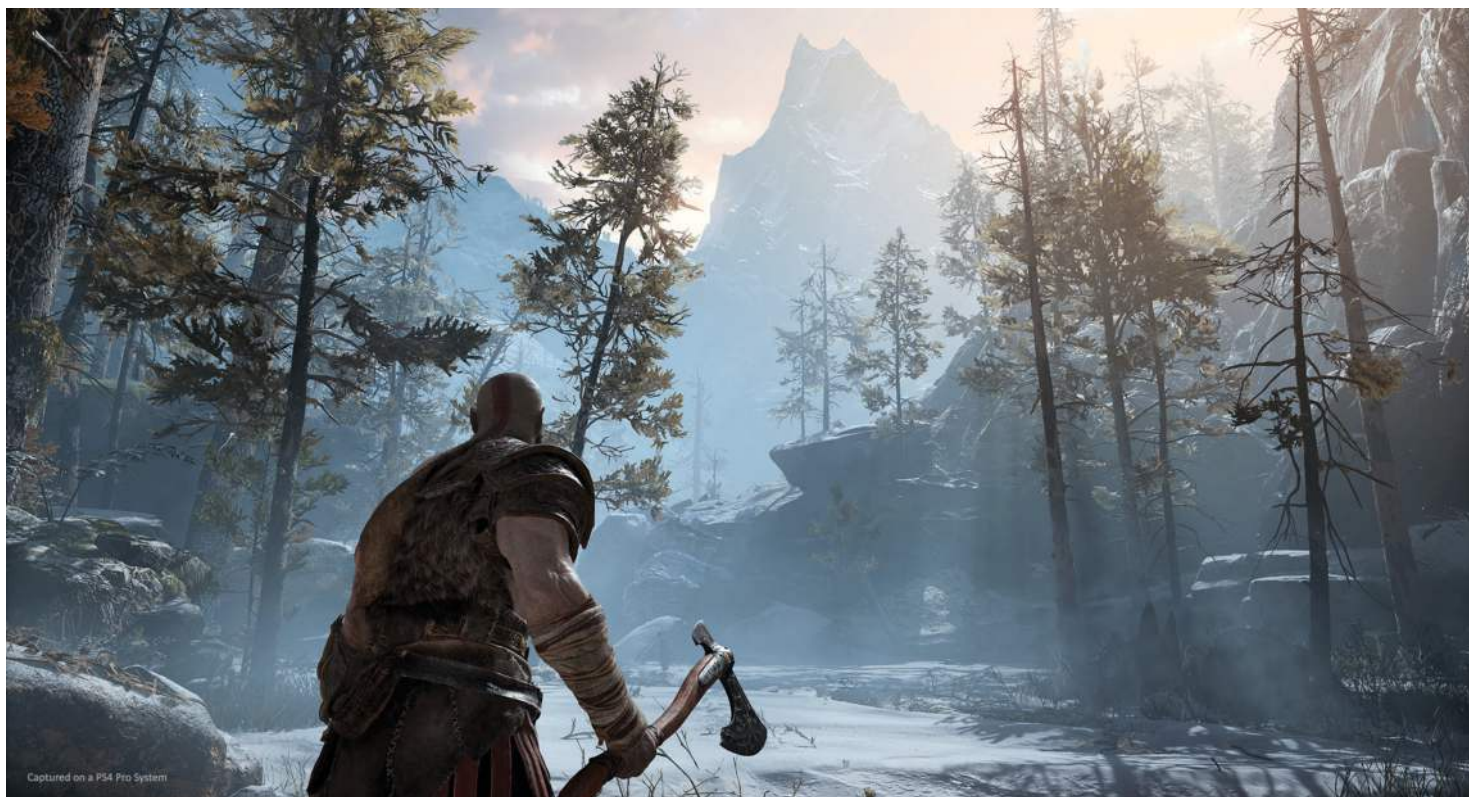
That technical wizardry — for gamers, a sort of 2007 iPhone moment every few years — came to define Sony's remarkable 30-year run in video games.

Getting there wasn't simple. In the late '70s, Sony helped create the CD-ROM format, so naturally the firm leaned on its expansive storage space and cheaper production cost to widen the playing field for video game developers. Nintendo and Sony originally flirted with a plan to make a CD console, then called the Play Station. But Nintendo infamously scrapped the arrangement to work with Philips instead.

That chain of events embittered and emboldened Sony engineer Ken Kutaragi to turn the idea into Sony's entry into the games market. Nintendo, meanwhile, stuck with the more restrictive game cartridge format.

Sony's top executives at the time scoffed at the games business they didn't understand — Sony as a business was native to the arts and entertainment through film and music. It flexed its marketing muscles to create a culture around PlayStation that targeted the more discerning, mature gamer, whereas Nintendo was family-friendly and the struggling Sega was for misfits. In 1995, before the PlayStation's U.S. release, Sony executives even guided Michael Jackson through the show floor of the Electronic Entertainment Expo. The late pop king played Tekken, one of the many arcade experiences PlayStation re-created at home.

One problem: Sony didn't know how to make games. Nintendo and Sega had homegrown creative talent. Sony had to acquire its studios, the first of which was Liverpool-based Psygnosis. It was not only the first step in creating the multicompany collective now known as PlayStation Studios, it also propelled the globalization of the video game business outside of Japan and the United States.



Sony Interactive Entertainment photos

Sony is currently led by Naughty Dog and Santa Monica Studio, respective creators of *The Last of Us*, and *God of War*, above. These games are among the most critically acclaimed works of the medium and rival big-screen superhero films.



PaRappa the Rapper, which Sony produced in 1996, was one of the first rhythm action games. It married East Village art sensibilities with Japanese game design.

Sony aggressively asked outside studios to pitch in. This led to an explosion of creativity during the first three generations of consoles as new ideas and game genres sprang up every year. Sony produced many innovative titles such as PaRappa the Rapper in 1996, which married East Village art sensibilities with Japanese game design to create one of the first rhythm action games. PlayStation 2 saw this trend continue, having space for odd-ball experiences like Mister Mosquito, where you play as a household mosquito terrorizing a suburban family.

Eventually, the PlayStation drew the biggest names in video games. Capcom published the first adult-rated PlayStation game, Resident Evil, which used voice acting and cinematic camera angles to establish the horror game genre. Betrayed by Nintendo's decision to stay with cartridges, the creators of Final Fantasy pledged their next game to the PlayStation, which helped sell consoles. Final Fantasy VII arrived in 1997 and pushed the boundaries of games as a storytelling

medium through its mix of real-time 3D models and prerendered computer graphics footage. In 1998, Konami published Metal Gear Solid, which contained hours of film, voice acting, a Hollywood-tier score and a charismatic rock star personality in its director, Hideo Kojima.

These three games and series would continue to define the modern video game, each new entry topping the last in graphics and production. Final Fantasy X, released only four years after VII, looked like a game made in a different century. Kojima's work would inspire countless video game stories and how they're told. Sony's own studios would crystallize its design philosophies around the cinematic narrative adventure.

Today, Sony's stable is led by Naughty Dog and Santa Monica Studio, creators of *The Last of Us* and *God of War*, respectively. They use expensive motion capture and acting talent along with thousands of hours spent on special effects and graphics to create games that rival big-screen superhero flicks. These games are among

the most critically acclaimed works of the medium, but the higher costs have cut into profit margins, extending development cycles from years to almost a decade.

Former PlayStation boss Shawn Layden has publicly expressed concern about this exact issue, saying that ballooning budgets have created a frightening atmosphere for "risk-averse" publishers. Sony fell victim to its own hubris this year and created one of the largest entertainment flops in recent memory: With a reported budget of at least \$200 million and at least six years of development time, Concord was on sale for less than two weeks before Sony recalled the game for dismal sales.

The Concord failure illustrates the precarious situation Sony PlayStation finds itself in today. Concord was meant to be an expanding intellectual property that appeals to people of all ages and interests, something Sony lacks because of its 30-year persistence in catering toward the "adult" gamer. PlayStation is a victim of its own success, successfully maturing the games market only to plateau with an aging, narrowing audience.

Fortunately, the spirit of freewheeling creativity is now everywhere in the games industry. The PC space further lowered the barrier of entry and is now home to more experimental games. PlayStation used to feel like the platform where no matter who you are, there's a unique game experience catered just for you. Today, it's just like every other video game platform, especially since many of its once-exclusive games are now available on PC.

To its eternal credit, PlayStation's mission was to shatter the status quo, only to become it. It shaped the games business as we know it today and matured the medium along with the audience. If PlayStation wants to repeat its groundbreaking 30-year run, it would take a different bag of magic tricks for a tough crowd that's now seen it all.

CROSSWORD AND COMICS

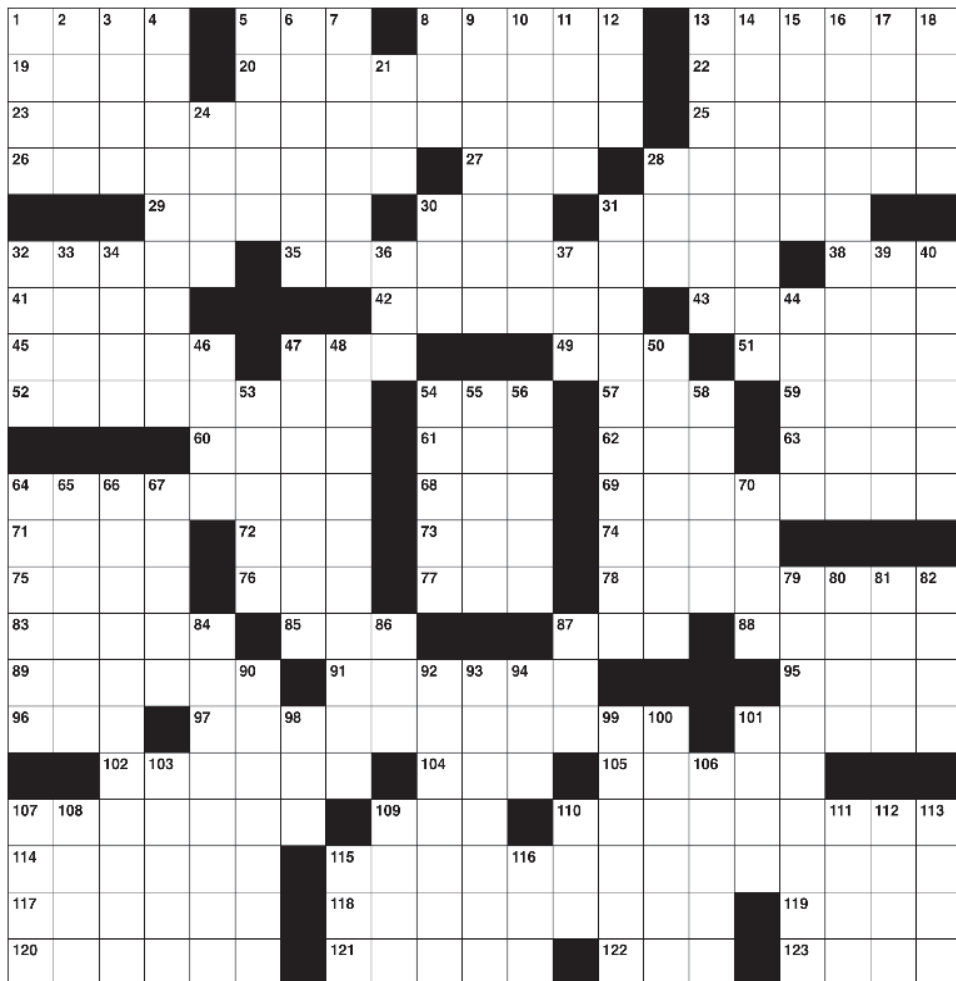
NEW YORK TIMES CROSSWORD

DRIVE AROUND THE BLOCK

BY JOHN LIEB / EDITED BY JOEL FAGLIANO

John Lieb is a high school mathematics teacher and football and baseball coach living in Boston. He is also the co-director of Boswords, a series of in-person and online crossword-puzzle tournaments. This is his first Sunday for The Times. He is particularly proud of his fresh clues for crossword staples, such as at 122-Across, 3-Down and 111-Down.

