

VIDEO GAMES

Latest Sniper Elite brings in new hero but same gameplay
Page 14



EUROPE

Russia rejoices over prospect of Putin, Trump negotiations
Page 4



NASCAR

76th season heads into 2025 with plenty of storylines
Page 32

Air Force delays technical sergeant testing to cut DEI content » Page 3

STARS AND STRIPES

stripes.com

Volume 83 Edition 213 ©SS 2025

CONTINGENCY EDITION

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 2025

Free to Deployed Areas



GEERT VANDEN WIJNGAERT/AP

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, center, speaks with Germany's Defense Minister Boris Pistorius, right, and Finland's Defense Minister Antti Hakkanen, left, at NATO headquarters in Brussels on Thursday.

Uncle Sam is no 'Uncle Sucker'

Hegseth warns NATO countries on US' defense spending demands

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth issued a warning at NATO headquarters Thursday that falling short of White House demands for higher defense spending will put Washington's commitment to the alliance at risk.

Hegseth, speaking at the end of a defense ministerial meeting in Brussels, said President Donald Trump would not allow a military imbalance between the United States and Europe

to continue when it comes to defending the Continent.

"This administration believes deeply in alliances, but make no mistake, President Trump will not allow anyone to turn Uncle Sam into Uncle Sucker," Hegseth said.

Trump has long argued that the failure of some NATO countries to meet defense spending commitments amounts to security free-loading.

In Brussels, Hegseth repeatedly hammered home the message of more defense spending

during his NATO debut, saying that the current target of 2% of gross domestic product was no longer acceptable. He also said allies need to spend more time talking about military firepower.

"We can talk all we want about values. Values are important, but you can't shoot values," he said. "There is no replacement for hard power."

Across-the-board defense spending increas-

SEE SUCKER ON PAGE 4

GOP pushes for adding billions more to DOD funds

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Congressional Republicans are pushing for at least \$100 billion in additional defense spending during the next decade to boost the military's budget and advance President Donald Trump's agenda.

The two chambers are working on two different budget resolutions that will direct the House Armed Services Committee and the Senate Armed Services Committee to develop legislation detailing how the money will be spent.

The Senate Budget Committee's resolution calls for a \$150 billion increase in defense spending to expand the Navy, strengthen the defense industrial base, build an integrated air and missile defense system and continue the modernization of strategic nuclear forces. About \$20 billion would also increase funding for the Coast Guard.

The House Budget Committee's fiscal blueprint, released Wednesday, proposes a \$100 billion spending cap for the military. The committee was to debate the measure Thursday, and the Senate Budget Committee began its deliberations Wednesday.

Both resolutions are part of a Republican effort to enact Trump's agenda, which includes tax cuts, securing the U.S. border with Mexico, increasing American energy independence and bolstering the military. The House aims to tackle all those priorities in one large bill, and the Senate wants to move the tax cuts into separate legislation.

The chairmen of the Senate and House Armed Services committees have stressed the need to raise defense spending to 5% of

SEE BILLIONS ON PAGE 8

BUSINESS/WEATHER

Japanese automakers end talks on business integration

Associated Press

TOKYO — Japanese automakers Honda, Nissan and Mitsubishi said Thursday they are ending talks on business integration.

Nissan Chief Executive Makoto Uchida said the talks had changed focus from setting up a joint holding company to making Nissan into a subsidiary of Honda.

Honda Chief Executive Toshihiro Mibe said in a separate news conference that Honda had suggested a stock swap to speed up decision-making.

The automakers agreed to end their agreement on considering a structure for a collaboration, a joint statement said. The decision was passed by board meetings at each of the companies.

Honda Motor Co. and Nissan Motor Corp. announced in December that they were going to hold talks to set up a joint holding company. Mitsubishi Motors Corp. had said it was considering joining that group.

From the start, the effort had analysts puzzled as to the advan-

tages to any of the companies, as their model lineups and strengths overlap in an industry shaken by the arrival of powerful newcomers like Tesla and BYD, as well as the move to electrification.

Honda and Nissan initially said they were trying to finalize an agreement by June and set up the holding company by August.

The three automakers will continue to work together on electric vehicles and smart cars, such as autonomous driving, they said Thursday.

EXCHANGE RATES

Military rates		Commercial rates	
Euro costs (Feb. 14)	0.94	Bahrain (Dinar)	0.3769
British pound (Feb. 14)	\$1.22	Britain (Pound)	1.2485
Japanese yen (Feb. 14)	150.00	Canada (Dollar)	1.4268
South Korean won (Feb. 14)	1417.00	China (Yuan)	7.3091
		Denmark (Krone)	7.1706
		Egypt (Pound)	50.6624
		Euro	0.9614
		Hong Kong (Dollar)	7.7884
		Hungary (Forint)	386.47
		Israel (Shekel)	3.5766
		Japan (Yen)	153.53
		Kuwait (Dinar)	0.3088
		Norway (Krone)	11.2373
		Philippines (Peso)	58.04
		Poland (Zloty)	4.01
		Saudi Arabia (Riyal)	3.7506
		Singapore (Dollar)	1.3501
		South Korea (Won)	1453.49
Switzerland (Franc)	0.9074		
Thailand (Baht)	33.86		
Turkey (NewLira)	36.0991		

(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.)

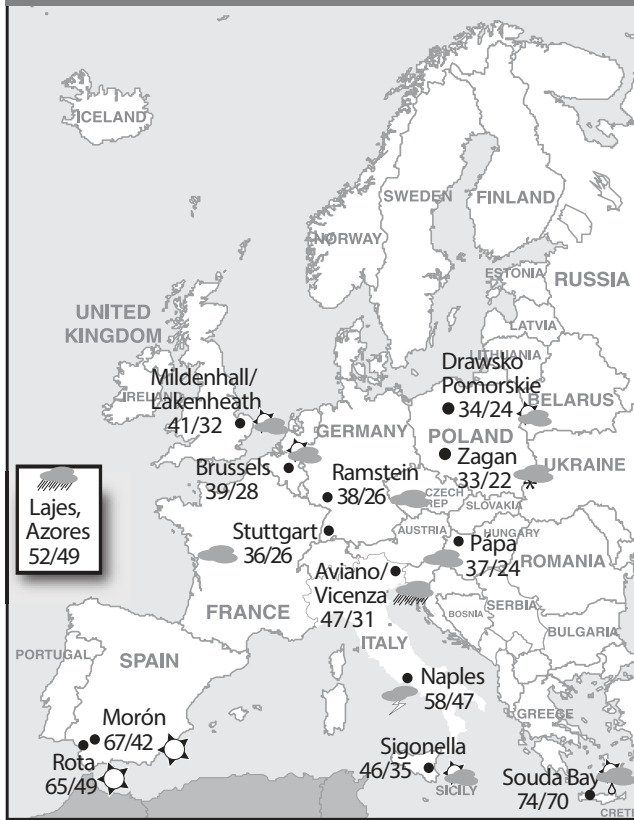
INTEREST RATES	
Prime rate	7.50
Interest Rates Discount rate	4.50
Federal funds market rate	4.33
3-month bill	4.34
30-year bond	4.83

WEATHER OUTLOOK

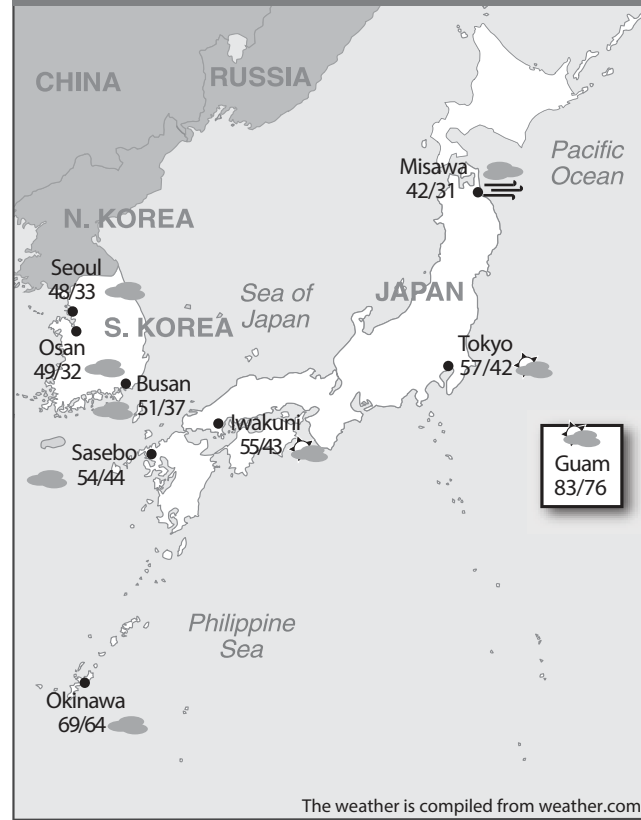
FRIDAY IN THE MIDDLE EAST



FRIDAY IN EUROPE



SATURDAY IN THE PACIFIC



TODAY IN STRIPES

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

STARS AND STRIPES

However you read us, wherever you need us.

Mobile • Online • Print

EUROPE

CustomerService@stripes.com

+49 (0) 0631.3615.9111
DSN: 314.583.9111

MIDDLE EAST

CustomerService@stripes.com

+49 (0) 0631.3615.9111
DSN: 314.583.9111

PACIFIC

PacificAdvertising@stripes.com

+81 (42) 552.2511
DSN: 315.227.7310

Round-the-world news for America's military.

Stripes.com supplies constant updates, on news of interest — including reports from our overseas military bases in Europe, Pacific, Southwest Asia and the Mideast, and coverage of the Pentagon and Capitol Hill.

Also available on mobile apps for Android and iOS.

STARS AND STRIPES

Mobile • Online • Print

MILITARY

Promotion testing delayed to remove DEI content

BY MATTHEW ADAMS

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Air Force has delayed the start of the promotion cycle for technical sergeants to review testing material and remove content related to diversity, equity and inclusion, the service said Wednesday.

“The upcoming 25E6 promotion testing cycle was scheduled to begin on Feb. 15 and conclude on April 15, 2025, however, the testing cycle has been delayed and will now begin March 3 and conclude May 1, 2025,” an Air Force spokesperson said in a statement. “This delay is to ensure we take appropriate action to evaluate testing materials, remove all DEI-related content in the [Air Force] Handbook and [Career Development Courses] study guides and remain consistent with the orders of our commander in chief and defense secretary.”

The Air Force said the decision to delay testing ensures “limited disruption in the promotion and

advancement of airmen.” The service also added that its handbook and CDC study guides were temporarily removed on Jan. 29 to comply with presidential executive orders. Updated versions are expected to be published no later than Feb. 18.

“We are unable to immediately remove all DEI-questions from the test, as this would cause a four-month delay in testing and negatively impact [6,300] promotions,” the spokesperson added. “Until questions can be removed, testers will still see DEI-questions and are expected to answer all questions to the best of their ability. However, any DEI-questions will not be scored.”

Since President Donald Trump took office, he has signed a range of executive orders. In his first week, Trump signed an executive order rolling back DEI programs across the federal government.

Trump also signed an executive order Jan. 27 calling for the Defense Department and the Depart-

ment of Homeland Security to abolish every DEI office within the agencies.

The secretaries of both departments must provide detailed guidance for the implementation of this order to their respective agencies within 30 days of the order signing. Within 180 days, the secretaries must submit a report through the White House deputy chief of staff for policy documenting the progress of implementing the order, along with any recommendations for action to fulfill the objectives of this order.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth signed a memo Jan. 29 stating race and sex will no longer be considered in military promotions and academy admissions as the Pentagon moves to weed out diversity and equity-based programs across the U.S. military.

“The [Defense Department] will strive to provide merit-based, color-blind, equal opportunities to service members but will not guarantee or strive for equal out-

comes,” Hegseth wrote in a memo titled “Restoring America’s Fighting Force.”

The Air Force’s top civilian leader last month directed the closure of a working group that since 2008 has sought to eliminate arbitrary barriers to women’s service, such as providing equipment designed for female pilots who for decades relied on gear designed for men.

A memo signed Jan. 21 by acting Air Force Secretary Gary Ashworth and obtained by The Washington Post directed the “disestablishment” immediately of the Air Force Women’s Initiatives Team, along with other Air Force working groups that dealt with disability, LGBTQ and racial issues.

The Air Force also last month faced severe blowback — and was forced to backtrack — after briefly removing from its recruit-training curriculum educational films about the role that female pilots and the famed Black Tuskegee Airmen of World War II played in

service history.

Gen. David Allvin, Air Force chief of staff, in a statement at the time said he directed the service to implement Trump’s orders swiftly — “no equivocation, no slow-rolling, no foot-dragging.” But Allvin said while staff are reviewing training courses to ensure compliance with the orders, no curriculum featuring the Tuskegee Airmen or women Air Force pilots has been removed.

The Air Force has temporarily halted career development courses as part of a broader effort to remove DEI-related content from military training and education.

The Army, Navy and Marine Corps are also reviewing instructional materials to ensure compliance with Trump’s executive orders.

Within the Air Force, the review has led to a pause in career development courses that teach airmen technical skills, along with an evaluation of the “brown book,” which outlines enlisted standards.

Aviators eject from Growler before crash off San Diego

BY JAIMIE DING
AND TARA COPP
Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Two crew members ejected from a Navy jet before it crashed Wednesday off the San Diego coast and were quickly rescued by a sportfishing boat, authorities said.

The two occupants of the E/A-18G Growler were first picked up by the Premier Sportfishing vessel and then transferred to a nearby Customs and Border Protection craft, Coast Guard spokesperson Petty Officer Christopher Sappey said.

The crash occurred during what is known as a “go-around maneuver,” in which the aircraft landed and was taking off again, according to Navy spokesperson Cmdr. Beth Teach.

The cause of the crash is under investigation.

On a webcam of San Diego har-

bor traffic, someone aboard the Premier can be heard telling the Coast Guard that the crew members ejected right after takeoff.

“We’re on our way to help assist,” the man called in about 10:14 a.m.

“They’re in the water.”

Shortly afterward someone from the boat reported: “We have both pilots on board and safe.”

Brandon Viets, captain of the Premier, said he had taken a dozen passengers out by Point Loma on a fishing trip when he heard a jet taking off from the naval base that “seemed a little louder than normal.”

He turned and saw two people falling with parachutes. Viets immediately headed toward them in his boat.

The jet remained in the air for several minutes before diving into the water, he said.

“All I could see was a plume of

water and mud and muck, 70 to 80 feet tall,” Viets said.

“Captain Brandon Viets and the crew of the Premier acted swiftly, and thanks to their professionalism, were able to bring these pilots to safety,” Frank Ursitti, general manager of boat owner H&M Landing, said in a statement.

The two men were taken to a hospital and were in stable condition, authorities said.

The Coast Guard deployed two vessels to safeguard the Growler wreckage in the San Diego Harbor, Sappey said.

The Growler is a two-seater jet that specializes in electronic warfare.

A similar Navy aircraft crashed last October during a routine training flight in Washington state, killing its two crew members.

The wreckage was found in remote mountainous terrain.



BRANDON VIETS, PREMIER SPORTSFISHING/AP

Two aviators are rescued after their E/A-18G Growler crashed off the San Diego coast Wednesday.

Carrier Truman, merchant ship collide off coast of Egypt

BY CAITLYN BURCHETT
Stars and Stripes

The aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman and a merchant ship collided Wednesday while operating near Egypt’s Port Said, according to a Navy official.

The Truman was operating near the port on the Mediterranean Sea at about 11:46 p.m. when it was involved in a collision with the

merchant vessel Besiktas-M, said Cmdr. Timothy Gorman, a spokesperson for the U.S. 6th Fleet.

The collision did not endanger the ship or the crew, Gorman said. There have been no reports of flooding or injuries. Additionally, the propulsion plants are unaffected and in a safe and stable condition.

The Besiktas-M is a bulk cargo carrier sailing under the flag of Panama.

The collision is under investigation.

The Truman deployed in September from Naval Station Norfolk, Va. In December, the ship arrived in the Middle East, where it has spent the past two months supporting strikes against the Houthis

rebels in Yemen, the Navy said.

Those actions include attacks on Dec. 30 and 31 against a Houthi command hub, weapons production facility and storage facilities that included missiles and drones.

On Feb. 1, the carrier’s group conducted airstrikes against the Islamic State in Somalia in support of Africa Command and in coordination with the Somali gov-

ernment, the Navy said. Those strikes killed multiple ISIS operatives, the Pentagon said at the time.

Following combat operations, the Truman sailed Feb. 7 to Naval Support Activity Souda Bay on the Greek island of Crete for a working port visit to allow for maintenance to be done and sailors to get a break.

EUROPE

Trump's statements on input from Ukraine please Russia

Associated Press

Russian officials and state media took a triumphant tone Thursday after President Donald Trump jettisoned three years of U.S. policy and announced he would likely meet soon with Russian President Vladimir Putin to negotiate a peace deal in the almost three-year war in Ukraine.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, meanwhile, said he would not accept any negotiations about Ukraine that do not include his country in the talks. European governments also demanded a seat at the table.

Trump's change of tack seemed to identify Putin as the only player that matters in ending the fighting and looked set to sideline Zelenskyy, as well as European governments, in any peace negotiations. The Ukrainian leader recently described that prospect as "very dangerous."

Putin has been ostracized by the West since Russia's February 2022 invasion of its neighbor, and in 2023 the International Criminal Court is-

sued an arrest warrant for the Russian leader alleging war crimes.

Trump's announcement created a major diplomatic upheaval that could herald a watershed moment for Ukraine and Europe.

Russian officials and state-backed media appeared triumphant after Wednesday's call between Trump and Putin that lasted more than an hour.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Thursday that the "position of the current (U.S.) administration is much more appealing."

The deputy chair of Russia's National Security Council, Dmitry Medvedev, said in an online statement: "The presidents of Russia and the U.S. have talked at last. This is very important in and of itself."

Senior lawmaker Alexei Pushkov said the call "will go down in the history of world politics and diplomacy."

"I am sure that in Kyiv, Brussels, Paris and London they are now reading Trump's lengthy statement on his conversation with Putin with

horror and cannot believe their eyes," Pushkov wrote on his messaging app.

Russian state news agency RIA Novosti said in an opinion column: "The U.S. finally hurt Zelenskyy for real," adding that Trump had found "common ground" with Putin.

"This means that the formula 'nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine'—a sacred cow for Zelenskyy, the European Union and the previous U.S. administration—no longer exists. Moreover, the opinion of Kyiv and Brussels (the European Union) is of no interest to Trump at all," it added.

The pro-Kremlin Russian tabloid Komsomolskaya Pravda went even further and published a column stating in the headline that "Trump signed Zelenskyy's death sentence."

"The myth of Russia as a 'pariah' in global politics, carefully inflated by Western propaganda, has burst with a bang," the column said.

In his first comments to journalists since Trump held calls first with



GAVRIIL GRIGOROV, SPUTNIK/AP

Russian President Vladimir Putin holds a video conference meeting with Bryansk Region Gov. Alexander Bogomaz at the Novo-Ogaryovo state residence outside Moscow, on Thursday.

Putin and then Zelenskyy, the Ukrainian leader said the main thing was to "not allow everything to go according to Putin's plan."

"We cannot accept it, as an independent country, any agreements (made) without us. I articulate this very clearly to our partners — any bilateral negotiations about Ukraine, not on other topics, but any bilateral talks about Ukraine without us — we will not accept," Zelenskyy said as he visited a nuclear power plant in western Ukraine.

Trump appears ready to make a deal over the heads of Ukraine and

European governments.

He also effectively dashed Ukraine's hopes of becoming part of NATO, which the alliance said less than a year ago was an "irreversible" step, or getting back the parts of its territory captured so far by the Russian army. Russia currently occupies close to 20% of the country.

The U.S. administration's approach to a potential settlement is notably close to Moscow's vision of how the war should end. That has caused alarm and tension within the 32-nation NATO alliance and 27-nation European Union.

Sucker: NATO leader urges members to ramp up defense spending

FROM PAGE 1

es are needed, given "an urgent, real threat to the Continent" from Russia, he said.

Hegseth's comments came one day after he delivered a jolt to allies when he laid out parameters for anticipated peace talks that Trump expects to convene.

On Wednesday, Hegseth said any return to Ukraine's prewar borders is unrealistic, as is NATO membership for Kyiv. He also said an international peacekeeping force, minus the United States, could play a role in ensuring that fighting doesn't restart.

Such a force would function without NATO's collective security guarantee, he said.

Hegseth's statements that laid out conditions for formal talks amounted to a repudiation of the long-standing NATO mantra of being in it for the "long haul" with Ukraine, and that there would never be "discussions about Ukraine without Ukraine."

The idea of demanding that Ukraine give up large swaths of its territory as part of any peace has rattled some allies, especially on NATO's eastern flank.

"Today might go down in history as a dark day for Europe. It now depends on European leaders to finally recognize that we must take our fate into our own hands — right now," said Marko Mihkelson, chair of the Estonian parliament's foreign affairs committee, in a statement.



NATO

U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, third from left, speaks at a meeting of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group at NATO headquarters in Brussels, on Thursday. He has told NATO allies that European militaries will be expected to carry most of the security burden on the Continent given U.S. commitments elsewhere.

Estonia's defense minister, Hanno Pevkur, appeared to take issue with Washington ruling out NATO membership and Hegseth's statement that restoring Ukraine's occupied territory was a nonstarter for negotiations.

"Let's not make negotiations easy for [Russian President Vladimir] Putin," Pevkur said in a statement.

Kaja Kallas, the European Union's foreign affairs chief, also said Europe should play a central

role in any negotiation.

"Ukraine's independence and territorial integrity are unconditional," she said in a statement. "Our priority must now be strengthening Ukraine and providing robust security guarantees."

Russia has occupied Ukrainian land roughly equal in total size to the state of Pennsylvania. Hegseth on Wednesday was asked whether the new dynamic being pushed by the White House

should be interpreted as a betrayal of Ukraine.

"There is no betrayal there," Hegseth said. "There is a recognition that the whole world and the United States is invested and interested in peace, a negotiated peace. As President Trump has said, stopping the killing."

Any agreement between the two countries "will require both sides recognizing things they don't want to," he said.

Hegseth also has delivered a blunt message to NATO allies, saying that European militaries will be expected to carry most of the security burden on the Continent given U.S. commitments elsewhere.

While the U.S. will remain "an active part of this alliance," NATO countries will need to spend significantly more to fill the defense gaps, he said.

Trump has called on members to increase their minimum spending levels to 5% of GDP.

A key question that remains unanswered is how soon allies are expected to field ground forces capable of deterring potential Russian aggression without a major contribution from the U.S. military.

Earlier this week, Hegseth said it was too soon to say whether troops in Europe would be withdrawn. But the expectation is that a larger U.S. focus in the Pacific will eventually have implications for the American military mission

in Europe.

Secretary-General Mark Rutte said Thursday that the situation means allies need to ramp up fast. Russia, which has shifted to a wartime economy, is churning out more ammunition in three months than all of NATO's European members do in a year, he said.

And a new report issued Wednesday by the International Institute for Strategic Studies said Russian military spending outpaces all of Europe put together when Russia's lower production costs are factored in.

The IISS analysis found that Russia's total military expenditure grew by 42% in 2024 to an estimated \$145.9 billion, compared with Europe's collective \$457 billion.

However, when purchasing power parity was taken into consideration, Russia's total adds up to the equivalent of \$462 billion, IISS said.

Rutte has warned that if allied spending remains at current levels, security on the Continent will be put in danger given the scale of Russia's military investments.

"We need to ramp up defense spending because it is clear that the U.S. rightly requires us to do more here on the European side and the Canadian side of NATO," Rutte said Thursday.

Rutte said he expected ministers to return home from the Brussels meeting "with an even greater sense of urgency."

EUROPE

Ukraine vet group raising funds to stay open after US aid freeze

By MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

One of Ukraine's largest veterans service organizations faces an uncertain future as it works to raise funds following a freeze and spending review of U.S. foreign aid.

Veteran Hub, founded in 2018, provides free legal, mental health, educational and employment support to Ukrainian soldiers, veterans and their families, co-founder Ivona Kostyna said.

The organization was originally funded by Ukrainian donors but began receiving aid from multiple U.S. State Department programs in 2019.

Their support line, which operates much like a stateside suicide prevention hotline, launched after Russia's full-scale invasion nearly three years ago.

The agency temporarily shut down services after losing U.S. funding support but has received enough money from public and private donors to operate for three months, Kostyna said.

Our employees "are starting (to ask) questions like, 'What's beyond the three months?' Kostyna said over the phone from her office in Kyiv. "Unfortunately, we don't have the answer to that yet."

Veteran Hub is now shifting resources to fundraising, she said. Kostyna remains optimistic but is unsure they will be able to come up with the money to fully fund their programs.

The group has 100 employees who work out of offices in Kyiv and Vinnytsia to the west, Kostyna said. Many are former soldiers and family members of the hundreds of thousands who have been wounded or killed in the war.

Veteran Hub has received funding from Ukrainian businesses, as well as the U.S. State Department. Kostyna said she can't disclose the amount of money they have received from the U.S. because of confidentiality clauses.

The support line receives upward of 1,300 calls per month. Some of those calls come from the roughly 19,900 Ukrainian soldiers



A Veteran Hub employee answers a call on a support line.

trained by American forces.

On his first day in office, President Donald Trump signed an executive order that froze all foreign aid for 90 days. Programs will be evaluated for "efficiencies and consistency with United States foreign policy," the order states.

Kostyna, who applied for funding through the U.S. State Department, was informed about the freeze in a Jan. 20 email instructing her to cease operations in four days, she said.

She told her employees not to come to work as they readied



Photos by Veteran Hub

A veteran of the Russia-Ukraine war receives counseling services at Veteran Hub's flagship office in Kyiv, Ukraine, on June 28.

layoffs, the shuttering of the support line and closure of the Vinnytsia office. They also froze research studies on mental health and veterans transitioning into civilian life.

After Kostyna posted the situation on X on Jan. 26, Ukrainian businesses, the Vinnytsia city council and private citizens rallied and donated enough to resume full operations Feb. 1 for three months. The support line missed 400 calls in the interim, Kostyna said.

Artem Pyndyk, who worked in information technology until the

Russian invasion, was looking for purpose after his time on the battlefield ended. The former sergeant was referred to Veteran Hub for services and now works there as an organizer and fundraiser.

He said three months is a long time for a soldier on the battlefield but not for a veterans service organization.

"We were stressed" when the funding was frozen, Pyndyk said. "It is a good lesson to be pragmatic and always to be ready for that. Anything can happen."

