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STARS AND STRIPES

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CONTINGENCY EDITION

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 29, 2023

Free to Deployed Areas



PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN/Stars and Stripes

From right, Sgt. Theodore Buckley, Pvt. Ramses Ayala, Pfc. Joshua Singleton and Pfc. Ethan Calender convene outside an M-SHORAD vehicle during an exercise at Lest Training Area, Slovakia, on Dec. 20.

Breaking ground in Slovakia

US soldiers use new air defense system for first time in active missions

BY PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

LEST TRAINING AREA, Slovakia — The soldiers of Able Battery's 1st Platoon are more than halfway through a groundbreaking deployment in the Slovak mountains, where they've had to live with technological challenges, prolonged freezing temperatures and a family of brown bears.

The unit and its two sister platoons, deployed to Poland and Romania, are using the Army's new Maneuver Short-Range Air Defense system, or M-SHORAD, for the first time in active defense missions.

The system is at the heart of efforts to re-vamp the service's short-range air defense capabilities amid growing concerns over competitors like Russia and China, and tactical trends seen in Ukraine and the Middle East.

"With the current threats — drones and things enemies are using now — this system is very important," Staff Sgt. Elijah Bentz said at the central Slovakia base where the platoon lives and works. "We're here writing the doctrine for it."

The platoon's home in an austere corner of the base could be mistaken for a camp in the Arctic.

Their shared bedrooms are in a building that looks like a double-decker trailer, with corrugated metal on the exterior walls. A common area with two TVs, a dining area and a gym are located in tents is nearby.

A sign in a communal kitchen reminds troops to keep an eye out for wildlife. A brown bear and two cubs have been seen and heard.

"You have to be careful out here," said Spc. Nathan Ebert, who operates the Sentinel radar used with the air defense system and who saw the bears while driving back from the Sentinel

SEE SLOVAKIA ON PAGE 6

Dozens killed in Gaza as Israel expands offensive effort

BY WAFAA SHURAFU
AND SAMY MAGDY
Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip — Israeli forces bombarded cities, towns and refugee camps across Gaza overnight and into Thursday, killing dozens of people in a widening air and ground offensive against Hamas that has forced thousands more to flee from homes and shelters in recent days.

The war has already killed over 20,000 Palestinians and driven around 85% of the population of 2.3 million from their homes. Much of northern Gaza has been leveled, and it has been largely depopulated and isolated from the rest of the territory for weeks. Many fear a similar fate awaits the south as Israel expands its offensive to most of the tiny enclave.

Israel has vowed to dismantle Hamas — which is still putting up stiff resistance, even in the north — and bring back more than 100 hostages still held by the militants after their Oct. 7 attack into southern Israel, in which some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, were killed.

Israeli officials have brushed off international calls for a ceasefire — saying it would amount to a victory for Hamas.

The United States — while providing crucial support for the offensive — has urged Israel to take

SEE GAZA ON PAGE 7

MILITARY

Some worry Israel isn't able to care for wounded soldiers

Page 7

BUSINESS/WEATHER

Amazon Prime Video ads to start in late January

Associated Press

If you are an Amazon Prime Video user, get ready to see ads on movies and TV shows starting next month.

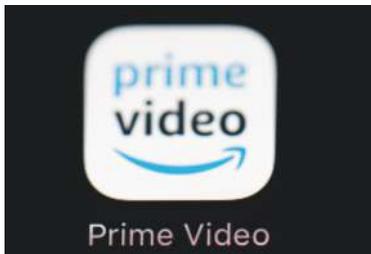
Prime will include ads beginning on Jan. 29, the company said in an email to U.S. members this week, setting a date for an announcement it made back in September. Prime members who want to keep their movies and TV shows ad-free will have to pay an additional \$2.99.

Amazon is also planning to in-

clude advertisements in its Prime service in the United Kingdom and other European countries, as well as Canada, Mexico and Australia next year.

The tech giant follows other major streamers — such as Netflix and Disney — who have embraced a dual model that allows them to earn revenue from ads and also offer subscribers the option to opt out with a higher fee.

Amazon said in its email that it will “aim to have meaningfully fewer ads” than others.



The ads, the company said, “will allow us to continue investing in compelling content and keep increasing that investment over a long period of time.”

EXCHANGE RATES

Military rates		Commercial rates	
Euro costs (Dec. 29)	\$1.08	Bahrain (Dinar)	0.3769
British pound (Dec. 29)	\$1.25	Britain (Pound)	1.2772
Japanese yen (Dec. 29)	139.00	Canada (Dollar)	1.3191
South Korean won (Dec. 29)	1256.00	China (Yuan)	7.1085
		Denmark (Krone)	6.7135
		Egypt (Pound)	30.9000
		Euro	0.9007
		Hong Kong (Dollar)	7.8140
		Hungary (Forint)	344.83
		Israel (Shekel)	3.6195
		Japan (Yen)	140.79
		Kuwait (Dinar)	0.3073
		Norway (Krone)	10.1238
		Philippines (Peso)	55.39
		Poland (Zloty)	3.90
		Saudi Arabia (Riyal)	3.7500
		Singapore (Dollar)	1.3171
		South Korea (Won)	1287.83
Switzerland (Franc)	0.8352		
Thailand (Baht)	30.17		
Turkey (NewLira)	29.4516		

(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	8.50
Interest Rates Discount rate	6.00
Federal funds market rate	5.33
3-month bill	5.40
30-year bond	3.95

WEATHER OUTLOOK



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MILITARY

US sending Ukraine \$250M in military aid

By DOUG G. WARE

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The United States is sending Ukraine a new military aid package to help bolster the country's air defenses and provide other needed items during the winter months, officials said Wednesday.

The new security package is worth \$250 million and includes rockets for National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile Systems, or NASAMS; and tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided missiles, the Pentagon said. Also included in the package are more stinger missiles, anti-armor systems, 15 million rounds of small-arms ammunition, various spare parts and medical equipment.

"This package includes additional air defense capabilities, artillery ammunition, anti-tank weapons and other equipment to help Ukraine counter Russia's war of aggression," the Defense Department said in a statement.

The equipment will be taken from military stocks and sent to Ukraine on an emergency basis, meaning the Pentagon ultimately will have to replace the hardware. The items should reach Ukraine within a few weeks.

The new aid package, which could be the last one of 2023, comes as Congress works toward passing full government funding for 2024 and debates President Joe Biden's \$100 billion supplemental funding request that would authorize more

aid for Ukraine — as well as Israel, which has been engaged in a new conflict with militant group Hamas for almost 12 weeks. The Pentagon is quickly running out of aid money for Ukraine that was authorized for this year.

"Without congressional action, by the end of the year we will run out of resources to procure more weapons and equipment for Ukraine and to provide equipment from U.S. military stocks. There is no magical pot of funding available to meet this moment. We are out of money — and nearly out of time," White House budget director Shalanda Young said earlier this month. "Already, our packages of security assistance have become smaller, and the deliveries of aid have become more limited.

If our assistance stops, it will cause significant issues for Ukraine."

Senate Majority Leader Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., said last week that new funding for Ukraine probably won't happen before the end of 2023.

"Negotiations aren't easy. We know it's going to take more time," he said in his weekly news conference.

Since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, the United States has provided nearly \$45 billion in military aid to Kyiv.

Items included in Wednesday's military aid package:

- Additional munitions for National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missiles Systems.

- Stinger anti-aircraft missiles.

- Air defense system components.

- Additional ammunition for High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS).

- 155mm and 105mm artillery rounds.

- Tube-Launched, Optically Tracked, Wire-Guided (TOW) missiles.

- Javelin and AT-4 anti-armor systems.

- More than 15 million rounds of small arms ammunition.

- Demolitions munitions for obstacle clearing.

- Spare parts, medical equipment, maintenance, and other ancillary equipment.

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South Korean troops practice responses to terror, drone attacks

By DAVID CHOI

Stars and Stripes

SUWON, South Korea — Seoul's metropolitan government held an urban field exercise this week with the country's military to prepare for threats against the roughly 10 million residents from North Korean attacks, the South Korean army said.

The one-day Integrated Defense Operation in the capital city Wednesday focused on a wide range of simulated threats, including an aerial drone attack on a water purification plant, a North Korean special operations forces assault and a chlorine gas leak, according to a news release from South Korea's army.

The exercise was held to defend Seoul from "terrorist threats" from North Korea; further efforts will be made to "strengthen our integrated defense posture to protect the lives of the people," South Korean army Col. Choi Won-seok said in the release.

The South Korean army did not disclose how many soldiers and Se-

oul municipal employees took part in the exercise. Photos released by the army showed soldiers operating in streets and drilling rigs preparing to simulate a rescue of people trapped underground.

American troops did not participate in the exercise, U.S. Forces Korea spokesman Wesley Hayes said by email Thursday.

The drill comes a day after the year anniversary of a North Korean drone incursion into South Korean airspace. Five North Korean drones flew across the Demilitarized Zone and into Seoul and Gimpo city on Dec. 26, 2022, prompting South Korea's military to scramble fighter jets and helicopters, and ground civilian flights from airports.

None of the drones were captured or shot down, according to the Ministry of National Defense.

On Aug. 23, South Korea held its first national civil defense drill in six years. The 20-minute drill required residents to evacuate to one of 17,000 designated shelters and for cars to stop and pull over to the side of the road.



South Korea Army

South Korean soldiers take part in Integrated Defense Operation in Seoul, South Korea, on Wednesday.

Other large-scale defense exercises are held annually in densely populated cities in South Korea, such as the Ulchi Exercise in August. Over 580,000 civil and military personnel were activated in the four-day exercise focusing on threats in urban areas, according to the Ministry of Interior and Safety at the time.

North Korean leader Kim Jong

Un during a plenary meeting Wednesday ordered "civil defense sectors to further accelerate ... war preparations" due to the "grave political and military" tension on the Korean Peninsula, the state-run Korean Central News Agency reported the next day.

South Korean army Gen. Kim Seung-kyum, the then-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told law-

makers in October that Pyongyang still threatened the safety of Seoul.

Of the over 700 long-range artillery systems in North Korea's arsenal, 300 of them "constitute a threat to the Seoul metropolitan area," Kim said during a National Assembly meeting Oct. 12.

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N. Korea's Kim vows to bolster war readiness to repel US-led moves

By HYUNG-JIN KIM

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — North Korean leader Kim Jong Un called for bolstered war readiness to repel what he said were unprecedented U.S.-led confrontational moves, state media reported Thursday, as rival South Korea vowed a stern retaliation against any provocations by the North.

Kim's comments, which came during a key political meeting

tasked with setting state objectives for 2024, indicated North Korea will likely continue weapons tests to modernize its nuclear arsenal. Observers say Kim likely hopes to eventually use his boosted arsenal as leverage in potential diplomacy with Washington, possibly after the U.S. presidential election in November next year.

During Wednesday's second-day session of the ruling party's plenary meeting, Kim set forth

unspecified tasks for the military and the munitions industry to "further accelerate the war preparations" in the face of "(anti-North Korea) confrontation moves by the U.S. and its vassal forces unprecedented in history," the official Korean Central News Agency said.

It said Kim also clarified the party's stance on expanding North Korea's strategic cooperation with anti-imperialist coun-

tries amid the world's rapidly changing geopolitical situation. KCNA said Kim spoke about the direction of the North's dealings with South Korea as well but didn't elaborate.

The Workers' Party meeting is expected to last several days, and state media are expected to publicize details of its discussions after it ends, likely on Dec. 31. Experts say North Korea is expected to come up with pledges and steps

to strengthen its nuclear attack capability and expand cooperation with Russia and China, which are also locked in separate confrontations with the U.S.

South Korea's spy agency said Thursday there is a high possibility that North Korea will launch military provocations and cyberattacks ahead of South Korean parliamentary elections in April and the U.S. presidential election in November.

PACIFIC

Japanese official approves runway permits on Okinawa

By MARI HIGA
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — A Japanese Cabinet minister on Thursday approved the design changes holding up construction on a Marine Corps runway at Camp Schwab, three days after the Okinawa governor ignored a court order to approve the changes himself.

Japanese Minister of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism Tetsuo Saito gave the Okinawa Defense Bureau the go-ahead to start landfill work on Oura Bay, permission Gov. Denny Tamaki repeatedly refused to give for 3½ years.

The approval letter was handed that morning to the Okinawa Defense Bureau, a spokesman for the ministry's Water and Disaster Management Bureau told Stars and Stripes by phone Thursday.

A starting date to commence work at the site is not set yet, since "it is necessary to observe the weather," a spokesman for the Okinawa Defense Bureau said by phone Thursday. The bureau represents the Ministry of Defense in the prefecture.

The bureau posted its comment on its website Thursday.

"We will continue to provide detailed explanations to the local residents and steadily carry out the Henoko relocation work in order to realize the full return of Futenma Air Base as soon as possible, while giving due consideration to the natural environment and the living environment of the residents," the message stated.

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

The runway being built on reclaimed land in Oura Bay in the rural Henoko area of Okinawa is a planned replacement for Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in urban, densely populated Ginowan.

Tamaki on Wednesday appealed the case again to Japan's Supreme Court, he said in a statement posted that day on the pre-

fecture's website. The court in September ruled against him on nearly the same question.

In his statement, Tamaki criticized the most recent legal opinion Dec. 20 from Fukuoka High Court that handed Saito authority to approve permits for the construction changes over Tamaki's head. That ruling, Tamaki said, by allowing new base construction is biased toward the national government's interests and overlooks the true public interests that are the essence of local autonomy and the Okinawan people's will.

He wrote that the judiciary, along with the national government, has fallen into a fixed mindset that the construction of a Marine runway in Henoko is the only solution to relocating MCAS Futenma.

"This fixed mindset on the part of the government is precisely what is delaying the immediate elimination of danger of Futenma Air Station," he wrote.

Tamaki, who opposes the U.S. military presence in Okinawa, in November 2021 denied the pending requests for permits at Schwab but was overruled by Saito, who deemed the governor's decision "illegal and unreasonable." Tamaki began a protracted legal battle, filing and losing three suits to block the permits, culminating in the September loss at the Supreme Court.

The Fukuoka High Court, Naha branch, ordered Tamaki to approve the permits by Monday, a deadline Tamaki ignored.

Appealing to the Supreme Court cannot halt the construction. Japan's Local Autonomy Act states that the latest decision by the Fukuoka court remains in effect unless the Supreme Court overturns the ruling.

Tamaki argues that the soft seabed in the construction zone poses a hazard and that Tokyo had failed to consider the environmental impact on the endangered dugong, a cousin of the manatee protected by Japanese law.



MATTHEW M. BURKE/Stars and Stripes

A newly renovated kitchen in one of 50 single-story duplexes nearing completion at Seville Manor on Kadena Air Base in Okinawa, Japan.

Housing upgrades nearly complete at Air Force base on Okinawa site

By MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

KADENA AIR BASE, Okinawa — The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is nearing completion of dozens of family housing units for junior enlisted airmen at this strategic air hub in Japan's southern island chain.

The agency's Japan district plans to turn over 50 freshly renovated duplexes, or 100 total housing units, at Seville Manor to the 18th Wing at Kadena Air Base by early May, Jesse Pruneda, resident engineer of the corps' Kadena office, told Stars and Stripes during a site visit Dec. 14.

The units, originally built in the 1960s, were gutted down to their concrete shells.

They now feature modern flooring, countertops, tile and bathrooms. The wing plans to install all new appliances.

The units are part of a broader Defense Department push to upgrade family housing on the island. The Corps of Engineers is also renovating additional units on Kadena and nearby Marine base Camp Foster in Chatan.

"Besides the concrete walls and the exterior, everything else is

brand new," Pruneda said as he walked through one of the units.

The Corps of Engineers was established in 1802 to provide public engineering services that "strengthen national security, energize the economy, and reduce risks from disasters," according to the agency website. Its engineers have explored and mapped the Western frontier of the United States, surveyed roads and canals, and built missile sites and NASA facilities.

It is responsible for all U.S.-funded military construction projects on Okinawa, Pruneda said.

Renovations at Seville Manor were greenlit in 2020 at a cost of around \$53 million, project manager Mighty Binonwangan said Dec. 14. Construction by Japanese contractors with Corps of Engineers support began a few months later.

Most of the units, located a stone's throw from the Department of Defense Education Activity's Bob Hope Elementary School, are single-story with four bedrooms, Pruneda said.

Additions to each unit increased their size to 1,470 square feet.

Thirteen two-story duplexes

feature three bedrooms, he said. Some of the new units have 2½ bathrooms, engineer Bryan Ciccocioppo told Stars and Stripes.