- | | | | |
|--|--|--|---|
| ACROSS | 47 Aired of annual "A Christmas Story" marathons | 97 *Holding that's hard to convert to cash | 10 John of "Footloose" |
| 1 Smack | 49 ___ Plaines, Ill. | 101 *See 32-Across | 11 Record label for Buffalo Springfield |
| 5 Source of distress for a bull | 51 Manage | 102 Purveyor of lifeguard gear | 12 "Put a sock in it!" |
| 8 George Eliot's "___ Marner" | 52 Americana symbol | 104 X exchanges, for short | 13 Inspiration for the Camaro and Firebird |
| 13 Actress Barton of "The O.C." | 54 Decorate at a bakery | 105 ___ metabolism | 14 Xenon, e.g. |
| 19 Home of Oberlin College | 57 Grumpy friend | 107 Settled down for the night | 15 Rocky debris |
| 20 Economist who wrote about an "invisible hand" | 59 Flashes | 109 Seer's sphere | 16 *Expectation at the start of a hotel stay |
| 22 Clear, in a way | 60 Once, old-style | 110 Midwestern city where Pete Buttigieg was mayor | 17 [Stop looking at your phone! Go!] |
| 23 *Blemish on a vehicle | 61 Clinch | 114 Uselessly | 18 Matures |
| 25 Untroubled | 62 East Lansing sch. | 115 *1984 Sade hit | 21 Hosts |
| 26 Small talks | 63 "Now!" | 117 "You pickin' up what I'm puttin' down?" | 24 What a par 5 has never been, on the P.G.A. Tour |
| 27 "___, me?" | 64 Info provider at a crossroads | 118 Businessperson bringing in beaucoup bucks | 28 Tre + tre |
| 28 Things compared between Wordle solvers | 65 Rapper ___ Spice | 119 It goes with the flow | 30 Org. for John Cena and Roman Reigns |
| 29 Norman Vincent ___, "The Power of Positive Thinking" author | 74 ___ Nationalgalerie, modern art museum in Berlin | 120 Worked the land | 31 Operate at a heavy loss |
| 30 Joker | 75 Diving bird | 121 Like Sanskrit | 32 Emmy winner born Alphonso D'Abruzzo |
| 31 Defeated | 76 Always, in verse | 122 Digits rarely given out in a bar: Abbr. | 33 Arrange, as hair |
| 32 *With 101-Across, extra level of intricacy | 77 Diamonds, informally | 123 Exam on which Elle Woods got a 179 in "Legally Blonde" | 34 Jettison |
| 35 *Like a weakly hit ground ball | 83 Actor Elgort of "West Side Story" | | 36 Special ___ |
| 38 Lotion letters | 85 Ride the pine | DOWN | 37 Took control |
| 41 Clamorous | 87 Address a gray area? | 1 Bartlett cousin | 39 Mr. Bigglesworth, to Dr. Evil |
| 42 Youth sports level | 88 Either of two wisecracking film critics in "Mystery Science Theater 3000" | 2 "Not gonna fly" | 40 Winter morning phenomena |
| 43 Understand, so to speak | 89 Dirt-y words? | 3 Voice heard by millions worldwide | 44 Thompson of "The Marvels" |
| 45 "The Corsican Brothers" author, 1844 | 91 Co-star of 1952's "Moulin Rouge," familiarly | 4 Play down | 46 Trickle |
| | 95 Big name in travel mugs | 5 Russian country house | 47 Cold comfort? |
| | 96 Summer on the Seine | 6 Things to strive for | 48 Leader of the Pink Ladies in "Grease" |
| | | 7 Lilac or lavender | 50 "I was wrong . . . big deal!" |
| | | 8 One of 15 boycotting the 1984 Summer Olympics: Abbr. | 53 Government investigation |
| | | 9 "That's already crossed my desk" | 54 Positive votes |
| | | | 55 "___ the day!" |
| | | | 56 Comfort |
| | | | 58 One leaving you in stitches |
| | | | 64 Livestock feed |
| | | | 65 "Your accusation is unfounded!" |
| | | | 66 *Quickly moves past in conversation |
| | | | 67 Tots, in Tijuana |
| | | | 69 "Cinderella" setting |
| | | | 80 Toe the line |
| | | | 81 Form of memorization |
| | | | 82 Brouhaha |
| | | | 84 0 to 100, maybe |
| | | | 86 Mao ___-tung |
| | | | 87 Courtroom figs. |
| | | | 90 Straightened, as feathers |
| | | | 92 Alternative to iOS |
| | | | 93 Machine waiting to enter the middle of this grid, as suggested by the answers to the starred clues |
| | | | 94 Bad sound to hear while biking |
| | | | 98 Incongruous |
| | | | 99 Volume options on an iPad? |
| | | | 100 Gray-brown shades |
| | | | 101 Cowardly Lion portrayer |
| | | | 103 Song of David |
| | | | 106 Unbending |
| | | | 107 Musical phrase |
| | | | 108 Fit for service |
| | | | 109 Mideast sultanate |
| | | | 110 ___ Na Na |
| | | | 111 Guesses of interest in the cellphone lot |
| | | | 112 Brilliant observation? |
| | | | 113 "Phooey!" |
| | | | 115 Eastern honorific |
| | | | 116 Cable choice for film fans |



GUNSTON STREET



"Gunston Street" is drawn by Basil Zaviski. Email him at gunstonstreet@yahoo.com, and online at gunstonstreet.com.

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FACES

Honoring Motown's music legacy

Smokey Robinson, Halle Bailey host TV special in celebration of music label's cultural influence

By JONATHAN LANDRUM JR.
Associated Press

Smokey Robinson and Halle Bailey — bridging Motown's old and new school — lent their voices during a holiday special to honor the groundbreaking record label that changed music forever.

Robinson and Bailey hosted “A Motown Christmas,” a special that celebrated Motown's iconic music and influence on American culture. The show included solo performances, duets and group medleys.

The show boasted an all-star lineup including Robinson, Bailey, Gladys Knight, Andra Day, The Temptations, Jamie Foxx and Ashanti. Other performances featured BeBe Winans, JoJo, Martha Reeves, the Vandellas, Jordin Sparks, Machine Gun Kelly, October London and Pentatonix.

Here are some insights into the special, which is now streaming on Peacock:

For years, Robinson and Motown founder Berry Gordy celebrated their success with “elaborate” Christmas gifts for each other. But eventually, they decided to forgo the flashy exchanges.

“That’s what we did a long time ago,” Robinson said.

Now, their holiday tradition is simply catching up — whether it’s over a call or casual hangout.

When Bailey visited South Carolina for Christmas, her grandfather filled the house with Motown music.

One of the first songs she remembers hearing is the 1965 single “The Tracks of My Tears,” composed by Robinson, Pete

Moore and Marv Tarplin from the singing group The Miracles. Another moment was when she and her sister, Chloe Bailey, performed The Supremes’ 1964 track “Baby Love” during a talent show, sporting black sequin dresses while trying to mimic their moves.

“That’s how I first started listening to it,” said Halle Bailey, who starred in Disney’s live-action remake of “The Little Mermaid.” “I remember the feeling of Christmas and the music of Motown being just the beautiful background music, anytime you’re opening presents. It’s just amazing.”

More than 25 Motown songs are on display, including classics such as: “ABC”; “Ain’t No Mountain High Enough”; “Dancing in the Streets”; “I Heard It Through the Grapevine”; “My Girl”; “Reach Out (I’ll Be There)”; and “Superstition.”

Robinson sang “Tears of a Clown,” “Being With You” and “Tracks of My Tears.”

Bailey performed a medley celebrating Diana Ross and the Supremes. She also performed “Stop (In the Name of Love),” “Baby Love” and “You Keep Me Hanging On.”

“When you grow up listening to this music, it lives inside of you forever,” Bailey said. “It was truly an honor to perform those songs that sang in my heart since I was a little girl.”

The 11-piece live band for “A Motown Christmas” was led by Emmy Award-winning musical director Rickey Minor.

NBC previously aired two Mo-



NBCUniversal

Smokey Robinson, left, and Halle Bailey, celebrated their mutual love of the music of Motown while hosting their holiday special.

town television specials, including “Motown 25: Yesterday, Today, Forever” and “Motown Returns to the Apollo,” which both won Emmy Awards.

When Gordy launched Motown, he gave Black musicians the platform to showcase their talents at a time when they struggled to get records played on mainstream radio stations.

Gordy’s label introduced and helped launch the careers of some of the biggest-selling stars, from Marvin Gaye to Lionel Richie.

The success of Gordy’s label is captured at the Motown Museum in Detroit, the first headquarters of Gordy’s music empire where Stevie Wonder, The Supremes, the Miracles and other performers recorded hits. Motown moved to California in 1972.

Robinson, 84, pointed during a pre-show interview toward 24-year-old Bailey, a living testament

to how Motown’s magic has transcended generations.

“This lady right here, she’s living proof of the importance of Motown,” said Robinson, who was the lead in the pioneering Motown group, the Miracles. He was once the label’s vice president.

“When Motown was started, she wasn’t even born,” he continued. “And here she knows the music. She knows the artists. I think there are kids now, her son, who will grow up knowing Motown. Kids who haven’t been born yet will know it.”

Bailey called Motown “universal.”

“The longevity of the music,” she said. “The truth and honesty of the music. The stories told. You resonate with almost every song because you’ve been through it or you’re going through it. Each song speaks to your heart. They stay with you.”



CHRIS PIZZELLO, INVISION/AP

Double Golden Globe nominee Selena Gomez has announced her engagement to music producer Benny Blanco.

Selena Gomez announces engagement

From wire reports

Selena Gomez is capping a big year in a big way — she has announced that she’s engaged to music producer and songwriter Benny Blanco.

The Grammy- and Emmy-nominated performer announced she was off the market in an Instagram post Wednesday of her ring and an embrace with her fiancé, with the caption “Forever begins now.”

Gomez became a Golden Globe double nominee Monday for her roles in “Emilia Pérez” and “Only Murders in the Building.”

Blanco and Gomez worked together on the 2019 song “I Can’t Get Enough,” which also featured J Balvin and Tainy.

‘Friends’-themed game show premiering on Max

A game show inspired by “Friends” will hit the airwaves this month in celebration of the 30th anniversary of the iconic NBC sitcom.

Comedian and actress Whitney Cummings will host the four-part series “Fast Friends,” set to premiere Dec. 19 on Max. New episodes will be released each Thursday through Jan. 9.

The streamer on Tuesday released a first look at the game show, which was filmed at the interactive “Friends Experience” exhibit in New York City. The show features competing pairs of “Friends” superfans facing off among a number of pieces from the set of the sitcom, including the famous orange couch from coffee shop Central Perk.

Other news

■ **George Joseph Kresge Jr.**, who was known to generations of TV watchers as the mesmerizing entertainer and mentalist The Amazing Kreskin, died Tuesday at his home in Caldwell, N.J. He was 89. Kreskin launched his television career in the 1960s and remained popular for decades, making guest appearances on talk shows hosted by everyone from Merv Griffin to Johnny Carson to Jimmy Fallon.

‘Golden Bachelor’ Gerry Turner reveals cancer diagnosis

By NARDINE SAAD
Los Angeles Times

There was more to the shocking “Golden Bachelor” divorce than met the eye. Gerry Turner, who charmed all ages as the ABC franchise’s elder star, has cancer and he says that’s what cut short his marriage to final rose recipient Theresa Nist.

The 72-year-old revealed to People on Tuesday that early in their marriage he was diagnosed with a rare bone marrow cancer, which influenced their decision to split.

Upon announcing their divorce in April, Turner and Nist said that distance was mainly the culprit. The two couldn’t decide whether they should live in Turner’s Indiana or Nist’s New Jersey — because they didn’t want to be separated from their respective families.

The reality star said the cancer revelation “probably will clear up a lot of mystery” around what happened at the beginning of the year.

“As Theresa and I were trying very hard to find our lifestyle and where we were going to

live and how we were going to make our life work, I was unfortunately diagnosed with cancer,” he told People.

The former couple, who got engaged during the “Golden Bachelor” finale that aired in November 2023, tied the knot during an ABC special that aired in January. But three months later, the two announced on “Good Morning America” that they were calling it quits. Turner filed his divorce petition the same day, ending the short-lived marriage to the financial services professional.

Turner said his diagnosis followed a three-year-old shoulder injury that he sustained while teaching a pickleball class. But he got busy and didn’t have it properly looked at until after his run on the reality show.

The reality star said he was then diagnosed with Waldenström’s macroglobulinemia, a slow-growing bone marrow cancer. The Mayo

Clinic says it’s a non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma that occurs when white blood cells turn into cancer cells and build up in the spongy material of the marrow.

“Unfortunately, there’s no cure for it. So that weighs heavily in every decision I make,” Turner told People. “It was like 10 tons of concrete were just dropped on me. And I was a bit in denial for a while; I didn’t want to admit to it.”

The widower shared the perceived blood disorder news with Nist in February and underwent additional testing for a more definitive diagnosis. He told Nist in mid-March that it was cancer. Their conversation was brief and she was understandably “a little bit awestruck” by the news, he said.

“I wanted my life to continue on as normal as possible, and that led me to believing that as normal as possible more meant spending time with my family, my two daughters, my two son-in-laws, my granddaughters,” he said, adding that “the importance of finding the way with Theresa was still there, but it became less of a priority.”



Turner

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Furry fugitive gains fame eluding dart guns, nets

LA NEW ORLEANS — A scruffy little fugitive is on the lam again in New Orleans, gaining fame as he outwits a tenacious band of citizens armed with night-vision binoculars, nets and a tranquilizer rifle.

Scrim, a 17-pound mutt that's mostly terrier, has become a folk hero, inspiring tattoos, T-shirts and even a ballad as he eludes capture from the posse of volunteers.

And like any antihero, Scrim has a backstory: Rescued from semi-feral life at a trailer park and adopted from a shelter, the dog broke loose in April and scurried around the city until he was cornered in October and brought to a new home. Weeks later, he'd had enough. Scrim leaped out of a second-story window, a desperate act recorded in a now-viral video. Since then, despite a stream of daily sightings, he's roamed free.

Leading the recapture effort is Michelle Cheramie, a 55-year-old former information technology professional. She lost everything — home, car, possessions — in Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and in the aftermath, found her calling rescuing pets.

Scrim's repeated escapades have prompted near-daily local media coverage and a devoted on-line following.

Faulty gas fitting causes chocolate factory blast

PA WEST READING — Cascading failures involving a corroded steam pipe and a defective natural gas fitting caused a powerful explosion in 2023 at a Pennsylvania chocolate factory, killing seven workers when the company failed to evacuate, a federal safety board said.

About 70 production workers and 35 office staff at R.M. Palmer Co. were working in two adjacent buildings at the time of the blast. Employees in both buildings told federal investigators they could smell gas before the explosion. Workers at the plant have accused the company of ignoring warnings of a natural gas leak, saying the plant, in a small town 60 miles northwest of Philadelphia, should have been evacuated.

The National Transportation Safety Board said the factory failed to have natural gas emergency procedures in place that could have resulted in an immediate evacuation. The explosion leveled one building and heavily damaged another, sending flames more than 40 feet into the air and causing \$42 million in property damage.

Kayaker who faked death, fled to Europe in custody

WI GREEN LAKE — A Wisconsin man who faked his own drowning and left his wife and three children to go to Eastern Europe is in police custody, online records showed.



BRETT DUKE, THE NEW ORLEANS ADVOCATE/AP

Michelle Cheramie, director of Zeus' Rescues, left, walks with Scrim at the Metairie Small Animal Hospital in Metairie.

Ryan Borgwardt, 45, was booked into the Green Lake County Jail, according to the Victim Information and Notification Everyday system, a service that provides information to crime victims such as a person's jail custody status. No charges were listed.