NAVY FEDERAL
Credit Union

ARMY
MARINE CORPS
NAVY
AIR FORCE
SPACE FORCE
COAST GUARD
VETERANS

GET A LOW INTRO APR AND DOMINATE DEBT

You could take down debt this year with a **0% intro APR on balance transfers**. For **12 months**, you'll save on transfers to select Navy Federal cards made in your **first 60 days**.¹ After that, a **standard variable APR** between **10.99% and 18%** will apply.² Plus, no transfer fees.

➔ **Hurry—these balance transfer offers end March 31, 2025.**
Get started at navyfederal.org/CreditCards.

Navy Federal is federally insured by NCUA.

¹As of 2/3/25, rates range from 10.99% APR to 18% APR, are based on product type and creditworthiness, and will vary with the market based on the U.S. Prime Rate. ATM cash advance fees: None if performed at a Navy Federal branch or ATM. Otherwise, \$0.50 per domestic transaction or \$1.00 per foreign transaction. ²This offer is non-transferable and is valid for the intended recipient only. This means that only members who receive this offer directly from Navy Federal are eligible to accept the offer. To be eligible for the 0% promotional APR on balance transfers, you must transfer a balance from a non-Navy Federal credit card between 1/2/25 and 3/31/25. Qualifying balances will revert to your variable Standard APR 12 months after your balance transfer has posted to your Navy Federal credit card account. All balance transfers that do not meet the requirements for this offer will accrue interest at your variable Standard APR. Balance transfers are not eligible to earn rewards. Maximum total transfer amount is limited to your available credit line, but no single balance transfer can be greater than \$30,000. Balance transfers using convenience checks are excluded from this offer. If you transfer a balance with this offer, interest will be charged on purchases made with your credit card unless your purchases have a 0% APR or you pay the entire balance, including any transferred balances, in full each month by the payment due date. Navy Federal reserves the right to change or end this offer at any time without notice. © 2025 Navy Federal NFCU 14300 (1-25)

PACIFIC

S. Korea decries demolition of reunion site

BY DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korea condemned North Korea's demolition of a 12-story resort where families separated by the Korean War held brief reunions, calling the action "an act against humanity."

The 206-room Reunion Center for Separated Families at Mount Kumgang, or Diamond Mountain, is about 15 miles north of the border, according to a statement Thursday from the South Korean Ministry of Unification.

"The government expresses deep regret over the North's unilateral dismantlement of a facility that was built by agreement between the two Koreas, and sternly urges the North to immediately suspend all such actions," the ministry said. "Demolishing the reunion center is an act against humanity that crushes the yearning of separated families, as well as a grave infringement of our state-owned property."

Built for \$38 million, the building hosted group reunions for families separated since the 1950-53 Korean War, according to the ministry.

Families shared meals and took walks along the scenic mountain during their hours-long reunions before returning to their respective homes.

On April 27, 2018, then-South Korean President Moon Jae-in and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un agreed to "boldly open up a new era of national reconciliation, peace and prosperity," according to a joint statement.

Four months later, at the last reunion at the resort on Aug. 20, 2018, nearly 90 South Koreans, including a 101-year-old, briefly met with

their families living in the North.

A symbol of reconciliation between North and South, the resort also laid the groundwork for economic exchanges through tourism. South Koreans were allowed to tour the resort for 10 years before the trips were halted in 2008, when a South Korean woman was fatally shot by North Korean troops who alleged she had entered a restricted area.

Pyongyang has destroyed other symbols of reconciliation amid strained relations with Seoul.

In April, roughly three months af-

ter Kim described Seoul as his "primary foe" in a speech, North Korea demolished a fire station that served visitors to the mountain. South Korea paid \$1.6 million in 2008 to build the two-story station, according to the Unification Ministry.

North Korea also used explosives on Oct. 15 to destroy unused roads and railway lines that connected the two countries. Debris from the explosion flew south of the border, prompting South Korean soldiers to fire warning shots, according to South Korea's military.

Lawmaker sends 500 valentines to US troops near N. Korean border

BY LUIS GARCIA
Stars and Stripes

CAMP HOVEY, South Korea — Nearly 500 Valentine's Day cards were delivered to soldiers near the DMZ this week, marking the first time a Washington congresswoman's annual program has reached overseas.

Rep. Marilyn Strickland, D-Wash., sent a staffer to Camp Hovey on Tuesday to deliver valentines collected in Washington state's 10th Congressional District, which includes southern Tacoma, Olympia and Joint Base Lewis-McChord.

The Valentines for Veterans and First Responders program, launched in 2022, has grown into an annual effort involving thousands of messages from students and community groups in Strickland's district, spokeswoman Siena Miller said in an email Wednesday.

This year, for the first time, cards were sent to soldiers deployed to Hovey from Lewis-McChord, she said.

"Service members who are stationed abroad should also feel appreciation for their service," Mill-



A soldier opens a Valentine's Day card at Camp Hovey.

er said.

At the 1st Battalion, 37th Field Artillery Regiment motor pool, soldiers received valentines decorated with handwritten messages, drawings and crafts.

"To me, small things count, and they really matter," Spc. Todd Marquez, of California, said at the motor pool Tuesday. "Sometimes you might be having a bad day, and little things like this help a lot."

Hovey is 11 miles south of the Demilitarized Zone, a 2½-mile-wide, heavily guarded swath that divides the two Koreas. Units of the 2nd Infantry Division, primarily combat arms such as field artillery and mechanized infantry,



PHOTOS BY LUIS GARCIA/Stars and Stripes

American soldiers receive Valentine's Day cards at Camp Hovey, South Korea, on Tuesday.

are stationed there.

Marquez, who serves with the artillery regiment, said the gesture reminds troops that people back home are thinking about them.

"I probably speak on everybody's behalf in saying that we appreciate it," he told Stars and

Stripes. "It's really thoughtful, and it does help morale with the unit."

For 1st Lt. Gerard Massey, of Texas, the impact went beyond the physical gift.

"It's not necessarily the valentine itself; it's the mental acknowledgment," he said. "It's the 'hey, we know you're forward, we know

you're making a sacrifice, and we appreciate you.'"

Massey said the effort resonated across the unit.

"What may have taken them five minutes to make means the world to us," he said. "There were huge smiles on faces today because of this."

Army refers charges against soldier accused in pregnant wife's death

BY WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

FORT SHAFTER, Hawaii — The Army on Wednesday referred five charges, including murder and killing an unborn child, against a Hawaii-based soldier in connection with his pregnant wife's disappearance last year.

The Army Office of Special Trial Counsel referred charges against Pfc. Dewayne Arthur Johnson II, 29, in "the death of Mischa Johnson, intentionally killing her unborn child, obstruction of justice, providing false offi-



Johnson

cial statements, possession of child pornography and the production and distribution of child pornography," the Army said in a news release Wednesday.

Johnson, of Frederick, Md., waived his right to an Article 32 preliminary hearing, the Army said. His case will now be assigned to a military judge who will schedule dates for an arraignment, pre-



Mischa Johnson

He has served as a cavalry scout with the 25th Infantry Division since June 2023.

Mischa Johnson, then 19, was six months pregnant on Aug. 1 when her husband reported her missing from their home on Scho-

field Barracks in central Oahu.

"Mischa Johnson is presumed deceased and her body has not been found," the Army said.

Agents with the Army Criminal Investigation Division continue to probe the case, the Army said.

CID agents told Mischa Johnson's family that based on evidence found in the home and the soldier's car, they believe she was killed, Marianna Tapiz, the missing woman's older sister, said during an Instagram livestream in August.

Johnson's report of his missing

wife set off a flurry of searches on and around Schofield Barracks, the largest Army base in the state and home to the 25th ID.

He led his platoon on a 6-mile search for his wife near the base days after he reported her missing, Tapiz said in the livestream.

Johnson told officers with the Honolulu Police Department and military police that his wife had been "emotionally distraught."

CID is asking anyone with information regarding the case to contact the Army CID Pacific Field Office at 808-208-0559.

PACIFIC

Navy ships make two-day Taiwan Strait trip

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

A pair of U.S. Navy ships made a rare, two-day trip through the Taiwan Strait this week, marking the first transit of the contentious waterway under the Trump administration.

The guided-missile destroyer USS Ralph Johnson and the survey ship USNS Bowditch sailed southwest through the 110-mile-wide channel that separates mainland China from Taiwan between Monday and Wednesday, U.S. Indo-Pa-

cific Command told Stars and Stripes by email Thursday.

"The transit occurred through a corridor in the Taiwan Strait that is beyond any coastal state's territorial seas," wrote command spokesman Cmdr. Matthew Comer. "Within this corridor, all nations enjoy high-seas freedom of navigation, overflight, and other internationally lawful uses of the sea related to these freedoms."

Transits of the strait typically last less than a day and are announced via news releases from

INDOPACOM or the U.S. 7th Fleet. However, this week's passage was not publicly announced by either command as of Thursday morning.

Comer did not address questions about the transit's timing, length or why it wasn't publicized.

Seventh Fleet spokeswoman Lt. j.g. Sarah Merrill, in an email Thursday, referred all questions about the transit to INDOPACOM.

The United States regularly sends warships and, less frequently, aircraft through the strait. This week's transit marks the first since

President Donald Trump was sworn into office on Jan. 20.

The 7th Fleet last announced a transit on Nov. 26 by a P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol and reconnaissance aircraft.

The Navy typically describes the transits as a routine means of traveling between the East and South China seas, but Beijing views them as provocative and regularly condemns them as support for Taiwan. China considers the island, a functioning democracy, a breakaway province that must be reunified

with the mainland, by force if necessary.

China's military tracked the ships' passage via naval and air forces, China's Eastern Theater Command spokesman Col. Xi Li said in a Wednesday post on the command's official Weibo social media account.

The transit "sent the wrong signal and increased security risks," he wrote, adding that troops remain on high alert to defend regional stability and China's sovereignty.

Underwater explosion destroys 264 pounds of WWII-era shells

By BRIAN McELHINEY
AND KEISHI KOJA
Stars and Stripes

URUMA CITY, Okinawa — Japanese troops exploded 461 U.S.-made shells off the coast on Thursday, the latest in a continuing stream of World War II leftovers that turn up on the former island battleground.

Eleven explosive ordnance disposal divers with the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force's Sub Area Activity Okinawa unit detonated the shells a mile offshore of Nakagusuku Bay Port, according to a Self-Defense Force spokesman. The detonation took place at 10:50 a.m.

The divers installed a plastic bomb to detonate the shells 36 feet below the surface, the spokesman told Stars and Stripes before the operation began.

The shells were discovered over

the past two to three years in and around Nakagusuku Bay, according to a spokesman with the city's Crisis Management Division. Some were found by construction vessels during dredging work, while others were discovered by civilians swimming in the area.

According to a document shown to Stars and Stripes by the city spokesman, the ordnance included one 5-inch shell, one Type 90 shrapnel, one 57 mm field gun shell, one 60 mm trench mortar round, two 81 mm trench mortar rounds, 13 20 mm field gun shells, five 37 mm field gun shells, 237 12.7 mm machine gun rounds, and 200 7.62 mm rounds.

The shells collectively weighed 264 pounds, according to a Jan. 30 Uruma city news release.

Japanese troops last detonated a collection of ordnance off Okinawa about two years ago, the Self-

Defense Force spokesman said.

"This time, the amount is larger because there are a lot of small bullets, but the weight is almost the same," he said.

The shells were stored in an underwater metal cage in the bay away from swimmers and boaters until Thursday's detonation, he added.

Some Japanese government officials speak to the press only on condition of anonymity.

The detonation followed multiple recent discoveries of unexploded ordnance believed to be from WWII on Okinawa.

On Feb. 6, five members of the Ground Self-Defense Force's 101st Explosive Ordnance Disposal Unit removed a U.S.-made, 5-inch shell from a warehouse construction site inside the Maritime Self-Defense Force's air base in Naha city, a spokesman with the



BRIAN McELHINEY/Stars and Stripes

Japanese navy divers detonate 461 U.S.-made shells believed to be from World War II in Nakagusuku Bay, Okinawa, Thursday.

city's Disaster Prevention and Crisis Management Division said by phone Thursday.

The soldiers moved the shell into an explosion-proof container using a crane and defused it without issues, the spokesman said.

The Japanese government has ramped up searches for unexploded ordnance at airports across the

country. The government began surveys in October at Miyazaki Airport on Kyushu, the southernmost of Japan's four main islands, after a WWII-era bomb exploded on a taxiway that month.

Magnetic surveys began in December at Naha Airport, along with airports in Sendai, Matsuyama and Fukuoka.

US sailor in crash may face charge of negligent driving

By HANA KUSUMOTO
AND ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — Japanese police on Wednesday recommended a charge of negligent driving causing death against a sailor involved in a fatal collision outside the home of the U.S. 7th Fleet.

Yokosuka city police allege the sailor, identified only as a 22-year-old man, made an illegal right turn at a five-way intersection near the Yokosuka base's Womble Gate and collided head-on with a motorcyclist, a police spokesman said by phone Thursday.

The incident occurred at 6:42 p.m. on Sept. 18. The motorcyclist, a 22-year-old Japanese man from Yokosuka, was pronounced dead less than an hour later at a nearby hospital, the

spokesman said.

Police interviewed the sailor and subsequently recommended to prosecutors a charge of negligent driving causing death, he said.

In Japan, prosecutors make charging decisions following a police investigation.

The sailor admitted he caused the accident and has apologized, the spokesman said. The sailor has been in U.S. military custody since the accident, he added.

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

Yokosuka Naval Base spokesman Justin Keller declined to confirm the sailor's identity or custody status in an email Thursday to Stars and Stripes.

"It would be inappropriate to comment on ongoing legal proceedings," he wrote.

Australia accuses Chinese fighter of unsafe interaction with its P-8 surveillance plane

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Australia has protested what it describes as an unsafe and unprofessional interaction over the South China Sea where a Chinese fighter is accused of releasing flares that endangered an Australian military surveillance plane.

A Chinese J-16 fighter released flares on Tuesday that passed within 100 feet of a P-8 Poseidon surveillance jet in daylight and in international air space, Defense Minister Richard Marles said on Thursday.

The Australian plane usually carries eight or nine crew. The plane was not damaged and no crew member was injured, Marles said.

"The J-16 was so close that there's no way you could have been able to ensure that the flares did not hit the P-8," Marles told

Sky News.

"Had any of those flares hit the P-8, that would have definitely had the potential for significant damage to that aircraft," he added.

Australia has protested in its capital Canberra and in Beijing on Wednesday and Thursday, Marles said.

The protest accused the two Chinese pilots of an "unsafe and unprofessional maneuver that posed a risk to the aircraft and personnel," a statement said.

The Chinese Embassy in Australia did not immediately respond to a request for comment on Thursday.

The protest highlights that while bilateral diplomatic and trade relations have improved, relations between the two militaries remain dangerous.

The interaction is the first sig-

nificant clash between Chinese and Australian forces that Australia has disclosed in nine months.

Australia accused the pilot of a Chinese J-10 fighter of unsafe and unprofessional behavior over the Yellow Sea in May last year by dropping flares in the path of an Australian navy Seahawk helicopter.

Australia said the helicopter pilot had to take evasive action to avoid the flares.

There were no injuries or damage, although experts warned the helicopter could have been forced to ditch at sea if a flare had struck an engine.

China protested at the time that the helicopter had flown close to Chinese airspace and had attempted to carry out reconnaissance on a Chinese navy training exercise.

MILITARY

Military spouses exempt from return-to-office rule

Stars and Stripes

Spouses of active-duty service members and overseas foreign service officers are exempt from recent rules requiring nearly all federal government employees to return to the workplace, the U.S. Office of Personnel Management said in a memo Tuesday.

Agencies are also allowed to continue hiring spouses to remote work positions, according to the memo sent by Charles Ezell, acting director of the government's personnel agency.

The directive also covers the spouses of service members who died while on active duty if the

spouse hasn't remarried, as well as those married to service members who retired with a 100% disability rating.

The memo was released a week after House lawmakers introduced a bipartisan bill to exempt military spouses from President Donald Trump's Jan. 20 directive that federal employees return to their respective offices.

The decision to exempt spouses comes amid concerns about the economic ripple effect on military families in connection with the presidential order. In the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic, teleworking arrange-

ments proliferated across government.

Applying the new return-to-office regulation to spouses would be disruptive for military spouses, who already are at a disadvantage when it comes to finding work, according to advocates.

Frequent moves that come with the military lifestyle are one of the factors that complicate a spouse's employment situation.

One in five military spouses is unemployed — nearly four times the national unemployment rate — according to military data.

And 45% of spouses consider themselves underemployed,



FACEBOOK/Military Onesource

Military spouses and foreign service officer spouses have been exempted from the return-to-work mandate for federal workers.

meaning that they are doing jobs below their education and experience levels, according to a June 2024 Army statement.

"While many civilians can relocate to take an attractive job offer

or gain notice in a more promising market, military spouses must make do where they are," the Army said in the statement, which outlined the challenges of spouse employment.

Meta warns of Valentine's Day military posers online

By PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN

Stars and Stripes

Those searching for love online this Valentine's Day should be extra cautious when messaging supposed military personnel — especially if they start asking for money.

Scammers impersonating service members continue to be rampant and eager to pounce on a day dedicated to romance, the internet giant Meta, which owns Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, said in a statement Wednesday.

"In these cases, scammers typically pose as attractive, single, and successful individuals, often with a military or business background," it said.

For example, fake profiles of retired Army Gen. Stephen Townsend are so abundant that advisories get repeated over the years by various commands.

A post on U.S. Africa Command's Facebook page in 2021 said Townsend, who led AFRICOM at the time, does not have any social media profiles. "If someone is claiming to be the general, it is a SCAM," the message added.

The scams usually begin with a generic message sent to numerous potential victims. If someone responds, the scammer



Rachel Tobac, CEO of SocialProof Security, talks about how to avoid becoming a victim of social media romance scams in a Meta public service announcement video.

gradually builds trust before ultimately requesting money or proposing a fraudulent investment opportunity.

Fraudsters posing as military personnel, often using stolen photos and personal information from real veterans or active-duty

service members, have been a persistent problem.

Because military members are often stationed in remote locations and unable to meet in person, they provide scammers with a convenient excuse to keep victims

engaged.

Another reason criminals frequently impersonate military personnel is that many people feel a sense of gratitude for their service and are unfamiliar with military life and protocols, according to the online safety company Aura.

In 2021, the U.S. military in Afghanistan reported nearly 900 fake accounts on various social media sites impersonating Gen. Scott Miller, the top U.S. commander in the country.

Stars and Stripes still gets occasional emails from people asking if messages purported to be from Miller are real (they aren't.)

Since 2020, active-duty troops have reported 1,751 incidents of romance scams, with losses of \$16.1 million, according to the Military Officers Association of America, citing Federal Trade Commission data.

Meta has already deactivated 116,000 accounts associated with scams in 2025, including many that lured victims under false romantic pretexts, the company said.

In a video accompanying the Meta statement, internet safety expert Rachel Tobac says of the scammers: "Their goal is to steal your money, sadly — not your heart."

Billions: Republicans argue more spending will help deter enemies

FROM PAGE 1

the U.S. gross domestic product to meet security challenges from China, Russia, North Korea and Iran.

"We must make the investments necessary to deter, and if necessary, defeat this new axis of aggressors," Rep. Mike Rogers, R-Ala., the chairman of the House panel, said Wednesday. "Yet today, U.S. defense spending as a percentage of GDP is at its lowest level since before World War II. This is not enough to deter our enemies."

The annual defense budget, totaling more than \$800 billion, is

now at about 3% of GDP, according to a report issued last year by Sen. Roger Wicker, R-Miss., the chairman of the Senate panel.

"The president campaigned on a 'peace through strength' agenda," Wicker said after recently meeting with Trump. "I am hopeful that the reconciliation process will allow Congress to help him meet that goal. We cannot rebuild the military on the cheap, and we should not cut corners when building the tools our service members need."

The reconciliation process begins with the budget resolutions that the House and Senate are

now considering. If the resolutions are approved, Republicans would be able to bypass the 60-vote threshold typically required in the Senate and pass their budget priorities with a simple majority vote.

Democrats on Wednesday decried the process and said the Republican proposals will drive up the national debt while cutting programs for families and giving tax cuts mainly to the rich.

The House's overall budget plan provides for a \$4 trillion increase in the debt limit and aims to cut spending by \$2 trillion in the next 10 years. The Senate's

plan will require an \$85.5 billion reduction in annual spending on programs not related to defense, border security and domestic energy production.

Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, asked why Republicans were using the budget reconciliation process to raise defense spending when lawmakers in both parties have been willing to pass supplemental funding for the Pentagon in recent years.

"You don't need to use reconciliation to find spending on defense," Kaine said. "We do it all the time in a bipartisan way."

But Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., the chairman of the Senate Budget Committee, said Congress needed to "break the cycle" of raising defense spending in conjunction with also boosting funding for non-defense programs, as insisted on by Democrats.

"We want to increase defense spending because we believe we have threats from China, Russia, Iran, terrorist levels that are really unprecedented. We want to rebuild our military as quickly as we can," he said. "We can actually help the Defense Department that is underfunded."

NATION



JOSE LUIS MAGANA/AP

People protest the policies of President Donald Trump and Elon Musk at the U.S. Capitol on Wednesday.

Musk calls for government to 'delete entire agencies'

By JON GAMBRELL
Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Elon Musk called on Thursday for the United States to “delete entire agencies” from the federal government as part of his push under President Donald Trump to radically cut spending and restructure its priorities.

Musk offered a wide-ranging survey via a videocall to the World Governments Summit in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, of what he described as the priorities of the Trump administration interspersed with multiple references to “thermonuclear warfare” and the possible dangers of artificial intelligence.

“We really have here rule of the bureaucracy as opposed to rule of the people — democracy,” Musk said, wearing a black T-shirt that read: “Tech Support.” He also joked that he was the “White House’s tech support,” borrowing from his profile on the social platform X, which he owns.

“I think we do need to delete entire agencies as opposed to leave a lot of them behind,” Musk said. “If we don’t remove the roots of the weed, then it’s easy for the weed to grow back.”

While Musk has spoken to the

summit in the past, his appearance on Thursday comes as he has consolidated control over large swaths of the government with Trump’s blessing since assuming leadership of the Department of Government Efficiency. That’s included sidelining career officials, gaining access to sensitive databases and inviting a constitutional clash over the limits of presidential authority.

Musk’s new role imbued his comments with more weight beyond being the world’s wealthiest person through his investments in SpaceX and electric carmaker Tesla.

His remarks also offered a more-isolationist view of American power in the Middle East, where the U.S. has fought wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq since the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks.

“A lot of attention has been on USAID for example,” Musk said, referring to Trump’s dismantling of the U.S. Agency for International Development. “There’s like the National Endowment for Democracy. But I’m like, ‘OK, well, how much democracy have they achieved lately?’”

He added that the U.S. under Trump is “less interested in interfering with the affairs of other countries.”

There are “times the United

States has been kind of pushy in international affairs, which may resonate with some members of the audience,” Musk said, speaking to the crowd in the UAE, an autocratically ruled nation of seven sheikhdoms.

“Basically, America should mind its own business, rather than push for regime change all over the place,” he said.

He also noted the Trump administration’s focus on eliminating diversity, equity and inclusion work, at one point linking it to AI.

“If hypothetically, AI is designed for DEI, you know, diversity at all costs, it could decide that there’s too many men in power and execute them,” Musk said.

On AI, Musk said he believed X’s newly updated AI chatbot, Grok 3, would be ready in about two weeks, calling it at one point “kind of scary.”

He criticized Sam Altman’s management of OpenAI, which Musk just led a \$97.4 billion takeover bid for, describing it as akin to a non-profit aimed at saving the Amazon rainforest becoming a “lumber company that chops down the trees.” A court filing Wednesday on Musk’s behalf in the OpenAI dispute said he’d withdraw his bid if the ChatGPT maker drops its plan to convert into a for-profit company.

Trump shuts down federal worker offer after ruling

By OLIVIA GEORGE,
STEVE THOMPSON
AND EMILY DAVIES
The Washington Post

A judge on Wednesday lifted his pause on the federal government’s deferred resignation program, prompting the Trump administration to swiftly declare victory as it closed the offer to any more workers who might still have been mulling it.

The program — which encouraged federal workers to resign with the promise of pay through September — had been halted since last Thursday, when U.S. District Judge George A. O’Toole Jr. temporarily stopped the Office of Personnel Management from moving ahead. Unions representing more than 800,000 federal workers had filed a lawsuit to stop the program, calling it an “arbitrary, unlawful, short-fused ultimatum.”

In his ruling, O’Toole wrote that the unions’ lawsuit could not succeed because they lacked standing to sue and because his court lacked jurisdiction. The unions, the judge said, were not directly impacted by the administration directive “but are challenging a policy that affects others, specifically executive branch employees.”

“This is not sufficient,” he wrote, for the unions to sue under the Administrative Procedure Act. O’Toole, who was nominated in 1995 by President Bill Clinton, did not opine on the buyout program’s legality.

The ruling left a serious question: How much time would federal employees who had not yet signed up have to throw their names in? None, it turned out. McLaurine Pinover, spokesperson for the Office of Personnel Management, said the program was closed as of 7 p.m. “There is no longer any doubt,” she said in a statement. “The Deferred Resignation Program was both legal and a valuable option for federal employees.”

About 75,000 workers have already accepted the deal, Pinover said.

The decision out of the Massachusetts courthouse — and the Trump administration’s move immediately afterward — mark another milestone in a tumultuous period for federal workers, who have been left scrambling to make up their minds since the resignation offer, with the subject line “Fork in the Road,” first landed in their inboxes Jan. 28. Some workers jumped at the chance to leave. Others urged colleagues to reject a deal they consider a trap that will be used to eliminate staff without any payout.

The moves come as the Trump administration began initiating widespread layoffs across the federal government, starting Wednesday with probationary employees and with plans to extend deeper into the civilian federal workforce of 2.3 million. The drastic measures are led by representatives of Elon Musk’s U.S. DOGE Service, who are deployed across agencies with full oversight of the hiring process and one central mission: to shrink the sprawling bureaucracy and align it with Trump’s vision.

The unions had sought the right to sue by claiming the buyout program’s rapid deadline, along with what they characterized as its confusing and chaotic rollout, impeded the unions’ ability to carry out their missions of counseling and advocating for federal workers.

The deferred resignation was the administration’s effort to lure workers into leaving before initiating the more direct reductions-in-force — which can pose legal challenges, especially when it comes to union-protected employees.

Most of the 2.3 million federal workers were eligible for the deferred resignation deal, according to the White House. Agency heads could make exceptions, and military personnel, U.S. Postal Service employees, people working in immigration enforcement and national security, and thousands of Veterans Affairs employees in direct care roles were exempt, according to OPM.