All bedrooms in the renovated units are getting ceiling fans, Pruneda said. The kitchens feature an island with a counter for additional cooking space.

Each duplex will gain a second parking space, Binonwangan added.

In addition to Seville Manor, the engineers over the summer began renovating 130 single homes in Stearley Heights, near Kadena's Gate 2, Pruneda said. Those units, built in the 1950s, are for field grade and noncommissioned officers and will take two years to complete.

Renovations to 200 units at the three North Foster Towers on Camp Foster will be finished sometime in the spring, Ciccocioppo said.

"We're building something for the troops that are going to keep this region safe," Ciccocioppo said. "They're going to have a clean, comfortable place to live, with modern appliances and modern finishes."

US airman dead, sailor wounded in separate incidents

By JONATHAN SNYDER
AND ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

A service member died at a U.S. military base in Japan, and another was seriously injured over the Christmas holiday, according to military spokespeople.

Airman 1st Class Isabella M.

Garcia, 20, stationed at Kadena Air Base on Okinawa, died Monday, 1st Lt. Alvin Nelson told Stars and Stripes by email Thursday. He provided no further information.

"Details surrounding the incident are under investigation," Nelson said.

"We are deeply saddened at the loss of Airman First Class Garcia," 18th Wing Commander Col. Nicholas Evans said by email Thursday.

"We are focused on supporting her family, coworkers and other individuals impacted by this tragedy," Evans said. "We encourage

all members of Team Kadena to continue to look after one another over this holiday season and to reach out to our team of professional helping agencies if you are in need."

At Yokosuka Naval Base, south of Tokyo, an unidentified sailor aboard the guided-missile de-

stroyer USS Ralph Johnson was wounded Sunday in what a 7th Fleet spokeswoman said was a shooting incident.

The sailor was in critical condition Thursday at a local Japanese hospital, spokeswoman Lt. Kristina Wiedemann told Stars and Stripes that day.

MILITARY

Vet project collects oral history of war memories

By LINDA F. HERSEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Just before entering the Army, 19-year-old James N. Rollins asked his high school girlfriend to marry him. His mom paid for the ring.

More boy than man, Rollins was drafted in 1967, leaving his Maryland home for the first time for training at Fort Bragg, N.C. (now Fort Liberty), and Fort Gordon, Ga. (now Fort Eisenhower). In 1968 he boarded a plane for Vietnam, serving with the 1st Infantry Division as a military police officer at Quan Loi, north of Saigon.

As time in Vietnam was drawing to a close, Rollins said he was asked to extend in return for shortening his two-year military obligation. He kept the promise she had made to his future bride. She wanted him back home in Odenton, Md.

The decision saved his life. After he left Vietnam, the enemy “overran the camp and killed most everybody,” including his friends, Rollins said in an oral history recorded for the Veterans History Project. “I survived, and others didn’t. There is a piece of me that will always identify with that time.”

Rollins’ 45-minute narrative of his war experience is part of the project’s growing collection of nearly 120,000 firsthand accounts. Created by Congress nearly a quarter-century ago, the Veterans History Project has a mission to collect and preserve firsthand accounts of former armed service members.

The project runs an online platform filled with personal stories of military service in conflicts and peacekeeping missions.

With 100 to 125 histories submitted each month, the project bears testament to the enduring interest by veterans, their families and the public to chronicle, share and keep forever the personal stories of soldiers since World War I.

Individual histories of military service are revealed in diaries, letters home, photos, artwork and spoken accounts such as the videotaped narrative by Rollins.

“One of the things that kept me going was getting engaged before I left,” Rollins said. “I had to have a finish line with hope waiting at the end of it. I did my 12 months in Vietnam.”

He and Varle Celestine Sewell were married on July 5, 1969. They are still married 54 years later.

The memories of his buddies who never made it home still haunt him.



TONYA DORSEY

James Rollins stands at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington on Veterans' Day this year.



TRAVIS BICKFORD

Travis Bickford — seen at right in Baghdad in 2005 — heads program coordination and communications for the Veterans History Project.

“I think about it to this day and still wish they were here, and we could talk about what we went through together,” Rollins, a retired Maryland Corrections system officer, told Stars and Stripes. “I have reflected on that time, and it brings up all these feelings. I still deal with some anxiety and struggle from time to time. But I learned to develop ways to cope with it.”

Rollins’ recollections for the Veterans History Project have had a profound impact on his family members, including his two adult children and five grandchildren.

“Until he made the oral history, I had not connected his service to who he was as a teen who got a draft notice, or to my parents as a dating couple who sat down and processed it, or to what my grandmother must have felt watching her son leave the state of Maryland for the first time,” daughter Tonya Dorsey said. “My dad has the opportunity today to watch his grandson play football at the same high school he attended because of the decisions he made at 21.”

The Veterans History Project also welcomes Gold Star families — spouses and other immediate family members of those who died in service. They offer the histories

of armed service members whose lives were taken as the result of their military service.

All submissions are considered personal accounts that tell a larger story but are not meant to be an official record of the federal government or U.S. military. The veterans as a group represent a valuable resource for researchers studying the U.S. military and conflicts.

For Rollins, the project presented an opportunity to share his insights. Rollins said in the video that the unrecognized sacrifices of American troops still trouble him.

“I made it back. But 55,000 others did not,” he said. “But the country wasn’t celebrating Vietnam veterans. No one acknowledged you.”

Travis Bickford is another veteran who contributed the story of his war experience. An Iraq War veteran who served in the Army from 1999 to 2006, Bickford submitted his personal history to the collection in 2016.

Today Bickford heads program coordination and communications at the Veterans History Project. He said the project fascinated him for the opportunity it offered for veterans to share their stories, in their own words.

Technology advances are making it easier for veterans and their families to interact with the website, he noted.

Each of the digitized histories has a web page with the veteran’s name, military service, conflict and where the veteran served. Highlights from the Veterans History Project are shared on social media, reaching a larger audience with links to the stories online.

“Digitization has changed the landscape of collection preservation and access,” Bickford said. “For participants, there’s more access to digital recording devices than ever before. Smartphones and tablets have lowered the barrier to user participation, as have remotely conducted interviews enabled through video conference software.”

Bickford said he understands firsthand the project’s value to veterans, enabling them to have greater control over war narratives, even as conflicts and missions are dissected in the media.

“Our goal isn’t to get every living veteran’s firsthand remembrance into our collections,” Bickford said. “But we want every veteran to know it’s an option and that they have the opportunity to contribute.”

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CHRISTOPHER GREEN/Stars and Stripes

A child makes a cake with volunteers from Camp Humphreys at Ikseonwon Orphanage in Cheonan City, South Korea, on Dec. 23.

US Army volunteers bring gifts, cheer to S. Korean orphanage

By CHRISTOPHER GREEN
Stars and Stripes

CHEONAN CITY, South Korea — Yellow cake, white frosting and red strawberries provided the holiday decor at an orphanage in this city as December drew to a close.

Volunteers from Camp Humphreys, the largest U.S. military base overseas, visited Ikseonwon Orphanage in Cheonan, 15 miles away, to deliver Christmas gifts and the season’s cheer.

“I think it’s an important time of the year,” said Army Cpl. Akebo Baston, an air traffic controller, of Saint Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands. “And I think me being here and bringing joy to these kids, giving gifts, building cakes with them, it really cements a special feeling for this time of year.”

Baston and about 40 other volunteers spent Dec. 23 with about 50 children making three-tiered

cakes and handing out red, white, and green stockings stuffed with toys and candy.

Faces were smeared with frosting as the children topped off their creations with strawberries. Once the cakes were complete, the volunteers tried their hands at making gangjeong, a traditional Korean rice snack.

Cheonan city and the Korea Tourism Organization sponsored the event; Mayor Jang Seon Jung of Pyeongtaek, where Humphreys is located, was among the participants. It was the first event of its kind that Humphreys volunteers have taken part in since the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the children beamed, Min Tae-o, the Ikseonwon Orphanage director, said that if they’re smiling, the event is a success.

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MILITARY

Slovakia: Soldiers struggle with new tech, software issues

FROM PAGE 1

site a few months ago.

The platoons in Slovakia, Poland and Romania are part of 5th Battalion, 4th Air Defense Artillery Regiment, a subordinate to both the 52nd Air Defense Artillery Brigade and the 10th Army Air and Missile Defense Command, based in Germany.

They protect bases and infrastructure from short-range air threats like cruise missiles, drones and other low-flying aircraft.

In Slovakia, the air defenders are guarding a multinational battlegroup. Most of the soldiers pull 24-hour shifts inside their Stryker vehicles about once every four days, during which they monitor radar for incoming threats. There haven't been any so far.

On days when they're not manning the radar, they're leading efforts to determine how the M-SHORADs can best maneuver with other ground units, a critical aim of the program, platoon leader 2nd Lt. Chris Rosene said.

"We're the first ones to work out how to integrate with maneuver forces as we switch back from counterinsurgency to large-scale combat operations," Rosene said. "It's a learning experience for everyone out here."

That includes soldiers with the 101st Airborne Division who are also at the base supporting NATO. The platoon has been holding small exercises with the division's troops.

The idea is that if troops need to move around, M-SHORAD crews should be able to move with them and provide cover.

That support is currently lacking.

In the 1990s, every Army division had a short-range air defense battalion to protect it. But by 2017, after years of focusing on counterinsurgency, none of the service's active divisions had one, according to the Army.

Efforts are now underway to reestablish 10 SHORAD battalions for each division, the Army said.

At first, they'll operate with older Avenger systems, which consist of Stinger missiles and a .50-caliber machine gun mounted on a Humvee, before eventually receiving the M-SHORADs.

The new systems include Strykers, stinger missiles, a 30 mm cannon, an M240 machine gun and the radar system.

Each deployed platoon has a different mission set. The platoon in Poland, which neighbors Ukraine, is "at the highest state of readiness and alert due to their proximity to hostile forces" and has been focusing on operations with live missiles, said Capt. Michael N. Archer, Able Battery's commander.

In Romania, the air defenders have specialized in joint data sharing and overlapping coverage with additional systems that coun-



PHOTOS BY PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN/Stars and Stripes

Pfc. Ethan Calender drives an M-SHORAD system at Lest Training Area, Slovakia, on Dec. 20.



Pfc. Kaleb Odachowski, left, and Sgt. Orlando Sutherland participate in an M-SHORAD exercise at Lest Training Area, Slovakia.

ter aerial drones, Archer said.

And in Slovakia, partly because the soldiers are farther from the war in Ukraine and also because of the space available at their base, 1st Platoon is focused on improving maneuverability with partner units.

In a snow-covered field a few minutes drive from where the soldiers live, two M-SHORADs conducted a simulated bounding engagement in late December, with crews taking turns driving forward as if they were providing cover for ground forces.

It was preparation for the largest training yet with 101st Airborne soldiers, slated to be held sometime in January.

"We're doing pretty well," Sgt.

Theodore Buckley, one of the vehicle commanders, said after disembarking from the machine, explaining that constant communication with his crew and others is necessary.

Gunner Spc. Jason Castro, whose first deployment to NATO's eastern flank was in Lithuania with the Avenger system, said it's much easier to move with the eight-wheel-drive, M-SHORAD-equipped Stryker. Others echoed that sentiment.

The soldiers also spoke of issues with the system's software and difficulties adapting to the new technology.

Some of the challenges stemmed from the system's rapid development, with components



A Maneuver Short-Range Air Defense, or M-SHORAD, system drives through a field at Lest Training Area.

sourced from various vendors, according to Archer, who said the issues were being worked out with higher headquarters.

"There are many more years of training, refinement and improvements required to be able to fully optimize operations to the greatest effect, and our battery has had the privilege to lead the way," Archer said later by email. It's a similar process whenever any major new system is incorporated into the Army, he added.

Despite the hiccups, the consensus among troops working with the platoon was that the system was operating well.

"Their upgraded capabilities really add to our deterrence out here in Slovakia," said Capt. Bran-

don Thaxton, assistant operations officer for the 1st Squadron, 33rd Cavalry Regiment, 3rd Brigade, 101st Airborne.

The high-altitude weather can be relentless, affecting operations and causing blackouts, the soldiers said.

Despite the challenges, morale among the 1st Platoon remains high. Many appeared excited about their work, months into the deployment.

"It feels historic," Ebert said with a smile. "It's a test for the whole world to see if our system works or not. So far, it's been working."

MIDEAST

A new reality for Israel's wounded soldiers

Advocates worry country not able to provide care

By TIA GOLDENBERG
Associated Press

RAMAT GAN, Israel—Igor Tudoran spent just 12 hours inside the Gaza Strip before a missile slammed into his tank, leaving him with a life-altering injury.

“Already within the tank, I understood from the condition of my leg that I would lose it. But the question was how much of it will I lose,” he said, seated on a bed in the hospital where he has been treated since he was wounded last month.

Tudoran, 27, a reservist who volunteered for duty after the Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel by Hamas that triggered the war, lost his right leg beneath the hip. He has kept up a positive attitude — but concedes that his hopes of becoming an electrician may no longer be possible.

Tudoran is part of a swelling number of wounded Israeli fighters, yet another sizable and deeply traumatized segment of Israeli society whose struggles are emerging as a hidden cost of the war that will be felt acutely for years to come. Given the large numbers of wounded, advocates worry the country is not prepared to address their needs.

“I have never seen a scope like this and an intensity like this,” said Edan Kleiman, who heads the nonprofit Disabled Veterans Organization, which advocates for more than 50,000 soldiers wounded in this and earlier conflicts. “We must rehabilitate these people,” he said.

Israel's Defense Ministry says roughly 3,000 members of the coun-



ODED BAULTY/AP

Israeli soldier Jonathan Ben Hamou, 22, wounded in the war with Hamas, practices standing during a physiotherapy session in Ramat Gan, Israel, on Dec. 18. Ben Hamou was wounded in the Gaza Strip when a rocket-propelled grenade struck the bulldozer he was using. He lost his left leg below the knee.

try's security forces have been wounded since Hamas militants stormed into southern Israel on Oct. 7, killing 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and taking 240 people hostage. Nearly 900 of those are soldiers wounded since Israel began its ground offensive in late October, in which troops have engaged in close combat with Hamas militants. More than 160 soldiers have been killed since the ground operation began.

“They add up,” said Yagil Levy, who teaches civil-military relations at Israel's Open University, of the wounded. “There could be a long-

term impact if we see a big rate of people with disabilities that Israel must rehabilitate, which can produce economic issues as well as social issues.”

The war has also brought unprecedented suffering to Palestinians in Gaza, where more than 21,000 have been killed, close to 55,000 wounded and amputations have become commonplace.

Israelis still largely stand behind the war's objectives and it is mostly seen as an existential battle meant to restore a sense of security lost in Hamas' attacks. But historically the

plight of the wounded, though lauded as heroes, has taken a backseat to the stories of soldiers killed in battle. After the fanfare recedes, the wounded are left to contend with a new reality that can be disorienting, challenging and, for some, lonely.

The exceptionally large numbers of wounded in this war, however, will provide a visible reminder of the conflict for years to come.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu emphasized their sacrifice during a recent visit to wounded soldiers at Sheba Medical Center, Israel's largest hospital, which has

treated and rehabilitated many of the injured. “You are genuine heroes,” he said.

At Sheba, soldiers and civilians wounded in the war spilled out into the corridors on a recent day and passed the time with their families on an outdoor deck. Soccer paraphernalia adorned the wounded soldiers' hospital beds as did the ubiquitous Israeli flag.

Jonathan Ben Hamou, 22, who lost his left leg beneath the knee after a rocket-propelled grenade struck the bulldozer he was using to help clear the way for other troops, is already looking forward to the day when he can use a state-funded prosthetic.

Ben Hamou, who mostly uses a wheelchair since the incident in early November, said that he eventually plans to pursue his goal of attending a military commanders' course.

“I'm not ashamed of the wound,” said Ben Hamou. “I was wounded for the country in a war inside Gaza. I am proud.”

But Kleiman, who himself was wounded in an operation in the Gaza Strip in the early 1990s, said he thinks Israeli authorities are not grasping the severity of the situation.

He said if wounded soldiers don't receive the mental and physical care they need, including making their homes or cars accessible, it could stunt their rehabilitation and delay or even prevent their reentry into the workforce.

“There are wounded whose lives have been ruined,” said Idit Shafran Gittleman, a senior researcher at the Institute for National Security Studies, a Tel Aviv research center. “They will have to contend with their wound their entire lives.”