Borgwardt told authorities that he faked his death because of "personal matters," the Green Lake County Sheriff Mark Podoll said. He told them that in mid-August he traveled about 50 miles from his home in Watertown to Green Lake, where he overturned his kayak, dumped his phone and then paddled an inflatable boat to shore. He said he picked that lake because it's the deepest in Wisconsin.

Man who jumped desk to attack judge is sentenced

NV LAS VEGAS — A man who was captured on video attacking a judge in a Las Vegas courtroom after vaulting over her bench and desk has been sentenced to decades in prison.

Deobra Redden was ordered to serve between 26 and 65 years in a Nevada prison for the attack on Clark County District Court Judge Mary Kay Holthus, KLAS-TV in Las Vegas reported.

Redden, 31, pleaded guilty but mentally ill in September to attempted murder and other charges, ending his trial shortly after Holthus had testified that she feared for her life when Redden vaulted over her 4-foot-high bench and landed on her.

The attack happened Jan. 3 as Holthus was about to deliver Redden's sentence in a separate felony

battery case.

Redden's defense lawyer Carl Arnold has said his client was not taking his prescribed medication to control his diagnosed schizophrenia at the time of the attack.

Ex-Rep. Weiner, jailed for sexting child, eyes return

NY NEW YORK CITY — Former U.S. Rep. Anthony Weiner has filed to run for a seat on the New York City Council, launching a potential political comeback after his once-promising career was destroyed by sexting scandals and later a criminal conviction for having illicit online contact with a child.

Campaign finance records list a campaign committee that was set up on Friday for Weiner called Weiner 25, in addition to listing him as a candidate for a council seat in lower Manhattan.

In an interview, Weiner, a Democrat, said he is "still exploring" whether to actually campaign for the office, but said he opened the committee so he could participate in a forum held by the Downtown Independent Democrats. Weiner pleaded guilty in 2017 to having illicit online contact with a 15-year-old girl and was sentenced to 21 months in federal prison. He was released in 2019 and was ordered to register as a sex offender.

2 bodies recovered after fishing boat capsized

AK JUNEAU — Two bodies have been recovered amid debris from a fishing boat that reportedly capsized with five

people aboard in rough seas in waters off southeast Alaska.

Authorities believe the two individuals had been on the boat based on evidence found at the site, including buoys and other gear associated with the Wind Walker, Austin McDaniel, a spokesperson with the Alaska Department of Public Safety, said.

The bodies were being taken to the state medical examiner's office for autopsies and identification, the department said.

Authorities traveled to a bay east of the community of Hoonah after a beachcomber reported finding the remains and debris, which included fishing gear and survival suits from the boat, according to the department and McDaniel. According to the U.S. Coast Guard, the crew of the Wind Walker sent a mayday call at 12:10 a.m. Dec. 1, indicating the 50-foot boat was overturning off Point Couverden, southwest of Juneau.

Lawmaker's party switch gives GOP supermajority

FL WEST PALM BEACH — If last month's election wasn't painful enough for Florida Democrats, they're losing another state House seat after one of their members announced that she's switching parties.

State Rep. Susan Valdés, a former school board member who was reelected as a Democrat last month, said on X that she is "tired of being the party of protesting."

Valdés ran to be chairperson for her local county's Democratic executive committee earlier this month.

Republicans have controlled the governor's office and both branches of the Legislature since 1999. Valdés is serving her final two years before leaving office due to term limits. Republicans now have an 86-34 majority in the House.

Monarch butterflies to be listed as threatened

WI MADISON — U.S. wildlife officials announced a decision Tuesday to extend federal protections to monarch butterflies after years of warnings from environmentalists that populations are shrinking and the beloved pollinator may not survive climate change.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service plans to add the butterfly to the threatened species list by the end of next year following an extensive public comment period.

The Endangered Species Act affords extensive protections to species the wildlife service lists as endangered or threatened. Under the act, it's illegal to import, export, possess, transport or kill an endangered species. A threatened listing allows for exceptions to those protections.

In the monarch's case, the proposed listing would generally prohibit anyone from killing or transporting the butterfly. People could continue to remove milkweed, a key food source for monarch caterpillars, from their gardens and fields but would be prohibited from changing the land to make it permanently unusable for the species.

Bizarro

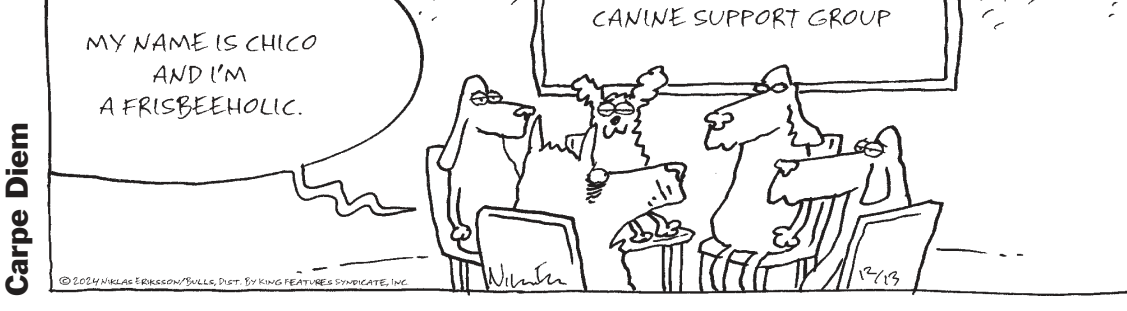
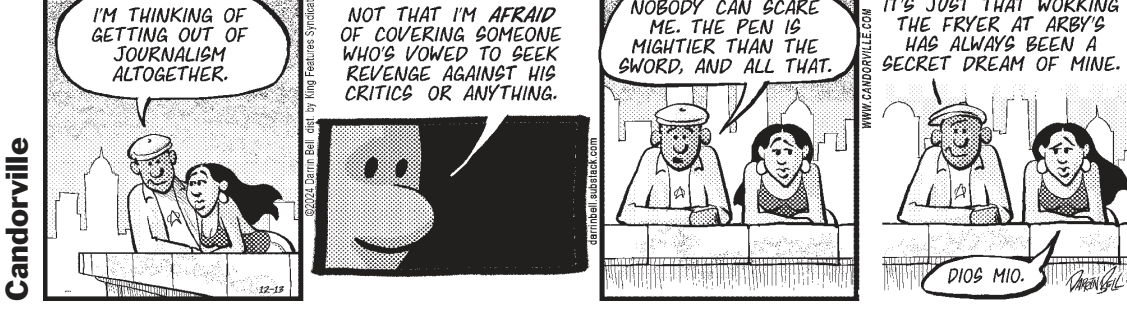
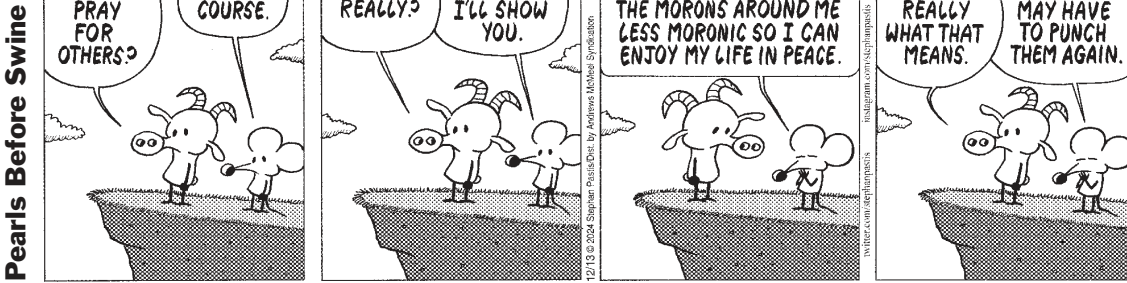
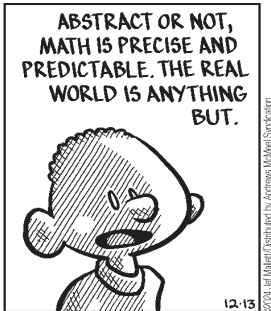
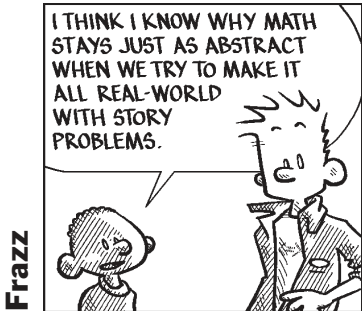


Loose Parts



Eugene Sheffer Crossword

1	2	3	4	5		6	7	8		9	10	11
12						13				14		
15						16				17		
		18			19					20		
21	22			23				24				
25			26		27		28					
29				30			31			32	33	34
			35			36				37		
38	39	40				41		42		43		
44						45				46		
47				48				49			50	51
52				53				54				
55				56				57				



ACROSS

- 1 Belted area
- 6 Ship's sail
- 9 '60s chic
- 12 Host
- 13 Nest egg letters
- 14 URL ender
- 15 Bar mishap
- 16 Social groups
- 18 Opera legend Maria
- 20 Source
- 21 Wire measure
- 23 — card (cell phone insert)
- 24 Lincoln's coin
- 25 With (Fr.)
- 27 Saw
- 29 Home of St. Francis
- 31 Pizza topping
- 35 "Fast Car" singer Chapman
- 37 Jog
- 38 Skydiver's camera
- 41 Author Tolstoy
- 43 Whatever
- 44 "Superfood" berry
- 45 Signs from above?
- 47 Bodybuilder's pride
- 49 Pale purple

DOWN

- 19 TV chef Bastianich
- 21 Goat's plaint
- 22 ICU hookups
- 24 Corral
- 26 — acid
- 28 Trifled (with)
- 30 "No seats"
- 32 Prophets
- 33 Sine qua —
- 34 Hog haven
- 36 Concludes
- 38 Entire range
- 39 Eyelike openings
- 40 Peoples' histories
- 42 Edmonton player
- 45 Goose egg
- 46 Suffix for billion
- 48 "Bad" cholesterol
- 50 Do something
- 51 Dol. fractions

Answer to Previous Puzzle

T	A	L	C		P	R	Y		O	W	N	S		
E	L	O	I		A	T	E		S	E	E	P		
A	B	C	D		G	E	O		P	L	E	A		
M	A	K	E	D	O		W	O	R	L	D	S		
					R	A	P		N	E	W			
B	I	O	S		A	N	N	O	Y	E	R	S		
A	S	K			G	O	A			L	O	O		
T	E	A	R	D	O	W	N			S	L	I	D	
					Y	O	U		U	M	A			
C	L	O	U	D	S				N	Y	M	P	H	S
O	A	K	S			A	J	A		B	E	E	T	
A	M	A	T			R	A	N		A	C	R	E	
L	A	Y	S			A	B	U		S	K	E	W	

12-13

CRYPTOQUIP

UTVL CQC LTM KVP UTG
 UGAJMC VZ V BGU KQXJMA ZVS
 MVBT KGAPQPY? "VP RCCMA
 CVS, VP RCCMA CGXXVA."
 Yesterday's Cryptoquip: THAT LADY NO LONGER ENJOYED HER JOB WORKING AT THE BREAD BAKERY. THINGS WERE GETTING STALE.
 Today's Cryptoquip Clue: C equals D