Denver Public Schools sues DHS to block immigration raids at schools

The Denver Post

Denver Public Schools sued the U.S. Department of Homeland Security on Wednesday in an effort to block federal immigration agents from making arrests at schools as the Trump administration ramps up mass deportations nationwide.

DPS’s lawsuit, which was filed in U.S. District Court in Denver, comes a week after multiple federal agencies conducted raids across the Denver metropolitan area and prevented school buses from picking up children on the morning of Feb. 5.

U.S. Immigration and Customs

Enforcement agents did not make any arrests at Denver schools on Feb. 5, but DPS leaders and educators across the area have become concerned about such a scenario after the Trump administration rescinded a 2011 policy that prevented immigration officials from making arrests at sensitive

locations, such as schools.

“The fear that has set in ... we can’t continue this way,” said Superintendent Alex Marrero in an interview. “We can’t fathom, we can’t function under the pretext that it will happen in our buildings.”

The goal of the lawsuit, he said,

is to have the sensitive locations policy reinstated so that immigration activity at schools is restricted.

On Tuesday, 27 Christian and Jewish groups filed a lawsuit over the same policy change as DPS in an effort to stop immigration arrests at places of worship.

NATION

RFK Jr. is confirmed as health secretary

BY AMANDA SEITZ
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Senate on Thursday confirmed Robert F. Kennedy Jr. as President Donald Trump's health secretary, putting the prominent vaccine skeptic in control of \$1.7 trillion in federal spending, vaccine recommendations and food safety as well as health insurance programs for roughly half the country.

Nearly all Republicans fell in line behind Trump despite hesitancy over Kennedy views on vaccines, voting 52-48 to elevate the scion of one of America's most storied political — and Democratic — families to secretary of the Health and Human Services Department. Democrats unanimously opposed Kennedy.

Kentucky Sen. Mitch McConnell, who had polio as a child, was the only "no" vote among Republicans, mirroring his stands against Trump's picks for the Pentagon chief and director of national intelligence.

"I'm a survivor of childhood polio. In my lifetime, I've watched vaccines save millions of lives from devastating diseases across America and around the world," McConnell said in a statement afterwards. "I will not condone the re-litigation of proven cures, and neither will millions of Americans who credit their survival and qual-



DEMETRIUS FREEMAN/The Washington Post

Robert F. Kennedy Jr., nominee for secretary of health and human services, testifies Jan. 29 during a Senate Finance Committee confirmation hearing on Capitol Hill.

ity of life to scientific miracles."

The rest of the GOP, however, has embraced Kennedy's vision with a directive for the public health agencies to focus on chronic diseases such as obesity.

"We've got to get into the business of making America healthy again," said Sen. Mike Crapo, R-Idaho, adding that Kennedy will bring a "fresh perspective" to the office.

Kennedy, 71, whose name and family tragedies have put him in the national spotlight since he was a child, has earned a formidable following with his populist and sometimes extreme views on food,

chemicals and vaccines.

His audience only grew during the COVID-19 pandemic, when Kennedy devoted much of his time to a nonprofit that sued vaccine makers and harnessed social media campaigns to erode trust in vaccines as well as the government agencies that promote them.

With Trump's backing, Kennedy insisted he was "uniquely positioned" to revive trust in those public health agencies, which include the Food and Drug Administration, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the National Institutes for Health.

Last week, Sen. Thom Tillis, R-N.C., said he hoped Kennedy "goes wild" in reining in health care costs and improving Americans' health. But before agreeing to support Kennedy, potential holdout Sen. Bill Cassidy, R-La., a doctor who leads the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, required assurances that Kennedy would not make changes to existing vaccine recommendations.

During Senate hearings, Democrats tried to prod Kennedy to deny a long-discredited theory that vaccines cause autism. Some lawmakers also raised alarms about Kennedy financially benefiting from changing vaccine guidelines or weakening federal lawsuit protections against vaccine makers.

Committee sets up final vote on Patel to lead FBI

CQ-Roll Call

WASHINGTON — The Senate Judiciary Committee approved the pick of President Donald Trump ally Kash Patel to lead the FBI on a party-line vote Thursday, setting up a final confirmation vote on the Senate floor as early as next week.

Patel, who served in the first Trump administration and had branded himself a crusader against the "Deep State" and Trump's enemies in the media, would lead the federal law enforcement agency.

The committee voted 12-10 to advance Patel's nomination to the Senate floor. Democrats remain powerless to block his confirmation without help from Republicans, who have a 53-seat majority.

Republicans at the meeting defended Patel's record and approach to making changes at the agency, downplaying Democratic criticism of Patel's partisanship.

Chairman Charles E. Grassley, R-Iowa, characterized his vote for Patel as countering "weaponization" of the FBI, and stopping retaliation against whistleblowers.

"The FBI has fallen into really old habits and is long overdue for massive reform," Grassley said. "Mr. Patel is the man to do it and that is

why he is being attacked so viciously right now."

Since taking office, President Donald Trump has fired more than a dozen inspectors general and the government special counsel who regularly work with government worker whistleblowers.

Grassley and other Republicans said he did not believe Patel had an "enemies list" or would target Trump's political enemies.

Sen. Marsha Blackburn, R-Tenn., said the American people who voted for Trump wanted to end "two tiers of access, two tiers of treatment and two tiers of justice," and renew the FBI's focus on violent crime.

Democrats have long criticized Patel as too partisan to lead the nation's premier law enforcement agency. Ranking member Sen. Richard J. Durbin, D-Ill., said Patel is a partisan actor who does have an enemies list.

The disputed list appeared in an appendix of Patel's book "Government Gangsters: The Deep State, the Truth, and the Battle for Our Democracy." The list includes former FBI Director Christopher Wray, former Attorney General Merrick B. Garland and former President Joe Biden.

VA secretary Collins directed to lead 2 other agencies after firings

BY LINDA F. HERSEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Doug Collins, the new secretary at the Department of Veterans Affairs, temporarily assumed open leadership posts at two federal watchdog agencies after President Donald Trump fired their leaders in a move criticized by some Democratic lawmakers.

The president designated Collins to serve as interim director at the Office of Government Ethics and the Office of Special Counsel.

"Barely one week on the job, Doug Collins should have enough on his plate taking the reins of the largest health care system in the country," said Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., a member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, who called for Collins to step aside and focus on veterans. "Upon his confirmation, [Collins] was placed in charge of a department that serves more than 9 million veterans but has been under constant assault from unlawful directives from the White House that blatantly endanger veterans and the life-saving services they have

earned."

Trump tapped Collins to fill in at the Office of Government Ethics, after the president terminated director David Huitema on Monday. Huitema was a political appointee of former President Joe Biden and had been in his job since December 2024.

The office is an independent agency that oversees ethics rules and financial disclosures. The director is appointed by the president to a five-year term.

Collins

After the White House announced Collins' interim role as director, the agency said Shelley Finlay, chief of staff and program counsel at the Office of Government Ethics, had been named acting director, according to announcement on the agency's website.

The Office of Government Ethics did not respond to a request for comment.

Collins also briefly stepped into the top role at the Office of Spe-

cial Counsel, after Trump fired Hampton Dellinger as special counsel on Feb. 7.

Dellinger filed a lawsuit in federal court Monday claiming his termination was illegal and requesting an emergency hearing. He has served in his role since March 2024. A judge on Tuesday ordered him to return to his job until documents in the case are reviewed.

A decision was expected Thursday or Friday.

"Per an emergency court order issued Monday night in response to a lawsuit filed by Special Counsel Hampton Dellinger challenging the legality of his attempted ouster, Mr. Dellinger remains the head of OSC," the agency said.

According to Dellinger's lawsuit, he "is entitled to continue to serve as special counsel for the remainder of his five-year term and may be removed by the president 'only for inefficiency, neglect of duty, or malfeasance in office.'"

The Office of Special Counsel investigates and prosecutes wrongdoing in the government.

NATION

California braces for floods; snow, ice set for Oregon

BY BEN FINLEY
AND JOHN RABY
Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Rain intensified Thursday in California, where the strongest atmospheric river of the season is expected to bring downpours, strong winds and flooding to areas ravaged by wildfires. Ahead of the storm's arrival, officials distributed sandbags, prepositioned rescue swimmers and told residents to have go-bags ready.

Meanwhile, Portland, Ore., coated its streets with liquid anti-icer while officials in that state and Idaho opened emergency shelters to prepare for snow and ice on Thursday.

Southern California could see as much as 6 inches of rain in the mountains and 3 inches in coastal areas and valleys, according to Brent Bower, a hydrologist with the National Weather Service. Strong wind gusts could bring down trees, cause power outages and delay flights.

Evacuation warnings were issued in Mandeville Canyon and other areas ravaged by the Palisades Fire, which was the most destructive in Los Angeles' history, over concerns about potential debris flows during the storm.

There were also warnings for Trabuco Canyon and other areas near the burn scar for an earlier wildfire.

All Malibu schools were closed Thursday and the Knott's Berry Farm amusement park shuttered

due to the atmospheric river, which is along band of water vapor that forms over the ocean and transports moisture from the tropics to northern latitudes.

Daniel Swain, a climate scientist for the University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources, said the area is desperate for rain, but that this storm might bring too much too quickly.

The result could be debris flows and flash flooding around wildfire burn areas.

These burned areas are more at risk to debris flows because vegetation that helps to keep soil anchored has been burned away and loose debris, including ash, soil and rocks, have been added, he said in a statement.

The rain follows storms Wednesday that dumped heavy snow and freezing rain on a swath of the East from Kentucky to the nation's capital, causing hundreds of traffic accidents, knocking out power in places and threatening to flood waterways.

The storm system, which cut a path from Kentucky to Maryland and points farther north on Tuesday, brought more than 14 inches of snow to Iron Gate, a tiny Appalachian town in western Virginia, and 12 inches to White Sulphur Springs, W.Va., a small city about 65 miles to the west, the National Weather Service said.

By early Thursday, more than 150,000 customers in Virginia and more than 13,000 in North Carolina were still without electricity, ac-

ording to PowerOutage.us.

Appalachian Power, which serves a million customers in West Virginia, Virginia and Tennessee, said more than 5,700 workers were trying to restore power.

The region's airports received several inches of snow, according to Scott Kleebauer, a meteorologist with the weather service's Weather Prediction Center.

Nearly 7,000 flights were canceled or delayed across the United States Wednesday, including almost 300 into Ronald Reagan National Airport near Washington, according to the flight-tracking site FlightAware.com.

A suspected tornado flung large pieces of debris into the air as it moved through the small town of Columbia, Miss., where it shredded the steel roof of an industrial building and damaged several homes Wednesday, video shows.

About 20 homes were damaged, but no deaths or major injuries were reported, Columbia Mayor Justin McKenzie told WDAM-TV.

An ice storm forecast for the Portland area early Thursday and Friday could challenge deliveries of flowers and other gifts for Valentine's Day. Temperatures plummeted earlier this week in Portland, which is more known for its rainfall.

Julia Duncan, a co-owner of Flowers in Flight, shrugged off the weather, saying the area endured ice storms in past winters and customers are willing to go the extra mile for the people they love.



NICK ROHLMAN/AP

Rick Boland uses a snowblower to clear snow from his driveway in North Liberty, Iowa, Wednesday.

Unemployment numbers fall as companies hold onto workers

Associated Press

U.S. applications for unemployment benefits fell last week as employers continue to retain workers despite resurgent inflation and elevated interest rates.

The number of Americans filing for jobless benefits fell by 7,000 to 213,000 for the week ending Feb. 8, the Labor Department said Thursday. Analysts projected that 215,000 new applications would be filed.

Weekly applications for jobless benefits are considered representative of layoffs.

The four-week average, which smooths out some of the week-to-week volatility, inched down by 1,000 to 216,000.

Despite showing some signs of weakening during the past year, the labor market remains healthy with plentiful jobs and relatively few layoffs.

Last week, the Labor Department reported that U.S. employers added 143,000 jobs in January, significantly fewer than December's 256,000 job gains. How-

ever, the unemployment rate ticked down to an even 4%, signaling a still very healthy labor market.

Late in January, the Federal Reserve left its benchmark lending rate alone after issuing three cuts late in 2024. Fed officials are closely monitoring inflation and the labor market for signs of a potentially weakening economy. They expect only two rate cuts this year, down from previous projections of four.

However, after Wednesday's consumer prices report that showed inflation accelerated last month, many experts believe the Fed may not be moved to cut rates at all this year.

The consumer price index increased 3% in January from a year ago, up from a 3 1/2 year low of 2.4% in September.

The new data shows that inflation has remained stubbornly above the Fed's 2% target for roughly the past six months after it fell steadily for about a year and a half.

Overall, while layoffs remain low by historical standards, a host of companies have announced job cuts already this year.

Workday, Dow, CNN, Starbucks and Facebook parent company Meta have all trimmed their workforces already in 2025.

Late in 2024, GM, Boeing, Cargill and Stellantis announced layoffs.

The total number of Americans receiving unemployment benefits for the week of Feb. 1 fell to 1.85 million, a decrease of 36,000 from the previous week.

Are you in the picture?



Reading Stars and Stripes gives you a better handle on issues that affect you most.

No one covers the bases the way we do.

STARS AND STRIPES

In print • Online at stripes.com • Mobile for Android, iPhone & iPad

Read
STARS AND STRIPES
online at
www.stripes.com

WORLD

Hamas says it will free hostages as planned

BY SAMY MAGDY
AND MELANIE LIDMAN
Associated Press

CAIRO — Hamas said Thursday it would release three more Israeli hostages as planned, paving the way toward resolving a major dispute over the ceasefire in the Gaza Strip.

Hamas had threatened to delay the next release of captives, accusing Israel of failing to meet its obligations to allow in tents and shelters, among other alleged violations of the truce. Israel, with the support of President Donald Trump, had threatened to renew its offensive if hostages were not freed.

There was no immediate comment from Israel on Hamas' announcement, but it should allow the ceasefire to continue for now, though the future of the truce remains in doubt.

Hamas said its delegation held

talks in Cairo with Egyptian officials and was in contact with Qatar's prime minister about bringing into Gaza more shelters, medical supplies, fuel and heavy equipment for clearing rubble — its key demand in recent days. It said in a statement that the mediators had pledged to "remove all hurdles."

Shortly after the announcement, Hamas spokesman Abdul Latif al-Qanou confirmed to The Associated Press by phone that three hostages will be released on Saturday.

Egypt's state-run Qahera TV, which is close to the country's security services, reported that Egypt and Qatar had succeeded in resolving the dispute. The two Arab countries have served as key mediators with Hamas and helped broker the ceasefire, which took effect in January, more than 15 months into the war.

Egyptian media also aired footage showing trucks carrying temporary housing and bulldozers on the Egyptian side of the Rafah crossing with Gaza. They reported that the trucks were heading to an Israeli inspection area before crossing into Gaza.

The truce faces a much bigger challenge in the coming weeks. The first phase is set to conclude at the beginning of March, and there have not yet been substantive negotiations over the second phase, in which Hamas would release dozens of remaining hostages in return for an end to the war.

Trump's proposal to remove some 2 million Palestinians from Gaza and settle them in other countries has thrown the truce's future into further doubt. The plan has been welcomed by Israel but vehemently rejected by Palestinians and Arab countries, which have refused to accept any influx

of refugees. Human rights groups say it could amount to a war crime under international law.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's far-right allies are already calling for a resumption of the war after the first phase with the goal of implementing Trump's plan and annihilating Hamas, which remains in control of the territory after surviving one of the deadliest and most destructive military campaigns in recent history.

The war began on Oct. 7, 2023, when Hamas-led militants stormed into Israel, killing some 1,200 people, mainly civilians, and abducting around 250 people. More than half have been released in deals with Hamas or other agreements, eight have been rescued and dozens of bodies have been recovered.

The captives are among the only bargaining chips Hamas has left,

and it may be difficult to get the group to commit to further releases if it believes the war will resume.

Trump has given mixed signals about what he wants to see in Gaza.

He took credit for brokering the ceasefire, which was reached days before he took office after more than a year of negotiations under the Biden administration. But he has also expressed misgivings about how the agreement is unfolding and says it's up to Israel whether to resume the war or not, while pledging continued U.S. military support.

Seventy-three hostages have not yet been released, around half of whom are believed to be dead.

Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz, echoing Trump, said Wednesday that "all hell will break loose" if Hamas stops releasing hostages.

Driver plows into Munich protest

Associated Press

BERLIN — A driver drove a car into a labor union demonstration in central Munich on Thursday, injuring at least 28 people including children, authorities said. Officials said it was believed to be an attack.

The suspect, an Afghan asylum-seeker, was arrested. The incident follows a series of attacks involving immigrants in recent months that have pushed migration to the forefront of the campaign for Germany's Feb. 23 election.

Participants in a demonstration by the service workers' union ver.di were walking along a street at about 10:30 a.m. when the car overtook a police vehicle following the gathering, accelerated and plowed into the back of the group, police said.

Officers arrested the suspect after firing a shot at the car, deputy police chief Christian Huber said. He added that at least 28 people were believed to be injured, some of them seriously. A damaged Mini was seen at the scene, along with debris including shoes.

The suspect was a 24-year-old Afghan asylum-seeker, Huber said. Bavaria's state interior minister, Joachim Herrmann, said the man was known to authorities in connection with theft and drug offenses, but didn't give further details. He said officials believe the protest was likely targeted at ran-



ALEXA GRIF/AP

Emergency services attend the scene of an accident after a driver hit a group of people in Munich on Thursday.

dom.

The state's justice minister, Georg Eisenreich, said a prosecutors' department that investigates extremism and terror was looking into the case.

"We feel with the victims, we are praying for the victims — we hope very much that they all make it," Bavarian governor Markus Söder told reporters at the scene.

"It is suspected to be an attack — a lot points to that," Söder added.

Mayor Dieter Reiter said that children were among those injured.

The Munich incident comes three weeks after a 2-year-old boy and a man were killed in a knife attack in Aschaffenburg, also in Bavaria. An Afghan whose asylum application was rejected was the suspect in that attack, which propelled migration to the center of the German election campaign.

The Aschaffenburg attack fol-

lowed knife attacks in Mannheim and Solingen last year in which the suspects were immigrants from Afghanistan and Syria, respectively.

In the December Christmas market car ramming in Magdeburg, the suspect was a Saudi doctor who previously had come to various regional authorities' attention.

Germany's main opposition conservative bloc, in which Söder is a prominent figure, has demanded a tougher approach to irregular migration. Curbing migration is also a core issue for the far-right Alternative for Germany, which polls put in second place behind the conservatives.

Center-left Chancellor Olaf Scholz's government said it already has done a lot to reduce irregular migration, and that the opposition's plans are incompatible with German and European Union law.

Elephants trumpet after move across Melbourne

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Elephants trumpeted, touched trunks and flapped their oversized ears upon reuniting with their herd after a complex, five-day move from an urban Australian zoo to a much larger enclosure.

The nine Asian elephants were transported 25 miles from Melbourne Zoo in the heart of the city to an enclosure 10 times bigger at the Werribee Open Range Zoo, Zoos Victoria said on Thursday. Police escorts and synchronized traffic lights aided their journey in three convoys of trucks.

The animals' reactions demonstrated they were happy with their move, the elephants' manager Erin Gardiner said.

"The behaviors that we saw that indicated to us that they felt really comfortable and also excited to see each other were lots of ear flapping, trunk touching, lots of vocalizations," Gardiner said.

"So, roaring, trumpeting, tweaks and squeaks. And so all those interactions helped us understand that they are happy to see each other and feeling comfortable. By the afternoon, those calves were playing together and interacting and I just couldn't believe how well they traveled," Gardiner added.

Planning the move began almost two years ago by training the elephants to enter and exit the transport crates, veterinarian Bonnie McMeekin said.

The elephants weighing a combined 25 U.S. tons were given mild sedatives to reduce their stress during their 40-minute journeys.



JO HOWELL/AP

Handler Tayla Newman interacts with female elephant calf Aiyara, at Melbourne Zoo, Australia, on Thursday.

The adults were also tethered around their ankles to hold them steady on the road.

The trucks mostly traveled around 37 mph but took turns cautiously, McMeekin said. The crates were air-conditioned and purpose built, three of them specifically for mothers and calves to travel together.

The herd has one adult male, five adult females and three calves, all 2 years old.

The herd on Wednesday was introduced into their new 52-acre enclosure that has two 11-foot-deep swimming pools. The enclosure is as big as the entire Melbourne Zoo where the herd had outgrown their 5-acre habitat.

Their new \$55 million home has mud wallows, specially designed elephant barns and a communal sleeping area filled with 3,600 U.S. tons of sand.

The herd will be given weeks to settle into their new home before the habitat is opened to the public.

HEALTH & FITNESS

Sleeping on the job

Experts, devoted nap-takers explain why, how to take an afternoon siesta

BY CATHY BUSSEWITZ
Associated Press

They snooze in parking garages, on side streets before the afternoon school run, in nap pods rented by the hour or stretched out in bed while working from home.

People who make a habit of sleeping on the job comprise a secret society of sorts within the U.S. labor force. Inspired by famous power nappers Winston Churchill and Albert Einstein, today's committed nap-takers often sneak in short rest breaks because they think the practice will improve their cognitive performance, though it still carries a stigma.

Multiple studies have extolled the benefits of napping, such as enhanced memory and focus. A midafternoon siesta is the norm in parts of Spain and Italy. In China and Japan, nodding off is encouraged since working to the point of exhaustion is seen as a display of dedication, according to a study in the journal *Sleep*.

Yet it's hard to catch a few z's during regular business hours in the United States, where people who nap can be viewed as lazy. The federal government even bans sleeping in its buildings while at work, except in rare circumstances.

Individuals who are willing and able to challenge the status quo are becoming less hesitant to describe the payoffs of taking a dose of microsleep.

Marvin Stockwell, the founder of PR firm Champion the Cause, takes short naps several times a week.

"They rejuvenate me in a way that I'm exponentially more useful and constructive and creative on the other side of a nap than I am when I'm forcing myself to gut through being tired," Stockwell said.

The art of napping

Sleep is as important to good health as diet and exercise, but too many people don't get enough of it, according to James Rowley, program director of the Sleep Medicine Fellowship at Rush University Medical Center.

"A lot of it has to do with electronics. It used to be TVs, but now cellphones are probably the biggest culprit. People just take them to bed with them and watch," Rowley said.

Napping isn't common in academia, where there's constant pressure to publish, but University of Southern California lecturer Julianna Kirschner fits in daytime naps when she can. Kirschner studies social media, which she says is designed to deliver a dopamine rush to the brain. Viewers lose track of time on the platforms, interrupting sleep. Kirschner says she isn't immune to this



ILLUSTRATION BY ANNIE NG/AP

While workplace dozing is uncommon in the U.S., some companies and managers encourage it, including artificial intelligence startup Exa, ice cream maker Ben & Jerry's and wellness technology company Thrive Global, where celebrity author Arianna Huffington is founder and CEO.

problem — hence, her occasional need to nap.

The key to effective napping is to keep the snooze sessions short, Rowley said. Short naps can be restorative and are more likely to leave you more alert, he said.

"Most people don't realize naps should be in the 15- to 20-minute range," Rowley said. "Anything longer, and you can have problems with sleep inertia, difficulty waking up and you're groggy."

Individuals who find themselves consistently relying on naps to make up for inadequate sleep should probably also examine their bedtime habits, he said.

A matter of timing

Midafternoon is the ideal time for a nap because it coincides with a natural circadian dip, while napping after 6 p.m. may interfere with nocturnal sleep for those who work during daylight hours, said Michael Chee, director of the Centre for Sleep and Cognition at the National University of Singapore.

"Any duration of nap, you will feel recharged. It's a relief valve. There are clear cognitive benefits," Chee said.

A review of napping studies suggests that 30 minutes is the optimal nap length in terms of practicality and benefits, said Ruth Leong, a research fellow at the Singapore center.

"When people nap for too long, it may not be a sustainable practice, and also, really long naps that cross the two-hour mark affect nighttime sleep," Leong said.

Experts recommend setting an alarm for 20 to 30 minutes, which gives nappers a few minutes to fall asleep.

But even a six-minute nap can be restorative and improve learning, said Valentin Dragoi, scientific director of the Center for Neural Systems Restoration, a research and treatment facility run by Houston Methodist hospital and Rice University.

Bucking the trend

While workplace dozing is uncommon in the U.S., some companies and managers encourage it.

Will Bryk, founder of artificial intelligence search startup Exa, swears by 20-minute power naps and ordered two sleeping pods for employees to use in his company's San Francisco office.

Ice cream maker Ben & Jerry's has had a nap room in its Vermont headquarters for a couple of decades, and a handful of employees use it, company spokesman Sean Greenwood said. "Employees who feel taken care of are much more likely to use this responsibly," he said.

Arianna Huffington, the celebrity author who co-founded the news website Huffington Post, became an advocate

of a good night's sleep and occasional naps after she collapsed from exhaustion in 2007. She installed a nap room at her former company, now called HuffPo, and at Thrive Global, a wellness technology company where she serves as founder and CEO.

"If people have been up all night because of a sick child or a delayed flight, if they have the opportunity to nap ... then they will be much more productive and creative for the rest of the day instead of dragging themselves or trying to boost their energy through multiple coffees or cinnamon buns," Huffington said in an email.

Kirsten Perez, 33, is a devoted napper. She used to use her lunch break at work to catch a few winks in her car. When she got her own office, she closed the door for a siesta while sitting at her desk.

Nowadays, working from home as a marketing manager at Nvidia, the Atlanta resident usually takes her daily nap in bed. She sets an alarm for 15 minutes, falls asleep within a minute and wakes up 30 seconds before the alarm rings.

"I can tell when my reasoning, my mood are dropping, just kind of feeling the drag of the day," Perez said. In those situations, she asks herself, "Do I have a chunk of time in the next hour or so? And then I'll figure out when I can find 15 minutes and find myself horizontal."

Creating space for sleep

Naps are accepted and even a necessity in some occupations. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention encourages naps for nurses working night shifts. But many nurses can't sleep at the hospitals where they work because they're too busy and aren't given access to beds.

Nurses "regularly struggle to have sufficient time to use the bathroom or go outside for fresh air, no less take a nap," Michelle Morris, spokesperson for the National Nurses United union, said.

Some companies are trying to fill the void. Inspired by his mother who worked as a nurse, Neil Wong founded Nap York, which offers sleeping pods in Manhattan and Queens that can be rented for about \$27 an hour.

His regular customers include supercommuters, UPS drivers, a security guard who works two full-time jobs, and doctors who work at nearby hospitals. Nap York also gives half-off prices to essential workers such as police officers, firefighters and emergency medical service personnel.