Gaza: Targeted camps built to house Palestinian refugees from 1948 war

FROM PAGE 1

greater measures to spare civilians and allow in more aid. But humanitarian workers say the amount of food, fuel and medical supplies entering is still far below what is needed, and 1 in 4 Palestinians in Gaza are starving, according to U.N. officials.

Northern strikes

An Israeli airstrike on a home in the northern town of Beit Lahiyeh — one of the first targets of the ground invasion that began in October — buried at least 21 people, including women and children, according to a family member.

Bassel Kheir al-Din, a journalist with a local TV station, said the strike flattened his family house and severely damaged three neighboring homes. He said 12 members of his family — including three children aged 2, 7 and 8 — were buried and presumed

dead, and that nine neighbors were missing.

In central Gaza, Israeli warplanes and artillery pounded the built-up Bureij and Nuseirat refugee camps, leveling buildings, residents said. Israel said this week it would expand its ground offensive into central Gaza, and typically launches waves of airstrikes and shelling before troops and tanks move in.

A hospital in the nearby town of Deir al-Balah received the bodies of 25 people killed overnight, including five children and seven women, hospital records showed on Thursday. Nonstop explosions could be heard throughout the night in the town — where hundreds of thousands of people have sought shelter, with many spending cold nights sleeping on sidewalks.

“It was another night of killing and massacres,” said Saeed Mous-

tafa, a resident of the Nuseirat camp. He said people were still crying out from the rubble of a house hit by an airstrike on Wednesday.

“We are unable to get them out. We hear their screams but we don't have equipment,” he said.

Farther south, in Khan Younis, the Palestinian Red Crescent said a strike near its Al-Amal Hospital killed at least 10 people and wounded another 12. Much of the population has left, but many are sheltering near Al-Amal and another hospital, hoping they will be spared from the bombardment.

More displacement

Rami Abu Mosab, who lives in the Bureij refugee camp, said thousands of people have fled their homes in recent days because of the intense bombardment. He plans to remain there because he doesn't feel that any-

where in Gaza is safe.

“Here is death and there is death,” he said, “To die in your home is better.”

Bureij and Nuseirat are among several camps across the region that were built to house hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees from the 1948 war surrounding Israel's creation. They have since grown into crowded residential neighborhoods.

Some 700,000 Palestinians fled or were driven from their homes during that conflict, an exodus the Palestinians refer to as the Nakba, or catastrophe. Some 1.9 million have been displaced within Gaza since Oct. 7.

As Israel has broadened its offensive, fleeing Palestinians have packed into areas along the Egyptian border and the southern Mediterranean coastline, where shelters and tent camps are overflowing. Even in those areas, Israel

continues to strike what it says are militant targets.

The Israeli military blames the high civilian death toll on Hamas, which positions fighters, tunnels and rocket launchers in dense residential areas. But the military rarely comments on individual strikes.

Israel's offensive in Gaza has already been one of the most devastating military campaigns in recent history. More than 21,300 Palestinians, most of them women and children, have been killed, according to the Health Ministry in Hamas-ruled Gaza. Another 55,600 have been wounded, it says. Those counts do not differentiate between civilians and combatants.

The military says it has killed thousands of militants, without presenting evidence, and that 167 of its soldiers have been killed in the ground offensive.

NATION

Colorado GOP appeals Trump ballot ban case

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI
Associated Press

DENVER — The Colorado Republican Party on Wednesday appealed that state's supreme court decision that found former President Donald Trump is ineligible for the presidency, the potential first step to a showdown at the nation's highest court over the meaning of a 155-year-old constitutional provision that bans from office those who "engaged in insurrection."

The first impact of the appeal is to extend the stay of the 4-3 ruling from Colorado's highest court, which put its decision on pause until Jan. 4, the day before the state's primary ballots are due at the printer, or until an appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court is finished. Trump himself has said he still plans to appeal the ruling to the nation's highest court as well.

The U.S. Supreme Court has never ruled on Section 3 of the 14th Amendment, which was added after the Civil War to prevent former Confederates from returning to government. It says that anyone who swore an oath to "support" the constitution and then "engaged in insurrection" against it cannot hold government office.

The Colorado high court ruled that applies to Trump in the wake of his role in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol, intended to stop the certification of President Joe Biden's victory in the 2020 presidential election. It was the first time in history that the provision was used to block a presidential contender's campaign.

"The Colorado Supreme Court has removed the leading Republican candidate from the primary

and general ballots, fundamentally changing the course of American democracy," the party's attorneys wrote. The filing was posted on the website of a group run by Jay Sekulow, a former attorney for Trump representing the Colorado Republican Party.

The attorneys added: "Unless the Colorado Supreme Court's decision is overturned, any voter will have the power to sue to disqualify any political candidate, in Colorado or in any other jurisdiction that follows its lead. This will not only distort the 2024 presidential election but will also mire courts henceforth in political controversies over nebulous accusations of insurrection."

The U.S. Supreme Court is expected to take the case, either after the Colorado GOP's appeal or Trump's own appeal. If Trump ends up off the ballot in Colorado, it would have minimal effect on his campaign because he doesn't need the state, which he lost by 13 percentage points in 2020, to win the Electoral College in the presidential election.

But it could open the door to courts or election officials striking him from the ballot in other must-win states.

Sean Grimsley, an attorney for the plaintiffs seeking to disqualify Trump in Colorado, said on a legal podcast last week that he hopes the nation's highest court hurries once it accepts the case, as he expects it will. "We obviously are going to ask for an extremely accelerated timeline because of all the reasons I've stated, we have a primary coming up on Super Tuesday and we need to know the answer," Grimsley said.



KABC-TV/AP

Protesters are detained prior to arrest by Los Angeles police officers Wednesday, near Los Angeles International Airport.

Pro-Palestinian protesters block airport access roads in NY, LA

By JAKE OFFENHARTZ
Associated Press

NEW YORK — Pro-Palestinian protesters briefly blocked entrance roads to airports in New York and Los Angeles on Wednesday, snarling traffic as U.S. airlines contended with a rush of holiday travel.

The demonstrations stopped cars on the outskirts of New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport, where some travelers set off on foot to bypass the jammed roadway, as well as Los Angeles International Airport. A total of 62 people were arrested during the two protests, police said.

In New York, activists locked arms and held banners demanding an end to the Israel-Hamas war and expanded rights for Palestinians, bringing traffic to a standstill on the Van Wyck Expressway leading up to the airport for about 20 minutes.

Video posted to social media showed passengers, some carry-

ing suitcases, leaving vehicles behind and stepping over barriers onto the highway median.

Twenty-six people in the protest were arrested for disorderly conduct and impeding vehicular traffic, and the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey dispatched two buses to help travelers caught in the backup reach the airport, agency spokesperson Steve Burns said.

Around the same time as the New York protest, a major thoroughfare leading to the Los Angeles airport was shut down by another group of pro-Palestinian protesters, who dragged traffic cones, trash bins, scooters and debris into the lanes, according to news helicopter footage.

In a statement, the Los Angeles Police Department accused protesters of throwing a police officer to the ground and "attacking uninvolved passerbys in their vehicles," without providing further details about either incident.

The group appeared to flee

when police arrived, though the Los Angeles Police Department said traffic around the airport remained impacted roughly two hours after the demonstration was declared unlawful.

A spokesperson for the LAPD said 35 people were arrested for rioting and one person was arrested for battery of a police officer. No officers were injured, according to the spokesperson. An estimated 215,000 passengers and 87,000 vehicles were expected to pass through the Los Angeles airport on Wednesday.

Since the Israel-Hamas war erupted on Oct. 7, near nightly protests have broken out in cities across the United States. In New York, pro-Palestinian organizers have responded to the growing death toll in Gaza with escalating actions aimed at disrupting some of the city's best-known events, including the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade and the annual tree-lighting ceremony at Rockefeller Center.

Boebert switches congressional districts, avoiding rematch

Associated Press

DENVER — Republican Rep. Lauren Boebert announced Wednesday she is switching congressional districts, avoiding a likely rematch against a Democrat who has far outraised her and following an embarrassing moment of groping and vaping that shook even loyal supporters.

In a Facebook video Wednesday evening, Boebert announced she would enter the crowded Republican primary in retiring Rep. Ken Buck's seat in the eastern side of the state, leaving the more com-



Boebert

on her controversial style.

Boebert implied in the video that her departure from the district would help Republicans retain the seat, saying, "I will not allow dark money that is directed at destroying me personally to steal

petitive 3rd District seat she barely won last year — and which she was in peril of losing next year as some in her party have soured

this seat. It's not fair to the 3rd District and the conservatives there who have fought so hard for our victories."

"The Aspen donors, George Soros and Hollywood actors that are trying to buy this seat, well they can go pound sand," she said.

Boebert called it "a fresh start," acknowledging the rough year following a divorce with her husband and video of her misbehaving with a date at a performance of the musical "Beetlejuice" in Denver. The scandal in September rocked some of her faithful supporters,

who saw it as a transgression of conservative, Christian values and for which Boebert apologized at events throughout her district.

She already faced a primary challenge in her district, as well as a general election face-off with Democrat Adam Frisch, a former Aspen city council member who came within a few hundred votes of beating her in 2022. A rematch was expected, with Frisch raising at least \$7.7 million to Boebert's \$2.4 million.

Instead, if Boebert wins the primary to succeed Buck she will run

in the state's most conservative district, which former President Donald Trump won by about 20 percentage points in 2020, in contrast to his margin of about 8 percentage points in her district. While it's not required that a representative live in the congressional district they represent, only the state the district is in, Boebert said she would be moving — a shift from Colorado's western Rocky Mountain peaks and high desert mesas to its eastern expanse of prairie grass and ranching enclaves.

NATION

Study: Social media made \$11B from kids

BY BARBARA ORTUTAY
AND HALELUYA HADERO
Associated Press

Social media companies collectively made over \$11 billion in U.S. advertising revenue from minors last year, according to a study from the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health published on Wednesday.

The researchers say the findings show a need for government regulation of social media since the companies that stand to make money from children who use their platforms have failed to meaningfully self-regulate.

They note such regulations, as well as greater transparency from tech companies, could help alleviate harms to youth mental

health and curtail potentially harmful advertising practices that target children and adolescents.

To come up with the revenue figure, the researchers estimated the number of users under 18 on Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, X (formerly Twitter) and YouTube in 2022 based on population data from the U.S. Census and survey data from Common Sense Media and Pew Research. They then used data from research firm eMarketer, now called Insider Intelligence, and Qustodio, a parental control app, to estimate each platform's U.S. ad revenue in 2022 and the time children spent per day on each platform. After that, the researchers said they built a

simulation model using the data to estimate how much ad revenue the platforms earned from minors in the U.S.

Researchers and lawmakers have long focused on the negative effects stemming from social media platforms, whose personally-tailored algorithms can drive children towards excessive use. This year, lawmakers in states like New York and Utah introduced or passed legislation that would curb social media use among kids, citing harms to youth mental health and other concerns.

Meta, which owns Instagram and Facebook, is also being sued by dozens of states for allegedly contributing to the mental health crisis.

"Although social media platforms may claim that they can self-regulate their practices to reduce the harms to young people, they have yet to do so, and our study suggests they have overwhelming financial incentives to continue to delay taking meaningful steps to protect children," said Bryn Austin, a professor in the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences at Harvard and a senior author on the study.

Social media platforms are not the first to advertise to children, and parents and experts have long expressed concerns about marketing to kids online, on television and even in schools. But online ads can be especially insidious because they can be targeted to chil-

dren and because the line between ads and the content kids seek out is often blurry.

In a 2020 policy paper, the American Academy of Pediatrics said children are "uniquely vulnerable to the persuasive effects of advertising because of immature critical thinking skills and impulse inhibition."

According to the Harvard study, YouTube derived the greatest ad revenue from users 12 and under (\$959.1 million), followed by Instagram (\$801.1 million) and Facebook (\$137.2 million).

Instagram, meanwhile, derived the greatest ad revenue from users aged 13-17 (\$4 billion), followed by TikTok (\$2 billion) and YouTube (\$1.2 billion).



HEATHER KHALIFA, THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER/AP

John Giovannitti, left, mayor-elect of Paulsboro, and brother Vince Giovannitti, mayor of Greenwich Township, stand together for a portrait in Gibbstown, N.J., on Dec. 12.

Neighboring New Jersey towns will have brothers as mayors

Associated Press

GIBBSTOWN, N.J. — Two neighboring New Jersey towns may feel even closer next year when they're governed by two brothers.

John Giovannitti, 61, will be sworn in Jan. 2 as mayor of Paulsboro, one day before newly-re-elected younger brother Vince Giovannitti, 57, is sworn in to a second term as mayor of Gibbstown.

Paulsboro, with a population of 6,300, stretches from Route 130 to the Delaware River, across from Philadelphia International Airport. Gibbstown, with just under 4,000 people in Greenwich Township, is connected to its larger neighbor through the main corridor, Broad Street.

The Paulsboro brothers describe becoming mayors as a "happy coincidence" but also a natural next step after decades serving their communities. They told The Philadelphia Inquirer that being siblings aids the necessary collaboration of mayors of neighboring towns that share certain services.

"We can say things to one another," Vince said, acknowledging that he might be more reserved in dealings with someone else. John says constantly seeing each other at family functions also helps.

Gibbstown and Paulsboro, described by John as "classic American small towns," have families and church and civic groups that span municipal lines. Vince calls

them "really one big community" and John adds that he does not know if there are many other communities that are "so intermingled."

The brothers, both Democrats, said they have never lived anywhere else.

"The roots are deep ..." Vince said. "Your friends are here; your family is here."

The Gibbstown mayor's salary is \$12,314 with a three-year term. Paulsboro's mayor has a four-year term and is paid between \$7,000 and \$9,100.

John also works as Paulsboro High School's assistant principal and athletic director and Vince was a special-education teacher and guidance counselor in the district before retiring in 2021.

Alibaba must face US lawsuit alleging sales of fake Squishmallows

Associated Press

A judge in New York has ruled that Alibaba must face a lawsuit by a U.S. toymaker alleging that the Chinese ecommerce giant's online platforms were used to sell counterfeit Squishmallows.

Judge Jesse Furman of the Southern District Court of New York refused Alibaba's request to dismiss the case filed by Kelly Toys Holdings, which makes the popular plush toys.

Kelly Toys is owned by Jazwares, a toy company whose parent company Alleghany Corp. is controlled by billionaire Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway.

There was no immediate comment by Alibaba, China's biggest ecommerce company. Among other things, Alibaba based its motion to dismiss on how it was

named in the lawsuit as Alibaba.com instead of its formal corporate name.

In its complaint, Kelly Toys said sales of faked Squishmallows by merchants using Alibaba sites continued despite earlier lawsuits demanding they be stopped. The company had earlier filed the case to stop about 90 ecommerce companies from selling counterfeit versions of the toys. Alibaba was named as a defendant in March.

"Kelly Toys alleges that, notwithstanding that awareness, infringing listings — including some by the Merchant Defendants — have continued to proliferate on the Alibaba platforms," Furman wrote. He said the court held that the claims were plausible, so the motion to dismiss them was denied.



REBECCA S. GRATZ/AP

A shareholder leaves the Squishmallows booth with a large bag of purchases in the exhibition hall of the Berkshire Hathaway annual meeting on May 6 in Omaha, Neb.

NATION

Experts voice election misinformation fears

Concerns grow as AI deepfakes now everywhere and guardrails falling

BY ALI SWENSON
AND CHRISTINE FERNANDO
Associated Press

NEW YORK — Nearly three years after rioters stormed the U.S. Capitol, the false election conspiracy theories that drove the violent attack remain prevalent on social media and cable news: suitcases filled with ballots, late-night ballot dumps, dead people voting.

Experts warn it will likely be worse in the coming presidential election contest. The safeguards that attempted to counter the bogus claims the last time are eroding, while the tools and systems that create and spread them are only getting stronger.

Many Americans, egged on by former President Donald Trump, have continued to push the unsupported idea that elections throughout the U.S. can't be trusted. A majority of Republicans (57%) believe Democrat Joe Biden was not legitimately elected president.

Meanwhile, generative artificial intelligence tools have made it far cheaper and easier to spread the kind of misinformation that can mislead voters and potentially influence elections. And social media companies that once invested in correcting the record have shifted their priorities.

"I expect a tsunami of misinformation," said Oren Etzioni, an artificial intelligence expert and professor emeritus at the University of Washington. "I can't prove that. I hope to be proven wrong. But the ingredients are there, and I am completely terrified."

Deepfakes go mainstream

Manipulated images and videos surrounding elections are nothing new, but 2024 will be the first U.S. presidential election in which sophisticated AI tools that can produce convincing fakes in seconds are just a few clicks away.