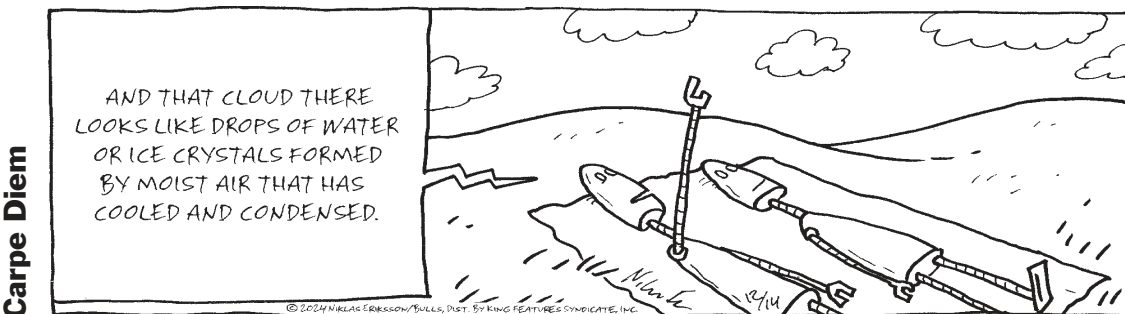
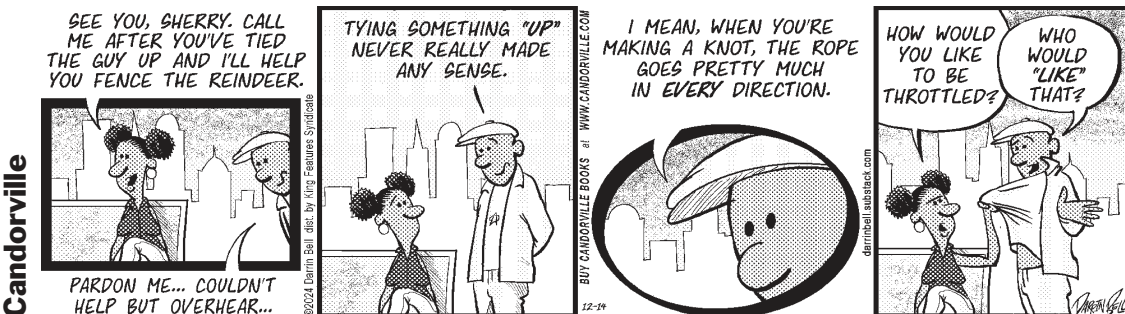
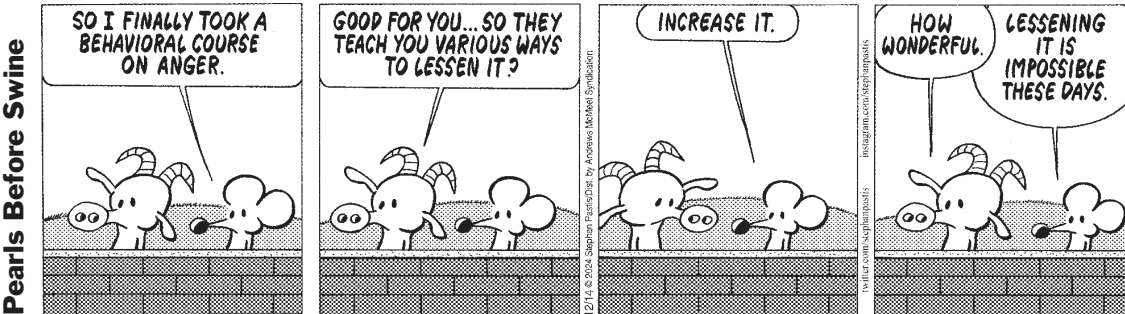
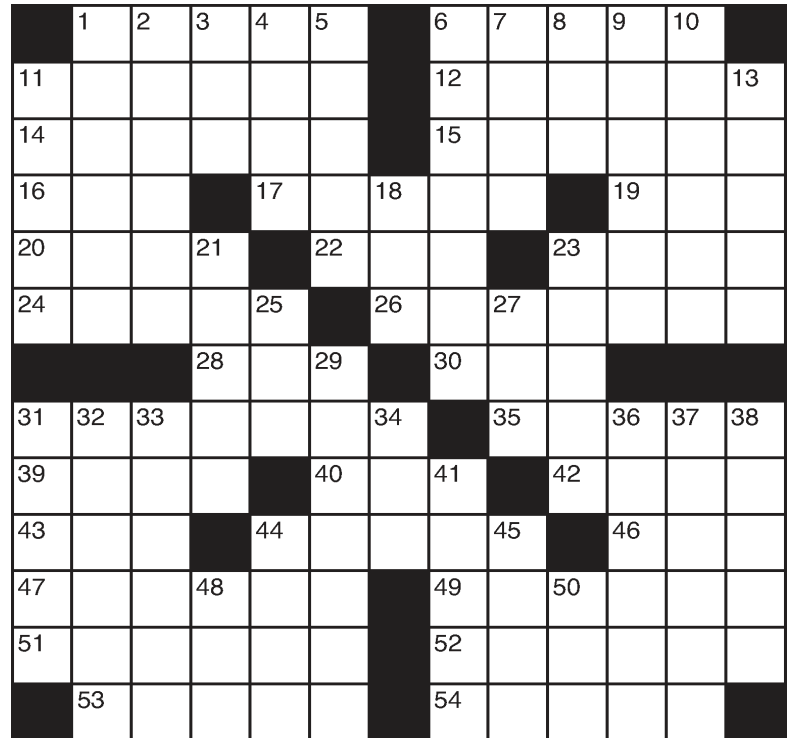
Bizarro



Loose Parts

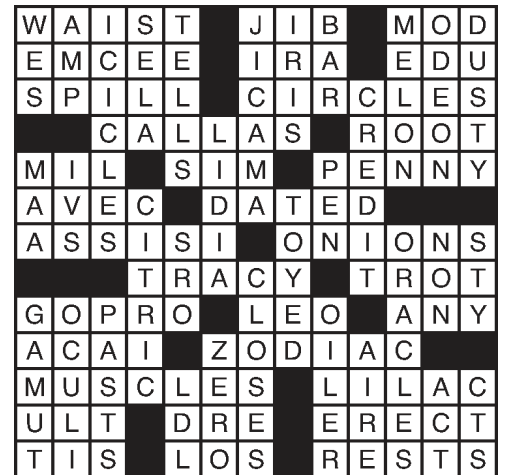


Eugene Sheffer Crossword



- ACROSS**
- 1 "What's the —?"
 - 6 Nibbles
 - 11 Sushi condiment
 - 12 Fesses up
 - 14 Biker's headgear
 - 15 Bathroom bowl
 - 16 Equi-
 - 17 Some IRAs
 - 19 Sale rack abbr.
 - 20 Siestas
 - 22 Court divider
 - 23 "Understood"
 - 24 Upright
 - 26 Busy store in December
 - 28 Granola morsel
 - 30 Actor Brynner
 - 31 Dog's plaything
 - 35 Track horse
 - 39 Lounge
 - 40 "Certainly!"
 - 42 Algeria's neighbor
 - 43 "Alley —"
 - 44 Wedding setting
 - 46 Lawn material
 - 47 Major shock
 - 49 Delaware Valley tribe
 - 51 Move fast
 - 52 Pueblo structures
 - 53 Cache
 - 54 South Indian crepes
- DOWN**
- 1 Roman ruler
 - 2 On an angle
 - 3 Highland hat
 - 4 Driver with a handle
 - 5 Discover, as an idea
 - 6 Small rubber duck, say
 - 7 Nuptial vows
 - 8 Texter's "Enough!"
 - 9 "Ocean Eyes" singer Billie
 - 10 Sound system
 - 11 Complain
 - 13 Throat affliction
 - 18 Hanoi holiday
 - 21 Grumpy look
 - 23 Imam's faith
 - 25 Bit of ink
 - 27 "Uh-huh"
 - 29 "Babes in —"
 - 31 Fabric
 - 32 "Yay!"
 - 33 Sun Bowl city
 - 34 Even so
 - 36 Melon type
 - 37 Runs off to wed
 - 38 Carnival attractions
 - 41 Leafy lunch
 - 44 Pt. of U.S.A.
 - 45 Make over
 - 48 Actress Hagen
 - 50 Refusals

Answer to Previous Puzzle



12-14

CRYPTOQUIP

RAVO B MEGXSZOK QGK RZSA
 B WBAGKBOF-XVQ HGBS KVSM
 HAZDDF, WZKAS ZS RVBX BO
 ZXZMA MRVBSVX?

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: WHAT DID THE MAN WHO WORKED AS A COW MILKER SAY EACH MORNING? "AN UDDER DAY, AN UDDER DOLLAR."

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: K equals G

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Ukraine helped Syrian rebels humiliate Russia

BY DAVID IGNATIUS

The Washington Post

The Syrian rebels who swept to power in Damascus last weekend received drones and other support from Ukrainian intelligence operatives who sought to undermine Russia and its Syrian allies, according to sources familiar with Ukrainian military activities abroad.

Ukrainian intelligence sent about 20 experienced drone operators and about 150 first-person-view drones to the rebel headquarters in Idlib, Syria, four to five weeks ago to help Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the leading rebel group based there, the knowledgeable sources said.

The aid from Kyiv played only a modest role in overthrowing Syrian President Bashar Assad, Western intelligence sources believe.

But it was notable as part of a broader Ukrainian effort to strike covertly at Russian operations in the Middle East, Africa and inside Russia itself.

Ukraine's covert assistance program in Syria has been an open secret, though senior Biden administration officials said repeatedly in answer to my questions that they weren't aware of it.

Ukraine's motivation is obvious: Facing a Russian onslaught inside their country, Ukrainian intelligence has looked for other fronts where it can bloody Russia's nose and undermine its clients.

The Ukrainians have advertised their intentions. The Kyiv Post in a June 3 article quoted a source in the Ukrainian military intelligence service, known as the GUR, who told the newspaper that "since the beginning of the year, the [Syrian] rebels, supported by Ukrainian operatives, have inflicted numerous strikes on Russian military facilities represented in the region."

That story, posted online, included a link to video footage that showed attacks on a stone-ribbed bunker, a white van and other targets that it said had been struck by Ukrainian-supported rebels inside Syria. The paper said that the Syria operation was conducted by a special unit known as "Khimik" within the GUR, "in collaboration with the Syrian opposition."

Russian officials have been complaining for months about the Ukrainian paramilitary effort in Syria. Alexander Lavrentyev, Russia's special representative for Syria, said in a November interview with TASS, "We do indeed have information that Ukrainian specialists from the Main Intelligence Directorate of Ukraine are on the territory of Idlib."

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov had made a similar claim in September about "Ukrainian intelligence emissaries" in Idlib. He claimed they were conducting "dirty operations," according to the Syrian newspaper Al-Watan, which asserted that Lt. Gen. Kyrylo Budanov, head of the GUR, had been in touch personally with HTS.

Before the HTS offensive toppled Assad, Russian officials had asserted that Ukraine's link with the rebel group was an attempt to recruit Syrian fighters for its war against the Kremlin.

A September report in an online site called the Cradle alleged that Ukraine had offered 75 unmanned aerial vehicles in a "drones-for-fighters" deal with HTS. But there isn't any independent evidence to back this Russian claim.

Russia clearly was surprised by HTS's



LORENZO TUGNOLI/For The Washington Post

A group of militants celebrate the fall of the Assad regime in central Damascus on Monday.

Like Ukraine's Africa forays and its assault on the Kursk region inside Russia, the covert operation in Syria reflects an attempt to widen the battlefield — and hurt the Russians in areas where they're unprepared.

rapid advance on Damascus — but interestingly, Russian sources have tried to minimize the Ukrainian role.

A Dec. 2 article in Middle East Eye quoted a Russian Telegram account, said to reflect the views of the Russian military, that discounted Kyiv's assistance: "Firstly, GUR members did visit Idlib, but they stayed there for only a short time" — not enough to train Syrians to operate unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) from scratch. "Secondly," the message continued, "HTS has long had its own UAV program."

The Syria operation isn't the only instance of Ukrainian military intelligence operating abroad to harass Russian operatives. The BBC reported in August that Ukraine had helped rebels in northern Mali ambush Russian mercenaries from the Wagner Group. The July 27 attack killed 84 Wagner operatives and 47 Malians, the BBC said.

Andriy Yusov, a GUR spokesman, touted

the Mali operation several days later, saying that the Malian rebels "received necessary information, and not just information, which enabled a successful military operation against Russian war criminals," according to the BBC. After the attack, Mali severed its diplomatic relations with Ukraine.

Budanov pledged in April 2023 that Ukraine would pursue Russians guilty of war crimes "in any part of the world," according to a news report. Budanov's aggressive intelligence operations have sometimes worried the Biden administration, U.S. officials have told me.

I asked Budanov in an interview at his headquarters in Kyiv last April about the GUR's reported operations against the Wagner militia in Africa.

"We conduct such operations aimed at reducing Russian military potential, anywhere where it's possible," he answered. "Why should Africa be an exception?"

Like Ukraine's Africa forays and its assault on the Kursk region inside Russia, the covert operation in Syria reflects an attempt to widen the battlefield — and hurt the Russians in areas where they're unprepared. Ukraine's aid wasn't "the drone that broke that camel's back," so to speak. But it helped, in at least a small way, to bring down Russia's most important client in the Middle East.

And like Israel in its failure to anticipate Hamas's surge across the Gaza fence on Oct. 7, 2023, Russia saw the Ukrainian-backed rebels coming, but couldn't mobilize to stop the attack and prevent the devastating consequences.

SCOREBOARD/NBA

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Wednesday's men's scores

EAST

Delaware St. 71, NJIT 59
Howard 124, Va.-Lynchburg 50
Maine 61, Duquesne 56
Mass.-Lowell 69, LIU 62
Pittsburgh 96, E. Kentucky 56
St. John's 99, Bryant 77
Stonehill 97, Lesley 53
Villanova 86, Fairleigh Dickinson 72

SOUTH

Alabama St. 103, UT Martin 93, OT
Coastal Carolina 82, S. Virginia 57
Kentucky 78, Colgate 67
Louisiana-Lafayette 68, SE Louisiana 61
Louisiana-Monroe 89, Ark.-Pine Bluff 73
Louisville 77, UTEP 74
N. Kentucky 98, Cumberlands 79
North Alabama 74, East Carolina 67
Presbyterian 97, Koalas 57
UNC-Asheville 92, Bluefield 46

MIDWEST

Fort Wayne 78, IU Indianapolis 76
Milwaukee 88, Green Bay 67
Notre Dame 77, Dartmouth 65
Wright St. 88, Marshall 79

SOUTHWEST

Baylor 94, Norfolk St. 69

FAR WEST

BYU 95, Fresno St. 67
Nevada 77, S. Dakota St. 63
San Diego St. 81, Cal Baptist 75
San Francisco 68, CS Stanislaus 52
Utah Valley St. 80, North Dakota 57

Men's Top 25 schedule

Saturday's games

No. 1 Tennessee (8-0) at Illinois (6-2)
No. 2 Auburn (8-1) vs. Ohio St. (6-3) at Atlanta
No. 5 Kentucky (8-1) vs. Louisville (5-4)
No. 6 Marquette (9-1) at Dayton (8-2), 7 p.m.
No. 7 Alabama (7-2) vs. Creighton (7-3)
No. 8 Gonzaga (7-2) vs. No. 18 UConn (7-3) at New York
No. 9 Florida (9-0) vs. Arizona St. (8-1) at Atlanta
No. 10 Kansas (7-2) vs. NC State (6-3)
No. 11 Purdue (8-2) vs. No. 17 Texas A&M (8-2) at Indianapolis
No. 13 Oklahoma (9-0) vs. Oklahoma St. (6-2) at Oklahoma City
No. 16 Clemson (9-1) vs. Memphis (7-2)
No. 19 Mississippi (8-1) vs. Southern Miss. (4-4) at Biloxi, Miss.
No. 20 Wisconsin (8-2) vs. Butler (7-2) at Indianapolis
No. 22 Cincinnati (7-1) vs. Xavier (7-2)
No. 24 UCLA (8-1) vs. Arizona (4-4) at Phoenix
No. 25 Mississippi St. (8-1) vs. McNeese St. (5-4) at Tupelo, Miss.