"In this society, you really only have two place to sleep: you have your bed at home and you have a hotel room you can probably get for 100 bucks," Wong said. "There's really no third space that's quiet, that provides some privacy, where you can also rest."

VIDEO GAMES



REBELLION/TNS

Resistance, the newest entry in the long-running Sniper Elite franchise, features a new main protagonist — Harry Hawker, a British special operations agent.

Resistance kills Nazis but also novelty

Latest entry in Sniper Elite franchise puts a new WWII character behind the rifle but doesn't change much else

BY GIESON CACHO
The Mercury News

Rebellion Developments knows how to kill Nazis. The developers of the Sniper Elite series have been doing it for nearly 20 years as they've followed the exploits of German-born American Office of Strategic Services (OSS) operative Karl Fairburne around the European theater of World War II.

Their past five games have taken him to North Africa, Italy, France and Germany. The latest entry, Sniper Elite: Resistance, is set in German-occupied France before the D-Day invasion and stars a new main protagonist named Harry Hawker, a British special operations agent.

The gameplay loop

Despite a fresh character offering the developers a chance to switch up the gameplay and inject new ideas into the franchise, this sequel follows the mold of the past two games. Sniper Elite: Resistance features expansive maps crawling with Nazi soldiers. Players use binoculars to scout and tag them. If there are planes above or there is a loud generator nearby, they can conceal players' presence by masking the sound of their gunfire.

Players have the option to go in like Rambo with a 50-caliber machine gun, but that usually doesn't end well. Nazis sound the alarm and players face a small army's wrath. Players succeed in Sniper Elite: Resistance when they're methodical and patient. It's a formula that Rebellion has polished and fine-tuned. The game isn't about defeating hordes of Nazis, but rather, it's about dispatching them in the most painful but satisfying way possible.

Satisfying ways to eliminate Nazis

Players should stalk enemies and go in for knife kills by luring them into tall grass or around corners with a quick whistle. They'll have to hide the bodies afterward. They can booby-trap enemy bodies to blow up Nazis who check on fallen comrades. If players end up in a firefight, they can set up mines along their exit route.

The most common way to defeat enemies is via sniper rifle. The game is called Sniper Elite after all, and the most effective way to use the firearm is to eliminate enemies without their comrades noticing. Players have to time their shots so that other sounds hide their gunfire. They can also reduce the sound their arsenal makes by finding work benches scattered throughout the enormous maps. Doing so unlocks parts that Hawker can use to upgrade his weapons to make them quieter, easier to handle or deadlier. For example, customizing a pistol can turn it into something akin to a midrange-silenced sniper rifle, capable of reliably killing Nazis up to 50 meters away.

Sniper Elite's showstopper is its X-ray cam, which adds a visual flourish to kills. While it pop ups every now and then when knives or standard guns are being used, players are more likely to see it when they employ a sniper rifle to dispatch foes: A well-aimed shot can produce a short cinematic segment that follows the bullet's path into its target, showing in gruesome detail the damage to hearts, skulls, lungs, stomachs and other body parts. No place is sacred, and that makes the X-ray cam one of the more gratifying parts of the game. Players can eliminate Nazis and make sure they can't have children.



A few fresh wrinkles

One of the newish elements is Hawker's Focus skill. Pressing the R3 button heightens his awareness but raises his heart rate, affecting his aim. With Focus activated, players can sense Nazis through walls within a limited radius. It makes sneaking up on them easier and reduces the impact of being surprised from a foe players didn't mark. Players can upgrade this ability along with others as part of the progression system. Players constantly earn experience points for kills and stealth actions.

Sniper Elite: Resistance tiptoes a bit into Hitman territory with side missions where players have to eliminate a target. They can snipe them from afar, but real stealth experts will find devious ways to eliminate them, like slipping poison in a mark's drink or mixing a coal torpedo into a scientist's wood pile.

These elaborate kills are more difficult to do and require players to explore the area more to pull them off. Even then, it can be difficult to figure out the conditions that will trigger a kill.

When it comes to online play and new modes, Rebellion carries over co-op play, invasions, survival and multi-player. It also adds Propaganda Challenges, which are unlocked by finding special posters in seven of the nine missions. It's a time attack mode, where players race against the clock to complete a challenge and are scored on the results.

Sniper Elite: Resistance is an effort that doesn't push the franchise forward despite its fresh face. The developers had the opportunity to move the series in a new direction, but instead they keep the Sniper Elite series in its comfortable but mundane space.

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

Online: sniperelite.com

MOVIES

From sidekick to superhero

Anthony Mackie finally gets starring film role: next Captain America

By **TIMOTHY BELLA**
The Washington Post

Anthony Mackie really wanted to make a good first impression on Harrison Ford.

So when his co-star accepted his dinner invitation during their first week filming “Captain America: Brave New World” in Atlanta, Mackie asked Ford what he liked to eat.

“I would really like some really clean Italian food,” he says Ford told him.

Mackie was perplexed: What the hell is clean Italian food?

Over the next week Mackie — a first-time Marvel Cinematic Universe headliner, trying to impress a blockbuster legend — asked friends, acquaintances, anyone if they knew what “clean Italian food” meant. Was it fish? A salad? No red sauce? No one knew.

“I called at least 100 people,” Mackie says.

Mackie even contacted a friend living on the Italian island of Ischia; his buddy, confused by the question, thought he was asking whether Italian people take showers. Every time Mackie looked over at Ford on set, the same two words popped in his head — clean Italian. What did that mean?

Mackie — Captain America himself! — was losing it. He had invited Ford to dinner and still hadn’t shared the details. Finally, he asked Ford what he meant.

“I said, ‘I’ve been thinking, what is clean Italian?’” Mackie says before slipping back into a raspy Ford impression. “He goes, ‘It’s Italian food made by an Italian.’”

“What do you do with that?” Mackie asks, belly-laughing as he relates the Seinfeldian exchange. Mackie found an Italian place in Atlanta run by “an Italian dude from Italy, making Italian food,” with waiters who were speaking Italian. His weeklong crisis was resolved. The dinner was a success.

And the food?

“It was clean,” Mackie says. “It was sooo clean.”

“But it was sooo nerve-racking, dude.” Should Mackie be nervous?

That’s what everyone wants to know: How the shield feels. How the title feels. How the attention feels.

You won’t find the 46-year-old actor trying to face all this with superheroic stoicism, but with something that looks suspiciously like humanity. He’s persistent, sure, but also amusing, honest, a little awkward — and quick to pull out a ridiculous story.

He thanks me for not asking what it was like to work with Ford, knowing he’ll hear



Marvel Studios

Anthony Mackie, shown here in “Captain America: Brave New World,” was informally made the next Captain America at the end of 2019’s “Avengers: Endgame.” His character cemented his new status when he finally donned the stars and stripes at the end of “The Falcon and the Winter Soldier,” a 2021 Disney+ series.

that question repeatedly during the next month’s marathon of junket interviews and red-carpet stops. He envisions responding, with a straight expression, that Ford punched him in the face every day on set: “He came with his ‘Indiana Jones’ lasso and just started whippin’!”

It is a frigid mid-January morning in Tribeca, and Mackie is sipping on a black coffee with Baileys in a corner of the posh lobby of the Greenwich Hotel. We’re weeks from the Feb. 14 release of “Captain America: Brave New World,” the movie in which he’ll finally star not as the first Avenger’s sidekick but as Cap himself.

It’s been a wild month. He played golf with Keegan Bradley at the Sony Open; he celebrated the Golden Globes victory of his friend Sebastian Stan by proclaiming, “We won!” in a viral moment. He did manage to clear his schedule and watch “Superman II” on TV. (“That was the movie that made me say, ‘I want to be a superhero.’”)

He’s still processing the deadly New Year’s Day attack in New Orleans, where he still lives, and the fallout from the wildfires in Los Angeles, where our interview was supposed to take place. As he was

flying out of Los Angeles, a flight attendant jokingly asked why he wasn’t out there fighting the fires. Mackie wasn’t laughing.

“All of this puts in perspective to me that what I do is make-believe, and what they do is real,” he says, referring to first responders. “Let’s be respectful.”

Mackie has been uncomfortable among strangers most of his life, which makes the attention exhilarating but stressful. Yes, Captain America struggles with social anxiety. He pushes through it by flashing that unmistakable gap-toothed grin, understanding that being Cap, a pantheonic figure in American culture, is the definition of uncomfortable. And Mackie — the grandson of a sharecropper, the son of a roofer and a stay-at-home mom who raised six kids, the father of four boys of his own — is Captain America. It’s time to get used to it.

“This is the first time in my career that people are going to go see an Anthony Mackie movie,” he says, describing the slow-motion epiphany. “I get it now, and I didn’t get it before. I now realize who I am is much bigger than what I do.”

For nearly a quarter century, Mackie

has been one of Hollywood’s indispensable glue guys: someone with a quiet confidence and playful demeanor whose name you would find somewhere in the lower third of the movie poster. He was the villain rapper who got verbally castrated by Eminem in “8 Mile” and an Army sergeant succumbing to the pressures of war in Iraq in “The Hurt Locker.” He’s played the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. (in HBO’s LBJ movie “All the Way”), Tupac Shakur (the Biggie Smalls biopic “Notorious”) and a police informant named Booty who gets cheese-grated into a fence by Samuel L. Jackson (“The Man”). Before he was an Avenger, he was already a team player.

“He just doesn’t miss,” says Chris Evans, who helped anchor the MCU as Captain America until bowing out in 2019. “He’s like that athlete on the sports team who you know is going to get the job done. You just want him on the squad.”

Jackson writes in an email: “People are finally recognizing his incredible range.” Says director Kathryn Bigelow, who worked with Mackie in “The Hurt Locker” and again in the 2017 crime drama “Detroit”: “I truly believe there is nothing he cannot do with his searing, palpable intelligence.”

Mackie debuted as Wilson — aka the Falcon, a superhero without superpowers — in 2014’s “Captain America: The Winter Soldier,” and was informally made the next Captain America at the end of 2019’s “Avengers: Endgame.” His character cemented his new status when he finally donned the stars and stripes at the end of “The Falcon and the Winter Soldier,” a 2021 Disney+ series starring him and Stan.

“He comes with this authenticity that he can do almost anything,” says Julius Onah, the director of “Captain America: Brave New World.” “You can put him in Shakespeare. You can put him in ‘Half Nelson,’ playing the drug dealer. And obviously, he has come to life in a really incredible way as Captain America.”

In a universe with few Black heroes, Wilson is now at the center of a film franchise that has grossed more than \$31 billion globally and presumably would like to earn billions more, even after a few box-office stumbles and the Marvel fatigue of recent years. But Mackie isn’t the guy fans are used to seeing in that spot. There’s a point in the trailer for the film where Thaddeus “Thunderbolt” Ross, the long-time Cap antagonist (and now Red Hulk — yes, Red Hulk) played by Ford, turns to Wilson and says, “You’re not Steve Rogers,” referring to Captain America’s secret identity. It hits in the context of the MCU — and MCU fandom.

“People really want Marvel to work again,” Mackie says. “We miss that golden age of Marvel as an audience, as filmgoers.”

SEE MACKIE ON PAGE 16

“This is the first time in my career that people are going to go see an Anthony Mackie movie. I get it now, and I didn’t get it before. I now realize who I am is much bigger than what I do.”

Actor Anthony Mackie, of his lead role in “Captain America: Brave New World”

MOVIES



Marvel Studios

As much as “people really want Marvel to work again,” Anthony Mackie gets abuse in his direct messages from detractors who don’t think Captain America should be Black or who don’t appreciate how Mackie guards himself from fans and strangers in an attempt to protect his private life.

Mackie: Former colleagues say actor is worthy of appreciation

FROM PAGE 15

Still, he gets abuse in his direct messages from detractors who don’t want him at the center of Marvel’s change period, much of it ugly and racist: You’re stupid, go away. Black Captain America isn’t my Captain America. Some critics seize on how Mackie has protected his private life, guarding himself from fans and strangers who want documentary proof that they met an Avenger. Mackie noted during a roundtable discussion with the Hollywood Reporter last year that he didn’t want to be part of strangers’ social reality. Unsurprisingly, fans don’t like this, with some posting about his behavior. One person, who explained in a TikTok video last year how Mackie allegedly turned down an encounter at a gas station, called Mackie the “rudest human being alive.” Mackie decided he can’t be bothered.

“I can’t take a picture with you because I don’t know what you’re thinking,” he says. “You have no idea what people’s motives are. People will take you down just so they can get likes on the internet, and your entire career, the 25 years you put in, are gone.”

He laughs and admits that he’s striving for an ideal, one Jackson offered as advice many years ago: Don’t be a [jerk]. He sips his coffee and offers an amendment: “I’ll take a picture with somebody, but I’m going to stand 3 feet away. And then we can take a picture.”

Captain America’s story begins with the injection of a superserum. Mackie’s begins with his mother, Martha, rejecting a principal’s suggestion that her rambunctious 7-year-old boy should be on Ritalin. She considered it a slippery slope. A teacher’s idea led him to performing in a puppet show, and “my mom was cool with that since she said the theater wasn’t a gateway to anything,” Mackie says.

But he needed one more kick out the door — or a fall from a roof.

At a summertime job with his father’s

roofing company in New Orleans, Mackie’s brand-new Nikes caught on a shingle and sent the 13-year-old flying to the ground. Willie “Flash” Mackie Sr. checked on his son before letting him have it: I told you not to wear them damn Nikes!

Flash had dropped out of school in eighth grade to work with Mackie’s grandfather. If Mackie didn’t go to college, Flash said, then he was going to end up back there on the roof.

“You’re never going to see me on a [expletive] roof again,” he told his father.

“I compare being onstage to the trapeze people in the circus, where you let go of the trapeze, and when you do a flip, you want to know there are strong hands on the other side waiting for you. And Anthony was absolutely that with me.”

Christopher Walken

on acting with Anthony Mackie on Broadway in “A Behanding in Spokane”

When their mother unexpectedly died when he was 15, Mackie’s older brother, Calvin, offered some advice that stuck. When you find out you’re behind in the race of life, you have two options: You either quit, or you run faster. Mackie ran faster — all the way to Juilliard.

He was already that team player. Once, when he and his classmates faced the pressure of performing “Up Against the Wind,” a play about Shakur’s life, at the illustrious New York Theatre Workshop, it was Mackie who eased the tension by rapping “Until the End of Time” to his friends during rehearsal.

It was a small gesture, his fellow student Michael Develle Winn remembers, but Mackie made them believe they could do

anything he could do.

“Anthony led the group. We still talk about it to this day,” says Winn, now associate artistic director at Children’s Theatre Company in Minneapolis. “He’s a star now, but he’s also an actor.”

Christopher Walken counts his time with Mackie on Broadway in “A Behanding in Spokane” as “one of the best experiences I’ve had with an actor. I compare being onstage to the trapeze people in the circus, where you let go of the trapeze, and when you do a flip, you want to know there

way. Despite the steady work, the jobs were mostly supporting roles.

Mackie has previously expressed frustration with not booking more leads. He’s mentioned a particular Hollywood joke: If you’re a white actor who wants an Oscar nomination, then you should play opposite Mackie. Being underappreciated is an emotional topic for Mackie, one that makes him wonder what he’s supposed to tell his four sons about what’s possible for them in life.

“The idea of me being overlooked is frustrating in many different ways because I feel like I’ve put in the work,” he says.

Mackie says being offered a corporate superhero gig when he was in his 30s, at a poolside meeting with directors Anthony and Joseph Russo and producer Nate Moore, was the first time he didn’t feel overlooked. Years later, Evans got an advance copy of the script for “Avengers: Endgame” and spilled the ending to Mackie: Rogers giving Cap’s shield to Wilson.

“I was so happy for him,” Evans says, recalling how they celebrated in his basement over a drink. “It was just a really accidental, beautiful moment.”

Evans continues: “Mackie has the goods. You just got to give him a chance.”

The path to Cap wasn’t straight. Mackie was dispirited when he found out that he and Stan were getting a Disney+ show, and a stand-alone “Captain America” movie wasn’t happening just yet.

“I was like, that’s not what we have been doing with all these people before me who had these movies that were huge, monumental points in their careers,” Mackie recalls. “I just thought the show was taking away from the idea that I was in the MCU. I was in the M-Disney-U. It was just another one of those moments where I was like, ‘You need to work harder.’”

He likened his reaction to the meme of

SEE MACKIE ON PAGE 17

MOVIE REVIEW

Marvel's 'Brave New World' treads water

Lazy screenwriting, sloppy editing spoil Mackie's lead debut

By MARK KENNEDY
Associated Press

Celebrate Valentine's Day this year with "Captain America: Brave New World," a highly processed, empty calorie, regret-later candy of a movie.

We're nearing the end of Phase Five of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, with predictable and underwhelming returns. "Captain America: Brave New World" feels like it's just treading water, wasting Anthony Mackie in his first cinematic outing as his "Hamlet"-like Captain America.

The story by Rob Edwards, Malcolm Spellman and Dalan Musson gathers familiar characters and blends them into a White House conspiracy-meets-international-faceoff in the Indian Ocean. Only Marvel in Phase Five could make that boring.

It lifts from "The Manchurian Candidate" and "Top Gun" and even pointlessly steals its title from Aldous Huxley. It cannibalizes from other Marvel movies, like the addition of a substance called Adamantium, much like Vibranium from Wakanda. There is a Kendrick Lamar song heard at the climactic end, but it's not new; it's from 2014.

We start with Harrison Ford as Thaddeus "Thunderbolt" Ross — taking the role over from the late William Hurt — in his first days as U.S. president. He insists he's changed from the days when he



Marvel Studios

President Thaddeus "Thunderbolt" Ross (Harrison Ford), left, proposes a strategic union between Captain America (Anthony Mackie) and the government in "Captain America: Brave New World."

hunted down Hulk and was an all-around evil dude.

He approaches Sam Wilson, the new Captain America, and proposes a strategic union between the government and Captain America. "Work with me, Sam. We'll show the world a better way forward."

This is a dangerous idea — superheroes working for the government — and Cap is warned but still agrees. "Trust me. My eyes are wide open," he reassures Danny Ramirez as his

sidekick and fledgling new Falcon. (Cap's eyes may be open, but yours may be slowly closing.)

There are also some tangential characters, and a trio of bad guys, each more powerful and more heavily overacting than the last — a delicious Giancarlo Esposito as the villain Sidewinder, Tim Blake Nelson as Samuel Sterns (a hyperintelligent megalomaniac with his brain literally bursting out of his skull) and Red Hulk, a massive slab of angry man-meat who makes the reg-

ular Hulk look like Timothée Chalamet.

Director Julius Onah does well with the action but fumbles the quieter moments and supervises editing that's the opposite of crisp, not helped by script writers who ape military language — "Negative, the package is the priority" — and grandiose sentiment — "The country is lost."

There does emerge a theme that unites Cap and Ross, which is that both feel the need to prove themselves. Mackie's Captain



Red Hulk, also portrayed by Ford

America throughout the previous 2021 TV series "The Falcon and the Winter Soldier" was ambivalent about taking on the mantle of Steve Rogers, the original Sentinel of Liberty. "You wonder if you'll ever be enough," he says.

Ross says he wants to secure peace across the world but really wants to reconnect with his estranged daughter — Liv Tyler — and prove he's changed. He wants to take a walk with her to see the cherry blossoms. We would like him to ask serious questions of his agent.

Mackie, who joined the MCU more than a decade ago in 2014's "Captain America: The Winter Soldier," has been a good servant to Marvel and deserves better. One of our great actors, he can be steely and vulnerable. But he can't outrace stilted lines like "If we can't see the good in each other, we've already lost the fight." Marvel has lost more than the fight; they've lost the thread.

"Captain America: Brave New World" is rated PG-13 for intense sequences of violence, action and some strong language. Running time: 118 minutes. Now playing at select on-base movie theaters.

Mackie: Star says he wants character to inspire everyone, not just Black kids

FROM PAGE 16

Michael Jordan in the Bulls documentary "The Last Dance": Mackie took it personally.

"If I don't get the movie, you're telling me I haven't worked hard enough? I need to go back to the drawing board and figure out why I did not get my movie. Because everybody else got a [expletive] movie. And I'm not going to limit myself and say it's because I'm Black. I'm not going to limit myself and say it's because I'm a man. I'm not going to limit myself and say it's because I'm from New Orleans. I'm not going to limit myself and say it's because I like to fish. No, I didn't [expletive] work hard enough. So, I need to prove to you that I deserve that movie," Mackie said.

Four years later, Marvel wants to return to cultural hegemon status. It's brought back its Iron Man, Robert Downey Jr., but he'll play Doctor Doom in several upcoming films. It needs its marquee heroes. It needs Captain America.

Mackie knows that restoring the franchise's shine will be a team effort in 2025 — his movie is the first of three MCU films out this year — and that "Brave New World" will set the tone.

When I ask why he thinks recent Marvel movies didn't soar the way they had in earlier years, he pointed to the scene in "Avengers: Endgame" when Captain America

braces to take on Thanos and his army by himself.

"We know this is the end of his life, and he was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice. Those consequences were there," he says. "When we entered the multiverse" — the recent motif of MCU movies — "there were no consequences. If Steve Rogers were to be killed, Dr. Strange could go back 10 minutes, bring him back to life and continue the fight. All the consequences were gone, so no matter what happened, it was like, who cares?"

So what does playing Captain America mean to Mackie right now? The actor has long talked about the relationship between America and Black men, and how much of that history is tumultuous and abusive, but these days he's stuck to the more universal traits embedded in Captain America — bravery, dignity, honesty. He faced some backlash from U.S. fans recently when he told an Italian audience, "To me, Captain America represents a lot of different things, and I don't think the term 'America' should be one of those representations." He clarified his remarks on Instagram and said, "I'm a proud American."

Mackie stresses how much he wants his Cap to be a Black hero who can inspire anyone: "I look forward not so much about what having a Black Captain America means to Black kids, but what having a Black Captain America means to all kids. It might be monumental for some little kid in Des Moines, Iowa, or Amarillo, Texas, to go to the

movies and see a Black Captain America because that changes their perspective. The same way that it changed my perspective when I saw Christopher Reeve as Superman or Wesley Snipes up there in 'Blade,' chopping, kicking and fighting."

Mackie is still getting used to strangers calling him Captain America, including the charter boat captain in New Orleans who recently took him on a three-hour fishing trip for free once he figured out who Mackie was. But it wasn't until he took his sons to see "Sonic the Hedgehog 3" "for the 17th time" that he realized he was finally Captain America to his family. When they saw their father's face as the main guy on the poster in the movie theater, his oldest son let him know it was "pretty cool."

That's everything he works for, he said. "That's everything I could have asked for."

He didn't say anything, just got four buckets of popcorn, hot dogs and nachos, and joined them to see what happened to Knuckles.

Describing the scene, the man at the center of the movie poster repeats it one more time to me, holding onto the words with care: "That's pretty cool."

"Sometimes, you just need to take that moment and say, 'I [expletive] did it!'" Mackie says. "And over the next month, I'm definitely going to take that moment and say, 'I [expletive] did it!'"

MUSIC

Q&A

Earning a place among his heroes

Kris Bowers talks Oscar nomination for 'Wild Robot,' John Williams' impact and Kobe Bryant's advice

BY JONATHAN LANDRUM JR.
Associated Press

Kris Bowers embraced a new challenge with his first animated film, turning his signature storytelling through music into an Oscar-nominated masterpiece.

Bowers' work on "The Wild Robot" continues to solidify his place as one of Hollywood's most sought-after composers, earning him a nomination for best original score. His score complements the film's stunning visuals and emotional depth, capturing the journey of Roz, an out-of-place robot striving to connect with animals who struggle to understand it.

"It's about being really clear with each story, understanding what the emotion is and what's stirring inside of me," said Bowers, 35, a Grammy- and Emmy-nominated composer who won an Academy Award for the short documentary "The Last Repair Shop." He's also worked on Oscar-winning films such as "King Richard" and "Green Book."

For "The Wild Robot," Bowers first studied the early black-and-white sketches, where he uncovered his emotions toward the characters, before capturing those feelings at his piano, crafting a musical narrative filled with heart. Bowers said tapping into his emotions has never come easily, but he found inspiration in his journey as a father, watching his wife sacrifice her body during pregnancy, to help craft sounds that capture the essence of parenthood.

In a recent interview with The Associated Press, Bowers reflects on what the Oscar nomination means to him, the challenges of composing for animated films, the lasting influence of five-time Oscar winner John Williams and why Kobe Bryant's advice continues to resonate with him.

The Oscars will air March 2.

Associated Press: You have become so in-demand. You've been Grammy- and Emmy-nominated and won an Oscar. What does this nomination mean to you?

Bowers: It means a lot. As a kid, that's how I found a lot of composers. I was looking at that (Oscar noms) list. I would look at who's nominated, then go listen to those scores, so it became a way to expand my collection of CDs. It means something to be a part of this history. No matter what happens in my career from here on out, somebody's going to look at this year's list and see my name. To be nominated, you are chosen by the music branch of the academy ... filled with composers who I've been a fan of since I was a kid. ... It makes me feel like I've done something meaningful.

You revered John Williams too...

Yeah, he was the master of memorable melody. If there's a piece of score in a movie that you can sing, it's probably John Williams. One thing I took from him is that he came up in a time of composers who



WILLY SANJUAN, INVISION/AP

Kris Bowers, photographed Jan. 31 in Pasadena, Calif., composed the Oscar-nominated score for "The Wild Robot."

were storytellers and made sure the music was also developing the story. When those themes come back at the most pivotal point in the movie, we feel something emotional. I remember for "The Wild Robot," I studied the last 30 minutes of "Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope," primarily because the last 20-30 minutes of "The Wild Robot" is all action. I thought, "How did John Williams approach this?" Because "Star Wars" was so iconic with its themes.

While creating your score for "The Wild Robot," did you get your wife's thoughts?

The only moment was when I played the main theme. I was kind of just wanting to see if it triggered that complexity. I do this often with my wife where I'll have a theme that I'm playing it and ask her "What does this remind you of, or what does this make you feel?" I remember when I played her that sequence, which was a work in progress, and she got emotional. She cried watching just that three-minute sequence, having no idea of what the movie was

about. I felt like I was on the right track. ... It's reminding her of all the complex emotions she feels as a mom. I struck a nerve in a way that could be valuable.

Is it a tougher or easier process for an animated film compared to live action?

It's definitely more challenging. If you talk to any composer, they'll talk about the fact that animation is its own challenge. Most animated films have almost wall-to-wall music where music kind of doesn't ever stop. Whereas, a lot of live action, you can sit for five minutes and not have any music and be OK.

You composed music for the late Kobe Bryant's 2015 documentary "Muse" and other projects with him. You call the NBA legend your mentor. What words of wisdom did Kobe give you?