The fabricated images, videos and audio clips known as deepfakes have started making their way into experimental presidential campaign ads. More sinister versions could easily spread without labels on social media and fool people days before an election, Etzioni said.

"You could see a political candidate like President Biden being rushed to a hospital," he said. "You could see a candidate saying things that he or she never actually said. You could see a run on the banks. You could see bombings and violence that never oc-



JOHN FROSCHAUER/AP

Oren Etzioni at the Allen Institute for Artificial Intelligence in Seattle, where he serves as advisor and board member. Experts are warning that the spread of misinformation could get worse in the coming election.



NICOLE NERI/AP

Minnesota Secretary of State Steve Simon talks to students after a Q&A with members of Voterama, a student group focused on voter advocacy and awareness at Breck School in Golden Valley, Minn.

curred."

High-tech fakes already have affected elections around the globe, said Larry Norden, senior director of the elections and government program at the Brennan Center for Justice. Just days before Slovakia's recent elections, AI-generated audio recordings impersonated a liberal candidate discussing plans to raise beer prices and rig the election. Fact-checkers scrambled to identify them as false, but they were shared as real across social media regardless.

These tools might also be used to target specific communities and hone misleading messages about voting. That could look like persuasive text messages, false announcements about voting processes shared in different languages on WhatsApp, or bogus websites mocked up to look like official government ones in your ar-

ea, experts said.

Republicans and Democrats in Congress and the Federal Election Commission are exploring steps to regulate the technology, but they haven't finalized any rules or legislation. That's left states to enact the only restrictions so far on political AI deepfakes.

Social media safety fades

It was just over a year ago that Elon Musk bought Twitter and began firing its executives, dismantling some of its core features and reshaping the social media platform into what's now known as X.

Since then, he has upended its verification system, leaving public officials vulnerable to impersonators. He has gutted the teams that once fought misinformation on the platform, leaving the community of users to moderate itself. And he has restored the accounts

of conspiracy theorists and extremists who were previously banned.

The changes have been applauded by many conservatives who say Twitter's previous moderation attempts amounted to censorship of their views. But pro-democracy advocates argue the takeover has shifted what once was a flawed but useful resource for news and election information into a largely unregulated echo chamber that amplifies hate speech and misinformation.

Twitter used to be one of the "most responsible" platforms, showing a willingness to test features that might reduce misinformation even at the expense of engagement, said Jesse Lechrich, co-founder of Accountable Tech, a nonprofit watchdog group.

"Obviously now they're on the exact other end of the spectrum," he said, adding that he believes the company's changes have given other platforms cover to relax their own policies. X didn't answer emailed questions from The Associated Press, only sending an automated response.

In the run-up to 2024, X, Meta and YouTube have together removed 17 policies that protected against hate and misinformation, according to a report from Free Press, a nonprofit that advocates for civil rights in tech and media.

In June, YouTube announced that while it would still regulate content that misleads about current or upcoming elections, it would stop removing content that falsely claims the 2020 election or other previous U.S. elections were marred by "widespread fraud, errors or glitches." The platform said the policy was an attempt to protect the ability to "openly de-

bate political ideas, even those that are controversial or based on disproven assumptions."

The Trump factor

Trump's front-runner status in the Republican presidential primary is top of mind for misinformation researchers who worry that it will exacerbate election misinformation and potentially lead to election vigilantism or violence.

The former president still falsely claims to have won the 2020 election.

"Donald Trump has clearly embraced and fanned the flames of false claims about election fraud in the past," Starbird said. "We can expect that he may continue to use that to motivate his base."

Without evidence, Trump has already primed his supporters to expect fraud in the 2024 election, urging them to intervene to "guard the vote" to prevent vote rigging in diverse Democratic cities.

That continued wearing away of voter trust in democracy can lead to violence, said Bret Schafer, a senior fellow at the nonpartisan Alliance for Securing Democracy, which tracks misinformation.

"If people don't ultimately trust information related to an election, democracy just stops working," he said. "If a misinformation or disinformation campaign is effective enough that a large enough percentage of the American population does not believe that the results reflect what actually happened, then Jan. 6 will probably look like a warm-up act."

Election officials respond

Election officials have spent the years since 2020 preparing for the expected resurgence of election denial narratives. They've dispatched teams to explain voting processes, hired outside groups to monitor misinformation as it emerges and beefed up physical protections at vote-counting centers.

In Colorado, Secretary of State Jena Griswold said informative paid social media and TV campaigns that humanize election workers have helped inoculate voters against misinformation.

"This is an uphill battle, but we have to be proactive," she said. "Misinformation is one of the biggest threats to American democracy we see today."

Minnesota Secretary of State Steve Simon's office is spearheading #TrustedInfo2024, a new online public education effort by the National Association of Secretaries of State to promote election officials as a trusted source of election information in 2024.

"We hope for the best but plan for the worst through these layers of protections," Simon said.

NATION

Illegal crossings high at border despite arrests

By ACACIA CORONADO
Associated Press

EAGLE PASS, Texas — Before settling in New York City like thousands of other migrants this year, Abdoul, a 32-year-old from West Africa, took an unexpected detour: Weeks in a remote Texas jail on local trespassing charges after crossing the U.S.-Mexico border.

“I spent a lot of hours without sleeping, sitting on the floor,” said Abdoul, a political activist who fled Mauritania, fearing persecution. He spoke on the condition that his last name not be published for fear of jeopardizing his request for asylum.

Starting in March, Texas will allow police to arrest migrants who enter the state illegally and give local judges the authority to order them out of the country. The new law comes two years after Texas launched a smaller-scale operation to arrest migrants for trespassing. But although that operation was also intended to stem illegal crossings, there is little indication that it has done so.

The results raise questions about the impact arrests have on deterring immigration as Texas readies to give police even broader powers to apprehend migrants on charges of illegal entry. Civil rights organizations have already sued to stop the new law signed by Republican Gov. Greg Abbott, calling it an unconstitutional overreach that encroaches on the U.S. government’s immigration authority.

Since 2021, Texas authorities have arrested nearly 10,000 migrants on misdemeanor trespassing charges under what Abbott has called an “arrest and jail” operation: Border landowners enter



CHRISTIAN CHAVEZ/AP

Migrants cross the Rio Grande river to reach the U.S. from Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, on Wednesday.

agreements with the state authorizing trespassing arrests, clearing the way for law enforcement to apprehend migrants who enter the U.S. through those properties.

The arrests have drawn constitutional challenges in courts, including claims of due process violations. More recently, one landowner asked officials to stop the trespassing arrests on their property, claiming authorities never had permission in the first place.

Abbott had predicted the trespassing arrests would produce swift results. “When people start learning about this, they’re going to stop coming across the Texas border,” he told Fox News in July 2021, when Texas-Mexico border crossings reached 1.2 million that fiscal year.

That number has ticked up even higher over the past fiscal year, topping 1.5 million.

“They’re still coming through here,” said Sheriff Tom Schmerber of Maverick County, where Abdoul crossed the border and was quickly arrested in July.

Abbott suggested this month Texas may soon phase out the trespassing arrests as it moves forward with illegal entry charges that can be enforced most anywhere in the state, including hundreds of miles from the border.

The trespassing arrests have been a cornerstone of Abbott’s nearly \$10 billion border mission known as Operation Lone Star that has tested the federal government’s authority over immigration. Abbott has also sent an esti-

mated 80,000 migrants on buses to Democratic-led cities, strung up razor wire on the border and installed buoy barriers on the Rio Grande. Last week, Abbott sent a flight of 120 migrants to Chicago in an escalation of his busing operation.

The mission is visible in Maverick County, where many of the arrests have taken place. Patrol cars are parked every few miles along the two-lane roads leading to the border city of Eagle Pass. Along the Rio Grande, state troopers from Florida, one of several GOP-led states that have sent National Guard members and law enforcement to the border, work in tandem with Texas officials.

Abdoul was arrested in the city’s Shelby Park, a small piece of

greenery touching the river with a ramp for boaters. It was the Fourth of July when Abdoul set foot on American soil for the first time. Officers standing nearby asked him a few questions and quickly took him into custody.

He said that he was given small food portions in jail and was so miserable he would say anything to get out. He pleaded guilty to trespassing, a charge that carries a maximum sentence of a year in jail.

It’s unknown how many of those arrested on the border for trespassing remain in the U.S., were deported, were allowed to stay to seek asylum, or had their cases dismissed. But Kristen Etter, an attorney who said her legal organization has represented more than 3,000 migrants on the trespassing charges, said the majority of their clients were allowed to stay and seek asylum.

She said many migrants seek out law enforcement at the border because they want to surrender.

“If anything, rather than being a deterrent, it is attracting more people,” she said.

The trespassing arrests are spearheaded by the Texas Department of Public Safety, which said the state’s border operation has resulted in more than 37,000 total criminal arrests. Spokesperson Ericka Miller said officers have stopped gang members, human traffickers, sex offenders and others from entering the country.

“Had we not been there, all of it likely would have crossed into the country unimpeded,” Miller said in an email. “The state of Texas is working to send a message to those considering crossing into the country illegally to think again.”

Mexican officials clear border tent camp as US pressure mounts

By VALERIE GONZALEZ
Associated Press

MATAMOROS, Mexico — A ragged migrant tent camp next to the Rio Grande is a long way from Mexico’s National Palace, where a U.S. delegation met this week with Mexico’s president seeking more action to curb a surge of migrants reaching the U.S. border.

But as Mexican officials in the city of Matamoros dispatched bulldozers to clear out what they claimed were abandoned tents at the camp, the action was a likely sign of things to come.

The United States has given clear signs, including temporarily closing key border rail crossings into Texas, that it wants Mexico to do more to stop migrants hopping freight cars, buses and trucks to the border.

President Andrés Manuel Ló-

pez Obrador said he got a worried phone call on Dec. 20 from U.S. President Joe Biden.

“He asked, Joe Biden asked to speak with me, he was worried about the situation on the border because of the unprecedented number of migrants arriving at the border,” López Obrador said Thursday. “He called me, saying we had to look for a solution together.”

Mexico, desperate to get the border crossings reopened to its manufactured goods, started to give indications it would crack down a bit.

That was on display in Matamoros as U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken held talks with López Obrador in Mexico City.

Migrants set up the encampment across from Brownsville, Texas in late 2022. It once held as many as 1,500 migrants, but

many tents were vacated in recent months as people waded across the river to reach the United States.

“What we are doing is removing any tents that we see are empty,” Segismundo Doguín, the head of the local office of Mexico’s immigration agency, said.

But one Honduran who would give only his first name, José, claimed that some of the 200 remaining migrants were practically forced to leave the camp when the clearance operation began late Tuesday.

“They ran us out,” he said, explaining that campers were given short notice to move their tents and belongings and felt intimidated by the bulldozers “You had to run for your life to avoid an accident.”

Some migrants moved into a fenced-in area of the encamp-

ment where immigration officers said they could relocate, but fear remained.

About 70 migrants flung themselves into the river Tuesday night and crossed into the U.S. They were trapped for hours along the riverbank beneath the layers of concertina wire set up on order of the Texas governor.

Few options exist for the migrants who were asked to leave the encampment, said Gladys Cañas, founder of a Matamoros-based nongovernmental group, Ayudandoles a Triunfar, or Helping Them Win.

“The truth is that the shelters are saturated,” Cañas said.

She was working at the encampment Wednesday afternoon, encouraging migrants to avoid crossing illegally into the U.S., especially after several drowned in the last few days

while attempting to swim the river.

This month, as many as 10,000 migrants were arrested daily on the southwest U.S. border.

The U.S. has struggled to process them at the border and house them once they reach northern cities.

Mexican industries were stung last week when the U.S. briefly closed two vital Texas railway crossings, arguing that border patrol agents had to be reassigned to deal with a large number of migrants.

A non-rail crossing remained closed at Lukeville, Arizona, and border operations were partially suspended at San Diego and Nogales, Arizona.

Speaking Thursday, López Obrador said the meeting with U.S. officials focused on reopening border crossings.

WORLD

Rain keeps rivers high in northern, central Europe

Associated Press

BERLIN — Parts of northern and central Europe continued to grapple with flooding on Thursday after heavy rain. A barrier near the German city of Magdeburg was opened for the first time in a decade to ease pressure from the Elbe River, and some animals were removed from their enclosures at a safari park in northern Germany.

This week's floods have prompted evacuations of dozens or hundreds of people in parts of northern and central Germany, but largely dry weather was forecast on Thursday. Still, water levels on some rivers caused concern, and they have continued to rise in parts of Lower Saxony state in the northwest.

The Elbe was nearly 13 feet above its normal level in Dresden, German news agency dpa reported. Downstream, the Pretziener Wehr, a flood barrier built in the 1870s on a branch of the river and renovated in 2010, was opened for the first time since large-scale floods in 2013.

The aim was to divert about a third of the river's water into a 13-mile channel that bypasses the town of Schoenebeck and Saxony-Anhalt's state capital, Magdeburg.

In Lower Saxony, the Serengeti Park on the swollen Meisse River in the town of Hodenhagen faced flooding that began to affect some animal enclosures. Lemurs, prairie dogs and meerkats were moved to other parts of the grounds. Temporary dikes were put up to protect other enclosures.

Temporary dikes were put up to protect other enclosures.

To the south in Germany's Thuringia region, several hundred inhabitants of the village of Windehausen who evacuated earlier this week were cleared to return home after power was restored.

In the neighboring Netherlands, the Rhine peaked far above normal levels early Thursday at Lobith village on the German border but was expected to drop significantly over the next week, authorities said.

Emergency workers in the Dutch town of Deventer, forecast to be the hardest hit, heaped sandbags along the Ijssel River and closed roads to prepare for flooding. Several flood plains were underwater in the eastern Nether-



TAMAS KOVACS, MTI/AP

The Sara Salkahazi quay is flooded by the Danube River at Fovam Square in Budapest, Hungary, on Wednesday. Due to the recent rains and snow, the water level of the Danube has risen.

lands as rivers surged in recent days.

In Hungary, the Danube spilled over its banks in Budapest and was expected to peak in the capital on Thursday. Heavy rain has com-

pounded the effects of melting snow.

While some smaller rivers in western Hungary have started to recede, water levels on the Danube are predicted to fall slowly.

China reaffirms military threats as Taiwan election nears

Associated Press

TAIPEI, Taiwan — Weeks before Taiwan holds elections for its president and legislature, China renewed its threat to use military force to annex the self-governing island democracy it claims as its own territory.

Defense Ministry spokesperson Col. Wu Qian on Thursday at a monthly briefing that China's armed forces would "as always take all necessary measures to firmly safeguard our national sovereignty and territorial integrity."

Taiwan's 23 million people overwhelmingly favor maintaining the island's de-facto independent status, leaving the Jan. 13 polls to be de-

ecided largely by concerns over housing prices, health care, employment and education. China has continued sending warships and fighter jets near Taiwan as an intimidation tactic, even as Taiwan's military said it's raising alert levels before the vote.

The ruling party's candidate, William Lai, holds a lead in most surveys, while the main opposition Nationalist Party's candidate, Hou You-yi, has sought to appeal to voters who fear a military conflict with China that could draw in the United States and lead to massive disruptions in the global economy.

Hou's campaign literature, distributed Thursday in Taipei, af-

firmed his opposition to Taiwan independence and concurrence with Beijing's view of Taiwan as a part of China.

Taiwan was a Japanese colony for 50 years until 1945, when it was handed over to Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese Nationalist government. The Nationalists, also known as the

Kuomintang, then relocated to the island in 1949 after the Communist Party under Mao Zedong emerged victorious from a brutal conflict on the Chinese mainland in which millions were killed.

During Thursday's news conference, Wu repeated accusations that the U.S. was prompting Taiwan

into deliberately raising tensions with China. The claim meshes with China's posing itself as an unofficial ally of Russia in opposing the long-predominant Western liberal order, in favor of authoritarian rule.

Taiwan has answered Chinese military expansions with boosts to its navy, air and ground forces.

Storm disrupts trains, power as it batters northern UK

Associated Press

LONDON — A storm that battered the U.K. with high winds and heavy snow and rain damaged houses, canceled trains and left thousands of people without electricity on Thursday across Scotland and parts of northern England.

Workers faced wind speeds of 80 mph in some coastal areas of Scotland as they tried to restore power that was cut off when falling branches and other debris hit utility lines.

About 14,000 homes remained without power early Thursday.