Sunday's games

No. 3 Iowa St. (7-1) vs. Omaha (4-7)
No. 12 Oregon (9-1) vs. Stephen F. Austin (5-5)

Wednesday's women's scores

EAST

Boston College 62, UMass 57
Penn St. 68, Providence 51
Princeton 66, Rhode Island 54
Rutgers 83, Fairleigh Dickinson 58
St. John's 62, Hofstra 38
St. Peter's 51, LIU Brooklyn 37
Villanova 75, Delaware 65

SOUTH

Coll. of Charleston 66, Jacksonville St. 47
Furman 68, UNC-Asheville 50
Georgia Tech 97, Louisiana-Monroe 37
Liberty 109, Randolph 26
NC State 59, Davidson 57
North Carolina 80, UNC-Greensboro 56
Presbyterian 67, NC Central 63
W. Kentucky 88, Kentucky Wesleyan 61
Winthrop 55, SC State 46

MIDWEST

Fort Wayne 79, IUPUI 71
Green Bay 86, Milwaukee 53
Iowa 75, Iowa St. 69
Kansas 79, UMKC 49
Minnesota 81, Jackson St. 43
Nebraska 63, Tarleton St. 50
S. Dakota St. 76, Dakota Wesleyan 48
Wisconsin 71, Butler 64, 20T

SOUTHWEST

SMU 61, Texas Tech 57

Texas 97, Southern U. 39

FAR WEST

Cal Baptist 73, CS Northridge 71
E. Kentucky 78, Hawaii Hilo 49
San Diego St. 61, Cal St.-Fullerton 58

Women's Top 25 schedule

Sunday's games

No. 2 UConn (8-0) vs. Georgetown (6-3)
No. 3 South Carolina (9-1) vs. South Florida (5-5)
No. 4 LSU (11-0) vs. Louisiana-Lafayette (4-3)
No. 5 Southern Cal (8-1) vs. Elon (4-4)
No. 6 Texas (8-1) at Richmond (9-1)
No. 8 Notre Dame (7-2) vs. E. Michigan (1-5)
No. 10 Oklahoma (8-1) vs. Oral Roberts (6-2)
No. 12 TCU (9-1) vs. Louisiana Tech (5-3)
No. 14 North Carolina (9-1) vs. No. 25 Georgia Tech (9-0)
No. 15 West Virginia (9-1) at Temple (5-3)
No. 17 Michigan St. (9-0) vs. No. 21 Iowa (8-1)
No. 18 Iowa St. (8-2) vs. E. Illinois (3-5)
No. 22 NC State (6-3) at Louisville (5-4)
No. 22 Mississippi (6-3) vs. South Alabama (3-5)
No. 24 Nebraska (8-1) vs. Chattanooga (4-6)

DEALS

Wednesday's transactions

BASEBALL

Major League Baseball

MLB PLAYERS ASSOCIATION — Named Oriana Korin as chief communications officer.

American League

BOSTON RED SOX — Acquired LHP Garrett Crochet from the Chicago White Sox in exchange for RHP Wikelman Gonzalez, C Kyle Teel, OF Braden Montgomery and INF Chase Meidroth. Acquired C Carlos Narvaez from the New York Yankees in exchange for RHP Elmer Rodriguez-Cruz and international bonus pool space.

CHICAGO WHITE SOX — Agreed to terms with RF Mike Tauchman on a one-year contract.

TEXAS RANGERS — Acquired INF Jake Burger from Miami in exchange for SSS Echedry Vargas and Max Acosta and LHP Brayan Mendoza. Agreed to terms with RHP Jacob Webb on a one-year contract.

TAMPA BAY RAYS — Acquired RHP Mike Vasil from Philadelphia in exchange for cash considerations.

National League

MILWAUKEE BREWERS — Agreed to terms with LHP Grant Wolfram on a one-year contract.

NEW YORK METS — Agreed to terms with OF Juan Soto on a 15-year contract.

FOOTBALL

National Football League

ARIZONA CARDINALS — Signed P Michael Palardy to the practice squad.

ATLANTA FALCONS — Placed RB Jase McClellan on injured reserve. Elevated RB Carlos Washington to the active roster.

BUFFALO BILLS — Designated DE Dawaane Smoot and LB Baylon Spector to return from injured reserve.

CHICAGO BEARS — Placed WR DeAndre Carter on injured reserve. Signed DL Jonathan Ford to the active roster and RB Royce Freeman to the practice squad.

CLEVELAND BROWNS — Designated DT Mike Hall Jr. to return to practice. Signed TE Tre McKitty to the practice squad.

DETROIT LIONS — Signed DB Erick Hallett to the practice squad.

GREEN BAY PACKERS — Designated TE Luke Musgrave to return from injured reserve. Signed DL Jeremiah Martin to the practice squad.

INDIANAPOLIS COLTS — Designated C Ryan Kelly and LB Jaylon Carlies to return from injured reserve.

JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS — Signed G Dieter Eischen to the practice squad.

KANSAS CITY CHIEFS — Designated WR Marquise Brown and K Harrison Butker to return from injured reserve.

LOS ANGELES RAMS — Declined to reinstate OT KT Leveston from injured reserve.

MIAMI DOLPHINS — Designated WR Grant DuBose to return from injured reserve.

NEW YORK GIANTS — Placed S Tyler Nubin on injured reserve. Signed OT Jalen McKenzie to the practice squad. Designated C Austin Schlottmann to return from injured reserve. Signed CB Divaad Wilson to a contract.

NEW YORK JETS — Placed WR Irvin Charles on injured reserve. Signed DB Jaylin Simpson to the active roster.

SEATTLE SEAHAWKS — Designated DBs K'Von Wallace and Artie Burns to return from injured reserve. Signed RB Brittann Brown to the practice squad.

WASHINGTON COMMANDERS — Claimed WR K.J. Osborn off waivers from New England.

HOCKEY

National Hockey League

CAROLINA HURRICANES — Recalled C Tyson Jost from Chicago (AHL).

COLUMBUS BLUE JACKETS — Agreed to terms with D Luca Marrelli on three-year contract. Placed C Yegor Chinakhov on injured reserve. Recalled G Jet Greaces from Cleveland (AHL).

DETROIT RED WINGS — Reassigned G Sebastian Cossa to Grand Rapids (AHL).

EDMONTON OILERS — Claimed D Alec Regula off waivers from Boston.

NEW JERSEY DEVILS — Sent D Nick DeSimone to Utica (AHL).

SAN JOSE SHARKS — Waived G Vyacheslav Buteyets.

SEATTLE KRACEN — Recalled F Ryan Winterton from Coachella Valley (AHL).

UTAH HOCKEY CLUB — Recalled D Kevin Connauton from Tucson (AHL).

VANCOUVER CANUCKS — Reassigned D Mark Friedman from Abbotsford (AHL).

SOCCER

Major League Soccer

D.C. UNITED — Acquired M Hosei Kijima from San Diego FC in exchange for \$400,000 in 2025 general allocation money.

SAN DIEGO FC — Acquired D Christopher McVey from D.C. United in exchange for \$50,000 in 2025 general allocation money and up to \$50,000 in conditional 2026 general allocation money if certain metrics are met. Acquired G C.J. dos Santos from Inter Miami in exchange for \$100,000 in 2025 general allocation money.

SEATTLE SOUNDERS — Signed Ds Traivian Sousa and Leo Burney to one-year contracts.

National Women's Soccer League

ORLANDO PRIDE — Signed G Kat Asman to a two-year contract.

UTAH ROYALS FC — Signed F KK Ream to a contract.

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

FCS playoffs

Quarterfinals Friday, Dec. 13

Montana St. vs. Idaho

Saturday, Dec. 14

UC Davis vs. South Dakota
North Dakota St. vs. Mercer
UIW vs. South Dakota St.

NCAA Division II playoffs

Semifinals Dec. 14

Slippery Rock vs. Valdosta St.
Ferris St. vs. Minnesota St.

NCAA Division III playoffs

Quarterfinals Dec. 14

Susquehanna vs. Bethel (Minn.)
Springfield vs. North Central (Ill.)
Mary Hardin-Baylor vs. Johns Hopkins
Salisbury vs. Mount Union

Semifinals Saturday, Dec. 21

Susquehanna-Bethel (Minn.) winner vs. Springfield-North Central (Ill.) winner
Mary Hardin-Baylor-Johns Hopkins winner vs. Salisbury-Mount Union winner

Bowl glance

Dec. 14

Celebration Bowl

Jackson State vs. South Carolina State

IS4S Salute to Veterans Bowl

South Alabama vs. Western Michigan

Dec. 17

Frisco Bowl

Memphis vs. West Virginia

Dec. 18

Boca Raton Bowl

Western Kentucky vs. James Madison

LA Bowl

Cal vs. UNLV

Dec. 19

New Orleans Bowl

Georgia Southern vs. Sam Houston

Dec. 20

Cure Bowl

Ohio vs. Jacksonville State

Gasparilla Bowl

Florida vs. Tulane

College Football Playoff

First Round

Dec. 20

No. 10 Indiana vs. No. 7 Notre Dame

Dec. 21

No. 11 SMU vs. No. 6 Penn State
No. 12 Clemson vs. No. 5 Texas
No. 9 Tennessee vs. No. 8 Ohio State

Dec. 23

Myrtle Beach Bowl

Coastal Carolina vs. UTSA

Dec. 24

Hawai'i Bowl

South Florida vs. San Jose State

Dec. 26

GameAbove Sports Bowl

Pitt vs. Toledo

Rate Bowl

Kansas State vs. Rutgers

68 Ventures Bowl

Arkansas State vs. Bowling Green

Dec. 27

Las Vegas Bowl

Southern California vs. Texas A&M

Liberty Bowl

Texas Tech vs. Arkansas

Holiday Bowl

Syracuse vs. Washington State

Armed Forces Bowl

Oklahoma vs. Navy

Birmingham Bowl

Georgia Tech vs. Vanderbilt

Dec. 28

Fenway Bowl

North Carolina vs. UConn

Pinstripe Bowl

Boston College vs. Nebraska

New Mexico Bowl

TCU vs. Louisiana

Pop-Tarts Bowl

Miami vs. Iowa State

Arizona Bowl

Colorado State vs. Miami (Ohio)

Military Bowl

NC State vs. ECU

Alamo Bowl

BYU vs. Colorado

Independence Bowl

Army vs. Marshall

COLLEGE SOCCER

NCAA D-I men's tournament

Semifinals Friday, Dec. 13

Wake Forest vs. Marshall

Denver vs. Vermont

Championship Monday, Dec. 16

Semifinals winners



MARTA LAVANDIER/AP

Heat forward Jimmy Butler said he doesn't mind his name being in the rumor mill, as his concern is about helping Miami win.

Butler won't focus on future despite trade speculation

By **TIM REYNOLDS**

Associated Press

Jimmy Butler knows there are tons of questions about his future with the Miami Heat. He might get traded, he might leave as a free agent next summer, he might exercise a \$52.4 million option to return to the Heat or he might get a new contract.

"Who knows?" Butler asked.

Evidently, even he doesn't have answers.

The Heat forward—who has led the team to a pair of NBA Finals trips in his Miami tenure — spoke out about trade speculation Wednesday, telling reporters after practice that he doesn't mind his name being in the rumor mill. ESPN reported earlier in the week that the Heat are open to receiving trade offers; that wouldn't be surprising, given Butler's contract status and the possibility that he might leave with the Heat getting nothing in return next summer.

"I actually like it," said Butler, who is averaging 19 points per game this season. "It's good to be talked about. I don't think there's such a thing as bad publicity—to a point."

Butler's future in Miami has been a talking point for some time now.

The Heat could have offered an extension last summer and chose not to, presumably for a variety of reasons including Butler's age — he's 35 — and the fact that he missed 26% of Miami's games over his first five seasons with the team.

He still clearly impacts winning: Miami is 8-2 this season when he scores at least 18 points. And the Heat aren't new to trade specula-

tion; Tyler Herro has been the centerpiece of rumors in each of the last three summers. He is still in Miami, playing at an All-Star level and is the reigning Eastern Conference player of the week.

"Any other narrative, I don't care. Nobody should because most of this stuff has just been all a bunch of gibberish," Heat coach Erik Spoelstra said this week.

Butler said Wednesday that money doesn't really matter to him at this point. He stopped short of saying that he wants to absolutely remain in Miami — "I'm pretty sure y'all are going to get a report that's going to say otherwise anyways, so there's no sense in me answering that question," he said — and that he's not fixated on extensions or trades.

"My kids matter, my happiness matters, my well-being matters and my family matters," Butler said. "Right now, it's all about competing, staying healthy, playing some great basketball. I think I've done that so far, so we'll see what we got."

It has been social media fodder for a few days, with some even suggesting that Butler's hair dye in recent weeks — sometimes yellow, sometimes blue, sometimes red — has matched the teams some of the trade speculation links him to like Golden State, Dallas and Houston. That said, he has insisted since arriving in Miami that he wants to bring the team another championship. That stance has not changed. "We're going to continue to win and I'm proud of the guys," Butler said. "You see everybody out here working and we know what we're capable of."

NBA

AROUND THE NBA

Surprise starts not all that surprising

BY TIM REYNOLDS
Associated Press

There was a conversation Cleveland guard Donovan Mitchell had during training camp, the topic being all the teams that were generating the most preseason buzz in the Eastern Conference. Boston was coming off an NBA championship. New York got Karl-Anthony Towns. Philadelphia added Paul George.

The Cavs? Not a big topic in early October. And Mitchell fully understood why.

“What have we done?” Mitchell asked. “They don’t talk about us. That’s fine. We’ll just hold ourselves to our standard.”

That approach seems to be working.

For the first time in 36 seasons — yes, even before the LeBron James eras in Cleveland — the Cavaliers are atop the NBA at the 25-game mark. They’re 21-4, having come back to earth a bit following a 15-0 start but still better than anyone in the league at this point.

“We’ve kept our standards pretty high,” Cleveland coach Kenny Atkinson said. “And we keep it going.”

The Cavs are just one of the surprise stories that have emerged as the season nears the one-third-done mark. Orlando — the only team still unbeaten at home — is off to its best start in 16 years (17-9) and having done most of that without All-Star forward Paolo Banchero. Houston is 16-8, behind only Cleveland, Boston, Oklahoma City and Memphis in the race so far for the league’s best record.