I did a lot of work for Kobe. He talked about John Williams being my Michael Jordan. He was all about obsessing enough about your craft, so that you are ready for anything. The stuff I wrote for "The Wild Robot," I learned from when he

would challenge me to write. I wrote this audiobook for him, and he was like, "You know this has to be better than the music for 'E.T.'?"

I laughed. And he was like "You know, I'm not (expletive) kidding with you, right?"

He was always telling me, "If you're not taking on something that's going to make you a better artist by the time you finish it, then you are wasting your time."

That kind of mentality is the way I approach everything. I want to take on as many things as possible. If that opportunity came, I'd be prepared for it.

What fuels you?

I feel like my parents put me on this track from the very beginning. They wanted me to play piano before I was born. They gave me lessons and, like, found teachers for me. There's kind of, like, this debt I owe to them. I have to be as great as I possibly can. But it's also just me trying to live up to the steps my parents already got started for me.

CROSSWORD AND COMICS

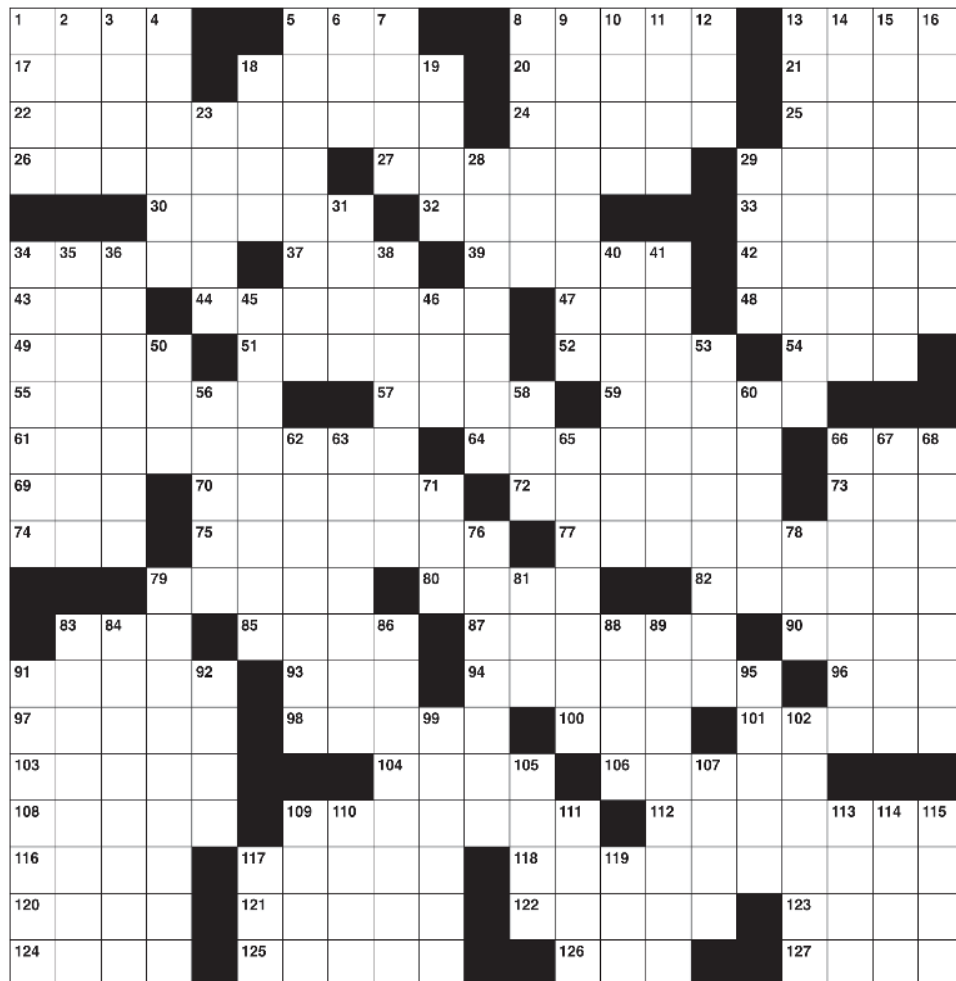
NEW YORK TIMES CROSSWORD

TWO-FOR-ONE SPECIAL

BY DERRICK NIEDERMAN / EDITED BY WILL SHORTZ

Derrick Niederman, of Charleston, S.C., recently retired from the mathematics department at the College of Charleston and is the author of numerous books, including "Math Puzzles for the Clever Mind," "Number Freak: A Mathematical Compendium From 1 to 200" and a mystery novel, "A Killing on Wall Street." This is his 14th crossword for The Times (all Sundays), going back to 1983. — W.S.

- ACROSS**
- 1 Trading post
 - 5 For example
 - 8 Italian fashion house
 - 13 Hard-liner
 - 17 "Ave Maria" finale, appropriately?
 - 18 Buying binge
 - 20 Venetian magistrates of old
 - 21 French friend
 - 22 Lead actress in "The Lovely Bones" (2009) and "The Bourne Legacy" (2012)
 - 24 Fast/car
 - 25 Wild/bunch
 - 26 Informer, informally
 - 27 Cartoon character inspired by W. C. Fields
 - 29 Gave a darn
 - 30 3,605, in ancient Rome
 - 32 Image on a Missouri state quarter
 - 33 Wombs
 - 34 Italian sports cars, informally
 - 37 Gear tooth
 - 39 Desirable condition for hostas
 - 42 "Cómo ___?"
 - 43 Divinity sch. subj.
 - 44 Provoked an online fight
 - 47 Treasure
 - 48 Holland/tunnel
 - 49 Figs. on flight boards
 - 51 Onetime Kia model
 - 52 Spot
 - 54 Tik ___ challenge
 - 55 Home of the Temple of Poseidon
 - 57 Put-down
 - 59 They put things on the back burner
 - 61 Stadium/timekeeper
 - 64 Smash hit
 - 66 Steamed Chinese bun
 - 69 Exist
 - 70 Your business start-up?
 - 72 Word often shortened to a letter and a number
 - 73 Catherine the Great, e.g.: Abbr.
 - 74 Average/income
 - 75 Jeans popular in the 1980s
 - 77 Denver/Colorado
 - 79 Name spelled by the initials of five consecutive months
 - 80 The "E" in G.E.: Abbr.
 - 82 Applied to
 - 83 Org. once led by George H. W. Bush
 - 85 Direction of the wind that brought Mary Poppins
 - 87 Where "Cheers" is set
 - 90 Chart-topping Basil or Braxton
 - 91 Start of "O Come, All Ye Faithful"
 - 93 Place to buy tickets: Abbr.
 - 94 Jewel case holders
 - 96 Architect Maya
 - 97 Follow
 - 98 Mel who sang the 1949 No. 1 hit "Careless Hands"
 - 100 Year abroad
 - 101 Stars and Stripes
 - 103 For the birds
 - 104 Rainproof cover
 - 106 ___ bears
 - 108 Hall-of-Famer Martínez
 - 109 Woodworking tool with a belt
 - 112 "Nothing much"
 - 116 Dino/expedition
 - 117 Card/game
 - 118 Certain emcee
 - 120 Grim Grimm figure
 - 121 Beethoven dedicatee
 - 122 Risk of heavy lifting
 - 123 First name in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame
 - 124 Costner's role in "The Untouchables"
 - 125 Sheen
 - 126 Happy companion
 - 127 Right hand: Abbr.
- DOWN**
- 1 Red rover home
 - 2 "I smell ___"
 - 3 ___ Act (measure against mobsters)
 - 4 Indigenous people's name for Mount Rainier
 - 5 Officer with a radar gun
 - 6 Shapiro of NPR
 - 7 Antiquated assent
 - 8 Fictional composer whose first three initials mean "A.S.A.P."
 - 9 Dietary plant fiber
 - 10 Foreign exchange fee
 - 11 Chrysler Building style, familiarly
 - 12 Request
 - 13 Protective outfits for handling radioactive material
 - 14 Almond-flavored liqueur
 - 15 Stand in a cellar
 - 16 Small entryway receptacle that might also house loose change
 - 18 Skinny/dip
 - 19 Poet Pound
 - 23 Horror film locale, in brief
 - 28 Seasoning brand that dropped the first part of its name in 2020
 - 29 Prompted, in a theater
 - 31 Horse/power
 - 34 Tour aid
 - 35 What Hester Prynne wore in a Hawthorne novel
 - 36 Excessive praise
 - 38 Like some eyeliners
 - 40 Lineage
 - 41 Major shops
 - 45 Honking or screeching, for example
 - 46 Bygone owner of Virgin Records
 - 50 "Hello there, good ___"
 - 53 One eager for radical change
 - 56 Kind of line that no one just stands in
 - 58 Party to the left of Dem.
 - 60 Body parts with caps
 - 62 How caviar might be served
 - 63 Will, given the opportunity
 - 65 Sephora purchase
 - 66 "Help me out here"
 - 67 Fast-evaporating cleaning agent
 - 68 Sicilian Defense in chess, e.g.
 - 71 Adversary
 - 76 Deli devices
 - 78 Pickleball need
 - 79 Classic British sports cars
 - 81 Conclusion
 - 83 What parallel lines never do
 - 84 Ones in the know
 - 86 Feature of rhubarb pie
 - 88 [Kapow!]
 - 89 Not plugged in, in a way
 - 91 Grabbed, as an opportunity
 - 92 Sommelier's prefix
 - 95 Diploma modifier
 - 99 Mothers, in Mexico
 - 102 Slumber/party
 - 105 Trail/head
 - 107 Crib call
 - 109 Cotton capsule
 - 110 Sony co-founder Morita
 - 111 Promise/keeper
 - 113 Soul legend Redding
 - 114 Something to look through
 - 115 Mild expletive
 - 117 Digital picture format
 - 119 ___-cone



- 53 One eager for radical change
- 56 Kind of line that no one just stands in
- 58 Party to the left of Dem.
- 60 Body parts with caps
- 62 How caviar might be served
- 63 Will, given the opportunity
- 65 Sephora purchase
- 66 "Help me out here"
- 67 Fast-evaporating cleaning agent
- 68 Sicilian Defense in chess, e.g.
- 71 Adversary
- 76 Deli devices
- 78 Pickleball need
- 79 Classic British sports cars
- 81 Conclusion
- 83 What parallel lines never do
- 84 Ones in the know
- 86 Feature of rhubarb pie
- 88 [Kapow!]
- 89 Not plugged in, in a way
- 91 Grabbed, as an opportunity
- 92 Sommelier's prefix
- 95 Diploma modifier
- 99 Mothers, in Mexico
- 102 Slumber/party
- 105 Trail/head
- 107 Crib call
- 109 Cotton capsule
- 110 Sony co-founder Morita
- 111 Promise/keeper
- 113 Soul legend Redding
- 114 Something to look through
- 115 Mild expletive
- 117 Digital picture format
- 119 ___-cone

GUNSTON STREET



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

RESULTS FOR ABOVE PUZZLE

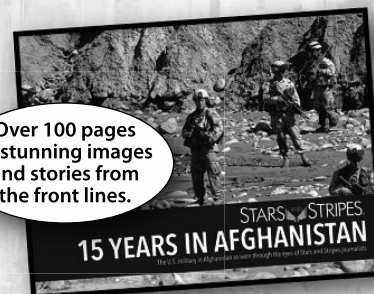


STARS AND STRIPES 15 YEARS IN AFGHANISTAN



The story of the U.S. military's role in Afghanistan, as seen through the eyes of Stars and Stripes journalists covering America's longest war.

Only **\$14.99** with Free Shipping



Over 100 pages of stunning images and stories from the front lines.

ORDER NOW at www.stripesstore.com

FACES



SEAN SCHEIDT/For The Washington Post

Sophie Thatcher stars in the show “Yellowjackets,” which begins its third season Friday on Showtime.

Scares, but no screams

Actress Sophie Thatcher at the tough center of several spooky storlines

BY OLIVIA MCCORMACK
The Washington Post

The first time Sophie Thatcher had to scream for a living, she couldn't do it.

The actress, then 11, had booked the lead in the musical “The Secret Garden” at a professional theater in the Chicago suburbs. The director asked her to shriek. Nothing came out.

By the time she was the star of the 2023 Stephen King adaptation “The Boogeyman,” excuses weren't going to cut it. To get it right, Thatcher locked herself in her mom's basement and searched “Woman screaming” on YouTube. Thatcher, a singer as well as an actress, is very aware of her voice, so pushing such an unpleasant sound out of her body never became natural.

While her short but spooky filmography might suggest otherwise, the 24-year-old Thatcher isn't really a scream queen. She's more like the raven on your windowsill or the black cat crossing your path. Whether she's a stranded soccer player turned cannibal in “Yellowjackets” (returning for a third season on Showtime on Friday), a Mormon missionary fleeing a deadly trap in “Heretic” (a horror hit last year) or an android rebelling against her programming in “Companion” (a well-received thriller last month), Thatcher's presence is usually an omen that things are about to get grisly. Her characters just don't usually scream about it.

And her vibe — sardonic, a little haunted in a Victorian way — doesn't scream “victim” in the slightest.

“I don't like the term scream queen,” explains Thatcher, who has often been called one. Instead, she's tended to portray complex genre characters who defy our assumptions about who lacks, and takes, control, even when things get very bloody.

The time-hopping series “Yellowjackets” stars Thatcher, Sophie Nélisse, Jasmin Savoy Brown, Samantha Hanratty and Courtney Eaton as the primary figures in a group of teenage athletes who survive a plane crash and resort to violent means — while worshipping an unseen force — to survive in the Canadian woods. A murderer's row of Gen X veterans — including Melanie Lynskey, Juliette Lewis and Christina Ricci — play the characters as adults.

The rough-edged Natalie is the loner of the group, with a tough

Thatcher tends to portray complex genre characters who defy our assumptions about who lacks, and takes, control, even when things get very bloody.

home life and a history of drug use. In the woods, the other girls explode while Natalie contains her feelings like hot coals in her chest. After the surviving team members are rescued, the adult Natalie leans heavily on narcotics and alcohol to cope. “She holds onto her guilt,” Thatcher says of her character, a punk whom she plays as boiling with just-contained anger. “She stores it, whereas the other girls find ways to let go of it or distract or forgive themselves.”

As the events of “Yellowjackets” spiral into unbridled chaos, Natalie clings to her ethics. “From the very beginning we talked about Natalie as the moral center

of the show,” co-creator Ashley Lyle says. “She has an incredibly strong sense of what she believes to be right and wrong. Sophie brings that so specifically but also brings herself to the character.”

As a teen, Thatcher appeared in short films and had some small roles on TV before starring in the 2018 sci-fi thriller film “Prospect” alongside Pedro Pascal. After the first season of “Yellowjackets” aired in 2021, more projects came rushing in: “The Boogeyman,” “Heretic” and “Companion.”

“Heretic” follows two Mormon missionaries (Thatcher and Chloe East) who enter the home of a prospective convert (Hugh Grant) only to be caught in his sadistic web. For Thatcher, a former Mormon herself, the press tour for the film felt like doing “reverse therapy.”

“Companion” shows off a different side — well, sides — of Thatcher. Her character, Iris, is the perfect girlfriend: styled straight out of the late '50s and early '60s, desperately in love with her boyfriend Josh (Jack Quaid). She sleeps on command and can have her settings changed to speak different languages. She's a sex robot.

In the first act, Thatcher plays the dutiful girlfriend bot; as she gains consciousness in the second half, she achieves her blood-soaked final girl form.

“Companion” director Drew Hancock calls Thatcher a movie star in the making, singling out how she invented a way of walking for her role that felt just off-putting enough for viewers to notice something was up.

“I remember the first take. I was like, ‘Sophie walks really weird.’ I was convinced that she just didn't know how to walk,” Hancock says. A few moments later it came to him: “Wait a minute, what am I talking about? This is all intention. She planned this? That's how good she is.”

Fairy tale ‘Hansel and Gretel’ being reimagined by King, Sendak

BY HILLEL ITALIE
Associated Press

An upcoming edition of “Hansel and Gretel” combines the dark and singular talents of two literary giants who apparently never met: Stephen King and the late Maurice Sendak.

HarperCollins Publishers announced Thursday that the King-Sendak re-imagining of the famed Brothers Grimm tale about two lost children in a frightening forest is scheduled for Sept. 2. King's words will be complemented by sketches Sendak drew up for set and costume designs for a 1997 production of the Humperdinck opera adaptation.



decided to agree to the project after seeing Sendak's illustrations.

“Two of his pictures in particular spoke to me: One was of the wicked witch on her broom with a bag of kidnapped children riding behind her; the other was of the infamous candy house becoming a terrible face.

The book was initiated by the Maurice Sendak Foundation.

King, author of “The Shining,” “Carrie” and other horror classics, said he

I thought, ‘This is what the house really looks like, a devil sick with sin, and it only shows that face when the kids turn their backs. I wanted to write that!’” King said in a statement issued through HarperCollins.

“To me, it was the essence of this story and, really, all fairy tales: a sunny exterior, a dark and terrible center, brave and resourceful children. In a way, I have been writing about kids like Hansel and Gretel for much of my life.”

Representatives for King say he has no memory of meeting Sendak.

Lynn Caponera, the Sendak foundation's executive director, said in a statement that she thought King ideal because outside of

the Grimms, “he's the master of scary stories and a wonderful writer to boot.”

Sendak, who died in 2012, spoke about Hansel and Gretel around the time he was working on the opera. In an interview published in the 2003 book “The Art of Maurice Sendak” he called the fairy tale “the most profound” of the Grimm canon.

“Generally speaking, most of Grimm is about heroic children. ‘Hansel and Gretel’ are the most heroic of them all,” said Sendak, known for “Where the Wild Things Are,” “In the Night Kitchen” and other children's favorites. “It's the toughest story in the world and people are afraid of it, yet it's famous because it's so truthful.”

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Bayer backs broadened weedkiller liability effort

IA DES MOINES — A renewed and expanded effort from chemical giant Bayer to shield itself from lawsuits that claim its popular weedkiller Roundup causes cancer brought dozens of protesters to the Iowa Capitol building Monday begging lawmakers to reject it.

The legislation, pending in Iowa and at least seven other states, would protect pesticide companies from claims they failed to warn that their product causes cancer if the product label otherwise complies with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's regulations.

Similar efforts failed during 2024 legislative sessions in Iowa, Missouri and Idaho. But this year, Bayer and a coalition of agricultural groups are doubling down. A broader media campaign is highlighting the importance of glyphosate-based Roundup for American agriculture.

Opponents, including those who rallied Monday in Des Moines, say the bills would limit the rights of people to hold companies accountable if their products cause harm.

Bayer disputes the claims that Roundup causes cancer, but the company has been hit with about 177,000 lawsuits involving the weedkiller and has set aside \$16 billion to settle cases.

3 convicted of murder after men were drugged

NY NEW YORK — Three men were convicted of murder Monday in a conspiracy to rob men leaving Manhattan nightclubs and bars late at night, plying them with potent and dangerous drugs and ultimately draining their bank accounts once they were incapacitated.

The 2022 deaths of Julio Ramirez, a 25-year-old social worker, and John Umberger, a 33-year-old political consultant, were the result of "drug-facilitated thefts" and homicides, according to the medical examiner's office. Ramirez died in a taxi of an overdose while Umberger was found dead a month later in a townhouse.

Lab tests showed both men had substances including fentanyl, cocaine and lidocaine in their systems when they died. Their families suspected foul play after discovering money missing from the men's bank accounts.

The defendants — Jayqwan Hamilton, 37, Robert Demaio, 36, and Jacob Barroso, 32 — were convicted of murder, conspiracy and robbery and face 25 years to life in prison. All three were convicted of the death of Ramirez while Demaio and Hamilton were convicted in Umberger's killing.

GOP former lawmaker to lead state university

FL TALLAHASSEE — Florida Atlantic University on Monday picked a former Repu-



BECKY BOHRER/AP

Face time with the glacier

A person stands on the frozen Mendenhall Lake to take photos at the face of Mendenhall Glacier on Sunday, in Juneau, Alaska.

blican lawmaker as its leader in what is the latest example of a public university in the state picking someone with a political background for such high-paying posts over experienced academic leaders.

The board of trustees of the university in Boca Raton picked Adam Hasner to be the school's next president, following a lengthy and controversial search process that resulted in FAU tossing out its initial slate of finalists. State officials called off the school's previous presidential search after a Republican state senator then-aligned with Gov. Ron DeSantis was not named as a finalist.

After FAU relaunched the search, Hasner, a former Republican majority leader in the Florida House, emerged as a finalist. Hasner beat out two academics for the role.

Hasner's pick comes just days after Florida International University in Miami announced it's tapping Lt. Gov. Jeanette Nuñez — DeSantis' second-in-command — to be that school's interim president, without conducting a public search.

Governor sues over laws meant to weaken him

NC RALEIGH — New North Carolina Gov. Josh Stein says more recent laws enacted by state Republicans that erode some gubernatorial appointment powers are "partisan power grabs that thwart North Carolina voters' decisions at the ballot box."

The Democratic governor sued

House Speaker Destin Hall and Senate leader Phil Berger in Wake County court last week, aiming to strike down provisions within wide-ranging legislation that removed his power to fill court vacancies and name members of a commission that regulates companies that offer electricity, natural gas and other services. The Republican-controlled General Assembly enacted the omnibus legislation in December over then-Gov. Roy Cooper's veto.

Cooper, also a Democrat, and Stein had filed two similar lawsuits in December challenging other provisions in the omnibus legislation that took away powers to appoint State Board of Elections members and name a state Highway Patrol commander.

Judge won't order new election despite errors

GA ATLANTA — A Georgia state House member won't face a new election after a judge ruled there wasn't enough evidence to prove voters who received the wrong ballots swayed the race's outcome.

Senior Judge Gary McCorvey on Monday declined to order a new election in state House District 128, where Democratic incumbent Mack Jackson beat Republican challenger Tracy Wheeler by 48 votes out of a total of 27,804 votes cast in November.

Wheeler sued to force a new election, arguing some people who lived outside the district improperly got ballots for House District 128, while

a smaller number of voters living inside the district didn't receive ballots.

McCorvey found that 58 voters got the wrong ballot. But the judge found there wasn't enough testimony indicating whether each person in question voted in the House race, saying Wheeler hadn't met the high bar for overturning an election.

Fugitive dog recaptured after gaining fame on lam

LA NEW ORLEANS — A scruffy New Orleans rescue dog famed for evading a monthslong effort to recapture him using nets and tranquilizer rifles has finally been caught and returned to domestic life Tuesday.

Scrim, a 17-pound mutt who has become a Louisiana folk hero, first escaped from his adopted family in April and roamed the city for months until he was cornered and brought back home. Weeks later, in October, he leaped out of a second-story window in a moment recorded on video that got attention online.

During his months on the lam, Scrim survived a hurricane and freezing blizzard conditions. A posse of volunteers tracked his movements over 57 square miles using wildlife surveillance cameras and a crowdsourced map of sightings.

The renowned fugitive was ultimately captured in a cat trap, said Michelle Cheramie, the owner of animal rescue nonprofit Zeus' Rescues who led the mission to find Scrim.

The elated Cheramie held Scrim

in her arms on Tuesday after giving him a bath. The pooch appeared calm, and a vet found him in good shape.

Cheramie has carefully locked the doors and windows in her house as she waits to take Scrim to his long-term residence with a family she declined to name. Scrim has been outfitted with a new GPS collar and an AirTag tracking device.

Election official won't focus on disinformation

NY NEW YORK — One of the top election officials in Arizona's largest county, which has been roiled in recent years by conspiracy theories and intimidation of election workers, is moving away from the office's previous efforts to combat misinformation.

Maricopa County Recorder Justin Heap has downsized his external communications staff from seven to one, drastically shrinking a team whose duties had included combating false information about elections.

Heap, a Republican who took office in January, said in an update on Friday that the previous recorder had placed too much focus on external political communications.

Heap's announcement signals a shift away from the philosophy of his predecessor Stephen Richer, a Republican whose office had spent four years aggressively defending how elections were run and votes were counted in Maricopa County.