Police in Manchester in northwest England said they received numerous reports late Wednesday of homes damaged by a brief "localized tornado." Photos showed roofs torn from houses and cars smashed by fallen trees, and residents reported garden sheds being blown away.

The U.K.'s weather forecaster, the Met Office, said a "supercell thunderstorm" with a "strong rotating updraft" crossed the Greater Manchester area late Wednesday.

Local officials said some 100 properties were evacuated overnight. Greater Manchester Police declared a major incident due to the severity of the damage and potential risk to public safety, though no injuries were reported.

Storm Gerrit also caused widespread disruption to train service across Scotland, where travel on some lines was suspended until officials could carry out a full inspection. A falling tree hit the driver's cabin on one train; no one was injured.

Heathrow Airport, the U.K.'s main travel hub, canceled 18 flights Wednesday because of air traffic control restrictions.

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HEALTH & FITNESS

Your doctor is rooting for you

5 things physicians want patients to know

BY TRISHA PASRICHA, M.D.
Special to *The Washington Post*

I have now been writing *The Washington Post's Ask A Doctor* column for one year, and what a privilege it has been. But I've been doing more than dishing advice. I've also been listening — reading your comments, getting emails and talking to my patients. I've learned the science is only the bare bones of the story: Your lived experience is the heart. After reflecting on what I've heard this year, these are five things I want my patients to know:

Our health isn't all determined by the big moments

Preventive health comes down to the innumerable micro-decisions each of us make every day. Bacon at breakfast may be another inconsequential food in your week, while a lifetime of eating processed meats can tip the scales between colon cancer and health.

Those smaller moments can have a butterfly effect you can't always foresee. One patient of mine agreed to adopt his relative's dog three years ago — mainly because he felt lonely and wanted companionship. Despite being a self-described "couch potato," he's since been easily hitting the recommended physical activity guidelines every week because he started taking his dog for runs around the neighborhood. In addition to the mental health benefits, he's no longer prediabetic.

How would his trajectory have been different if he had never adopted a pet, if he had hired a dog walking service instead

or decided to play fetch instead of joining his dog on a run? Where would his health be in 10 years if he had developed diabetes?

Our tiny daily decisions add up. Healthy choices made even some of the time are better than unhealthy choices made all of the time.

Everyone is frustrated with doctor's appointments

A recurring theme I heard (and lived) this year was about how doctors are always running late. These frustrations drive your physician nuts, too.

The roots of the problem trace back to the early 1990s when Medicare assigned a relative value unit to primary care appointments of the equivalent of 15 minutes. Private health insurers quickly followed suit, and so to sustain themselves, clinic administrations jam-packed their physicians' schedules. Those overflowing clinics racing to meet the demands of insurance companies are loathed by doc-

tors and patients.

Here are two tips to maximize time with your doctor:

Come 15 minutes early to your visit. That means, you're checked in, paperwork is filled out and vitals are checked, so that when your appointment officially starts, you spend more of your allotted time face-to-face with your physician and not getting your height measured.

Plan your story ahead. Lead with your most pressing problem and get the timeline of your symptoms straight with as many specifics as possible. (It makes a big difference to your doctor if your cough has been going on for several months instead of for two weeks.)

Don't be afraid to talk about embarrassing health issues

The semantics of our bowel habits were an unexpectedly steaming hot subject of debate among my readers. Some weren't sure if it was even okay to say "poop" aloud. (For the love of bidets, yes, I give you permission.) I perform colonoscopies every week, so believe me when I say that words such as flatulence or farting won't make me blush.

More importantly, don't let embarrassment keep you from getting the help you need. For example, as many as 80% of people on an SSRI, a kind of antidepressant, experience sexual dysfunction as a side effect, but about half of people who stop their SSRI for this reason don't discuss why with their physicians. If you tell us the real reason, we can do a better job of trying to help you.

Talk to your family members about their medical history

Many of my patients don't know what their grandparents died of, if their brother has an autoimmune condition or how old their uncle was when he was diagnosed with cancer.

These details affect how your doctor thinks about the right tests for you. For instance, if you knew that your aunt and grandmother both had breast cancer diagnosed in their 40s, your doctor may recommend you undergo genetic testing for breast and ovarian cancer.

But if you didn't know about your aunt's history because no one talked about it, and you weren't sure how old your grandmother was when diagnosed, it's possible your doctor would just recommend regular mammograms.

Talking about our medical problems can feel uncomfortable. But explain that it's important for your health and that of other loved ones in the family to know.

Your doctor is cheering for you

Literally. When I see pathology results come back showing one of my patients is cancer-free, I cheer out loud — yes, by myself, in front of my computer. My co-residents and I have been known to do a happy dance in the hospital call rooms when patients get offered a lifesaving organ transplant.

Medicine is a team sport. Patients don't always see what happens behind the curtains, but your wins are the very best parts of our day.

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YEAR IN REVIEW – MOVIES

Eyes on the stars



Picks for best films of the year, according to AP's Bahr and Coyle

MUBI/AP

Alma Pöysti and Jussi Vatanen in "Fallen Leaves." Associated Press critics Lindsey Bahr and Jake Coyle both listed the Finnish deadpan romance among their top films of the year.

1. 'Oppenheimer'

Christopher Nolan has had so many major films in a relatively short time, that "Oppenheimer" might seem like a given, rather than the triumphant fusion of everything he's passionate about: large format film; the tension between humanity and science; the turmoil of a brilliant mind; and the wonder of an exceptional group coming together to make an impossible thing (in this case a nuclear weapon but also, on a meta level, the film).

2. 'The Zone of Interest'

Like in "Oppenheimer," the horror in Jonathan Glazer's "The Zone of Interest" is what is unseen. Depiction bubbled up as a hot topic this year, as though audiences aren't intelligent enough to imagine the worst. In "The Zone of Interest," it's only a wall that separates one Nazi family from the gas chambers of Auschwitz. Glazer's film is a master class in atmosphere: a

chilling, artful representation of the not-so-gray areas of complicity.

3. 'Priscilla'

Sofia Coppola's "Priscilla" is so beautiful to look at, it's easy not to notice its rigorous restraint and minimalism in storytelling. It provides a singular showcase for her very capable actors, Cailee Spaeny and Jacob Elordi, that's about all the small things — the moments that might be imperceptible were it not for her quiet gaze. That the Elvis estate wasn't on board just means she did her job as an independent artist.

4. 'Asteroid City'

The play-within-a-play conceit of Wes Anderson's "Asteroid City" is perhaps his most self-conscious film, made in his signature style but also about his style and the artifice of it. It is immensely rewatchable, funny and quotable, with a career-best performance from Scarlett Jo-

hansson and a brilliant Margot Robbie cameo.

5. 'May December'

It takes a master like Todd Haynes to authentically blend high camp and melodrama with grounded emotion, but that's what he's managed to do with the sickly entertaining "May December." It's a satire about actors and the Lifetime-ing of human tragedies, and a soulful portrait of a victim who doesn't realize it.

6. 'Fallen Leaves'

Aki Kaurismäki was, embarrassingly, a blind spot for me. But the Finnish filmmaker's deadpan romance about the missed connections of two lonely souls in a cold, unglamorous, alcohol-soaked setting is a wonderful place to start. Like Holappa and Ansa come to learn, it's never too late to grow.

7. 'The Holdovers'

There were a few movies this year that were just so good and

so watchable that it feels too easy to select them. Alexander Payne's "The Holdovers" is the best of them: a well-written, -acted and -composed film that makes you feel like you too are stuck in a New England boarding school over a holiday break and learning things about yourself and those in the trenches with you.

8. 'Poor Things'

Yorgos Lanthimos crafts a deranged, provocative, unabashedly stylish and funny fairy tale that feels completely fresh. The themes aren't exactly subtle, what with Emma Stone's insatiable Bella Baxter calling her creator (Willem Dafoe) God, but the film has one of those huge, ambitious swings that works.

9. 'A Thousand and One'

Writer-director A.V. Rockwell made the year's best debut feature in this vibrant portrait of a mother and son in New York City

in the 1990s. The city as character may be a tired trope, but here you feel their home changing and gentrifying as their own relationship takes unexpected turns. This grand opening statement is both intimate and epic, with a pulsating soundtrack.

10. 'Bottoms'

It's kind of hard to believe that "Bottoms" was a real movie that was released by a major studio, MGM. Director Emma Seligman and her co-writer/muse/star Rachel Sennott created one of the wildest, funniest, weirdest high school movies that Generation Z still needs to discover and claim. It's OK; there's time.

Honorable mentions: "20 Days in Mariupol," "Theater Camp," "Blue Jean," "All of Us Strangers," "Eileen," "Showing Up," "You Hurt My Feelings," "Killers of the Flower Moon," "The Eight Mountains," "Anatomy of a Fall," "The Pigeon Tunnel."

— Lindsey Bahr

YEAR IN REVIEW – MOVIES

1. 'Fallen Leaves'

Loneliness and lousy bosses are everywhere in the cold world of Finnish filmmaker Aki Kaurismäki's latest. But there are stirring signs of life beneath the deadpan surface of "Fallen Leaves," a minimalist fable about a maybe-romance between two working-class loners (Alma Pöysti, Jussi Vatanen). Kaurismäki doesn't need much — a trip to the movies, a few good songs, a dog named Chaplin — to say a lot. An 82-minute balm for a bleak world.

2. 'The Holdovers'

Alexander Payne's latest, with its cozy, Christmas New England environs, has sometimes been compared to a warm blanket. But there's a strong anti-authoritarian streak running through "The Holdovers," much like the '70s films it models itself on. The cast, including Paul Giamatti, Da'Vine Joy Randolph and newcomer Dominic Sessa, is flawless. There's plenty of warmth here, but there's rage, too — including a lament for a lost spirit of American filmmaking.

3. 'The Eight Mountains'

Seasons sweep through Felix Van Groeningen's and Charlotte Vandermeersch's gentle tale of friendship set in the Italian Alps. The film, vast and intimate at once, tracks two childhood friends (Luca Marinelli, Alessandro Borghi) over the course of years, enveloping them in a breathtaking high-mountain backdrop and the radiant folk songs of Daniel Norgren.

4. 'Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse'

The year's giddiest and most spectacular film. As good as "Into the Spider-Verse" was, the second chapter pushes dazzlingly against both superhero convention and the limits of animation.

5. 'Perfect Days'

The great Japanese actor Kôji Yakusho stars as a solitary, soft-spoken public toilet cleaner in Tokyo in Wim Wenders' profoundly lovely ode to the everyday. Though plot and backstory make hesitant inroads, "Perfect Days" is mostly about the day-to-day rhythms of Hirayama, who reads Faulkner at night, takes pictures of trees on his lunch break and listens to cassette tapes (yes, including by Lou Reed) while he drives.

6. 'Origin'

Ava DuVernay's stirring adaptation of Isabel Wilkerson's "Caste" isn't exactly an adaptation. DuVernay dramatizes Wilkerson's writing of the celebrated non-fiction book, mixing in historical accounts of caste systems with the intimate dramas of Wilkerson's own life. The combination movingly fuses the social with the personal.

7. 'Barbie'

Here's one thing that's not been said enough about Greta Gerwig's runaway sensation: It's the funniest movie of the year. With apologies to Cord Jefferson's blistering debut, "American Fiction," and Nicole Holofcener's white-lie opus, "You Hurt My Feelings," nothing was as clever as Gerwig's I'll-have-my-cake-and-eat-it-too balancing act of brand marketing and gender satire.

8. 'La Chimera'

The past is everywhere in Alice Rohrwacher's enchanting 1980-set folk tale: underfoot and in the melancholy eyes of its Englishman protagonist (Josh O'Connor), the gifted but haunted leader of a ramshackle band of tomb-robbers who raid ancient Etruscan burial sites in Tuscany. This is a magical but earthy movie.

9. 'All of Us Strangers'

The latest by Andrew Haigh, the British filmmaker of "Weekend" and "45 Years," is an aching, unshakeable ghost story. In a dreamy metaphysical daze, the film toggles between the unfolding relationship of two gay men, Adam (Andrew Scott) and Harry (Paul Mescal), and Harry's visitations to his frozen-in-time childhood home where he finds his long-dead parents (Claire Foy, Jamie Bell). It's about family, loss, fiction, romance, coming out and growing older, and it will absolutely level you.

10. 'Tótem'

Mexican writer-director Lila Aviles' film is likewise about family and grief, and it, too, has the power to devastate. Aviles' follow-up to her 2018 debut "The Chamber-



SEACIA PAVAO, FOCUS FEATURES/AP

From left, Dominic Sessa, Paul Giamatti and Da'Vine Joy Randolph in a scene from "The Holdovers." Both Associated Press film critics Lindsey Bahr and Jake Coyle praised the film's cast for its acting in the film.



A24/AP

Christian Friedel as the commandant of Auschwitz in "The Zone of Interest," a master class in atmosphere.



SIDESHOW AND JANUS FILMS/AP

"Tótem" is about grief, the story of a family preparing for the death of the father of Sol (Naima Senties, above).



SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES/AP

Emma Stone and Mark Ruffalo in "Poor Things." Bahr says Yorgos Lanthimos' fairy tale feels completely fresh.



SIDESHOW AND JANUS FILMS/AP

Luca Marinelli and Alessandro Borghi in "The Eight Mountains," a tale of friendship set in the Italian Alps.

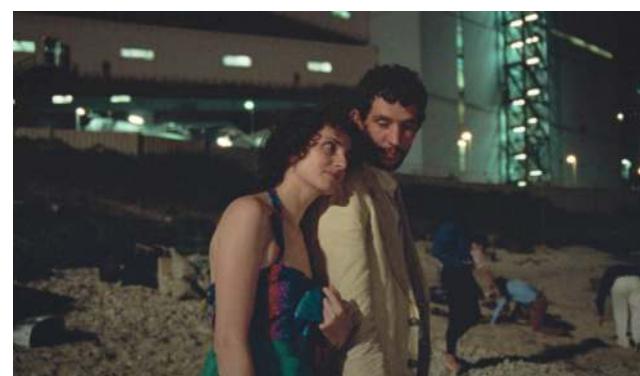


NEON/AP

Kôji Yakusho and Arisa Nakano star in an ode to the everyday, "Perfect Days."

maid" is largely seen through the perspective of young Sol (Naima Senties) on a day when her multigenerational family is preparing a birthday party for her dying father (Mateo García Elizondo). The teeming, distracted lives of her relatives nearly obscure the hard truth at hand for Sol.

— Jake Coyle



NEON/AP

Carol Duarte and Josh O'Connor in the enchanting, magical and earthy 1980-set folk tale "La Chimera."

Honorable Mentions: "R.M.N.," "Anatomy of a Fall," "Oppenheimer," "You Hurt My Feelings," "A Thousand and One," "Tori and Lokita," "Youth (Spring)," "Killers of the Flower Moon," "The Delinquents," "Orlando: My Political Documentary," "Past Lives," "American Fiction," "Ferrari," "The Boy and the Heron," "Asteroid City."

YEAR IN REVIEW – MUSIC

Monét, Miley lead AP's top songs of 2023

BY MARIA SHERMAN
Associated Press

The following are 10 of the best songs of the year, as determined by Associated Press Music Writer Maria Sherman, in no particular order. Dive in.

'On My Mama,' Victoria Monét

Buckle up for some positive affirmations! The 10-time Grammy-nominated Victoria Monét, once best known as a hitmaker for Ariana Grande, Fifth Harmony and Chloe x Halle, is getting her flowers these days as a soloist — and passing them right along to the mothers listening. Her blockbuster single “On My Mama” is a loving tribute to her mom and her daughter, with Monét’s buttery voice and bright brass production carrying throughout. It may very well be the best R&B track of the year — with one of the best samples, utilizing Charlie Boy’s 2009 banger “I Look Good.” It takes a real talent to borrow from such a recognizable sound. Monét doesn’t just manage to do that — she makes it her own.

'Monaco,' Bad Bunny

Bad Bunny’s 2023 album, “Nadie Sabe Lo Que Va a Pasar Mañana,” is a reclamation of his past sound, the hard-hitting rap that preceded his mainstream superstardom. Perhaps it’s an exercise in getting back to the basics while unraveling the complications of fame, the source material for most of the album’s lyrics. At any rate, the combination makes for a more restrained, pointed listen: a true success on the stellar “Monaco,” a Latin trap song with a need for speed that wouldn’t feel too far removed on his debut album, 2018’s “X 100PRE.” Benito’s smooth, somber baritone carries the track, as does the rush sound of a Formula One car that bleeds into baroque production.