The Cavaliers were a playoff team a year ago, as were the Magic. And the Rockets planted seeds



SUE OGRONKI/AP

The Orlando Magic’s Franz Wagner, left, and the Cavaliers’ Donovan Mitchell have been major contributors to their teams’ successful starts, with Cleveland maintaining the best record in the NBA thus far.

for improvement last year as well; an 11-game winning streak late in the season fueled a push where they finished 41-41 in a major step forward after a few years of rebuilding.

“We kind of set that foundation last year to compete with everybody,” Houston coach Ime Udoka said. “Obviously, we had some ups and downs with winning and losing streaks at times, but to finish the season the way we did, getting to .500, 11-game winning streak and some close losses against high-level playoff teams, I think we kind of proved that to ourselves last year that that’s who we’re going to be.”

A sign of the respect the Rockets

are getting: BetMGM Scorebook has made them a favorite in 17 of 24 games so far this season, after favoring them only 30 times in 82 games last season.

“Based on coaches, players, GMs, people that we all know what they’re saying, it seems like everybody else is taking notice as well,” Udoka said.

They’re taking notice of Orlando as well. The Magic lost their best player and haven’t skipped a beat.

Banchero’s injury after five games figured to doom Orlando for a while, and the Magic went 0-4 immediately after he tore his oblique. Entering Tuesday, they’re 14-3 since — and have to

regroup yet again. Franz Wagner stepped into the best-player-on-team role when Banchero got hurt, and now Wagner is going to miss several weeks with the same injury.

Ask Orlando coach Jamahl Mosley how the team has persevered, and he’ll quickly credit everyone but himself. Around the league, it’s Mosley getting a ton of the credit — and rightly so — for what the Magic are doing.

“I think that has to do a lot with Mose. ... I have known him a long time,” Phoenix guard Bradley Beal said. “A huge fan of his and what he is doing. It is a testament to him and the way they’ve built this team.”

Kerr: Foul call that led to Warriors’ loss ‘unconscionable’

BY KRISTIE RIEKEN
Associated Press

HOUSTON — Golden State Warriors coach Steve Kerr said a foul call against his team that led to their loss to the Houston Rockets on Wednesday night in the NBA Cup was “unconscionable” and that an elementary school referee wouldn’t have made it.

After Stephen Curry missed a 3-pointer with Golden State up a point with 11 seconds to go, Gary Payton II grabbed the offensive rebound, but turned it over with a pass Jalen Green intercepted. Jonathan Kuminga was then called for a foul against Green while they were on the floor, giving Green two free throws that lifted Houston to the 91-90 victory and a spot in the NBA Cup semifinals.

“That is unconscionable,” Kerr



ASHLEY LANDIS/AP

Golden State Warriors forward Jonathan Kuminga, right, fouls Rockets guard Jalen Green, left, during the second half of an Emirates NBA cup tournament quarterfinal game in Houston on Wednesday.

said. “I mean, I don’t even understand what just happened.”

Kerr thought it should have either been a jump ball or Houston

should have been given the time-out it was attempting to call.

“Our guys battled back, played their (expletives) off and deserved to win that game or at least have a chance for one stop at the end to finish the game,” he said.

“And that was taken from us by a call that I don’t think an elementary school referee would have made. Because that guy would have had feel and said: ‘You know what I’m not going to decide a game on a loose ball 80 feet from the basket.’”

Crew chief Billy Kennedy was asked by a pool reporter why the foul was called.

“The defender makes contact with the neck and shoulder area, warranting a personal foul to be called,” Kennedy said.

Kerr ranted for about two min-

Scoreboard

Eastern Conference

Atlantic Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Boston	19	5	.792	—
New York	15	10	.600	4½
Brooklyn	10	14	.417	9
Philadelphia	7	15	.318	11
Toronto	7	18	.280	12½

Southeast Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Orlando	17	10	.630	—
Miami	12	10	.545	2½
Atlanta	14	12	.538	2½
Charlotte	7	17	.292	8½
Washington	3	19	.136	11½

Central Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Cleveland	21	4	.840	—
Milwaukee	13	11	.542	7½
Indiana	10	15	.400	11
Chicago	10	15	.400	11
Detroit	10	15	.400	11

Western Conference

Southwest Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Houston	17	8	.680	—
Memphis	17	8	.680	—
Dallas	16	9	.640	1
San Antonio	12	12	.500	4½
New Orleans	5	20	.200	12

Northwest Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Oklahoma City	19	5	.792	—
Denver	12	10	.545	6
Minnesota	12	11	.522	6½
Portland	8	16	.333	11
Utah	5	18	.217	13½

Pacific Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Golden State	14	10	.583	—
L.A. Clippers	14	11	.560	½
L.A. Lakers	13	11	.542	1
Phoenix	12	11	.522	1½
Sacramento	12	13	.480	2½

Wednesday’s games

Atlanta 108, New York 100 (Quarterfinal Game 3)
Houston 91, Golden State 90 (Quarterfinal Game 4)

Thursday’s games

Detroit at Boston
Toronto at Miami
Sacramento at New Orleans

Friday’s games

Indiana at Philadelphia
Washington at Cleveland
Brooklyn at Memphis
Charlotte at Chicago
L.A. Lakers at Minnesota
L.A. Clippers at Denver
Phoenix at Utah
San Antonio at Portland

Saturday’s games

Milwaukee vs Atlanta
Oklahoma City vs Houston

utes about the officiating after the game and complained about what he believed was a clear foul on Curry that wasn’t called earlier.

“The game was a complete wrestling match,” Kerr said. “They didn’t call anything. Steph Curry got hit on the elbow plain as day on a jump shot, just clubbed right on there and no call. So you’ve established that you’re just not going to call anything throughout the game, it’s a physical game. Then you’re going to call a loose ball foul on a jump ball situation with guys diving on the floor with the game on the line?”

Houston snapped a 15-game skid against the Warriors, winning for the first time in the series since Feb. 20, 2020, when James Harden and Russell Westbrook led the Rockets.

NHL

Scoreboard

Eastern Conference

Atlantic Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Florida	29	18	9	2	38	108	92
Toronto	28	17	9	2	36	82	72
Boston	30	15	12	3	33	76	95
Tampa Bay	26	14	10	2	30	99	78
Ottawa	28	13	13	2	28	87	87
Detroit	28	11	13	4	26	73	88
Buffalo	29	11	14	4	26	87	95
Montreal	28	11	14	3	25	78	100

Metropolitan Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Washington	27	19	6	2	40	109	74
New Jersey	31	18	10	3	39	103	84
Carolina	28	18	9	1	37	104	83
N.Y. Rangers	28	15	12	1	31	89	83
Philadelphia	29	13	12	4	30	88	101
N.Y. Islanders	30	11	12	7	29	78	90
Pittsburgh	30	12	14	4	28	86	116
Columbus	28	12	13	3	27	96	101

Western Conference

Central Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Minnesota	28	19	5	4	42	91	69
Winnipeg	30	21	9	0	42	111	76
Dallas	27	17	10	0	34	92	69
Colorado	30	17	13	0	34	101	105
St. Louis	29	14	13	2	30	77	90
Utah	28	12	11	5	29	83	84
Chicago	28	9	17	2	20	68	87
Nashville	29	7	16	6	20	64	92

Pacific Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Vegas	28	18	7	3	39	99	82
Los Angeles	28	17	8	3	37	86	72
Edmonton	28	16	10	2	34	84	80
Vancouver	27	14	8	5	33	88	87
Calgary	29	14	10	5	33	78	87
Seattle	30	14	14	2	30	90	90
San Jose	31	10	16	5	25	84	111
Anaheim	27	10	13	4	24	65	84

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.

Tuesday's games

Philadelphia 5, Columbus 3
Carolina 3, San Jose 2
Toronto 2, New Jersey 1, OT
Colorado 6, Pittsburgh 2
Los Angeles 3, N.Y. Islanders 1
Calgary 4, Nashville 3
Winnipeg 8, Boston 1
Edmonton 2, Tampa Bay 1
Minnesota 5, Utah 4, SO
St. Louis 4, Vancouver 3, OT
Florida 2, Seattle 1, SO

Wednesday's games

N.Y. Rangers 3, Buffalo 2
Ottawa 5, Anaheim 1

Thursday's games

Anaheim at Toronto
Detroit at Philadelphia
Los Angeles at New Jersey
Pittsburgh at Montreal
Washington at Columbus
Chicago at N.Y. Islanders
Nashville at Dallas
San Jose at St. Louis
Vegas at Winnipeg
Edmonton at Minnesota
Tampa Bay at Calgary
Utah at Colorado
Boston at Seattle
Florida at Vancouver

Friday's game

Ottawa at Carolina

Saturday's games

Chicago at New Jersey
Los Angeles at N.Y. Rangers
Philadelphia at Minnesota
Vegas at Edmonton
Anaheim at Columbus
Buffalo at Washington
Montreal at Winnipeg
Pittsburgh at Ottawa
Toronto at Detroit
St. Louis at Dallas
Nashville at Colorado
Boston at Vancouver
Florida at Calgary
Tampa Bay at Seattle
Utah at San Jose

Sunday's games

N.Y. Islanders at Chicago
Buffalo at Toronto
Columbus at Carolina
N.Y. Rangers at St. Louis
Vegas at Minnesota

Monday's games

Washington at Dallas
Carolina at Edmonton
Colorado at Vancouver

Caps still rolling even without Ovi

Thanks to depth, Washington still atop Eastern Conference and leads league in scoring

By **STEPHEN WHYNO**

Associated Press

Alex Ovechkin has not missed many games during his two decades in the NHL with the Washington Capitals, and that remarkable durability is one reason why he is fast-approaching Wayne Gretzky's career goals record.

The Capitals had lost 33 of their 59 games without Ovechkin in the lineup during his first 19 seasons, including 23 of 36 over the past decade. In stark contrast to that, they've won six of nine since the 39-year-old captain was sidelined by a broken left fibula — a testament to a roster built not only to help him break the record but prepare the organization for the post-Ovechkin era.

“Ovi, he's a legend, he's special, he's always going to probably lead the team in goals and we're a better team with him, but we're also a team where I think we're not necessarily maybe relying on one or two players to win games,” said center Lars Eller, who rejoined the team in a trade from Pittsburgh a month ago. “We have four pretty strong lines, three D pairs and two good goalies. We don't depend on one or two individuals, and I think that's the strength of the team.”

Depth fortified by the additions of centers Dylan Strome, Pierre-Luc Dubois and Eller, wingers Andrew Mangiapane, Brandon Duhaime and Taylor Raddysh, defensemen Jakob Chychrun, Matt Roy and Rasmus Sandin and goaltenders Charlie Lindgren and Logan Thompson over the past few years has been the key to returning a playoff contender.

Longtime general manager Brian MacLellan, who after the most recent makeover this past summer handed day-to-day duties to Chris Patrick and moved upstairs as president of hockey operations, excelled in keeping Washington's winning window open with Ovechkin in the second-to-last year of his contract. Veteran defenseman John Carlson said the infusion of talent “really lit a fire under everybody.”

The Capitals led the Eastern Conference when Ovechkin got injured Nov. 18, and they remain atop the East more than three weeks into his absence. Fourteen players have scored a goal during this stretch, including six wins and an overtime defeat since losing the first two without him.

“We're a deep group,” said right winger Tom Wilson, the team's leading scorer during this stretch with nine points on five goals and four assists who expects to continue playing with a shield protecting his face after breaking a small bone in the sinus cavity area on the



PHOTOS BY NICK WASS/AP

Capitals right wing Tom Wilson, center, celebrates his goal with center Dylan Strome, left, and defenseman Rasmus Sandin against the Islanders. Wilson has nine points since Alex Ovechkin was sidelined.



Capitals left wing Pierre-Luc Dubois, left, and defenseman Matt Roy are two of the additions who have helped keep the team contending.

“It's a real group effort, and I think guys are really playing for each other.”

Tom Wilson

Capitals leading scorer since Ovechkin has been out

left side. “Everybody's kind of stepping up on any given night. It's a real group effort, and I think guys are really playing for each other.”

Carlson, who along with Ovechkin, Wilson and now Eller upon return are the only players left from Washington's 2018 Stanley Cup championship team, also sees it as a case of younger teammates taking advantage of this chance.

“There's the colossal emptiness of it, but there's also a lot of opportunity for guys who would never otherwise be there when he's on this team,” Carlson said. “When someone goes down, it's obviously always kind of a rallying thing where guys need to step up, guys need to fill in and play bigger roles and play more minutes. But I think the way that our team's built is depth, and that's been our strength this year is kind of contributions from everybody.”

Ovechkin led all players with 15 goals when he went down, and the Capitals were the high-scoring team in the league at 4.33 goals a

game. They still are, down just a tick to an average of 4.04, and their 16 goals from defensemen are a big reason for that after ranking second-last in blue line production last season.

“We're playing to our structure and doing what we want to do out there,” said Chychrun, who has eight points in nine games as part of an impressive start to his contract year. “We've got a D corps where everybody's a really good player on that back end and can play in all situations and two-way guys and guys who have contributed offensively throughout their career.”

Another major defense is second-year coach Spencer Carbery, who acknowledged the structure and playing standard as a good place to start but pointed the credit to veteran leaders like Carlson, Strome, Wilson and Nic Dowd for shepherding the Capitals through Ovechkin-less hockey.

“They don't go around the room and go, ‘Hey, we've got to do more,

guys,” Carbery said. “They don't announce it, but what they do is they think about it and go: ‘OK, we're missing him. I've got to step my game up and I need to bring more.’ And that's not just on the ice, on the power play, on 5 on 6 when we're defending a lead. It's not just the Xs and Os. It's in the locker room. It's energy in practice. It's all the things that he brings every day when he's in the lineup and when he's practicing.”

Ovechkin skated before practice Wednesday and got an assist from longtime running mate Nicklas Backstrom, who stepped away 13 months ago because of a lingering hip injury. Carlson quipped, “I think Ovi wanted someone with a little more skill passing him the rock out there.”