From The Associated Press

Bizarro

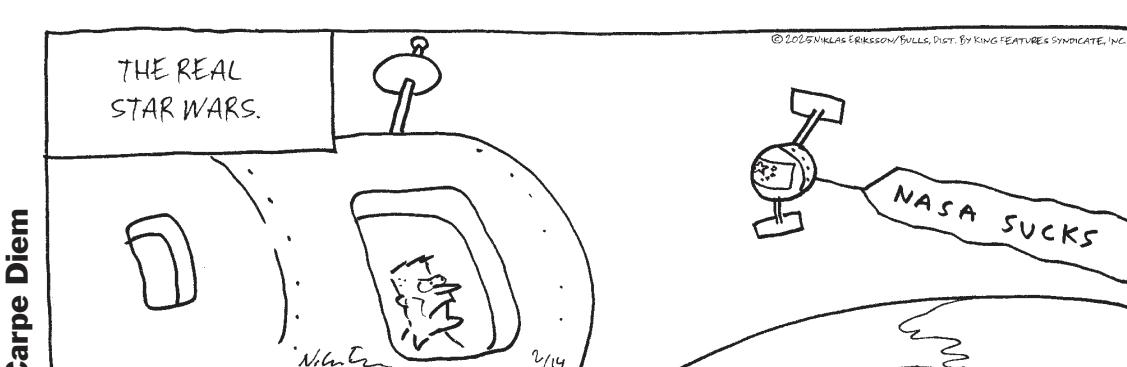
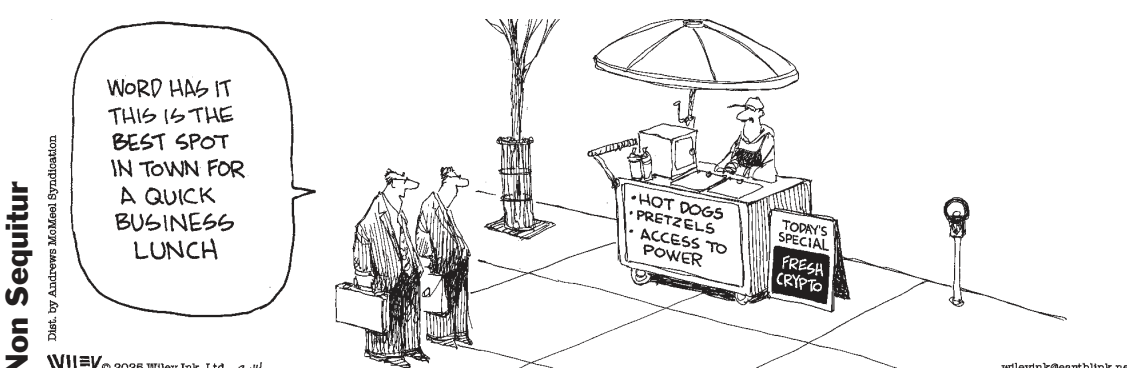
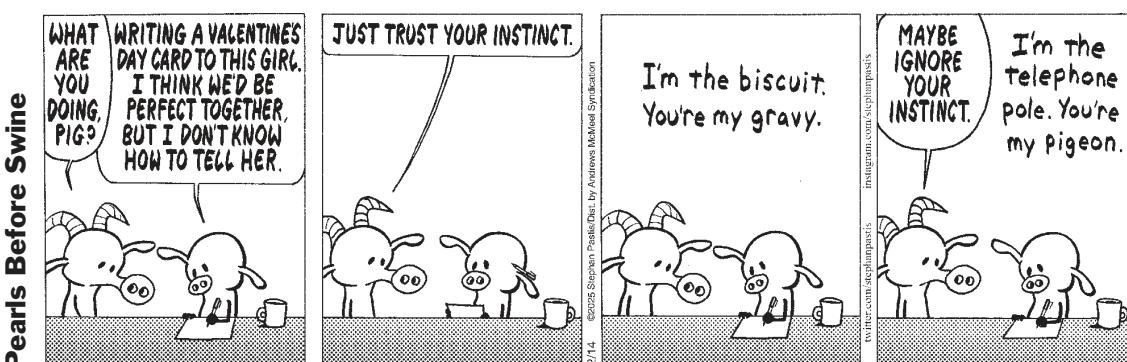
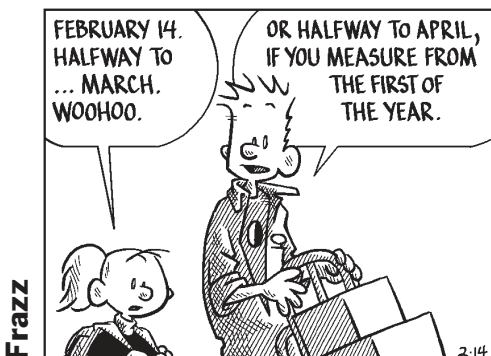


Loose Parts



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		



- ACROSS**
- 1 Personal
 - 4 Poi base
 - 8 Fraud
 - 12 Romance
 - 13 — incline (tilted)
 - 14 Unruly groups
 - 15 Message from an admirer
 - 17 Border on
 - 18 On an angle
 - 19 Vinyl records
 - 21 Before
 - 22 "Darn it!"
 - 26 Scrabble pieces
 - 29 Movie format
 - 30 "Little piggie"
 - 31 Rd. crossers
 - 32 Grant's foe
 - 33 1982 sci-fi film
 - 34 "The Newsroom" actor Patel
 - 35 Farm grazer
 - 36 Resided
 - 37 "I, Robot" author
 - 39 Lanka lead-in
 - 40 Storm center
 - 41 Sculpted trunks
 - 45 Sagan or Sandburg
 - 48 Romantic Ella Fitzgerald song
 - 50 Squad
 - 51 — Stanley Gardner
 - 52 PC linking system
- DOWN**
- 1 They give a hoot
 - 2 Scarf material
 - 3 De — (from the start)
 - 4 Printer refills
 - 5 Battery part
 - 6 Squealer
 - 7 Bob Marley hit song
 - 8 Big hit
 - 9 Corn core
 - 10 — Dhabi
 - 11 Rockies hrs.
 - 16 Tools for duels
 - 20 Third degree?
 - 23 To be, in Tours
 - 24 "Neato!"
 - 25 Superman's alias
 - 26 "There!"
 - 27 Currier's partner
 - 28 Jeans maker Strauss
 - 29 Morning moisture
 - 32 Mini-shutout at Wimbledon
 - 33 Spin
 - 35 Demure
 - 36 Buzzed
 - 38 Thaws
 - 39 Unmoving
 - 42 Aviator's milestone
 - 43 Track shape
 - 44 Email command
 - 45 Young lion
 - 46 Year in Spain
 - 47 Chest bone
 - 49 Granada gold

Answer to Previous Puzzle

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

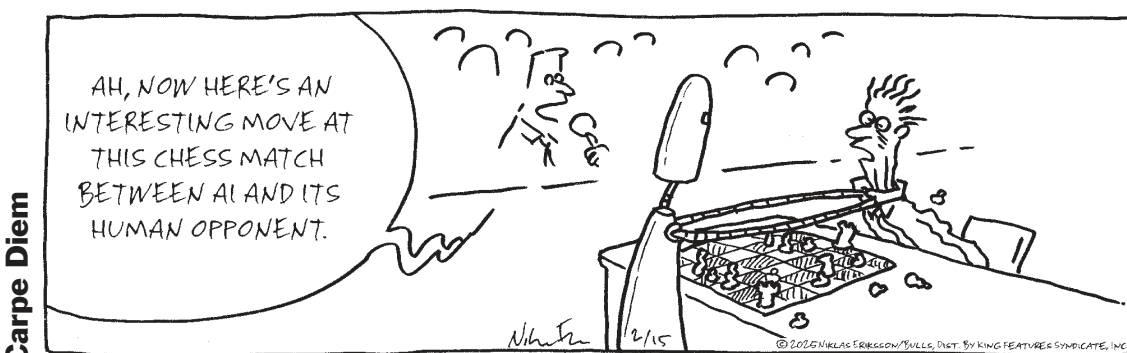
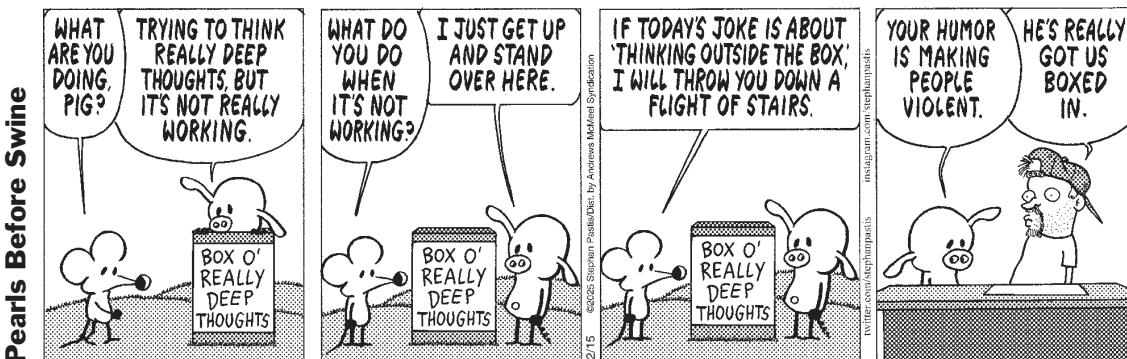
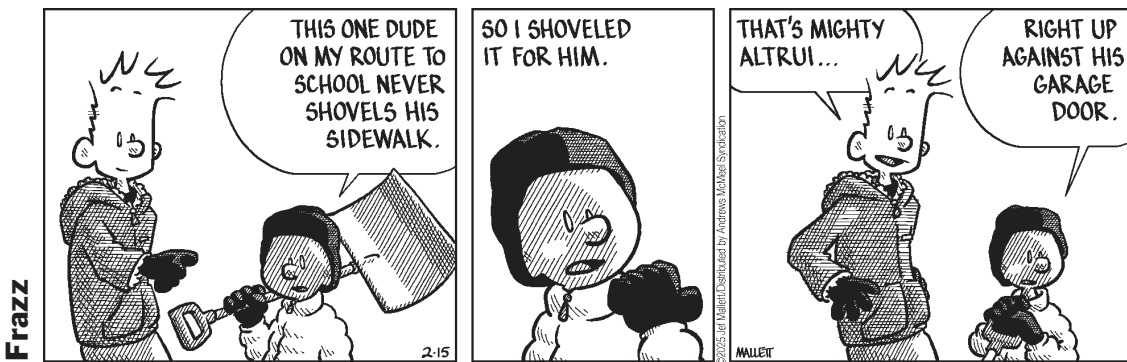
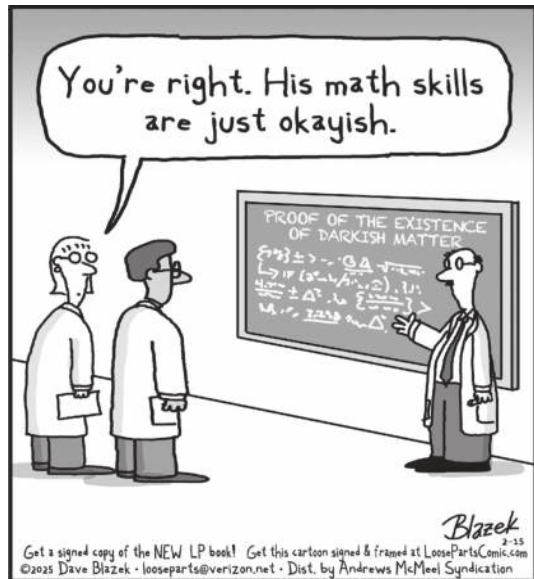
2-14 CRYPTOQUIP

E XWVQ W XTCH CLMMLYQIH
 XQWH VECS HSWH QJQNZTIQ
 VQJTLNQV SLNNEQVYZ, WIV
 HSQ NTWCH EC SECHTNZ.
Yesterday's Cryptoquip: WHAT COULD ONE CALL A RAINWEAR ITEM DESIGNED TO ACCOMMODATE PROTRUDING STOMACHS? A PAUNCH-O.
 Today's Cryptoquip Clue: W equals A

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 Interior design
- 6 Views
- 12 Made over
- 13 "Phooey!"
- 14 Aromatic herb
- 15 Found out, to Brits
- 16 Party pooper
- 17 "Dream on!"
- 19 Prof's helpers
- 20 Poker pot money
- 22 Covert agent
- 24 Jungfrau, for one
- 27 Melodies
- 29 Emmy winner Falco
- 32 Paintings of artists, say
- 35 Dessert fruit
- 36 Not even one
- 37 Mom's mate
- 38 "— -hoo!"
- 40 Grant basis, at times
- 42 Home for mil. jets
- 44 Horse's halter?
- 46 Eight (Pref.)
- 50 Illusionist David
- 52 — app
- 54 Boris of tennis
- 55 Hearth remains
- 56 Gardeners, at times
- 57 Synthetic fabric

DOWN

- 1 Woodland grazer
- 2 Writer Buchanan
- 3 Line dance
- 4 Small bill
- 5 Affinity
- 6 Pieces for one
- 7 Kitchen VIPs
- 8 Coach Parseghian
- 9 Bowlful served with chips
- 10 Sicilian spouter
- 11 Swift jets
- 12 "Mayberry —"
- 18 Hot chili pepper
- 21 Snooze
- 23 Pod dweller
- 24 Nile viper
- 25 Director Spike

- 26 Listen to a recording
- 28 Football game prankster
- 30 Judge Lance
- 31 Mentalist's claim
- 33 Swing to and —
- 34 Deli bread
- 39 Proprietor
- 41 Surround sound name
- 42 Shortened wd.
- 43 Dog bane
- 45 Towel word
- 47 Jazz singer Laine
- 48 Shore bird
- 49 Hosp. areas
- 51 Mamie's man
- 53 "— Little Teapot"

Answer to Previous Puzzle

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

2-15

CRYPTOQUIP

G Z G M S N F N J G B M F Y
 Q A F Y S K K G F B L Z L A U G N A L N F A K
 L K Q S F Q Z S P J F L A S P F A M G B H
 G B C S T T Z S C L B L H S C S B N.

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: I MADE A MOST SUCCULENT MEAT DISH THAT EVERYONE DEVoured HURRIEDLY, AND THE ROAST IS HISTORY.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: Q equals P

STARS AND STRIPES.

Laura Law, Chief Operating Officer

Lt. Col. Katie R. Fidler, Europe commander

John Rodriguez, Europe chief of staff

Lt. Col. Marci Hoffman, Pacific commander

EDITORIAL

Robert H. Reid, Editor in Chief
reid.robert@stripes.comSean Moores, Managing Editor for Presentation
moores.sean@stripes.comAnn Pinson, Digital Managing Editor
pinson.ann@stripes.com

BUREAU STAFF

Europe/Mideast

Erik Slavín, Europe & Mideast Bureau Chief
slavin.erik@stripes.com

+49(0)631.3615.9350; DSN (314)583.9350

Pacific

Aaron Kidd, Pacific Bureau Chief
kidd.aaron@stripes.com

+81.42.552.2511 ext. 88380; DSN (315)227.7380

Washington

Joseph Cacchioli, Washington Bureau Chief
cacchioli.joseph@stripes.com

(+1)(202)886-0033

Brian Bowers, Assistant Managing Editor, News
bowers.brian@stripes.com

CIRCULATION

Mideast

David Schultz, District Manager
schultz.david@stripes.comxsscirculation@stripes.com
+49(0)152.5672.5036; DSN (314)583-9111

Europe

Carlo Aquino, Circulation Manager
aquino.carlo@stripes.commemberservices@stripes.com
+49(0)631.3615.9136; DSN (314)583.9136

Pacific

Mari Mori, customerhelp@stripes.com
+81-3 6385.3171; DSN (315)227.7333

CONTACT US

Washington

tel: (+1)202.886.0003

633 3rd St. NW, Suite 500, Washington, DC 20001-3050

Reader letters

letters@stripes.com

Additional contacts

stripes.com/contactus

OMBUDSMAN

Jacqueline Smith

The Stars and Stripes ombudsman protects the free flow of news and information, reporting any attempts by the military or other authorities to undermine the newspaper's independence. The ombudsman also responds to concerns and questions from readers, and monitors coverage for fairness, accuracy, timeliness and balance. The ombudsman welcomes comments from readers, and can be contacted by email at ombudsman@stripes.com, or by phone at 202.886.0003.

Stars and Stripes (USPS 0417900) published daily (except Saturday, Sunday, 25 December and 1 January) for 50 cents (Monday through Thursday) and one dollar on Friday by Stars and Stripes Pacific, OPC 706 BOX 7, APO AP 96301-9001. Periodicals postage paid at San Francisco, CA Postmaster: Send address changes to Pacific Stars and Stripes, OPC 706 BOX 7, AP 96301-9001.

The Stars and Stripes newspaper is authorized by the Department of Defense (DoD) for the overseas U.S. military community. As an authorized newspaper, Stars and Stripes publications may be distributed through official channels and use appropriated funds for distribution to remote locations where overseas DoD personnel are located. The content printed in this newspaper is not classified as command information and is neither endorsed by nor represents the official views of the U.S. government.

The appearance of advertising in this publication does not constitute endorsement by the Department of Defense, Stars and Stripes, and/or services advertised. Products or services advertised shall be made available for purchase, use or patronage without regard to race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, marital status, physical handicap, political affiliation or any other nonmerit factor of the purchaser, user or patron.

© Stars and Stripes 2025

stripes.com

OPINION

The art of the just Ukraine peace deal

BY DAVID IGNATIUS

The Washington Post

Now that President Donald Trump has launched negotiations to end the war in Ukraine, the big question is whether he will sell out the Ukrainians to get peace. On that critical issue, there were mixed signals on Wednesday — with some indications that Trump might support sensible steps that would protect Kyiv.

The White House whirlwind accelerated with Trump's Truth Social post announcing that he had agreed in a "lengthy and highly productive phone call" with Russian President Vladimir Putin to "start negotiations immediately." A Kremlin statement said Putin had "agreed ... that a long-term settlement could be achieved through peaceful negotiations."

Trump spoke with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, too. According to the Kyiv Post, Zelenskyy responded: "Ukraine wants peace more than anyone else. We are defining our joint steps with America to stop Russian aggression and guarantee a reliable, lasting peace."

The chummy tone of the American and Russian statements led some Ukraine supporters to worry that Trump and Putin might be ready to do a deal over Kyiv's head — with concessions that reward Russian aggression and leave Ukraine vulnerable to future attacks. That concern began with Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth's statement earlier in the day in Brussels that Ukraine must drop its "illusionary goal" of recovering all its territory and forget about joining NATO.

"It's certainly an innovative approach to a negotiation to make very major concessions even before they have started," said Carl Bildt, a former prime minister of Sweden, in a social media post.

But a careful look at Hegseth's statement offers some encouraging signs that the

Trump team is serious about supporting what Hegseth called "a sovereign and prosperous Ukraine." The secretary stressed: "A durable peace for Ukraine must include robust security guarantees to ensure that the war will not begin again," and said that these guarantees "must be backed by capable ... troops."

The administration, predictably, wants the work to be done by Europeans, who Trump believes haven't paid enough of the bill for Ukraine. The plan is to send peacekeeping troops from NATO countries, but in a "non-NATO mission," as Hegseth put it. U.S. troops wouldn't be involved, and the force wouldn't be backed by a NATO Article 5 commitment.

Hegseth's comments aren't a surprise. The European tripwire idea has been briefed to NATO allies since November by Trump and his advisers. Nations that are prepared to provide forces include Britain, France, Denmark, Finland and the Baltic states, according to William B. Taylor Jr., a former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine. Taylor noted that although Hegseth ruled out U.S. troops, he didn't mention intelligence support, air cover, logistics or other assistance.

The Trump and Hegseth statements, taken together, suggest that the administration envisions a ceasefire along a line of control that roughly tracks the current 600-mile front. Hegseth noted that there "must be robust international oversight of the line of contact." This approach sounds like the armistice line that ended the Korean War and allowed South Korea to achieve spectacular prosperity on its side of the Demilitarized Zone.

Ukraine would like more from the Trump administration — specifically, a credible U.S. commitment to back up the European peacekeeping force if Putin tries to advance. But I heard some positive comments on Wednesday from Americans who have been strong supporters of Kyiv's resistance to Russian aggression.

"I am actually encouraged by the talk of international monitors or peacekeepers. That shows a belief there will be a Ukraine, separate and free, on one side of a line," said Kevin Ryan, a former U.S. Army general and Harvard Kennedy School professor who runs a national security course at the Kyiv School of Economics.

"My polling of Ukrainians is certainly not scientific, but what I hear from government and non-government is that they are ready for a stop in the fighting," Ryan continued in an email to me on Wednesday. "They know there will be a partitioning. They just don't want to be forced to agree in writing."

And if the talks bog down, or if Trump demands too many concessions? "I think there is a chance that Ukraine will walk away from a deal that doesn't give some security guarantees and at least draw the line where troops are now," Ryan argued. "The people I know here in Ukraine are aware they are in a war for their sovereignty, but they are not throwing up their hands. ... They are preparing to go the distance."

Given the enormous cost of the war to Russia, you could sense relief in Putin's statement that "the time has come for our countries to work together." On the eve of Wednesday's announcement, Russia prepared the ground by releasing American prisoner Marc Fogel and encouraging Belarus to release an American, a Belarusian journalist for a U.S.-funded media outlet and an opposition supporter (it did later Wednesday). And Putin and Trump said the U.S. president might visit Russia soon.

Trump is right that "no more lives should be lost" in this terrible war. But he will be measured as president by whether he achieves a just peace agreement that doesn't benefit the aggressor. The process is just beginning but, so far, Trump doesn't appear to have caved to the Kremlin.

In rural America, more women are saying 'I don't'

BY SHELLEY CLARK
AND MATTHEW M. BROOKS
Special to The Washington Post

The Trump administration recently issued new guidelines for the Transportation Department, surprisingly prioritizing spending and infrastructure for "communities with marriage and birth rates higher than the national average." In other words, communities with large traditional families. We know what you're probably thinking: That means rural and small-town America — presumably President Donald Trump's core constituency — will disproportionately benefit from these funds.

But you could very well be wrong.

Many Americans still imagine rural communities as bastions of tradition, where marriage is widespread and families with lots of children abound. A quarter-century ago, these perceptions would have been largely correct. They no longer are.

Our research shows that over the past three decades, among women ages 15 to 44, marriage rates have fallen much faster for rural women than for their urban counterparts. Between 1988 and 2018, the proportion of rural women who were married fell from 55% to 33%. Marriage among urban women also declined, but to a lesser degree.

At the same time, cohabitation has risen more sharply and divorce has declined more

slowly in rural America. By 2018, rural women were more likely than urban women to be in an unmarried cohabiting partnership (19% vs. 14%). The proportion of women who have never married has also increased steadily for both rural and urban women. And although the proportion of urban women who never marry remains slightly higher, this is mainly because urban women marry at older ages.

Childbearing in the United States has fallen overall, but the "baby bust" has been larger among rural women. Although they still have slightly more children than urban women, a substantially higher share of rural children (54%) than urban children (45%) are born outside marriage. This is a significant change from years past. In 2002, the reverse was true. These rapid transformations in both marriage and nonmarital childbearing help explain why many rural residents and politicians are inclined to think the traditional family is under threat.

These changes in marriage and childbearing shape the family structures children are raised in, which has implications for their well-being. In a forthcoming study, we show that between 2005 and 2022, the proportion of rural children living with two married parents declined at more than twice the rate of urban children. White, Black and Hispanic children in rural areas were all affected by this decline, while at the same time the proportion of urban white children living with married parents re-

mained stable and the proportion of urban Black children living with married parents actually rose. There are now sizable rural-urban gaps in the percentage of white children living with married parents across all regions, ranging from 5.7 percentage points in the Midwest to 12.3 percentage points in the Northeast.

These findings suggest that using marriage and family size as the criteria for transportation funding is actually likely to disadvantage rural regions.

Policies that expand access to higher education or create better-paying jobs, with family-friendly policies that include regular work schedules, parental leave and child care, would help alleviate the chronic strain rural families face. Rural communities and the scholars who study them have been clamoring for these types of programs and supports since at least the 1980s.

Moralistic prioritizing of traditional marriage over other types of families doesn't produce sensible transportation policy. Neither does it generate effective rural development strategies. Instead of making arbitrary decisions on infrastructure funding based on outdated stereotypes about small-town family life, we need policies based on sound social science data to support rural families' real needs.

Shelley Clark is James McGill professor of sociology at McGill University. Matthew M. Brooks is an assistant professor of sociology at Florida State University.

SCOREBOARD/MLB

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Wednesday's men's scores

EAST

Army 64, Loyola (Md.) 60
 Bucknell 76, Boston U. 60
 Colgate 87, Holy Cross 65
 Davidson 77, UMass 68
 Dayton 93, Fordham 76
 Iowa 84, Rutgers 73
 Navy 63, Lehigh 60
 Niagara 71, Canisius 60
 Notre Dame 97, Boston College 94, 2OT
 Rhode Island 68, St. Bonaventure 64
 Saint Joseph's 75, La Salle 63
 Tulsa 80, Temple 74
 VCU 80, George Washington 72
 Villanova 73, St. John's 71
 Xavier 91, Providence 82

SOUTH

Charleston Southern 71, Presbyterian 70
 Chattanooga 82, Samford 68
 Duke 78, California 57
 Florida St. 72, Wake Forest 70
 Furman 96, Mercer 72
 Georgia Tech 60, Stanford 52
 Louisville 91, NC State 66
 Mississippi 72, South Carolina 68
 Troy 74, Louisiana-Lafayette 56
 UNC-Asheville 92, SC-Upstate 85
 UNC-Greensboro 80, VMI 54
 W. Carolina 76, ETSU 67
 Winthrop 78, Radford 74
 Wofford 74, The Citadel 71, OT

MIDWEST

Bradley 78, S. Illinois 64
 Drake 84, Illinois St. 77
 Missouri 82, Oklahoma 58
 Missouri St. 71, Evansville 54
 Oakland 82, IU Indianapolis 67
 Ohio St. 93, Washington 69
 Robert Morris 68, Cleveland St. 59
 Valparaiso 101, Belmont 86
 Wichita St. 69, UTSA 64
 Youngstown St. 93, Fort Wayne 17

SOUTHWEST

Arkansas 70, LSU 58
 Arkansas St. 101, Southern Miss. 67
 TCU 73, Oklahoma St. 72
 Texas Tech 111, Arizona St. 106, 2OT

FAR WEST

New Mexico 71, Wyoming 67

Men's Top 25 schedule

Saturday's games

No. 1 Auburn (21-2) at No. 2 Alabama (20-3)
 No. 3 Duke (20-3) vs. Stanford (16-8), 4 p.m.
 No. 3 Florida (20-3) vs. South Carolina (10-13)
 No. 5 Tennessee (20-4) vs. Vanderbilt (17-6)
 No. 6 Houston (19-4) at No. 13 Arizona (17-6)
 No. 7 Purdue (19-5) vs. No. 16 Wisconsin (19-5)
 No. 8 Texas A&M (18-5) vs. Arkansas (14-9)
 No. 10 Iowa St. (18-5) vs. Cincinnati (14-9)
 No. 11 Michigan St. (19-4) at Illinois (16-8)
 No. 12 Texas Tech (18-5) at Oklahoma St. (14-9)
 No. 15 Kentucky (16-7) at Texas (15-9)
 No. 17 Kansas (16-7) at Utah (13-10)
 No. 19 Mississippi (18-6) vs. No. 22 Mississippi St. (17-6)
 No. 21 Missouri (17-6) at Georgia (16-8)
 No. 23 Clemson (19-5) at Florida St. (14-9)

Wednesday's women's scores

EAST

Army 64, Loyola (Md.) 53
 Bucknell 67, Boston U. 63
 Butler 76, Georgetown 70
 Colgate 73, Holy Cross 51
 Fordham 61, La Salle 58
 Lafayette 72, American 55
 Lehigh 74, Navy 56
 Marquette 68, Seton Hall 61
 UConn 78, St. John's 40
 UMass 72, Duquesne 52

SOUTH

Charleston Southern 79, Presbyterian 65
 Charlotte 73, Wichita St. 59
 Coastal Carolina 67, Ga. Southern 56
 E. Kentucky 75, Queens (NC) 62
 Florida Gulf Coast 78, North Florida 49
 George Mason 56, Rhode Island 44
 High Point 70, Longwood 61
 Louisiana-Lafayette 71, Texas St. 54
 N. Kentucky 72, Cleveland St. 69
 SC-Upstate 60, UNC-Asheville 51
 South Florida 82, Rice 77, 3OT
 Stetson 68, Jacksonville 63
 Troy 84, Louisiana-Monroe 71
 UCF 85, Arizona St. 76
 West Georgia 70, Austin Peay 57
 Winthrop 78, Radford 68

MIDWEST

Davidson 61, Dayton 51
 G. Washington 53, Loyola Chicago 41
 Kansas St. 90, Cincinnati 53
 Michigan 70, Indiana 67
 Michigan St. 91, Wisconsin 71
 Oral Roberts 105, Omaha 74
 Providence 61, Xavier 53
 Purdue 75, Northwestern 60
 S. Dakota St. 68, N. Dakota St. 53
 South Dakota 63, UMKC 56
 St. Thomas (MN) 77, North Dakota 54
 Villanova 62, DePaul 56

SOUTHWEST

Arkansas St. 74, Southern Miss. 53
 Cent. Arkansas 73, North Alabama 52
 North Texas 97, Memphis 57
 Oklahoma St. 83, Arizona 64
 UTSA 60, East Carolina 46

FAR WEST

Colorado St. 72, Utah St. 54
 Nevada 67, Fresno St. 55
 Oregon 68, Washington 67
 UNLV 75, San Diego St. 65
 Utah 77, Colorado 60
 Wyoming 64, Air Force 56

DEALS

Wednesday's transactions

BASEBALL Major League Baseball American League

CHICAGO WHITE SOX — Agreed to terms with OF Michael Taylor on a one-year contract. Placed RHP Jesse Scholtens on the 60-day IL.