'Flowers,' Miley Cyrus

There’s a thin line between courageous and corny when it comes to uplifting pop records. Far too often, an empowering song with an ascendant chorus loses all tension and hits the ear like a too-sweet dessert. But on Miley Cyrus’ Grammy-nominated “Flowers,” her first No. 1 hit in a decade, the pop superstar makes magic happen. It’s a summery, retro-pop single teeming with optimism born out of divorce. “No remorse, no regret / I forgive every word you said,” she sings — the musical equivalent of someone saying, “I’m bored with this conversation” — before launching into a self-help mantra. Then, she finds an emotional solution and musical resolve in her chorus: “I can love me better than you can.”

'Boy's A Liar Pt. 2,'

PinkPantheress and Ice Spice

It is the song of the summer — heck, the year — and it came out in January. The dream team of Bronx rapper Ice Spice and hyperpop-punk hero PinkPantheress made “Boy’s a Liar Pt. 2” an examination of modern dating with an undeniable hook. It is so space-y as to take flight; a lackadaisical remix for the current moment. Plus, the pronunciation of “Liar”

like “Leo” in the song’s chorus is “It’s Gonna Be May”-level creativity. What’s not to love?

'I Remember Everything,' Zach Bryan and Kacey Musgraves

Country artist Zach Bryan knows a thing or two about writing the loneliness of heartbreak into song with cutting specificity. It is one of the reasons his 2022 major label debut, “American Heartbreak,” was named one of AP’s top albums of last year. And it is part of the reason why his 2023 single and first No. 1 track, “I Remember Everything,” is one of our favorites of this year. It’s confessional, rich, balladic songwriting amplified by his full-hearted voice — those open, resonating notes — and the sweetness of Musgraves’ tone.

'Crave,' Paramore

Long gone are the burnt orange pop-punk days of Paramore’s youth. The Tennessee rock band flirts with animated post-punk these days, experimenting with asymmetrical synth production that mirrors internal anxieties and the external forces that augment them. “Crave” is the latter reflecting on the former: a propulsive, matured band dancing around a prickly guitar riff. But at its core, like in all great Paramore tracks, is frontwoman Hayley Williams stretching her vast vocal range, belting out frustrations and exciting misguided desires.

'Rush,'

Troye Sivan

The opening track and lead single from Australian pop powerhouse Troye Sivan’s third full-length album, “Something



MARTA LAVANDIER/AP

Bad Bunny performs at the Latin Billboard Awards in Coral Gables, Fla., on Oct. 5. His “Monaco” reclaims the sound that preceded his mainstream superstardom.

to Give Each Other,” is all falsetto, locker room chants and utopic homoeroticism: “I feel the rush / Addicted to your touch,” a group of men harmonize on the perfect pop of his lead single, “Rush.”

Bravado is instituted only to drive home a sort of sweaty sexuality, all fun and light atop house and EDM beats. Sivan offered AP a kind of mantra for the song in an interview earlier this year: “Things are good. Life is fun. Sex is great.”

'Dumbest Girl Alive,' 100 geecs

What came first: the chicken or the egg, 100 geecs or

the internet genre of hyperpop? It doesn’t matter. The duo of Laura Les and Dylan Brady are not in the market for sense; rather, their musical art is fueled by pixelated chaos. In the case of “Dumbest Girl Alive,” a choice cut from their sophomore LP “10,000 geecs,” the only thing that matters is the nu-metal bass lick and distorted vocals that deliver unintelligible lines like “Put emojis on my grave / I’m the dumbest girl alive.” It’s 2023’s best song that sounds like getting sucked into a computer simulation, fun and dumb in equal measure.

'OMG,' NewJeans

In 2023, girl groups dominated the K-pop conversation. At the fore is NewJeans, with their Y2K-nostalgic sound that pulls from the turn of the millennium’s R&B and pop music. “OMG” was the catalyst for their fame, with its addictive trap rhythm, propelled by U.K. garage-inspired production, tasteful cowbells (you read that correctly) and a sticky staccato synth that lays a strong foundation, brought to the next level by the quintet’s ebullient harmonies. Oh my, oh my god, indeed.

'Tantor,' Danny Brown

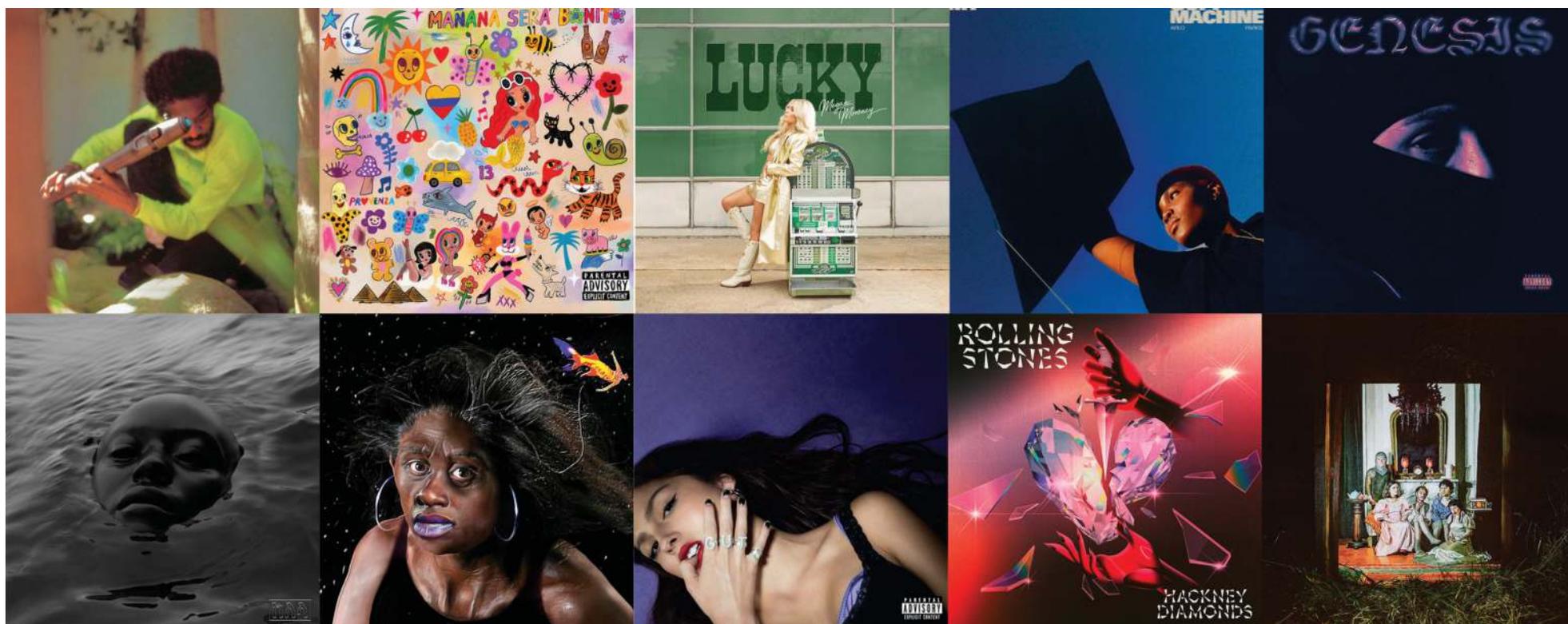
Danny Brown’s absurdist approach to contemporary rap has made him one to watch for years, and “Tantor,” the teetering lead single from his long-awaited sixth studio album “Quaranta,” is proof. The Alchemist-produced track is, in moments, prog-rock avant-rap, a retro-futuristic hip-hop filtered through, like, “Robocop.” If cyborgs aren’t your thing, look away — but then you’d be missing one of the most welcomingly clangorous and charming tracks of 2023.

Victoria Monét attends the Variety Hitmakers Brunch on Dec. 2 in Los Angeles. Monét’s “On My Mama” was named one of the top songs of the year by The Associated Press.

JORDAN STRAUSS/AP



YEAR IN REVIEW – MUSIC



Top row, from left: “New Blue Sun” by André 3000, “Mañana Será Bonito” by Karol G, “Lucky” by Megan Moroney, “My Soft Machine” by Arlo Parks and “Génesis” by Peso Pluma. Second row: “Raven” by Kelela, “Sundial” by Noname, “GUTS” by Olivia Rodrigo, “Hackney Diamonds” by the Rolling Stones and “Rat Saw God” by Wednesday.

Rodrigo, the Stones among AP’s top albums

By MARIA SHERMAN
Associated Press

It was a blockbuster year across genres, but only a few could make AP’s list. (SZA’s “SOS” released in December 2022, Ice Spice’s “Like...?” isn’t a full-length release, and the 11 Grammy nominations for “Barbie the Album” is recognition enough.)

Instead of embracing the antiquated practice of ranking very different albums against one another, we’re celebrating the best next to the best. Enjoy.

‘Génesis,’ Peso Pluma

The year belongs to regional Mexican artists, who brought their banda, norteño, mariachi, sierrano and more to geographies well beyond Mexico and the southwest U.S. As Carín León told The Associated Press earlier this year, it is no longer “regional,” but “global” music. Leading the charge is Peso Pluma, whose third studio album, “Génesis,” became the highest-charting regional Mexican album of all time. Across 14 tracks, Pluma marries contemporary swagger with traditional corridos tumbados, bringing the colorful and once-maligned music to the masses — and making it all his own in the same breath.

‘GUTS,’ Olivia Rodrigo

In the two years since her tear-jerking ballad “drivers license” came in like a wrecking ball, Olivia Rodrigo experienced a lot of life in a short period of time, resulting in “GUTS,” her sophomore album. Across 12 tracks of big-feelings balladry and riot grrrl-informed power pop-punk, Rodrigo expertly soundtracks the throes of fame — and the experience of entering your 20s. From the bloodsucking piano ballad “vampire” to the cheeky backslide anthem “bad idea right?” to the Joan Didion-referencing clean screams of “all-american bitch,” Rodrigo makes some hard lemonade out of some of life’s lemons — a sonic treatise on a modern young

woman’s dissatisfaction.

‘Lucky,’ Megan Moroney

Let’s cut straight to the chase: Country music dominated this year. But beyond Top 40 metrics should be recognition of Megan Moroney, whose stellar debut album “Lucky” emerged fully formed and fully without the male bravado that punctuates much of mainstream country. Her swooning single “Tennessee Orange” was ubiquitous on country radio this year, but it’s the whole of “Lucky” — and Moroney’s position as a songwriter with Swift-level acuity — that makes her one to watch.

‘Hackney Diamonds,’ The Rolling Stones

Prior to “Hackney Diamonds,” the Rolling Stones hadn’t released an album of original material in 18 years. (That was 2005’s “A Bigger Bang,” and a bigger bang it wasn’t.) No one saw this album coming, as raw and rocking as ever: a collection of 12 crackling songs, their first since the 2021 death of drummer Charlie Watts, produced by Andrew Watt (known for his work with Post Malone and Justin Bieber), featuring Lady Gaga, and a rapturous addition to their already legendary discography. But that’s the Stones for you — it’s as if they invented new ways to approach longevity.

‘Raven,’ Kelela

On her sophomore album, “Raven,” the fluid R&B singer Kelela offers a masterclass in sensual breakbeats and experiences in queer Black motherhood. (She sends potential collaborators a reading list featuring bell hooks and “Decolonizing Love in a World Rigged for Black Women’s Loneliness” by Shaadi Devereaux.) If pulling from U.K. garage, ’90s house and electronica has become a trend in 2023, Kelela does it with a restrained intensity — soulful vocals atop dance rhythms, hazy sunset music set in a vintage club, like on the single “Contact.” “Loneliness, I see in

your eyes / It might just render you blind,” she sings. “Baby, let’s dance it away.”

‘Mañana Será Bonito,’ Karol G

It took decades for reggaetón to be recognized in the mainstream arena and outside of the diverse Latin communities that created it — music comprising Jamaican dancehall riddims, Puerto Rican el underground, Panamanian reggae en español, New York hip-hop and beyond. But even now, when reggaetón enjoys worldwide success, men dominate the conversation: Bad Bunny, Daddy Yankee, J Balvin and Rauw Alejandro, to name a few. On “Mañana Será Bonito,” the greatest album in Karol G’s discography, the Colombian superstar proves there’s been some serious gender oversight.

‘New Blue Sun,’ André 3000

It’s not a rap record, but the opening track is titled “I Swear, I Really Wanted to Make a ‘Rap’ Album but This Is Literally the Way the Wind Blew Me This Time.” That one features California alt-jazz experimentalist Carlos Niño and sets the tone for the most daring release of 2023. For the first time in 17 years, André 3000 — half of the best-selling hip-hop duo of all time, Outkast — has released a new album of original material. Across 87 minutes, the musical innovator plays upward of 40 different types of flutes from around the world on this ambient jazz LP. It is a minimal, meditative listening experience — in some ways, ancient and, in others, an extension of the Afrofuturism that André 3000 has always worked to bring to the forefront.

‘Sundial,’ Noname

In a little over half an hour, Noname’s “Sundial” jolts the Chicago rapper-poet’s audience. The album is a contentious and confrontational continuation of the spirit felt on 2018’s “Room 25,” centering Black art and simultaneously unraveling the ways in which it is exploited. The high-

light, if just one, is “Namesake,” a track where Noname targets Rihanna, Beyoncé and Kendrick Lamar’s ties to the NFL. “War machine gets glamorized / We play the game to pass the time,” she raps, before flipping the lens on herself and her own shakable politics. Ideological quandaries — speaking truth to power and then highlighting the instances where that fails — abound, delivered in smooth packages.

‘Rat Saw God,’ Wednesday

The most exciting band in contemporary indie rock is informed by Drive-By Truckers, delivering an alt-country rock sensibility where narrative storytelling — pulling the listener into the quiet parts of a Carolinas hometown — is as much a part of the sonic fabric as lap steel or guitar fuzz or a poetic line sung out of key. At the heart of “Rat Saw God,” Wednesday’s fifth album, is a tension that plays out like a sonic embrace. It is an album about the complications of Southern identity, the pride and grit and shame and particularities of American geography that come out in songs about machine guns, race car drivers, crickets, trucks, Dollywood, sedans and Narcan.

‘My Soft Machine,’ Arlo Parks

It hasn’t been too long since Arlo Parks truly made a name for herself in 2021, when her unique brand of introspective R&B earned her a Mercury Award and two Grammy nominations for her debut album, “Collapsed in Sunbeams.” Parks’ acute understanding of writing early-20s ennui has only sharpened. On “My Soft Machine,” she expertly navigates an incredible diversity of sound: the reverbed guitars and breathy vocals of “Purple Phase,” the ’00s pop-rock-meets-soul of “Devotion,” the blurry retro “Room (red wings),” and the sweet love song “Impurities.” She manages to weave sounds together that shouldn’t quite fit together, finding congruency in her downy melodies and romantic lyricism.

YEAR IN REVIEW — VIDEO GAMES

These games had the goods

Washington Post reporter shares top 10 titles

BY GENE PARK
The Washington Post

This was one of the most critically acclaimed years ever in the video game industry. Month after month, a new video game became the standard-bearer for its respective genre, series or platform. Legendary classics like Resident Evil 4 and Metroid Prime received transformative remakes and remasters. And original titles pushed the art forward.

Among this unprecedented release schedule, the following 10 games have left an indelible mark on anyone who touched them.



Larian Studios

Baldur's Gate 3 is the best digital re-creation of a tabletop Dungeons & Dragons game.



Bethesda

Starfield

Bethesda Game Studios' ambition to create a thousand explorable planets sacrificed much of the developer's classic open-world magic. Still, Xbox's biggest title in recent years offered a space exploration adventure that kept its most concrete promises of inhabiting many different lives among the stars.



Team Reptile

Bomb Rush Cyberfunk

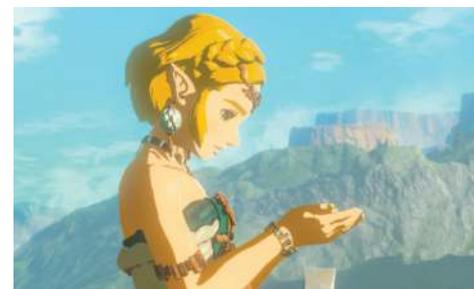
Sega Dreamcast cult hit Jet Set Radio is the clear inspiration for this stylish action platformer, but the original aged poorly due to turn-of-the-century challenges in depicting 3D worlds. Netherlands developer Team Reptile properly updated controls and sharpened player goals to finally give the formula its long-deserved shine.