The day is coming soon when Ovechkin returns to team drills and then game action. The Capitals are doing more than stay afloat without him, but they'll welcome him back with open arms the moment he's ready.

As Eller said, “Obviously I think we're even better when he's in the lineup.”

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

Belichick agrees to coach Tar Heels

By ROB MAADDI
AND AARON BEARD
Associated Press

Bill Belichick had seemingly been waiting for the right opportunity to return to an NFL sideline. Instead, the six-time Super Bowl-winning head coach is headed to the college ranks to take over at North Carolina.

The school announced that it had reached a five-year deal with Belichick on Wednesday night, roughly a week after Belichick's name surfaced as an unlikely candidate to replace the program's winningest coach in Mack Brown. The deal requires approval by UNC trustees as well as the UNC public system's governors; an introductory news conference has yet to be scheduled.

Moving on from Brown, 73, to hire Belichick, 72, means UNC is turning to a coach who has never worked at the college level, yet had incredible success in the NFL alongside quarterback Tom Brady throughout most of his 24-year tenure with the Patriots, which ended last season.

There's also at least a small family tie to the UNC program for Belichick; his late father, Steve, was an assistant coach for the Tar Heels from 1953-55.

"I am excited for the opportunity at UNC-Chapel Hill," Belichick said in a statement. "I grew up around college football with my dad and treasured those times. I have always wanted to coach in college and now I look forward to building the football program in Chapel Hill."

He's arriving on campus at a time of rapid changes in college athletics, from free player movement through the transfer portal and athletes' ability to cash in on endorsements to the looming arrival of revenue sharing. The hiring represents a novel approach by the school to rethinking how it will approach those challenges, led by someone known for success at the highest level of the sport.

"We know that college athletics is changing, and those changes require new and innovative thinking," UNC athletics director Bubba Cunningham said in a statement. "Bill Belichick is a football legend, and hiring him to lead our program represents a new approach that will ensure Carolina football can evolve, compete and win — today and in the future."

Belichick is the second coach to win a Super Bowl and then later become a college head coach; Bill Walsh won three Super Bowls with the San Francisco 49ers and went 17-17-1 at Stanford from 1992-94.

Belichick takes over a UNC pro-



STEVEN SENNE/AP

Bill Belichick, who coached the New England Patriots to six Super Bowl titles, has agreed to a five-year deal to replace Mack Brown at North Carolina.

Bill Belichick at a glance

A look at Bill Belichick, who has reached an agreement to become North Carolina's next head coach:

Personal

Birthdate: April 16, 1952 (age 72).

Birthplace: Nashville, Tenn.

College: Wesleyan University (lettered in football, lacrosse and squash; member of the school's athletics hall of fame).

NFL highlights

Head coach of the New England Patriots (2000-23), winning six Super Bowls.

Head coach of the Cleveland Browns (1991-95), reaching the playoffs once.

Defensive coordinator of the New York Giants (1985-90), winning two Super Bowls.

Owns 333 career victories in regular-season and postseason play as a head coach, ranking second to Don Shula (347) for the NFL record. His 31 playoff wins are the most in NFL history.

Associated Press

gram that is facing a familiar challenge of how to build a sustained winner. The program had reached elite levels in moments rather than eras, notably with Brown building UNC into top-10 national stats (1996, 1997) to end his first tenure in Chapel Hill before taking over at Texas or the Tar Heels cracking the top 10 of the AP Top 25 poll briefly in 2015 and 2020.

The school announced Nov. 26 that Brown wouldn't return for a seventh season in his second stint in Chapel Hill; his firing became effective after the Tar Heels' loss to rival N.C. State on Nov. 30.

Interim coach Freddie Kitchens has been preparing the Tar Heels to face UConn in the Fenway Bowl on Dec. 28.



ADAM HUNGER/AP

Army quarterback Bryson Daily has scored 29 touchdowns this season, tied for the most in the Football Bowl Subdivision with Boise State Heisman Trophy finalist Ashton Jeanty.

Goal: Despite much success this year, Army-Navy the game that really matters

FROM PAGE 32

a half, two weeks — whatever it is — to prepare. Right now, it's Army-Navy."

Ramos said beating Army would define Navy's season even more than the previous eight victories. Fellow senior captain Daba Fofana notices that importance when he feels the intensity of each practice leading up to this game.

"It's definitely amped up," Fofana said. "We put a lot of emphasis on it naturally, but our mentality to deal with the big stage and just to play like we do, it's another game. We've played this since we were young kids."

Monken, in his 11th year at West Point, refuses to apologize for making the Army-Navy game a talking point 365 days a year. He ends some conversations with the phrase, "Beat Navy."

Army would love to beat Marshall, too, but standout quarterback Bryson Daily has been proud of how he and his teammates have avoided getting ahead of themselves in recent months. He expects nothing less in the most anticipated showdown of the year.

"You come here to play in this game: the biggest stage possible, millions of people watching and a sold-out NFL stadium," said Daily, whose 29 touchdowns are tied for the most in the NCAA's Football Bowl Subdivision with Boise State Heisman Trophy finalist Ashton Jeanty. "Records don't matter. Rankings don't matter. All that goes out the window for the Army-Navy game."



NICK WASS/AP

Brian Newberry says that winning the Commander In Chief's Trophy is the "most important goal in our program."

Army is a 6½-point favorite on BetMGM Sportsbook for the game at the Washington Commanders' stadium in Landover, Md., a few miles outside the nation's capital. All the success so far has not prevented Army athletic director Mike Buddie from feeling nervous about this weekend.

"Thrilled that we've had the season that we've had, but the beauty of this game is this is the one that matters," he said. "They know that this is big game, and our guys know this is a big game. We're hoping we can stay focused the way we've been able to do so far and make Saturday really special, but it won't be easy."

Navy coach Brian Newberry called this "the most complete,

well-rounded Army football team, the best Army football team" he has seen since arriving in Annapolis in 2019 as defensive coordinator. After a few games he'd like to have back, including a lopsided loss to Notre Dame, this is still a winner-take-all chance to capture the Commander In Chief's Trophy that has gone to Army and Air Force in recent years.

"Winning the Commander In Chief's Trophy, this game, is our most important goal in our program," Newberry said. Facing a talented SEC opponent like Oklahoma in a bowl game in the fertile recruiting ground of Texas is important, too, but he added without hesitation, "We'll worry about that on Monday."

MLB

Red Sox get Crochet in deal with White Sox

By **STEPHEN HAWKINS**
Associated Press

DALLAS — Garrett Crochet was acquired by the Boston Red Sox from the White Sox on Wednesday for four prospects, giving Chicago a better deal for the All-Star left-hander than available at the trade deadline in July.

For Boston, which is still seeking more pitching, it was a quick pivot after losing out on free agent lefty Max Fried to the rival New York Yankees.

“Feel like we got a legitimate No. 1 starter in Garrett, left-handed, ton of swing and miss, you know, massive strikeouts and feel like the best is still in front of him,” Red Sox chief baseball officer Craig Breslow said. “Adding him to the rotation, it adds depth, it adds quality.”

The White Sox got back catcher Kyle Teel, infielder Chase Meidroth, right-hander Wikelman Gonzalez and outfielder Braden Montgomery in the trade announced during the winter meetings.

Crochet was 6-12 with a 3.58 ERA in 32 starts for a Chicago team that went 41-121, the most losses for any club since 1900. The 25-year-old was picked for the AL All-Star team in his first season as a starter.

“What he did this past season was nothing short of excellent,” White Sox general manager Chris Getz said. “But you look at, you know, the long-term health of the organization and to inject the type of talent that we just did in this trade is really exciting for us.”

Getz said plenty of teams were interested in Crochet and there were about five he thought could get a deal done. Many, including Boston, had inquired about the hard-throwing lefty over the summer.

“Discussions really heated up last night with the Red Sox and we

took that into the morning, and, you know, it was very clear that they were motivated,” Getz said. “We wanted to get something done. And, you know, we made a match. ... Both clubs should feel really good about the return.”

The trade came a day after Fried agreed to join the Yankees for a \$218 million, eight-year contract, the largest ever for a left-hander.

“We came here a few days ago thinking we needed to improve our rotation,” Breslow said. “If we exclusively looked down one path, we would be closed off from other options. I think that’s still the case. There’s still really good players, really good starting pitchers, left on the free agent market, and there are still conversations we’re having with teams as trade targets.”

Before the trade, Boston’s projected rotation had five starters: Tanner Houck, Kutter Crawford, Brayan Bello, Garrett Whitlock and Lucas Giolito.

Crochet is eligible for arbitration this offseason and next after having an \$800,000 salary this year. He can become a free agent after the 2027 World Series.

Selected 11th overall by Chicago in the 2020 amateur draft, Crochet made his big league debut that September. He had a 2.82 ERA in 2021 while striking out 65 in 54⅓ innings, then had Tommy John surgery April 5, 2022. He didn’t return to the major leagues until May 18, 2023.

Crochet’s sinker averaged 97.9 mph this season and his four-seam fastball 97.2. He also throws a cutter, sweeper and changeup.

Teel was rated the Red Sox’s No. 4 prospect by MLB.com, Meidroth No. 11, Gonzalez 14th and Montgomery 54th.

“Talk about accelerating a rebuild,” Getz said. “This was a deal that we feel like can do that.”



GREGORY BULL/AP

Left-hander Garret Crochet posted a 3.58 ERA and 209 strikeouts in 32 starts last season when he was named the White Sox’s only All-Star.



JULIO CORTEZ/AP

Juan Soto’s 15-year, \$765 million contract with the New York Mets set a record for the richest in baseball history just a year after Shohei Ohtani set the record with his 10-year, \$700 million deal with the Dodgers.

ON BASEBALL

\$1B contract unlikely soon even after Soto’s megadeal

By **DAVID BRANDT**
Associated Press

For the second straight Major League Baseball offseason, a norm-shattering contract has been the talk of the winter, with Juan Soto agreeing with the New York Mets on a \$765 million, 15-year deal that’s the richest in baseball history.

It comes almost exactly one year after the Los Angeles Dodgers forked out a princely sum of \$700 million on a 10-year, heavily deferred deal for two-way Japanese superstar Shohei Ohtani. They are believed to be the two richest contracts in pro sports history.

The way it’s going, a contract approaching \$1 billion doesn’t seem out of the question.

But several factors are working against it — at least in the near future.

There’s reason to believe the megadeals for Ohtani and Soto are unicorns in the baseball world. Both players are uniquely talented, surely, but both also had unusual circumstances propelling their value into the stratosphere.

Ohtani is the greatest two-way player in baseball history, capable of improving any team on both sides of the ball. He’s also the rare baseball player who has true international appeal. His every move (like his unexpected marriage announcement) is followed closely in his native Japan, adding another 125 million potential fans who buy merchandise, watch him play and

help fill the Dodgers’ coffers.

Then there’s Soto — a four-time All-Star and on-base machine who won a World Series with the Washington Nationals in 2019. The X-factor for him is he became a free agent at the prime age of 26, which is extremely hard to do under current MLB rules.

Players have to be in the big leagues for six years before testing free agency. The precocious Soto debuted at 19 with the Nats, making him part of a rare group of players who reached the highest level of professional baseball as a teenager. That accelerated his free agency timeline.

Two major trends are colliding that will make it harder for guys like Soto to hit free agency in their mid 20s.

First, MLB teams have been more likely in recent years to take college players early in the draft, betting on more experienced talents. Just 10 high school players were drafted among the top 30 picks in the 2024 draft.

Second, teams are more eager to lock up young, premium talent on long-term deals very early in their careers, well before they hit free agency. Sometimes before they even reach the majors.

Since Soto, just two players have debuted in MLB before their 20th birthday — Elvis Luciano and Junior Caminero. Luciano hasn’t been back to the majors since his 2019 cup of coffee. Caminero is now 21 and has only played in 50 big league games.

Among those that debuted at 20:

Fernando Tatis Jr. signed a \$340 million, 14-year deal with San Diego in 2021, years before reaching the open market. Milwaukee’s Jackson Chourio got an \$82 million, eight-year deal before even reaching the big leagues.

The exception and wild card: Blue Jays slugger Vladimir Guerrero Jr. will be a 26-year-old free agent next offseason. Guerrero hasn’t been as consistent in his young career as Soto, but a standout 2025 season could position him to threaten Soto’s deal.

More likely is that the player to pass Soto isn’t in the majors yet — and might not even be in pro baseball. When 25-year-old Alex Rodriguez signed his record \$252 million, 10-year deal with Texas in 2001, it took over a decade for another player to match that total, when Albert Pujols got \$240 million over 10 years from the Angels in 2012.

For many players, passing up life-changing money in their early or mid 20s is too enticing, even if it means that they might not maximize their value on the free agent market later in their careers.

Soto was determined to test the market. He famously turned down a \$440 million, 15-year offer to stay with the Washington Nationals in 2022, betting that he could make even more as a free agent.

Not many players would turn down that kind of cash.

Then again, that’s what makes Soto unique. And it’s also why his \$765 million deal could be the industry standard for some time.

NFL

Bills have something to prove

High-scoring Lions give Buffalo defense chance to prove it's better than dud vs. Rams

By JOHN WAWROW
Associated Press

ORCHARD PARK, N.Y. — Cornerback Taron Johnson is still agitated over the dud the Buffalo Bills defense produced in giving up season worsts in points and yards, while melting down on third down in a loss to the Los Angeles Rams last weekend.

There's no better time or opportunity to show how much better they are than this Sunday. That's when Buffalo (10-3) travels to play the NFC-leading Detroit Lions (12-1), who just happen to lead the NFL in scoring and feature the same dynamic style of offense as the Rams.

"I think our mindset is just going to be attack," Johnson said after practice Wednesday. "We can't wait to play Sunday just to prove people wrong and prove to ourselves that how we played wasn't who we are."