DETROIT TIGERS — Agreed to terms with RHP John Brebbia on a one-year contract. Placed RHP Alex Lange on the 60-day IL.

TEXAS RANGERS — Agreed to terms with RHP JT Chargois on a minor league contract.

National League

MIAMI MARLINS — Agreed to terms with RHP Cal Quantrill on a one-year contract. Placed LHP Braxton Garrett on the 60-day IL.

MILWAUKEE BREWERS — Agreed to terms with LHP Tyler Alexander on a one-year contract. Placed LHP Robert Gasser on the 60-day IL.

NEW YORK METS — Agreed to terms with 1B Pete Alonso on a two-year contract.

SAN FRANCISCO GIANTS — Agreed to terms with RHP Lou Trivino on a minor league contract.

BASKETBALL National Basketball Association

CHARLOTTE HORNETS — Signed guard Damion Baugh on a two-way contract.
TORONTO RAPTORS — Re-signed F Brandon Ingram to a contract extension.

FOOTBALL National Football League

ARIZONA CARDINALS — Hired Justin Frye as offensive line coach, Winston DeLattiboudere defensive line coach, Matt Feeney outside linebackers coach, Cristian Garcia linebackers coach, Conner Senger pass game specialist, Alec Osborne defensive quality control and Blaine Gautier as offensive quality control.

ATLANTA FALCONS — Signed OT Kilian Zierer to a reserve/futures contract.

BUFFALO BILLS — Signed OL Alec Anderson to an exclusive rights tender contract.

KANSAS CITY CHIEFS — Signed TE Anthony Firkser to a reserve/futures contract.

NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS — Re-signed WR JaQuae Jackson to a one-year contract.

HOCKEY National Hockey League

SEATTLE KRAKEN — Sent RW Jordan Eberle to Coachella Valley (AHL) on a conditioning loan.

SOCCER Major League Soccer

COLUMBUS CREW — Acquired \$500,000 in general allocation money from Los Angeles Galaxy in exchange for F Christian Ramirez.

FC DALLAS — Acquired F Luciano Acosta from FC Cincinnati for \$5 million.

ORLANDO PRIDE — Signed M Aryssa Mahrt and G DeAira Jackson to short-term contracts.

HOCKEY

4 Nations Face-Off

At Bell Centre, Montreal, Canada
Wednesday, Feb. 12

Canada 4, Sweden 3, OT

Thursday, Feb. 13

United States vs. Finland

Saturday, Feb. 15

Finland vs. Sweden

United States vs. Canada

At TD Garden, Boston

Monday, Feb. 17

Canada vs. Finland

Sweden vs. United States

Championship game

Thursday, Feb. 20

Each team will play three tournament games in a traditional round robin format, under the following points system: 3 points for a win in regulation time; 2 points for a win in overtime/shootout; 1 point for a loss in overtime/shootout; and 0 points for a loss in regulation time. The two teams with the best tournament record will then advance to a one-game Final.

TENNIS

Qatar Total Open

Thursday
 Doha, Qatar
Surface: Hardcourt outdoor
Women's Singles
Quarterfinals

Ekaterina Alexandrova, Russia, def. Jessica Pegula (6), United States, 4-6, 6-1, 6-1.
 Iga Swiatek (2), Poland, def. Elena Rybakina (5), Kazakhstan, 6-2, 7-5.

Delray Beach Open

Wednesday
 At Delray Beach, Fla.
Purse: \$680,140
Surface: Hardcourt outdoor
Men's Singles
Round of 16

Miomir Kecmanovic (7), Serbia, def. Yoshihito Nishioka, Japan, walkover.
 Cameron Norrie, Britain, def. Arthur Rinderknech (9), France, 7-6 (9), 6-2.
 Marcos Giron (5), United States, def. Ethan Quinn, United States, 6-3, 6-4.



LM OTERO/AP

Griffin Jax was hoping to move to the Minnesota Twins' starting rotation, but realized he was better suited to remain in the bullpen this season.

Jax embraces chaos of late-inning relief

By DAVE CAMPBELL

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — The breakthrough season Griffin Jax produced for the Minnesota Twins from the back of their bullpen last year wasn't enough by itself to convince the right-hander to fully accept his status as a relief pitcher and abandon his goal of being a starter.

Candid conversation and a receptive perspective were the keys to bringing back Jax and him embracing his late-inning role.

About halfway through the off-season, Jax recognized the importance of shaping a throwing regimen around a starter or relief track well in advance of spring training, so he initiated a call with his agent and the Twins to reach a decision once and for all.

"This wasn't an instance of me or anyone trying to convince Griff to do something. This was just finding out where Griff's head was at, ultimately," manager Rocco Baldelli said. "He's going to be pitching in really important spots for us, as we know. I think it worked itself out really well. It was a smooth conversation, and I think when the time came, he had confidence in his decision and what he was going to ultimately do."

Though the 6.10 ERA in 14 starts he had as a rookie in 2021 made for a rough debut, Jax still believed in his ability to be a solid starter. Competitiveness and pride are often influential feelings for pro athletes but, he acknowledged, there's also the matter of money.

Starting pitchers carry far more earning power than relievers, of course. Jax is already 30 and making \$2.365 million in his first year of salary arbitration eligibility. He can't reach free agency until he's 33. But during their December discussion, Jax was encouraged to see the big picture of his value to Minnesota and his overall job satisfaction.

"When I tried to take it in that perspective and remove money as much as possible, I just found my-

self always gravitating back toward the bullpen," Jax said during the team's annual fan festival last month at Target Field. "I'm sure part of it is because I failed as a starter at the big league level and found some pretty good success in the bullpen, but at the same time I feel like my personality just thrives in that back-end, late-inning role now. I almost just look at it as, 'If it's not broken, why bother trying to fix it?'"

Jax was reminded, too, that in this era of data-driven strategy, strikeout-focused pitching and matchup-based bullpen use, the best relievers in the game can make their share of millions.

"I found some comfort in knowing if I keep doing what I'm doing, I'll be fine, financially," said Jax, who posted a 2.03 ERA with 95 strikeouts in 71 innings last season.

Setting aside his formidable mix of five pitches, featuring a swing-and-miss-inducing sweeper and a fastball that averaged 97.1 mph last season, per MLB's Statcast tracking, Jax has a unique trait that simply fits best in the back of the bullpen. He's a self-avowed adrenaline junkie who comes from a family full of them.

Jax became the first graduate of the Air Force Academy to play in the majors, part of why he didn't debut until age 26.

Jax, who is a captain in the Air Force Reserve, was treated last Sept. 11 before the Twins played the Los Angeles Angels to a ceremonial first pitch from his brother while another one of his brothers flew a fighter jet overhead.

Down on the diamond, the action is considerably less intense. But when the tension increases and Jax gets the call in the eighth inning, he'll relish the opportunity to be where he's supposed to be.

"It just fits my personality," Jax said. "I just find myself craving those chaotic moments and embracing the chaos, and there's nothing better than thriving in those moments."

Red Sox to sign Bregman

By RONALD BLUM

Associated Press

Alex Bregman and the Boston Red Sox have agreed to a \$120 million, three-year contract, a person familiar with the deal told The Associated Press on Wednesday night.

The person spoke to the AP on the condition of anonymity because the agreement was subject to a successful physical.

Bregman can opt out after the 2026 and 2027 seasons to become a free agent again. He might need to shift from third base to second with the Red Sox, who already have All-Star slugger Rafael Devers at the hot corner.

A two-time All-Star and two-time World Series champion during nine years with the Houston Astros, the 30-year-old Bregman is coming off one of his poorest offensive seasons. He hit .260 with 26 homers and 75 RBIs in the final season of a \$100 million, five-year contract, also winning his first Gold Glove.

Bregman has 19 postseason home runs, tied for sixth in major league history. He was selected by Houston with the second overall pick in the 2015 amateur draft, made his big league debut a year later and hit .284 with 19 homers, 71 RBIs and 17 stolen bases in 2017.

He had four homers and 10 RBIs in the postseason as the Astros won their first World Series title, a championship marred when a Major League Baseball investigation revealed the team used banned electronics to steal opponents' signs.

Bregman had RBIs in his first five World Series games, homering off Clayton Kershaw in the opener and Kenley Jansen in Game 4, and hitting a walk-off 10th-inning single against Jansen in Game 5.

Bregman was fifth in AL MVP voting in 2018 and second to Mike Trout in 2019, Bregman's two most productive years at the plate. He batted .286 with 31 homers, 103 RBIs and a major league-leading 51 doubles in 2018, then set career highs the following season with a .296 average, 41 homers, 112 RBIs and a major league-leading 119 walks.

He walked just 44 times this year with a 23.6% chase rate, his highest since 2017.



Bregman

HOCKEY

Stacked in net

Goaltending depth is a 'luxury' for Americans that could be big factor at '26 Milan Olympics

BY STEPHEN WHYNO
Associated Press

MONTREAL — When Jeremy Swayman played hockey for the Alaska Jr. Aces and at South Anchorage High School, he did not have a goaltending coach, and his home state did not have a goalie school.

"Now there's two or three, just in Alaska alone, so you can only imagine what it's like around the U.S.," Swayman said. "To see how important they understanding goaltending is now, it's a reason why we're producing so many great goalies."

Swayman is one of those great goalies — too many for USA Hockey to choose them all for the 4 Nations Face-Off and the kind of embarrassment of riches that gives the U.S. a legitimate chance to win gold at the 2026 Milan Olympics. The depth is so strong with Connor Hellebuyck at the top and Jake Oettinger also in the tournament that Swayman might not even dress and an elite goaltender like Thatcher Demko didn't make the cut.

"We feel pretty spoiled right now with the level that the goaltending is at in the United States," general manager Bill Guerin said Tuesday.

"You need good goaltending to win — great goaltending — and we have a lot of different options. That's a luxury. We feel very fortunate."

USA Hockey said Wednesday that the start in Thursday's opener against Finland would go to Hellebuyck, who is on track to win the Vezina Trophy as the NHL's top goaltender for the third time in six seasons.

Hellebuyck said playing for the U.S. is something that has largely escaped him

throughout his career.

"The NHL wasn't allowed to go to the last Olympics, so we missed that opportunity," he said. "Then you never know, are you going to get another shot? And you've got to stay in your prime for when that opportunity comes."

The reality is Hellebuyck, Oettinger, Swayman and Demko are in their primes. Any of them could be the guy in Milan.

"It's pretty incredible," U.S. captain Auston Matthews said. "Playing against them, it's nice to be on the other side now. But I think goaltending, it's definitely an advantage that every team wants, whether it's international tournaments, Olympics or just in the NHL. But I feel like we're pretty fortunate to have three guys that are some of the best in the league."

That's not by accident. USA Hockey started the Warren Strelow Goalie Mentor Program in 2008 and has devoted resources to catching up to Canada, Russia, Finland, Sweden and other countries at the sport's most important position.

"I grew up in USA Hockey did the Strelow and all those goaltending camps, and they always prided themselves on wanting to be the No. 1 country for goaltending," said Oettinger, who helped the Dallas Stars reach the Western Conference final last year. "I know all the stuff I did with them helped me be here and the development process that I went through with USA Hockey has helped me separate myself and put me in the position I'm in now."

Swayman, in his first season as the unquestioned starter for the Boston Bruins,

"We feel pretty spoiled right now with the level that the goaltending is at in the United States."

Bill Guerin

Team USA general manager

Canada's goalie woes in spotlight again at 4 Nations Face-Off

BY STEPHEN WHYNO
Associated Press

MONTREAL — When Canada won the two most recent major international tournaments featuring the best hockey players in the world, the goaltending of Carey Price was one of the biggest reasons why.

Price is gone, Hall of Famers like Martin Brodeur, Roberto Luongo and Patrick Roy are not walking through the door to the dressing room and the birthplace of the sport has arguably never been weaker in net than it is right now. Who might be Canada's starter at the Milan Olympics a year from now remains a question, with the 4 Nations Face-Off the next chance for one of Jordan Binnington, Adin Hill or Sam Montembeault to change that perception.

"There's not much to be said, right?" said Binnington, who made 23 saves but struggled at times in Canada's 4-3 victory over Sweden on Wednesday night in the tournament opener. "It's about action, and let that do the talking. I'm excited. I'm excited to be



Binnington

here. Us three are all excited to be here. I mean, Canada's got a lot of good goaltending, for sure, just like the rest of the world."

Hill, Montembeault and Binnington rank 30th, 35th and 36th in save percentage in the NHL this season. None are in the top 20 in goals-against average. Just once in the past eight years has someone from Canada won the Vezina Trophy as the league's top goalie.

General manager Don Sweeney said Canada has "confidence in all three guys," citing Hill with Vegas in 2023 and Binnington with St. Louis in 2019 each backstopping his team to the Stanley Cup and Montembeault learning from playing in the pressure cooker that is Montreal.

Sweeney, whose Boston Bruins lost to Binnington's Blues in that final, pointed out he "had a front-row seat for watching Jordan Binnington rise to that occasion



CHRISTINNE MUSCHI, THE CANADIAN PRESS/AP

From left: U.S. goaltenders Connor Hellebuyck, Jake Oettinger and Jeremy Swayman stand on the ice during a practice prior to the 4 Nations Face-Off in Brossard, Quebec, on Monday. Any of the three could start, but Hellebuyck got the nod for the opener.

said the aim is for 51% of NHL goaltenders to be from the U.S. Of the 92 who have appeared in a game this season, just 19 are American, just over 20%.

But that group includes some of the best around, beyond Hellebuyck, Oettinger and Swayman. Dustin Wolf is a big reason Calgary is a contender, Anthony Stolarz and Joseph Woll have Toronto squarely in the mix and Charlie Lindgren is coming off carrying Washington into the playoffs last year.

Hellebuyck is the shining example, though, helping Winnipeg soar to the top of the NHL standings and sitting on pace to break the single-season wins record.

"I don't want to get his ego too high, but I just think his mind to be able to think the game and constantly learning, I think that's one of the biggest aspects," Jets and U.S. teammate Kyle Connor said.

"He's never satisfied and just seems so calm in net and is just a great presence. That mentality of just wanting to be the best and pushing yourself every day, it's fun to watch."

Swayman wasn't even born yet the last time the U.S. won an international tournament with the NHL's best players, the 1996 World Cup of Hockey, so he's too young to have watched Mike Richter and goalies of that ilk. But at 26 he's already conscious of being responsible for keeping the standard high.

"It's my job and it's obviously Hellebuyck's job and Oettinger's job to continue that for the next generation of goalies," Swayman said. "I know how inspiring it was to me for me to watch Jonathan Quick and Ryan Miller and guys that have really paved the way for us goalies from the U.S. to make noise in the NHL and on the global stage."

It's scary to think these goalies might just be on the leading edge of crease dominance for the U.S.

"I know we all take a lot of pride in that," Oettinger said.

"Hopefully we can continue to put great goalies in the NHL and I think the future is just getting better and better."

The always confident Binnington said his game has been "all right" and he has been putting in the time to try to win games.

"Personally, I put my right foot forward every day, and I keep my head down and keep working," said Binnington, who is 15-19-4 with a 2.89 save percentage and .897 goals against average this season. "Whatever comes up, I just handle it the best way I can and now we're here."

Binnington, who will be 32 when the puck drops on the 2026 Milan Olympics, looks like the leader in the clubhouse, in part because his GM with the Blues, Doug Armstrong, is in charge of picking that roster. That would make him next in the line of Brodeur, Luongo and Price.

He is not trying to compare himself to those greats.

"I'm just going to be me," Binnington said. "Those guys were themselves, and I'll be me and we're proud to be hockey players from Canada and compete together to be successful."

NBA

Scoreboard

Eastern Conference					
Atlantic Division					
	W	L	Pct	GB	
Boston	39	16	.709	—	
New York	36	18	.667	2½	
Philadelphia	20	34	.370	18½	
Brooklyn	20	34	.370	18½	
Toronto	17	38	.309	22	
Southeast Division					
	W	L	Pct	GB	
Orlando	27	29	.482	—	
Miami	25	27	.481	—	
Atlanta	26	29	.473	½	
Charlotte	13	39	.250	12	
Washington	9	45	.167	17	
Central Division					
	W	L	Pct	GB	
Cleveland	44	10	.815	—	
Indiana	30	23	.566	13½	
Milwaukee	29	24	.547	14½	
Detroit	29	26	.527	15½	
Chicago	22	33	.400	22½	
Western Conference					
Southwest Division					
	W	L	Pct	GB	
Memphis	36	18	.667	—	
Houston	34	20	.630	2	
Dallas	29	26	.527	7½	
San Antonio	23	29	.442	12	
New Orleans	12	42	.222	24	
Northwest Division					
	W	L	Pct	GB	
Oklahoma City	44	9	.830	—	
Denver	36	19	.655	9	
Minnesota	30	25	.545	15	
Portland	23	32	.418	22	
Utah	13	40	.245	31	
Pacific Division					
	W	L	Pct	GB	
L.A. Lakers	32	20	.615	—	
L.A. Clippers	30	23	.566	2½	
Sacramento	28	26	.519	5	
Golden State	27	27	.500	6	
Phoenix	26	28	.481	7	
Wednesday's games					
Orlando 102, Charlotte 86					
Boston 116, San Antonio 103					
Indiana 134, Washington 130, OT					
Cleveland 131, Toronto 108					
Brooklyn 100, Philadelphia 96					
Milwaukee 103, Minnesota 101					
Oklahoma City 115, Miami 101					
Sacramento 119, New Orleans 111					
Detroit 128, Chicago 110					
New York 149, Atlanta 148, OT					
Houston 119, Phoenix 111					
Utah 131, L.A. Lakers 119					
Denver 132, Portland 121					
Dallas 111, Golden State 107					
L.A. Clippers 128, Memphis 114					
Thursday's games					
Golden State at Houston					
Sacramento at New Orleans					
Miami at Dallas					
Oklahoma City at Minnesota					
L.A. Clippers at Utah					
Friday's games					
2025 Rising Stars Semifinal 1					
Team T vs Team C					
2025 Rising Stars Semifinal 2					
Team M vs Team G League					
2025 Rising Stars Final					
Team TBD vs Team TBD					
Saturday's games					
No games scheduled					
Sunday's games					
2025 All-Star Game Semifinal 1					
Global Stars vs Young Stars					
2025 All-Star Game Semifinal 2					
Rising Stars vs OGS					
2025 All-Star Game					
Team TBD vs Team TBD					
Scoring leaders					
Through Wednesday					
	G	FG	FT	PTS	AVG
Gil.-Alexander, OKC	52	590	408	1696	32.6
Antetokoun., MIL	41	521	254	1302	31.8
Jokic, DEN	49	556	247	1458	29.8
Maxey, PHI	46	442	232	1269	27.6
Edwards, MIN	53	489	258	1460	27.5
Durant, PHO	41	408	208	1121	27.3
Tatum, BOS	52	475	267	1406	27.0
Booker, PHO	48	411	309	1256	26.2
Brunson, NY	53	478	306	1384	26.1
Lillard, MIL	44	350	280	1133	25.8

Questions linger on new All-Star format

BY TIM REYNOLDS
Associated Press

Red Auerbach once got ejected from an All-Star Game for arguing a call. Rick Barry and Bob Cousy each fouled out of All-Star Games twice, the only players who can say that. Dwyane Wade was whistled for the first flagrant All-Star foul after breaking Kobe Bryant's nose.

As the story goes, Wade called Bryant not long after that 2012 game and attempted to apologize. Turned out, there was no need. Wade's recollection of what Bryant said? "Bro, I love it," Wade said in a conversation with Kevin Garnett, a clip that has been a social media standard ever since.

The NBA doesn't want coaches to get kicked out, anyone to get into foul trouble or anyone getting hurt. But they've asked, begged and pleaded for years with players in an effort to get the All-Star Game get taken more seriously. And the latest solution is a radical one: a mini-tournament.

Welcome to an All-Star format like none other: three games, no clock, first team to 40 points wins, eight-man rosters, and there's a reasonable chance that the team leaving San Francisco on Sunday as winners will have captured that title without having a single All-Star on its roster.

"We went back to the drawing board," NBA Commissioner Adam Silver said.

Here's the big question going in to Sunday: Will it work?

To be fair, there were skeptics when Silver added a play-in tournament to determine the final two playoff spots in the Eastern and Western Conferences; by all accounts, the play-in has been a smashing success. There were skeptics when Silver added an in-season tournament now called the NBA Cup; some players have said they still don't totally understand



DARRON CUMMINGS/AP

Phoenix Suns forward Kevin Durant shoots over Indiana Pacers guard Tyrese Haliburton during the second half of the NBA All-Star game in Indianapolis on Feb. 18, 2024. Durant is not a fan of the new format.

the format, but the first two Cup final four weekends in Las Vegas have been big hits as well.

Now, this. The NBA thinks players don't want to go to a 48-minute All-Star Game and play hard for a full game. Perfectly understandable. The proposed solution: short games, where nobody will have to play for long and there's little room for error since only 40 points are needed to win.

Kevin Durant's first response? "I hate it. Absolutely hate it. Terrible," the Phoenix star and 15-time All-Star said when the league announced the plan in December, though he quickly noted that his initial reaction could have been worded differently.

Some players want the traditional East vs. West format, although the league went back to that last year and it was a 211-186 game — all dunks and 3-pointers,

pretty much — that broke records and forced the NBA to break the mold on the format.

The NBA tried a target score approach; no clock in the fourth quarter and have the teams chase a set total to ensure the game ends on a made basket. Some years it worked, some years not so much. They tried having playing captains pick the teams; again, success was mixed.

Next up, the tournament. There is a prize pool of \$1.8 million for the All-Star tournament. Each player on the All-Star champion team gets \$125,000, each player on the runner-up team will get \$50,000 and the players on the teams eliminated in the semifinals will each get \$25,000.

"I don't know if everyone understands how this is going to go," said Miami's Tyler Herro, who'll make his All-Star debut this weekend.

"But everyone will want to win."

There are four teams in the tournament: three teams picked by Shaquille O'Neal, Kenny Smith and Charles Barkley from the pool of 24 All-Stars, and the fourth will be the team that wins the Rising Stars event Friday night. The Rising Stars players aren't All-Stars. Some aren't even in the NBA right now; there's a G League team in that event. And the Rising Stars winner could win the All-Star Game — meaning, yes, guys who aren't currently in the league could win the thing.

"Them trying to shake things up is expected and makes sense," Oklahoma City All-Star Shai Gilgeous-Alexander said. "But at the end of the day, it's going to come down to whether the players wanting to go at it, and I would love to see that. Love to be a part of that for sure, and hopefully it happens."

McClung seeks record 3rd straight dunk title

BY TIM REYNOLDS
Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — About a year ago at this time, Mac McClung thought his dunk contest days were done. He'd been in the contest at the NBA's All-Star weekend twice, won it both times with plenty of flair and figured there was nothing else to prove.

Then a week later, he found himself practicing new dunks. And that's when he quickly realized that he has one — and he insists, only one — dunk contest left in him.

"I love the contest, man," McClung said. "It'd be an action in fear not to do it again. So, I'll do it — one last time."

The 6-foot-2 McClung — a standout guard in the G League who has only appeared in five NBA games — is headed back to All-Star weekend, looking to become the first person to win the league's dunk title in three consecutive years. Nate Robinson is the only three-time



McClung

dunk champion, though his didn't come in back-to-back-to-back years.

McClung breathed new life into the dunk contest and got rave reviews from some of the NBA's biggest names when he first won it in 2023, then went airborne over Shaquille O'Neal to win it again last year. Now he goes for three in a row in San Francisco on Saturday night, with San Antonio rookie Stephon Castle, Chicago rookie Matas Buzelis and Milwaukee second-year wing Andre Jackson Jr. providing the competition.

"I'm not going there to lose," Buzelis said.

Added Jackson: "I just want to be myself and put on a show."

Castle is confident as well, though he acknowledged he expects to feel some nerves on Saturday night.

"I get nervous for most games," Castle said. "I think it's just going to be another event for me."

Despite his higher profile, McClung has only played five NBA games with four teams — one with Chicago, one with the Los Angeles Lakers, two with Philadelphia and one with Orlando. He has scored 33 points in those games, 20 coming in one contest with the 76ers at Brooklyn on April 9, 2023.

He hasn't scored an NBA point since that day.

"The easy answer is opportunity," McClung said. "It's not just Mac McClung. There's a lot of G League guys that can play in the league. There's a lot of guys I've seen in the G League and then they get an opportunity in the (NBA) and people are like, 'Man, he got so much better this last year.' And I'm like, 'No, he's been good.' I really have my faith in God, and believe I'm always right where I'm supposed to be."

NFL

Former dominant teams seek path back to past glory

BY MARK ANDERSON
Associated Press

HENDERSON, Nev. — The sayings “commitment to excellence” and “just win, baby” encapsulated what the Raiders represented as they bulldozed their way to three Super Bowl titles with a take-no-prisoners style that endeared and villainized them.

The Dallas Cowboys became the self-proclaimed “America’s Team” as the Cowboys built one of the NFL’s most successful and influential teams that owns five Vince Lombardi Trophies and, similar to Las Vegas, a swagger that has attracted them to a large segment of NFL fans while alienating others.

And the Miami Dolphins — though without the national following of the other two teams — proved perfection could exist as the dominant team of the early 1970s that remained a top contender into the ‘80s.

All three franchises are at least a generation removed from their glory days. The Raiders haven’t played in the Super Bowl in 22 years, the Cowboys in 29 and the Dolphins in 40. Dallas’ last Super Bowl appearance was also its last championship, but Las Vegas is 41 years from its most recent title and it’s at 51 years for Miami.

And none appear close to ending such droughts.

This long stretch of not winning the big one was again extended this season, with the Philadelphia Eagles claiming the Super Bowl with a 40-22 victory over the Kansas City Chiefs.

The Raiders and Cowboys will

enter next season with new coaches and Dolphins coach Mike McDaniel’s future beyond next season is unclear after Miami took a noticeable step back in 2024.