Round8 Studio

Lies of P

South Korean developer Round8 Studio makes a big splash with its first international release, elevating and at times surpassing the grindingly difficult formula popularized by the Dark Souls series. A newly conscious puppet navigates a dark spin on the classic Pinocchio tale that has more surprises than expected.



Nintendo

The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom

Nintendo games emphasize the concept of play above all, and TotK takes this to its natural extreme. Players can build almost anything, including robots and vehicles powered by literal quantum physics. It's Zelda for Minecraft fans, and it's a technical miracle on the aging Switch console.



Capcom

Street Fighter 6

Intending to grow a niche fighting game audience, Capcom made the latest chapter of the legendary series widely accessible with simple controls; fast, sturdy online play; and a compelling, funny story mode that allows for endless customization.



Black Salt Games

Dredge

True horror is found in the violation of safe spaces, and New Zealand studio Black Salt Games demonstrates its mastery of this concept in one of the great comfort sports, fishing. It's no coincidence that this game's title sounds like dread.



Square Enix

Final Fantasy XVI

Despite this entry's narrative messiness when handling themes of slavery and self-determination, Final Fantasy games are renowned for their dramatically emotional moments. Square Enix's PlayStation 5 exclusive nails this aspect, making it one of the most memorable stories of the year. It's a stellar action game, too.



Tango Gameworks

Hi-Fi Rush

Released by Tango Gameworks in January, Hi-Fi Rush is still one of the most innovative games of the year. It's an action game where every player input and on-screen element moves in time with the music, an audiovisual riot that feels unbeatably fresh.

Baldur's Gate 3

Larian Studios created the best digital re-creation of a tabletop Dungeons & Dragons game, an ideal chased by hundreds of studios since the inception of the games industry. It's an Olympian feat that the game narrative naturally threads out into untold different permutations, all at the whim of the player's intuition and fancy. Any character and line of dialogue can lead to another call to adventure. Baldur's Gate 3 is the new benchmark for computer role-playing games.

Alan Wake 2

While other games tried to push respective genres forward, Remedy Entertainment's psychological thriller rams against the boundaries of the medium altogether. On the surface, it seems like a typical horror game based on a novelist struggling with writer's block. But it's impossible to guess where this experience goes.

FACES

Wahlberg plans Hollywood 2.0

Actor discusses new movie 'The Family Plan,' dreams for Las Vegas film mecca

BY LINDSEY BAHR
Associated Press

Mark Wahlberg knows as well as any parent that it's hard to find a movie everyone in the household wants to watch — especially with teenagers around. It's part of the reason he latched on to "The Family Plan," a charming action-comedy about a former assassin turned suburban dad whose past catches up with him. It's now streaming on Apple TV+.

"You always have movies that parents can go to with the kids and they'll tolerate them because the kids really want to see it or vice versa," Wahlberg told the AP. "But this really felt like it was a movie that actually was for the whole family."

Early in "The Family Plan," his character is attacked in a grocery store and he must fend off the assailant with his 10-month-old in a baby-carrier on his chest. With his minivan cover blown, he then must convince his wife and teenagers to embark on a cross-country road trip to outrun the danger that he's also desperately trying to keep secret from them.

The grocery store fight with the baby needed to be a tone-setting moment. Director Simon Cellan Jones, a television director whose credits include "Boardwalk Empire," thought it was a "fantastic concept. It was a real spin on an action movie scene."

But he also wanted to use real babies rather than dolls. That, everyone quickly found, would prove immensely difficult.

"The baby's supposed to be enjoying seeing daddy in action. The baby and the audience are they only ones privy to that. But getting (the twins) to chuckle or laugh while somebody's kicking or flinging us around, that was next to impossible," Wahlberg said. "I thought we were in trouble."

Then in the editing room, they were relieved to discover that the babies had in fact performed. As Wahlberg said, the twins knew when to turn it on.



Apple TV+

Mark Wahlberg and Michelle Monaghan star in "The Family Plan," now streaming on Apple TV+. Monaghan says she was excited to take part in a comedy.

"I'm very proud of that scene," Cellan Jones said.

Wahlberg called on Michelle Monaghan to see if she'd want to star opposite him as his wife. The two had enjoyed working together on the Boston Marathon bombings drama "Patriot's Day" — and he even calls her "captain fun" on set — but Monaghan was mostly excited to get a comedy.

"It was truly one of the funniest scripts I've read in a long time," Monaghan said. "Creatively, I was super excited because it has a lot of facets of what I like to do as an artist with action and comedy. There are inventive, high-octane action sequences. But, at the heart of it, is this really, really sweet family that you're rooting for."

They filmed much of the movie in Wahlberg's new hometown of Las Vegas, where he dreams of creating a Hollywood 2.0 with tax credits, a studio and more affordable housing and better quality of life for crews. He and his family relocated from Los Angeles last year, and he's already made two movies there.

"People know how serious we are, but you can't put the carriage before the horse," Wahlberg said. "There are tons of talented people here, but also to attract new people you have to make sure that there is a guarantee you work for X amount of time. And (the state) wants to make sure that if they're

giving up the tax credit, that people are going to come."

Wahlberg has another movie with Cellan Jones on the way too, "Arthur the King," based on the true story of an adventure racer who befriends a stray dog who accompanies his team on a 435-mile journey through the Dominican Republic.

Wahlberg also produced "Arthur the King," which will be released theatrically from Lionsgate in March. When it comes to questions of theatrical versus streaming, he said he's just rolling with the punches and trying to stay ahead of the curve.

"In a perfect world, we all wanted to hold on to theatrical as much as possible. But people decided long ago how and where they wanted to consume their content," Wahlberg said. "And working with a company like Apple is very exciting to me."

Besides, he found the living room television was actually the perfect place to watch "The Family Plan."

"I went to watch the first cut of the movie in my home and, it's PG-13, there was only one F-bomb, so it was safe to turn on in the living room as opposed to hiding somewhere. And then slowly but surely everyone was sitting around the TV watching and enjoying the film, without any devices or distraction," Wahlberg said. "It was nice to see that."



AP

Ariana Grande has announced that she will release a new album in 2024, her seventh studio album and first since 2020.

Ariana Grande announces new album for 2024

Associated Press

Thank you, next: On Wednesday, Ariana Grande announced that she will release a new album in 2024.

The two-time Grammy award winner teased the future full-length album on her Instagram page. It will be her seventh studio album and first since 2020's "Positions."

"See you next year," she wrote in the caption of the Instagram post, which included images in a studio and in front of a mixing board, and a video where someone off screen tells her it is "almost the last day of this album." Grande responds, "I'm so tired," and laughs. "But so happy and grateful. I also feel like I weigh 3,000 tons."

On her Instagram story, she shared a screenshot captured from FaceTime with the text, "The two moods of the album."

She also shared posts from fans and a note that also read, "See you next year."

The announcement arrives a few weeks after news broke that Ariana Grande signed with the Good World Management firm, following her split with long-term manager Scooter Braun.

The new album will also be her first since her marriage and subsequent separation from real estate agent Dalton Gomez.

Comedian Tom Smothers, one-half of the Smothers Brothers, dies

BY FRAZIER MOORE AND ANDREW DALTON
Associated Press

Tom Smothers, half of the Smothers Brothers and the co-host of one of the most socially conscious and groundbreaking television shows in the history of the medium, has died at 86.

The National Comedy Center, on behalf of his family, said in a statement Wednesday that Smothers died Tuesday at home in Santa Rosa, Calif., of cancer.

"I'm just devastated," his brother and the duo's other half, Dick Smothers, told The Associated Press in an interview Wednesday. "Every breath I've taken, my brother's been around."

When "The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour" debuted on CBS in the fall of 1967 it was an immediate hit, to the surprise of many who had assumed the network's expectations were so low it positioned their show opposite the top-rated "Bonanza."

The Smothers Brothers proved to be a turning point in television history, with its sharp eye for pop culture trends and young rock stars such as the Who and Buffalo Spring-

field, and its daring sketches — ridiculing the Establishment, railing against the Vietnam War and portraying members of the era's hippie counterculture as gentle, fun-loving spirits — found an immediate audience with young baby boomers.



Tom Smothers in 2002

"We were moderate. We were never out there," Dick Smothers said. "But we were the first people through that door. It just sort of crept in as the '60s crept in. We were part of that generation."

The show reached No. 16 in the ratings in its first season. It also drew the ire of network censors. After years of battling with the brothers over the show's creative content, the network abruptly canceled the program in 1970, accusing the siblings

of failing to submit an episode in time for the censors to review.

After the show was canceled, the brothers sued CBS for \$31 million and were awarded \$775,000. Their battles with the network were chronicled in the 2002 documentary

"Smothered: The Censorship Struggles of the Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour."

Thomas Bolyn Smothers III was born Feb. 2, 1937, on Governors Island, N.Y., where his father, an Army major, was stationed. His brother was born two years later. In 1940 their father was transferred to the Philippines, and his wife, two sons and their sister, Sherry, accompanied him.

When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, the family was sent home and Maj. Smothers remained. He was captured by the Japanese during the war and died in captivity. The family eventually moved to the Los Angeles suburb of Redondo Beach, where Smothers helped his mother take care of his brother and sister while she worked.

The brothers had seemed unlikely to make television history. They had spent several years on the nightclub and college circuits and doing TV guest appearances, honing an offbeat comedy routine that mixed folk music with a healthy dose of sibling rivalry.

Smothers married three times and had three children. He is survived by his wife Marcy, children Bo and Riley Rose, and brother Dick, in addition to other relatives.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

New Year's Eve weddings may hit record this year

NV LAS VEGAS — For better or for worse, a wave of couples saying “I do” in Las Vegas on New Year's Eve could set a record for the city's busiest wedding day ever.

That's because 12/31/23 is known in the massive Las Vegas wedding industry as a “specialty date,” thanks to the repeating 1-2-3 1-2-3 pattern, the Las Vegas Review-Journal reported.

The icing on the cake? This specialty date falls on a holiday famous for blowout celebrations.

“It's a double whammy,” said Melody Willis-Williams, president of Vegas Weddings, which operates multiple venues. “Anytime you get these specialty dates, they're always hugely popular. But tie that in with New Year's Eve and it's a showstopper.”

The number to beat on New Year's Eve is 4,492—the single-day record for marriages in Las Vegas set on July 7, 2007.

Failed swatting attempted at Rep. Greene's home

GA ROME — Republican Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene was the target of a swatting attempt at her Georgia residence on Christmas morning, the congresswoman and local police said, marking the latest instance of someone calling in a fake emergency to draw armed officers or SWAT teams to her home.

The Rome Police Department quickly verified that the call was a hoax and did not send officers to the house, department spokesperson Kelly Madden said.

“I was just swatted. This is like the 8th time. On Christmas with my family here. My local police are the GREATEST and shouldn't have to deal with this,” Greene wrote in a post on X.

A man in New York called the Georgia suicide hotline claiming that he had shot his girlfriend at Greene's home and was going to kill himself next, Madden said.

Man stuck in truck saved after spotted by passersby

IN PORTAGE — A man who had been trapped for days in his crashed pickup truck was rescued Tuesday after two fishermen spotted the wreckage, Indiana State Police said.

Two men were scouting fishing locations when they found the man in his badly damaged vehicle, Sgt. Glen Fifield told local news outlets.

“They touched the body, and the person turned their head and started talking to them. So, that got a little rise out of them,” Fifield said.

The driver told the men he had been trapped since Dec. 20. The pickup had wrecked along Interstate 94 near Portage below an underpass where it could not be seen from the highway above.

The man, in his 20s, was airlifted to a hospital in South Bend for treat-



RICHARD VOGEL/AP

Corny decorations

Volunteers begin decorating the OneLegacy Donate Life Rose Parade Float at Fiesta Parade Floats in Irwindale, Calif., on Tuesday. Decorator's week has officially started with the Rose Parade less than a week away. All week long, thousands of volunteers will decorate the floats.

ment of life-threatening injuries, Fifield said.

Man pleads guilty to bank robbery in his hometown

MS JACKSON — A man faces up to 20 years in prison after he pleaded guilty to robbing a bank in his hometown in Mississippi.

Curtis Lee Williams, 21, robbed the BankPlus branch in Durant while wearing sunglasses, a wig, and no shoes, according to court documents and statements made in court during his plea hearing.

Within hours of the robbery, a \$50 bait bill from the bank was used to buy three firearms from a pawn shop in Kosciusko, about 18 miles east of Durant, U.S. Attorney Todd W. Gee and Jermicha Fomby, special agent in charge of the FBI's Jackson office, said in a news release. Williams was arrested later that day after a traffic stop in Durant, they said.

Lawmaker has no plans to resign after making slurs

ND BISMARCK — A North Dakota Republican lawmaker has no plans to immediately resign, despite party leaders' calls for him to step down after he railed against police with profane, homophobic and anti-migrant language during a recent traffic stop that ended in his arrest on a charge of drunken driving.

In a statement Wednesday, Republican state Rep. Nico Rios, of Williston, said he is “seriously mulling all aspects” of his future.

“As I weigh my future in the legislature, I am going to spend the next few months addressing my issues with alcoholism and getting the help I need,” he said in a statement. “Any decision I make going forward will be made with a sober mind and deliberative clarity. To do so, I will be prioritizing breaking my chemical dependency on alcohol, improving the interpersonal relations I have strained, and listening to our community.”

Rios also said he takes responsibility for his “disgusting actions” during the Dec. 15 traffic stop, and apologized “to those I have hurt and disappointed,” including law enforcement officers.

Rios' statement comes a day after Republican House Majority Leader Mike Lefor and state party officials publicly called on him to resign.

White couple who burned cross to be investigated

SC CONWAY — The FBI is investigating a white South Carolina couple for racial discrimination after they set a cross on fire in their yard facing toward their Black neighbors' home.

Federal civil rights investigators searched the white couple's home in Conway, according to FBI spokesperson Kevin Wheeler. The

retired Black couple also recorded video of the cross being burned on Thanksgiving weekend and described days of repeated threats from their neighbors. Worden Evander Butler, 28, and Alexis Paige Hartnett, 27, were arrested on state charges of harassment and later released on bond.

The cross wasn't on fire by the time local police officers arrived, but was still “facing and in full view of the victims' home,” according to a Horry County Police Department report. Shawn and Monica Williams, the Black neighbors, told WMBF-TV that the burning cross was about 8 feet from their fence.

Disney: Appointed panel failing to release records

FL ORLANDO — Disney has filed a lawsuit claiming that the oversight government for Walt Disney World, which was taken over by appointees of Gov. Ron DeSantis, has failed to release documents and properly preserve records in violation of Florida public records law.

Disney said in the lawsuit that the Central Florida Tourism Oversight District, often referred to as CFTOD, has been so slow in fulfilling its public records duties that it has failed to respond completely to a request the company made when it paid more than \$2,400 to get emails and text messages belonging to the five district board members appointed by DeSantis.

The public records lawsuit is asking a judge to review any documents that the district claims are exempt from being released, declare that the district is violating state public records law and order the district to release the documents that Disney has requested.

“CFTOD has prevented Disney from discovering the actions of its government through public records requests, in violation of Florida law,” said the lawsuit filed in state court in Orlando. “The Court should grant Disney relief.”

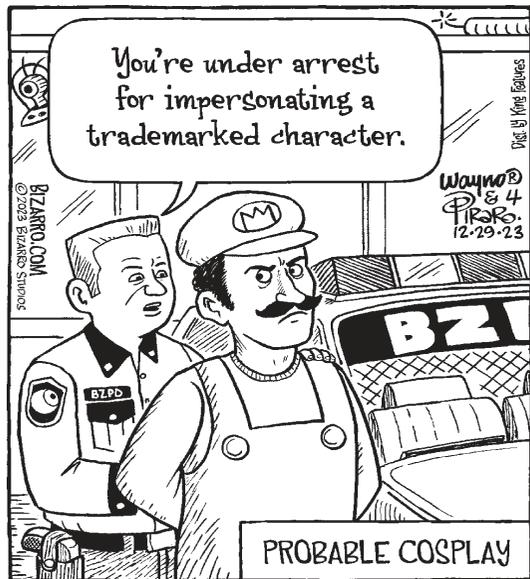
Litigation fighting trans care ban to move forward

AL MONTGOMERY — A federal judge declined to pause litigation challenging Alabama's ban on gender-affirming care for minors as similar cases wind upward toward the U.S. Supreme Court.

U.S. District Judge Liles Burke said no to a request from the U.S. Department of Justice to put the Alabama case on hold until appellate courts decide if they will hear related petitions on whether states can enact such bans. The Justice Department asked for the stay because, “this exceptional legal landscape is quickly evolving.”

Burke wrote that the case will move forward for now. He said a stay might be appropriate later if those petitions are granted.