The Bills acknowledge having several excuses to lean on for why they unraveled in a 44-42 loss — riding a little too high after a division-clinching win, a cross-country trip and facing a more driven opponent in the thick of a playoff race. What's unacceptable is the hesitancy their usually reliable defensive backs showed in coverage and the lack of pressure applied by their defensive front.

The bright side is the standard performance potentially serving as a late-season reminder of this not being the time to let their foot off the gas.

"A lot of teams have scars on their way to having a darn good season. And we're having a darn good season," coach Sean McDermott said. "So what has to be in front of us this week is the opportunity that's in front of us, quite frankly, to challenge that team," he added, referring to Detroit. "You better bring your heart, you better bring your guts, you better put it on the line."

With a little bit of added fire, Buffalo is going back to the basics on defense following an outing in which very little went right. The defense was off-balance from the



GREGORY BULL/AP

Los Angeles Rams wide receiver Cooper Kupp is tackled by Buffalo Bills cornerback Taron Johnson on Dec. 8 in Inglewood, Calif. The Bills allowed the Rams to score on their first six drives and lost 44-42.



**Buffalo Bills (10-3)
at Detroit Lions (12-1)**
AFN-Sports
10:25 p.m. Sunday CET
6:25 a.m. Monday JKT

start in being unable to stop the run, before being picked apart in the passing game while allowing Los Angeles to score on each of their first six drives (not including

a kneel-down to close the first half) in building a 38-21 lead.

The most frustrating part was the Bills' inability to get off the field while allowing the Rams to convert 11 of 15 third-down chances. LA's 73.3% conversion rate was the third highest against Buffalo — and worst since Miami converted 75% of its chances in 1986 — since the stat was introduced to NFL gamebooks in 1973.

"The recipe to lose a football game is what we did (Sunday) and it starts with me, first and foremost," defensive coordinator Bobby Babich said Monday. "Move on and let it not happen again. Let it be a learning lesson. Failure is the

best teacher."

The challenge is preparing for an exceptionally balanced Lions offense that ranks fourth in the NFL in rushing and passing, and averaging 32.1 points per outing.

The objective, McDermott said, is to not overcorrect but stick to the fundamentals that led to Buffalo winning seven straight before losing to the Rams.

A little more urgency, would help, too.

"It is a mentality. It is an attitude, and if you want to play good defense, that's where it starts," McDermott said. "There's not a lot of shortcuts or ways around it. It's got to be a mentality."

Scoreboard

American Conference

East						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
y-Buffalo	10	3	0	.769	397	268
Miami	6	7	0	.462	264	292
e-N.Y. Jets	3	10	0	.231	251	300
e-New England	3	10	0	.231	221	307
South						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Houston	8	5	0	.615	308	288
Indianapolis	6	7	0	.462	267	298
e-Jacksonville	3	10	0	.231	238	345
e-Tennessee	3	10	0	.231	227	342
North						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Pittsburgh	10	3	0	.769	323	238
Baltimore	8	5	0	.615	383	318
Cincinnati	5	8	0	.385	362	360
e-Cleveland	3	10	0	.231	232	335
West						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
y-Kansas City	12	1	0	.923	308	252
Denver	8	5	0	.615	305	234
L.A. Chargers	8	5	0	.615	277	207
e-Las Vegas	2	11	0	.154	236	361

National Conference

East						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
x-Philadelphia	11	2	0	.846	342	234
Washington	8	5	0	.615	376	296
Dallas	5	8	0	.385	268	366
e-N.Y. Giants	2	11	0	.154	194	293
South						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Tampa Bay	7	6	0	.538	363	309
Atlanta	6	7	0	.462	278	333
New Orleans	5	8	0	.385	290	292
Carolina	3	10	0	.231	233	388
North						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
x-Detroit	12	1	0	.923	417	234
Minnesota	11	2	0	.846	339	240
Green Bay	9	4	0	.692	349	274
Chicago	4	9	0	.308	254	278
West						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Seattle	8	5	0	.615	302	283
L.A. Rams	7	6	0	.538	298	332
Arizona	6	7	0	.462	284	289
San Francisco	6	7	0	.462	308	308

e-Eliminated from playoffs
x-clinched playoff spot
y-clinched division

Monday, Dec. 9

Cincinnati 27, Dallas 20

Thursday, Dec. 12

L.A. Rams at San Francisco

Sunday, Dec. 15

Baltimore at N.Y. Giants
Cincinnati at Tennessee
Dallas at Carolina
Kansas City at Cleveland
Miami at Houston
N.Y. Jets at Jacksonville
Washington at New Orleans
Buffalo at Detroit
Indianapolis at Denver
New England at Arizona
Pittsburgh at Philadelphia
Tampa Bay at L.A. Chargers
Green Bay at Seattle

Monday, Dec. 16

Chicago at Minnesota
Atlanta at Las Vegas

Thursday, Dec. 19

Denver at L.A. Chargers

Saturday, Dec. 21

Houston at Kansas City
Pittsburgh at Baltimore

Sunday, Dec. 22

Arizona at Carolina
Detroit at Chicago
L.A. Rams at N.Y. Jets
N.Y. Giants at Atlanta
New England at Buffalo
Philadelphia at Washington
Tennessee at Indianapolis
Cleveland at Cincinnati
Minnesota at Seattle
Jacksonville at Las Vegas
San Francisco at Miami
Tampa Bay at Dallas

Monday, Dec. 23

New Orleans at Green Bay



**Washington Commanders (8-5)
at New Orleans Saints (5-8)**
AFN-Sports2
7 p.m. Sunday CET
3 a.m. Monday JKT



**Miami Dolphins (6-7)
at Houston Texans (8-5)**
AFN-Sports
7 p.m. Sunday CET
3 a.m. Monday JKT



**Tampa Bay Buccaneers (7-6)
at Los Angeles Chargers (8-5)**
AFN-Atlantic
10:25 Sunday CET
6:25 a.m. Monday JKT



**Green Bay Packers (9-4)
at Seattle Seahawks (8-5)**
AFN-Sports
2 a.m. Monday CET
10 a.m. Monday JKT

NFL

Barkley will be big test of Steelers' stops

By WILL GRAVES
Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — Mike Tomlin started going down the checklist of the myriad ways Saquon Barkley can beat you. It took the Pittsburgh Steelers coach a while — by his usually measured standards anyway — to get to the end.

"He's got top-end speed," Tomlin said of the Philadelphia Eagles star and NFL's leading rusher. "He can hit the home run ... He's good in tight spaces. He can get downhill. He can lower his pads. He's got good lateral abilities. He can make people miss. He's just a really complete player."

So complete that Tomlin used the honorific "Mr. Barkley" when describing the challenge that awaits the first-place Steelers (10-3) when they visit the NFC East-leading Eagles (11-2) on Sunday.

"He's been dominant," Tomlin said. "Eye-opening at times."

Physics defying, too. It's one of the reasons Tomlin isn't worried about his team getting too caught up in the big picture as Pittsburgh begins a stretch of three games in 11 days that starts in Philadelphia, ends with Kansas City on Christmas and features a trip to AFC North rival Baltimore in between.

The way Tomlin figures, get caught looking down the road and you'll likely just end up as another hapless victim on Barkley's burgeoning highlight reel.

"If you don't minimize him in some way, you're not even going to position yourself to have a chance to be successful," Tomlin said.



MATT FREED/AP

Steelers cornerback Joey Porter Jr. tackles Browns running back Nick Chubb. Pittsburgh's defense has been strong against the run this season but faces Saquon Barkley, the NFL's leading rusher, this week.

Most teams haven't this season, though the Steelers and the NFL's fourth-ranked rush defense believe they has the tools to be the exception. Tools like inside linebacker Elandon Roberts, who has carved out a niche as an old-school run stopper over the last decade, or "tooth chipper," as Tomlin put it earlier this season.

Tomlin saw it nearly a decade

ago when he was scouting Roberts out of Houston. There was something about Roberts' willingness to stick his 6-foot-1 frame into uncomfortable places that stuck with Tomlin, so much so that when Roberts hit free agency in the spring of 2023, the Steelers practically sprinted to the bargaining table.

Roberts has been just as advertised, a veteran who welcomes the

dirty work his job entails. Against Dallas earlier this season, that meant vaulting over the line of scrimmage to stop Cowboys running back Rico Dowdle in his tracks, leading to a fumble that could have sealed the game had Dallas quarterback Dak Prescott not fallen on it.

When asked what's made him so effective through the years, Ro-

berts simply shrugged.

"I just think when you're good at something, you know, you hone in on it," he said.

He's hardly the only one on a defense that has slowed down Lamar Jackson, Derrick Henry, Nick Chubb and J.K. Dobbins among others this season.

Longtime defensive tackle Cam Heyward is playing some of the best football of his career at 35. Second-year defensive lineman Keanu Benton is starting to come into his own. Patrick Queen, signed in the offseason to play alongside Roberts, is Pittsburgh's best three-down linebacker since Ryan Shazier's career ended with a spinal injury in December 2017.

Queen is well aware the Steelers will need all 11 players on the field — whomever it might be on a given down — to work in tandem to keep Barkley from taking over.

"Everybody's got to do their job," Queen said. "That's really all it comes to. I think some teams are just unaware of how good Saquon is. You've got to keep your focus."

Mahomes: 'Not a good feeling' playing 3 times over 11 days

By DAVE SKRETTA
Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — You can count Kansas City Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes among those who are not exactly thrilled about the NFL forcing the two-time defending Super Bowl champions to play three times over an 11-day span in the coming weeks.

The Chiefs are among four teams — the Texans, Steelers and Ravens are the others — who were picked to play on Christmas Day this year. But with the holiday falling on Wednesday, when the NFL has rarely played, those four will also have to play the prior Saturday to give them at least some rest. And the result is two short weeks following their games Sunday.

"It's not a good feeling," Mahomes acknowledged Wednesday. "You never want to play this amount of games in this short of time. It's not great for your body. But at the end of the day it's your job, your profession, you have to come to work and do it."

Kansas City visits Cleveland on Sunday, while Baltimore visits the



**Kansas City Chiefs (12-1)
at Cleveland Browns (3-10)**
AFN-Atlantic
7 p.m. Sunday CET
3 a.m. Monday JKT

Giants, Pittsburgh visits Philadelphia and Houston hosts Miami.

On Dec. 21, the Texans head to the Chiefs and the Steelers visit the Ravens, before the Christmas Day doubleheader that begins with Kansas City heading to Pittsburgh and ends with Baltimore in Houston.

Mahomes was asked whether he has ever had three games in such a short span, he replied: "I haven't in football."

"All you can do is focus on the game. The practice you have that day," Mahomes said. "I try to prepare my body all year long for this stretch. That's tailoring my work-

outs, tailoring how you practice and prepare, and the coaches do a great job of taking care of us on the practice field. We practice as hard as anybody, but they know how to dial it back when needed."

The NFL has played on Wednesday in the past, most recently in 2020, when the Steelers and Ravens had their game pushed back because of a COVID-19 outbreak.

In 2012, the NFL's opener between the Giants and Cowboys took place on a Wednesday so the TV networks could broadcast Barack Obama's speech at the Democratic National Convention.

But prior to those games, the NFL had not had a Wednesday game since the Lions and Rams played Sept. 22, 1948.

"It's a unique situation. You just have to manage it," said Chiefs coach Andy Reid, whose team will have played on every day of the week but Tuesday this season. "It is what it is. You make the best of it."

It's not as if the games involved in the Christmas stretch are throwaways, either. Each has significant playoff ramifications.



PETER AIKEN/AP

Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes is not happy about the compressed schedule for the four teams playing on Christmas Day.

The Chiefs have already clinched the AFC West, but they are trying to fend off the Bills and Steelers for the No. 1 seed and a first-round playoff bye. Pittsburgh is two games ahead of the Ravens in the AFC North heading into this weekend, and could clinch a playoff berth if things fall their way, while the Texans are two games up on the Colts in the AFC South.

So how is Kansas City approaching such an important stretch of high-profile games?

"The main thing is you get guys ready for the game. Give them a chance to get ready for the game," Reid said. "They're going to do whatever you present to them. You try to help them out with that. Right now we have a normal week right here. We have to take care of business here."

SPORTS



Meeting 'Mr. Barkley'

Tomlin has healthy respect for league-leading RB » **NFL, Page 31**

COLLEGE FOOTBALL



The Navy Midshipmen and the Army Black Knights line up for a snap Dec. 9, 2023, at Gillette Stadium in Foxborough, Mass. The teams meet in the 125th Army-Navy game Saturday, and neither team is looking beyond their rivalry to their respective bowl games.

AP

Goal bigger than bowls

Army and Navy headed to postseason, but they're only focused on each other

BY STEPHEN WHYNO
Associated Press

LANDOVER, Md. — Army and Navy have combined to win 19 of 23 games this season and re-emerged as nationally relevant college football programs. For the first time since 2017, the two military academies are both going to a bowl game.

None of that matters much to players and coaches — not with the 125th rendition of the Army-Navy game on deck Saturday.

"It's a game and a season really all of its own," Army coach Jeff Monken said Tues-



Army (11-1) vs. Navy (8-3)
at Landover, Md.
AFN-Sports
9 p.m. Saturday CET
5 a.m. Sunday JKT



Monken

day. "We've had a good year. You make it a great year by winning this game coming up on Saturday. Frankly, that's just the way it goes around here." The Black Knights are ranked 19th in the country after routing Tulane to win the American Athletic Conference. They're 11-1, unbeaten in the AAC in their first season in it and their only loss came to College Football Playoff-bound Notre

Dame. Marshall awaits in the Independence Bowl.

Navy will face Oklahoma in the Armed Forces Bowl to cap its first winning season since 2019. Still, there's no way the Midshipmen are looking past this rivalry to the Sooners.

"Oklahoma's not on our mind right now because it's all Army-Navy," linebacker Colin Ramos said. "This is our No. 1 goal, and then after that, we'll have about a week and

SEE GOAL ON PAGE 28

Belichick agrees to 5-year deal to coach Tar Heels » College football, Page 28