“The goal is always to win and it has been to win playoff games and compete for Super Bowls and that will not change,” Dolphins general manager Chris Grier said. “It was a very disappointing year. It was a hard year. A lot of lessons were learned, and unfortunately, I think sometimes you have to go through these to take your next step and very committed and excited for 2025 and the challenge.”

The three teams can look to the Pittsburgh Steelers as hope of returning to such a prominent place.

After winning four Super Bowls in the the ‘70s, the Steelers didn’t return to the championship game for 16 years and didn’t win it all for 26 years. That title began a six-year stretch in which Pittsburgh made the Super Bowl three times and won it twice.

But it’s been a struggle in the 14 seasons since to return to that prominence. The Steelers haven’t won a playoff game since they made the AFC championship game in the 2016 season.

This season ended with five consecutive losses that included a one-and-done playoff appearance.

“After losing five in a row, it’s hard to say we’re closer,” Pittsburgh President Art Rooney II said. “I think the biggest piece of the puzzle, I keep saying this, we’ve got to address the quarterback position. And you look around and kind of see the teams that are at that next level, that’s where they are,



TONY AVELAR/AP

Cowboys quarterback Dak Prescott is entering the first year of a four-year, \$240 million contract extension and will once again look to lead Dallas to its first NFC championship game since 1996.

and they’re there for that reason.”

Las Vegas hasn’t had a championship-type quarterback since Rich Gannon took the then-Oakland Raiders to the Super Bowl in the 2002 season. Dak Prescott was largely expected to be that caliber of QB for Dallas, but hasn’t taken them to that level. No one has truly reminded fans in Miami of Dan Marino since he last suited up in 1999.

So where do the three teams stand?

Raiders

The club is on its fourth full-time coach since moving to Las Vegas in 2020, having hired Pete Carroll last month. Owner Mark Davis turned over much of the coaching search to seven-time Super Bowl-winning quarterback and minority owner Tom Brady, so he hopes his presence in the organization will help it finally rediscover its championship roots.

The Raiders have nearly \$100 million in salary-cap space for new general manager John Spytek, according to *overthecap.com*, to make over a roster that has a number of holes, especially on the offensive side. The most notable need is quarterback, a spot Las Vegas figures to address through free agency, the draft or both.

“We’ll see what we build here,” Davis said. “But it’s still the Raiders. That’s something everybody’s got to remember.”

Cowboys

Owner Jerry Jones had one of

the NFL’s all-time dominant teams when Troy Aikman, Emmitt Smith and Michael Irvin led the Cowboys to three championships in four seasons in the early to mid-1990s.

Jones has been searching for that success since, and he’s shown patience at coach and QB. Jason Garrett got almost 10 years to try to break through and McCarthy was brought back for the final season of his contract after losing to the Green Bay Packers 48-32 in the wild-card playoffs a year ago. It was arguably the worst defeat in Jones’ 35 years as owner.

McCarthy will not be return next season, and whether Brian Schottenheimer is the answer at coach is far from sure.

Dallas has also had just two starting quarterbacks — Tony Romo and Prescott — since the the middle of the 2006 season. Prescott will enter the first year of a four-year, \$240 million contract, the first in the NFL to average \$60 million per season. His \$89.9 million salary-cap hit next season is prohibitive, meaning the Cowboys will likely need to restructure his contract.

“Every team who made a coaching decision was looking at how they solve for their quarterback,” Dallas executive vice president of personnel Stephen Jones said. “That’s how you win in this league. I think we’ve got one of the best, if not the best, in terms of our quarterback, and he’s the ultimate leader. We just have to continue to put the pieces around. We’re not

naive. I know our fans, they’re not going to believe and there’s going to be pressure until we get the job done, and certainly we didn’t get the job done this year.”

Dolphins

The Dolphins showed signs in 2023 that they could be making a return to contender status, going 11-6 behind McDaniel and quarterback Tua Tagovailoa. But some of the shine McDaniel’s creative play calling came off this past season as Miami went from first in yardage and second in scoring to 18th and 22nd, respectively.

That drop in production forced McDaniel to answer whether someone else should handle play-calling. McDaniel didn’t rule it out, but said he believed the team was better with him at the controls.

Questions of whether Tagovailoa is the long-term solution at QB also have not gone away, particularly given his concussion history.

“This year, again we had high expectations,” Grier said. “Injuries happen and I am not using that as an excuse. It is what it is. Every team deals with it. I would say our biggest one, no matter what happens, is obviously the quarterback. When he misses 6½ games, when we miss it by a game getting into the playoffs, to me that’s the difference there.”

“The goal is always to win and it has been to win playoff games and compete for Super Bowls, and that will not change.”



JOHN LOCHER/AP

Raiders GM John Spytek, left, and coach Pete Carroll sit behind 3 Lombardi trophies. The team hasn’t played in a Super Bowl in 22 years.

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

TOP 25 THIS WEEK

Auburn-Alabama rivalry heating up

By JOHN MARSHALL
Associated Press

The basketball version of the Alabama-Auburn rivalry has heated up as both programs have risen into national prominence.

The Tigers and Crimson Tide have become regulars in the AP Top 25 and each has made a trip to the Final Four in the past five years, including Alabama's first trip last year.

Auburn and Alabama will take perhaps the biggest step in the basketball rivalry Saturday, when they'll make Southeastern Conference history as the first No. 1 vs. No. 2 matchup in league history.

Auburn (22-2, 10-1 SEC) has been the nation's top-ranked program for five straight weeks. Not even a loss could derail the Tigers' stay at the top; they were still No. 1 in Monday's poll despite losing to No. 3 Florida last week.

Alabama (21-3, 10-1) was the preseason No. 2 team and has remained in the top 10 all season. The Crimson Tide moved back up to No. 2 this week after stretching their win streak to six.

After three straight weeks as the unanimous No. 1, Auburn received 34 first-place points in Monday's poll and Alabama had 23.

Auburn beat Vanderbilt and Alabama beat Texas on Tuesday before the showdown in Tuscaloosa.

More SEC games

The SEC has a nation-high nine ranked teams and five in the top 10, so it's no surprise the week has key games between ranked teams.

No. 22 Mississippi State may have the toughest road of anyone in the conference. The Bulldogs lost at No. 3 Florida 81-68 on Tuesday and travel to No. 19 Mississippi for a rivalry rematch on Saturday. Mississippi State won the first meeting 84-81 in overtime on Jan. 18.

Florida could have staked a claim for No. 1 after taking down Auburn last week, but had to settle for its highest ranking since reaching No. 1 in 2013-14.

"Rankings are tricky because is it who is playing the best at this exact moment? Is it the best resume?" Gators coach Todd Golden said "There's a lot of different things that go into it. I have no doubt that we're firmly a top-four team in America right now. I think we are playing that way."

Florida plays South Carolina on Saturday.

Purdue's week

Purdue has handled playing without two-time national player of the year Zach Edey quite nicely,



No. 1 Auburn (22-2)
at No. 2 Alabama (21-3)
AFN-Sports2
Saturday 10 p.m. CET
Sunday 6 a.m. JKT



No. 6 Houston (20-4)
at No. 13 Arizona (17-7)
AFN-Atlantic
Saturday 8 p.m. CET
Sunday 4 a.m. JKT



No. 16 Wisconsin (19-5)
at No. 7 Purdue (19-6)
AFN-Sports2
Saturday 7 p.m. CET
Sunday 3 a.m. JKT

climbing to No. 7 in this week's poll thanks to a four-game winning streak behind forward Trey Kaufman-Renn.

Kaufman-Renn is averaging 18.9 points on 60% shooting while grabbing 6.4 rebounds per game.

The Boilermakers (19-6, 11-3 Big Ten) started a tough week, losing at No. 20 Michigan on Tuesday. They host No. 16 Wisconsin on Saturday.

Wisconsin (19-5, 9-4) has won three straight and will have had a week off before facing the Boilermakers.

Cougars and Wildcats

One of the biggest games in the Big 12 this season will be at Arizona's McKale Center on Saturday. That's when No. 6 Houston will face No. 13 Arizona in what could be for the conference lead.

The Cougars improved to 12-1 by beating Baylor 76-65 on Monday night. The Wildcats fell a game behind at 11-2 when they lost to Kansas State on Tuesday.

The Cougars have played at McKale Center six times, but this will be the first meeting at Big 12 schools.



JULIA DEMAREE NIKHINSON/AP

Dylan Harper, left, and Ace Bailey are two of the top freshmen in the country and are projected to be top five NBA draft picks. But they haven't given Rutgers the breakthrough season that many expected.

Despite top-5 draft picks, Rutgers still under .500

By NOAH TRISTER
Associated Press

Dylan Harper stepped to the free-throw line last weekend and the Maryland crowd showed no mercy, serenading the Rutgers star with an "overrated!" chant.

It's been that kind of season for the Scarlet Knights. At this point, it's hard to describe them as overrated because they aren't receiving a single vote in the AP Top 25. And yet, there are plenty of reminders of unfulfilled potential.

This was supposed to be a breakthrough season for Rutgers after the Scarlet Knights landed two of the top freshmen in the country in Harper and Ace Bailey. Those two have mostly produced as advertised. Each is averaging 19 points per game, and some mock drafts have them both going in the top three this year behind Duke's Cooper Flagg. Yet the Scarlet Knights are just 12-13 and probably will need to win the Big Ten Tournament to reach the NCAA Tournament.

Last week, they scored a big victory over then-No. 23 Illinois, but they weren't able to build on that when they faced another ranked team at Maryland. Bailey was limited against the Terrapins because he was sick.

"It's just been that kind of year. You can't plan these things," coach Steve Pikiell said. "You just play with the guys you got."

Pikiell took over at Rutgers in 2016, and in 2021 the Scarlet

Knights appeared in the NCAA Tournament for the first time in 30 years. After missing the March Madness the past two seasons, Rutgers was ranked coming into this one thanks to the additions of the 6-foot-6 Harper and 6-foot-10 Bailey.

According to Sportradar, only 15 times has one school produced two of the top five picks in an NBA draft. That list reads like a who's who of great college basketball programs: North Carolina (four times), UCLA (twice), Duke (twice), Kentucky (twice), Michigan State, UConn, Ohio State, Indiana and Kansas.

If Rutgers joins that group of schools at the 2025 draft, that would be a big moment for the Scarlet Knights. But if they don't reach the NCAA Tournament, they're in danger of making the wrong kind of history. Of those 15 teams that had two top-five picks, nine made the Final Four that year. Only one failed to reach the Sweet 16 — Kansas in 2014, when Joel Embiid was injured during the postseason.

Health has been an issue for Rutgers. Harper, the son of five-time NBA champ Ron Harper, dealt with a sprained ankle recently. He's back, but Bailey wasn't at full strength against Maryland.

"When you're down with guys that make such an impact in the game, it's hard to win," Harper said.

Experience also works against Rutgers. Four of the team's five starters last weekend were freshmen.

"It's been probably before COVID and the extra (year) that you see a bunch of freshmen on the court," Maryland coach Kevin Willard said.

Rutgers played Alabama and Texas A&M tough early in the season, but statistically there's little about this team that stands out. As of Tuesday, the Scarlet Knights ranked outside the top 50 in adjusted offensive efficiency according to Kenpom.com. On defense, they were barely in the top 100.

At Maryland, they were competitive but ultimately lost 90-81.

"We are getting better," Pikiell said. "Our defense was really doing a good job recently, and today — 90 on the road isn't the recipe in this league."

As the regular season winds down, expectations are a lot lower now.

"I think Steve has done an unbelievable job with that lineup. They had won two out of three. Defensively they had gotten much better, especially at home," Willard said. "If this team was together next year, I would think they would probably be five wins better."

Of course, this Rutgers team is highly unlikely to be together next season. Shortly after being taunted by the Maryland fans, Harper showed why he's on the NBA's radar, pulling off a beautiful spin move and then dishing to teammate Dylan Grant for a dunk.

A flash of brilliance — in another loss.

AUTO RACING

Briscoe secures first Daytona 500 pole

By JENNA FRYER
Associated Press

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — Chase Briscoe led a banner night for Toyota in qualifying for the Daytona 500 by winning the pole for NASCAR's "Great American Race."

It is the first Daytona 500 pole for Briscoe, who moved to Joe Gibbs Racing this season when Stewart-Haas Racing closed at the end of 2024. His move to the No. 19 gave Toyota its first pole in NASCAR's biggest race of the season.

"A great way to start our season. Unbelievable way to start off the



Briscoe

year. Unbelievable way to start off with Toyota," said Briscoe. "To be able to be the guy to deliver them the first anything when they've already accomplished so much is pretty cool. To think I'm going to start on the front row or on the pole of the 'Great American Race' with ultimately the great American brand of (sponsor) Bass Pro Shops is unbelievable. Can't thank Coach Gibbs enough, the entire Joe Gibbs Racing organization."

Briscoe's lap of 182.745 mph held off a slew of Ford challengers. Former Daytona 500 winner Austin Cindric qualified second in a Ford for Team Penske, which started from the pole last year with Joey Logano, who closed the year as NASCAR Cup Series champion.

Ford drivers claimed four of the



JOHN RAOUX/AP

Chase Briscoe's crew pushes his car along pit road during qualifying for the Daytona 500 at Daytona International Speedway on Wednesday. Briscoe's lap of 182.745 mph locked up the pole for Sunday's race.

top five spots in time trials, but only Briscoe and Cindric as the front row starters were locked in Wednesday night.

"A lot of fast Fords," said Cindric. "Pretty good to start on the front row with one of my good friends. All in all, a great box checked for the start of this week. I think every single part of this weekend is important to setting up with an opportunity to win this race on Sunday."

The only other drivers locked in during time trials were Toyota drivers Jimmie Johnson and Martin Truex Jr., who were not guaranteed entry but posted speeds

fast enough to claim two of the four "open" spots in the race.

The remainder of the starting order was set Thursday night in a pair of qualifying races.

There are nine drivers entered for four open spots, and Truex and Johnson claimed two of them in time trials. Johnson is a seven-time NASCAR champion, two-time Daytona 500 winner and member of the Hall of Fame. Truex is the 2017 Cup champion and in his first year of not racing NASCAR full-time.

"Both Jimmie and I were beneficiaries of their (Toyota's) hard work on their engines," Truex said.

Both would have been eligible to request the "world-class driver" provisional that guarantees entry as a 41st car to one driver who does not compete full-time in NASCAR, but brings marketability and visibility to the biggest race of the season.

The provisional will go to four-time Indianapolis 500 winner Helio Castroneves if he failed to race his way in Thursday night. If he takes the provisional, Trackhouse Racing will not receive any points or purse money, and the field will be 41 cars — the largest field since 43 cars was the standard in 2015.

Johnson said his Legacy Motor Club was unaware of the provisional until it was announced earlier this year — even though it was a new rule included in the charter agreement teams signed in September. The rule required a team to request the provisional 90 days before the event, and the rule was not publicly announced until after the deadline for the Daytona 500 had passed.

"We didn't know about it until the rule came out. Evidently, it was buried in the charter agreement that came out," Johnson said earlier Wednesday. "But when the rule came out, I forget the time of the morning, three minutes later, we were on the phone with NASCAR and recognized it wasn't within the 90 day-window and we weren't eligible."

"We've had a lot of talks with everyone at NASCAR and I have a better understanding of the intent of the rule, and I would anticipate some changes following (Daytona) to better define and clarify that. When first read, our reaction wasn't great, but it is what it is and hopefully we have a fast enough car to get in."

He did, just off the speed of Truex, but it was enough to ensure the two former champions will race Sunday.

The drivers who must race their way in Thursday, seeking the two remaining spots, are Anthony Alfredo, Justin Allgaier, Corey LaJoie, B.J. McLeod, Chandler Smith and J.J. Yeley. If Castroneves races his way in, there will only be one open spot available.

Mobile



Mobile apps with constantly updating news, featuring breaking news and stories from reporters at overseas bases. Unique galleries of images available nowhere else presented in an uncluttered interface and a responsive, intuitive design. One iOS app serves both phone and tablet devices.

In print, we serve military stationed overseas in contingency areas, Europe and Pacific. Daily editions focus on military news and include sports, comics and opinion. Available by mail delivery to any U.S. address.



Newspaper

Discover unique stories from reporters at bases around the world and embedded with downrange forces at Stripes.com, along with military news from every part of the country and photo galleries you'll see nowhere else. DoDDs sports also gets good coverage online. If it concerns our U.S. forces, you'll find it on our website.

Web



STARS AND STRIPES

UNBIASED NEWS WHATEVER WAY YOU WANT IT.

AUTO RACING



AP

Alex Bowman drives out of Turn 3 at Charlotte Motor Speedway in Concord, N.C., on Oct. 13, 2024. His car failed a post-race inspection, knocking Bowman out of the playoff for the NASCAR Cup Series championship.

Bowman moving on from playoff penalty

BY MARK LONG
Associated Press

Alex Bowman is over the sting of last season, the one that prompted him to throw his phone into his swimming pool amid disgust and disappointment.

The NASCAR driver was disqualified from a playoff race because his No. 48 Chevrolet failed to meet minimum weight, resulting in a loss of points that ended his season a month before the championship finale.

It ruined what Bowman thought was shaping up to be a championship-contending run.

"I'd say I was mad for about a day and then it was just time to get back to work," Bowman said.

Now, he's hoping to use that setback as motivation for 2025. The Cup Series begins with the Daytona 500 on Feb. 16.

"We ended the season really strong," Bowman told The Associated Press. "We had a really good playoff run. It took us too long to find that consistent speed. But we found it. If we can just start there and have that be our baseline, we can have a really strong year. I'm excited to get rolling."

Bowman notched five top-10 finishes in the series' 10 playoff events, solid enough to give his Hendrick Motorsports team a chance to make the finale at Phoenix Raceway. That penalty at Charlotte Motor Speedway, however, changed everything.

Bowman crossed the finish line in 18th place at the Roval, high enough to eliminate Team Penske's Joey Logano from the playoff field by four points.

But Bowman's car failed a post-race inspection, dropping him to 38th in the race and advancing Logano into the next round. Hendrick Motorsports called Bowman's weight issue unintentional and avoidable.

"It wasn't anything that I had any control over," Bowman said. "There was nothing anybody could do about it. There's no way to change it. All we really could do was move on and keep digging. It would have been nice to not have that happen, obviously."



Bowman

Bowman was home by the time the penalty got handed down. He learned about it while scrolling social media and responded by angrily throwing his phone into his pool.

Adding insult to misery, Logano ended up winning the championship four weeks later.

"From different perspectives, it probably makes it worse," Bowman said. "I hate that we gave them that opportunity, but we did, and they obviously capitalized on it and did what they needed to do."

"Props to them for being able to shake off what they had going on and go win a championship that way. That was a big achievement for them."

It could end up being a catalyst for Bowman, who has two wins over the past three seasons. Bowman has two years remaining on his Hendrick contract — plenty of time to turn things around. But he'll need to get to Victory Lane more often to make it happen. He's won at least one race in five of the past six seasons, although he's slipped significantly since winning a career-high four times in 2021.

"Winning multiple races is a big goal of ours," he said. "And we believe we can. The end of the year proved we can run as well as anybody. We just need to piece that together throughout the course of the whole season."

Daytona could be his launching spot. Bowman started "The Great American Race" from the front row in four consecutive years (2020-23), including two poles, and was seventh on the grid last year. Although he struggled earlier in his career on superspeedways, Bowman was second last year and fifth in 2023.

Neither was quite cause for celebration. But they didn't cause Bowman to chuck his phone, either.

"Qualifying means a lot to Mr. Hendrick and everybody in the engine shop and the chassis shop, everybody that puts the cars together. It's kind of their time to shine," Bowman said. "But winning the 500 means a little bit more than that. I would take the win over the pole."

Drama: NASCAR will spend '25 reviewing playoff structure

FROM PAGE 32

for the first time in the modern era. Its two previous points races outside the U.S. were in Canada, in 1952 and 1958, and all other events outside the country were exhibitions. NASCAR will race in Mexico City in June, a chance to stars as Mexican driver Daniel Suarez. NASCAR will use the same track that Formula 1 uses, and the hope is to land younger fans.

"I actually think things are in an OK place," said Chase Elliott, voted the most popular driver by fans seven times. The son of Hall of Fame driver Bill Elliott said he believes NASCAR's current leadership group "has been open to more change over the past three or four years" than the past three decades.

NASCAR has been owned and operated by the Daytona-based France family since its 1948 inception.

"As long as we're willing to say that some of the stuff hasn't been good, then it's fine," Elliott said of competition issues the past few years.

"I hope we can continue to go in a good direction."

First speed bump at Daytona

When qualifying for the Daytona 500 began Wednesday, nine drivers were attempting to qualify for one of four open spots in the field 500. Among the nine were seven-time NASCAR champion and two-time race winner Jimmie Johnson, former Cup Series champion Martin Truex Jr., and four-time Indianapolis 500 winner Helio Castroneves in his NASCAR debut.

Johnson and Truex claimed two of the spots Wednesday. If Castroneves fails to race his way into the field via one of two qualifying races Thursday, he would still be guaranteed a spot because of a new "world-class driver" provisional.

NASCAR last month went public with a rule that could expand the field to 41 to accommodate a world-class driver. It was earmarked for Castroneves, who, if he doesn't earn one of the four open spots, will race as an extra car not eligible for payment or points.

Johnson and Truex could have been considered for the waiver if they asked at least 90 days in advance, language NASCAR said was in the charters signed by teams in September. Trackhouse Racing was the only team to request the waiver, if needed, for Castroneves.

"I just think it reeks of desperation," said Hamlin, who as co-owner of 23XI has signed some splashy one-off entrants, including former F1 drivers Juan Pablo Montoya and Kamui Kobayashi.

"I don't know how nice you can really say it. It just feels like you are really trying to get any kind of headline you can to be relevant and I don't love it," Hamlin said of the provisional. "You are the premier stock car series in the U.S., the premier racing sport in the U.S. — be the big boys and force people to come in here and get their credentials and do it the natural way."

The drivers who must race their way in Thursday, seeking the two remaining spots, are Anthony Alfredo, Justin Allgaier, Corey LaJoie, B.J. McLeod, Chandler Smith and J.J. Yeley. If Castroneves races his way in, there will only be one open spot available.



JOHN RAOUX/AP

Joey Logano has won the Cup Series title two of the past three seasons.

What to watch for in 2025

■ Team Penske has won three straight Cup Series titles with Ryan Blaney's win sandwiched between two Joey Logano titles. Logano's third overall title broke a tie with Kyle Busch as the only active drivers with multiple championships. Busch is trying to bounce back from last year, when his record run of 19 consecutive seasons with at least one win came to an end.

■ Trackhouse, 23XI and Front Row have expanded to three-car teams with the charters from Stewart-Haas Racing, which ceased operations as a four-car program at the end of last season. Gene Haas will field one car branded Haas Factory for driver Cole Custer.

■ Spire Motorsports partnered with TWG Motorsports, an operation run by Dan Towriss and Mark Walter. The two were granted expansion with Cadillac onto the F1 grid for 2026 and are the new majority owners of Andretti Global in IndyCar.

■ William Byron is the defending Daytona 500 winner, and Hendrick Motorsports teammate Kyle Larson is the hottest driver in motorsports with offseason wins in big sprint car races in Australia and Oklahoma.

■ NASCAR will spend 2025 reviewing the playoff structure because fans are showing boredom with the current format and didn't like Logano winning the title. There was also a controversial penultimate race in which NASCAR accused the manufacturers of manipulating the finish to set the championship quartet.

■ NASCAR vowed to tighten the rule book and warned of penalties for anyone who tries to game the system to determine an outcome. The first test comes with the Daytona 500, a race in which the cars from Chevrolet, Ford and Toyota all work with an overall strategy for each brand.

■ The season starts on Fox, which has maintained its long relationship with NASCAR for this new \$7.7 billion TV deal. Fox Sports will broadcast 12 races, while NBC Sports has 14. New partners Amazon and TNT each have five, and newly inducted Hall of Famer Carl Edwards could return to NASCAR as part of all the new talent.

The drivers have to do their part, Logano said, and it starts with navigating all the new platforms. It is up to the drivers, he said, to make sure viewers can find them.

"I think the biggest challenge I see this year is going to be educating our fans where to watch the race, that's my number one concern," said Logano. "I think that's probably the same for everybody in the industry. We've got to communicate with our fans where to watch and how to watch."

SPORTS



Bound for Boston

Source: Bregman, Red Sox agree to \$120M, 3-year deal » **MLB, Page 25**



CUP SERIES SEASON PREVIEW

William Byron celebrates his victory in the Daytona 500 on Feb. 19, 2024, at Daytona International Speedway in Daytona Beach, Fla. The Cup Series returns to Daytona this weekend to begin a new season that will feature — among many storylines — an expanded TV deal, an international race and Team Penske’s quest for a fourth consecutive title.

Defiance, legal drama and Daytona

NASCAR heads into 2025 with plenty of storylines, none bigger than a lawsuit filed by Michael Jordan

BY JENNA FRYER
Associated Press

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. NASCAR has no shortage of storylines headed into its 76th season and the biggest one is the federal court showdown between the stock car series and NBA Hall of Famer Michael Jordan.

Jordan’s 23XI Cup Series team that he co-owns with three-time Daytona 500 winner Denny Hamlin didn’t like the terms of the take-it-or-leave-it charter offer last fall and, along with Front Row Motorsports, refused to sign as 13 others did.

The teams will race this season — 23XI’s driver, Tyler Reddick, was the regular-season champion and a title contender — as the



MATT KELLEY/AP

Last year’s regular-season champion, Tyler Reddick, leads the way for 23XI Racing, which is one of two teams locked in an antitrust lawsuit with NASCAR.

INSIDE

Briscoe wins 1st pole for ‘Great American Race’
Page 30

case proceeds.

23XI and Front Row head into the season-opening Daytona 500 this weekend coming off a flurry of courtroom victories, including one that recognizes and compensates their six combined cars as chartered entries. A trial is set for December after the season ends.

In the latest development, NASCAR filed a 68-page appeal Wednesday night — roughly an hour before the start of Daytona

500 qualifying — arguing a federal judge erred in recognizing 23XI and Front Row as chartered teams.

Despite the continuing legal drama, there are enough positives that everyone seemed excited to get back to racing when they gathered this month for a throwback to the early days of NASCAR at historic Bowman-Gray Stadium in Winston-Salem, N.C.

■ This year marks the start of a new seven-year television package that welcomes Amazon and Warner Bros. Discovery to a multi-network deal spanning the February through November season.

■ NASCAR will take the Cup Series outside the United States for a race that counts

SEE DRAMA ON PAGE 31

Biggest question about new All-Star format: Will it work? » Page 27