Bizarro

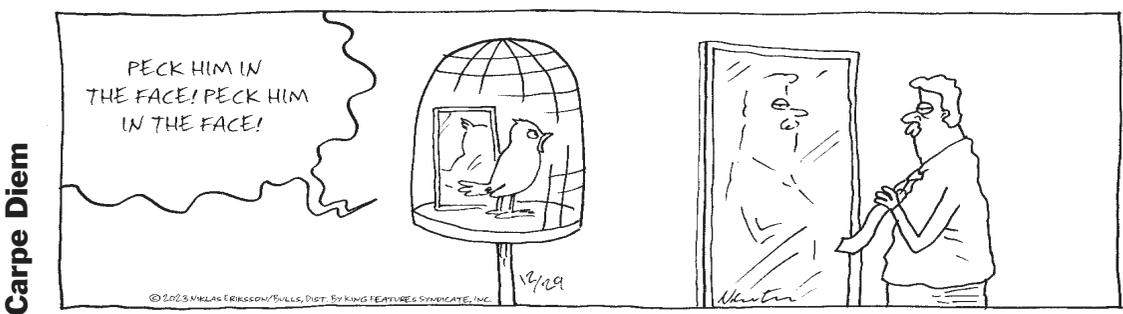
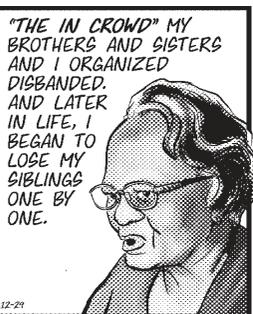
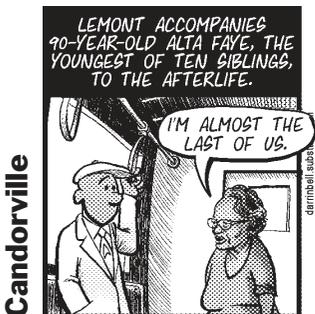
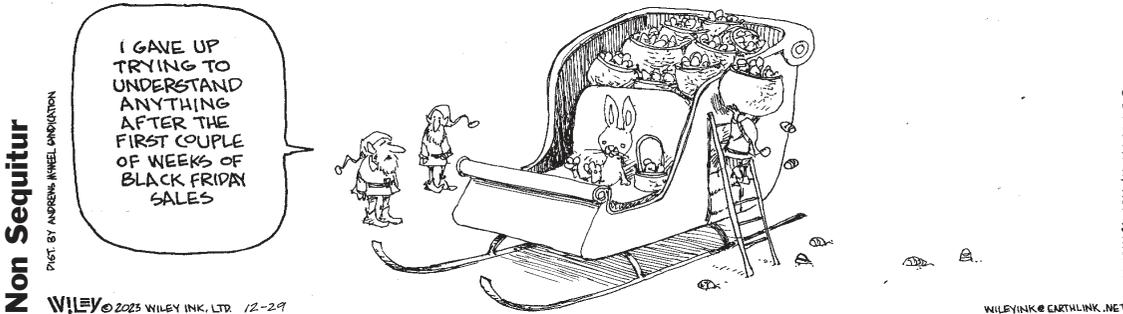
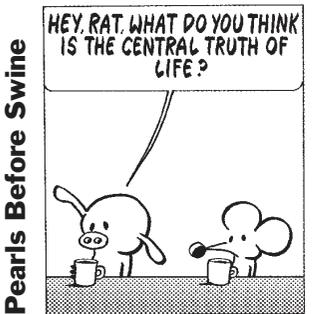


Loose Parts



Eugene Sheffer Crossword

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ACROSS

- 1 German auto
- 4 Roman 202
- 8 Turner or Fey
- 12 Bill's partner
- 13 Expel
- 14 Baltic feeder
- 15 Great Barrier Reef locale
- 17 Libretto
- 18 Music genre for BTS
- 19 Defeats
- 20 River of Rome
- 22 Counterfeit
- 24 Big fusses
- 25 Bar mixer
- 29 Author Tolstoy
- 30 Limerick feature
- 31 Pep
- 32 Church fundraiser
- 34 Big rig
- 35 Wee
- 36 Edgy
- 37 African language group
- 40 Retained
- 41 Six-sided state
- 42 Radio ID
- 46 Donated
- 47 Biblical king
- 48 Bygone bird
- 49 Swizzle
- 50 Doctrines
- 51 Montreal summer

DOWN

- 1 Abbr. in an email
- 2 Cattle call
- 3 Compilation of student exercises
- 4 Shade ending
- 5 Point
- 6 British verb
- 7 "Give — rest!"
- 8 Tribal emblems
- 9 Mid-month date
- 10 Adjoining newspaper section
- 16 Tarzan's clique
- 19 Innocent one
- 20 Body powder
- 21 Notion
- 22 In a sneaky way
- 23 Actor Cronyn

- 25 Casual talk
- 26 Tiebreaker period
- 27 Exemplar of thinness
- 28 During
- 30 Alphabetic sequence
- 33 Choice word
- 34 Tries the coffee
- 36 Oil sources
- 37 Elmer's bane
- 38 Rat- —
- 39 "Avatar" race
- 40 Model Heidi
- 42 CBS forensic drama
- 43 Small batteries
- 44 Inherited
- 45 Scot's denial

Answer to Previous Puzzle

W	N	B	A	N	A	H	A	S	H	E
E	A	R	L	R	D	A	S	P	E	D
A	V	E	C	O	A	R	T	A	R	S
R	E	T	O	R	T	D	A	R	N	
			V	A	C	A	T	I	O	N
I	L	I	E	D	L	O	L	I	L	E
R	U	N	S	R	E	P	O	N	I	N
A	L	T	P	A	R	P	U	G	E	T
Q	U	E	S	T	I	O	N	E	R	
		R	C	A	S	A	Z	T	E	C
R	I	C	A	I	M	O	O	D	I	E
I	D	O	L	N	A	M	W	I	N	E
M	A	M	A	S	C	I	N	E	E	D

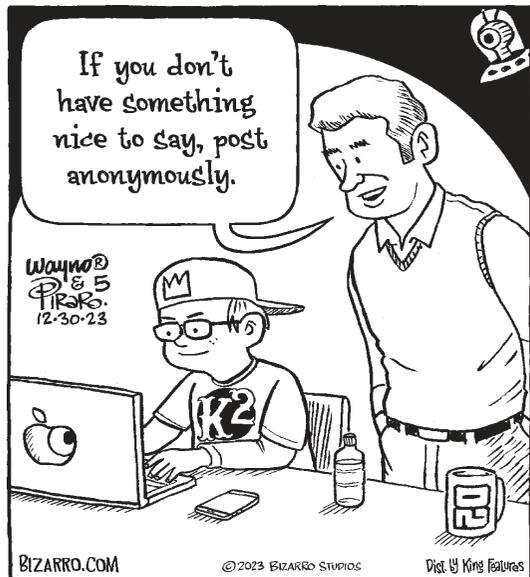
12-29

CRYPTOQUIP

RWLB RYPCJ FQ L NZBBZHA RLK
 BY RQZAW OQOFQGT YN BYJLK'T
 OZCCQHHLZLC AQHQGLBZYH?
 ZH ZHTBL-AGLOT.

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: TITLE OF A TUNE DEDICATED TO THE DELIGHTS OF DELICIOUS DESSERT FROSTINGS: "OF THEE ICING."
 Today's Cryptoquip Clue: R equals W

Bizarro



Loose Parts



Eugene Sheffer Crossword

Grid for Eugene Sheffer Crossword with numbered squares.

ACROSS

- 1 High-five sound
5 Film fragment
9 Gratuity
12 Nursery cry
13 Feels unwell
14 Glass of public radio
15 Friendly leader?
16 "— 18" (Uris novel)
17 Petty peeve
18 Ms. Rowlands
19 Trench
20 Ritzy
21 Lucy of "Elementary"
23 Sony rival
25 Autumnal drinks
28 Seuss title character
32 Maxim
33 Leslie of "Gigi"
34 Cream-pie flavor
36 "Hard as nails," for one
37 Conducted
38 Flamenco cry
39 "West Side Story" gang
42 New England cape
44 Facts and figures
48 Praise in verse
49 Actor Richard
50 Infamous tsar
51 Heavyweight champ Norton
52 Low-calorie

- 53 New York's — Field
54 Tolkien creature
55 Chimney grime
56 Cheeky back talk

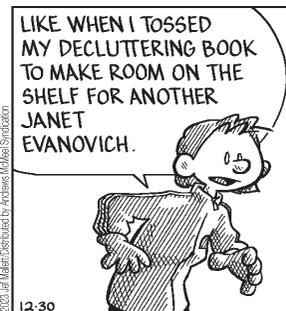
- 22 Peace goddess
24 Director DeMille
25 Urban carrier
26 Journalist Tarbell
27 Quarterback Marino
29 Prefix with athlete
30 Texter's chuckle
31 Chemical suffix
35 Slowly, in music
36 Shakespeare verse
39 Gag
40 Genesis garden
41 Camper's shelter
43 Post-WWII alliance
45 Athletic shoe brand
46 Makes lace
47 Black birds
49 Golfer Ernie

DOWN

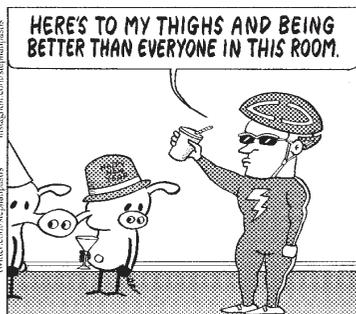
- 1 Overconfident
2 Zap with a beam
3 "So be it"
4 Workers in a law firm
5 School grounds
6 Ovid's 53
7 "Okay, here goes ..."
8 Unpaid TV spot
9 Ex-Yankee Martinez
10 Spring flower
11 Lane
20 Some first responders

Answer to Previous Puzzle

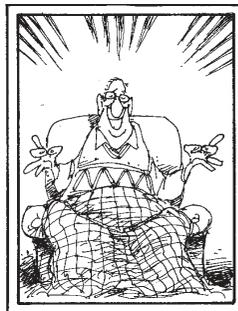
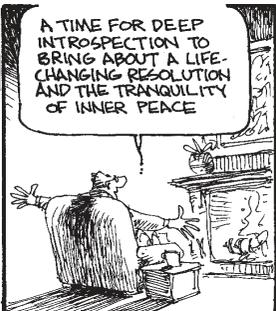
Answer grid for the previous crossword puzzle.



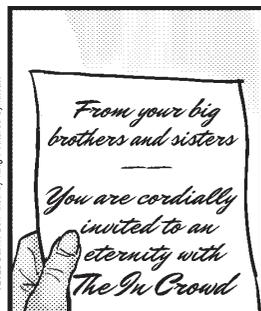
Pearls Before Swine



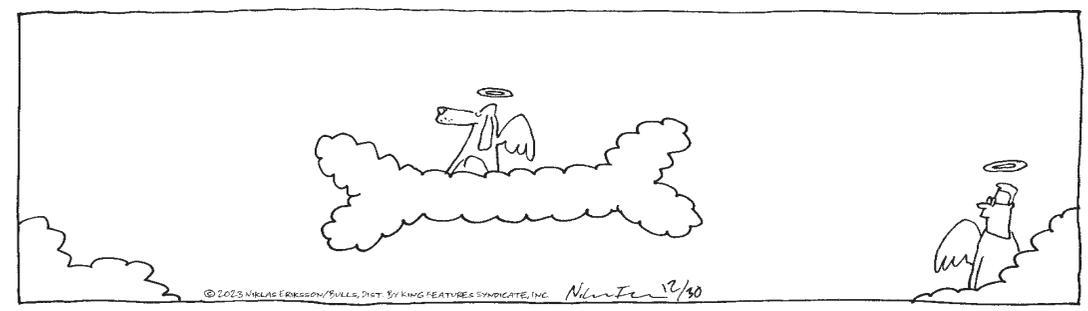
Non Sequitur



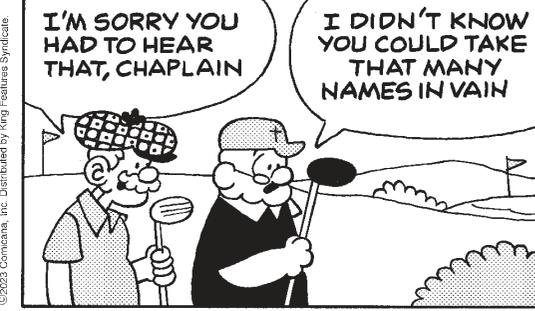
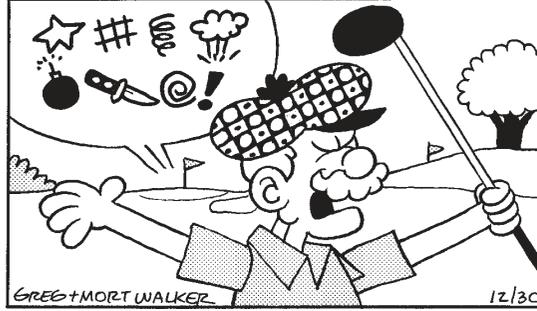
Candorville



Carpe Diem



Beetle Bailey



12-30

CRYPTOQUIP

CT V WMSJPA BPOHR QICAD
OW V WHPQ TPS V FPPD PT
TCBQCPA, C FMHCMKM QIVQ'R
FM V APKMH CRMV.

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: WHAT WOULD BE A FITTING WAY TO WEIGH MEMBERS OF TODAY'S MILLENNIAL GENERATION? IN INSTA-GRAMS. Today's Cryptoquip Clue: W equals P

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OPINION

Ukraine will fight regardless, but this is what it needs

By BERNARD-HENRI LÉVY

Los Angeles Times

Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, has said it many times: If Western military support were to falter, the Ukrainians would continue to fight.

They would do it alone if need be, their backs to the wall, at a terrifying human cost.

They would be in largely the same situation they were in during the first phase of Russia's full-scale invasion. After all, the Ukrainians had to wait months to more than a year for the United States to provide the weapons they needed. During those long months, the courage of the Ukrainians and the talent of their commanders were enough to hold off a Russian military whose troops still were fresh, motivated and sure of themselves.

In a worst-case scenario in which Congress continues to refuse to approve the funds requested by President Joe Biden and Europe follows suit in withdrawing support, the conflict would revert to those early stages. And the Ukrainian forces, which I've observed for two years while making three documentaries from the front lines, would shift to a long and grueling war of resistance.

But they would not lay down their arms. This war is existential. Of this I am sure.

So here's the question: Given that the war will go on, are we going to prolong the fighting or shorten it? Are we going to allow civilian deaths to pile up or try to minimize them?

Will the United States, for vile political reasons, let the conflict fester and encourage authoritarian and anti-American forces

throughout Europe? Or will it decide to come to the aid of its natural and reliable allies in Ukraine?

What message will the country choose to send to imperial China, neo-Ottoman Turkey and an Iran racing toward the nuclear threshold? Will America welcome a multipolar world in which unchecked dictatorships once again lay down the law? Or, having abandoned its allies in Kabul, Aleppo, Irbil and Yerevan, will the country pull itself together behind Kyiv because it's never too late to correct a series of mistakes?

If it's the latter — if enough Republicans reconnect with the spirit of Reagan and enough Democrats remain faithful to that of Kennedy; if they want the world's people to know they are right to rebel and to dream of liberal democracy — then American and allied aid must urgently flow to Ukraine.

European Storm Shadow cruise missiles must be delivered to the Zaporizhzhia region to enable the men and women of the 47th Separate Mechanized Brigade — which took the village of Robotyne last summer in bold commando operations — to push south past Russian fortifications toward occupied Verbove, Tokmak, Berdyansk and the Azov Sea. Ukrainian drone pilots — who have demonstrated since the early days of the war that no Russian ammunition depot, naval base or ship in Crimea is out of their reach — must receive the long-range U.S. Army Tactical Missile Systems promised since September, which they need to fully open the Black Sea. F-16s, whose arrival near Donbas is equally overdue, are an essential complement to the artillery and in-

fantry units working to liberate the Bakhmut and Avdiivka zones and the routes in and out of Donetsk and Luhansk.

To the south, in the Kherson zone, which was liberated more than a year ago by unassisted Ukrainian forces, the need is for river-crossing gear, amphibious equipment and light Bradley tanks. That would enable the Ukrainian commandos under the command of Maj. Gen. Andriy Kovalchuk to expand the operations I watched them conducting on far too small a scale to the eastern side of the Dnipro River, near the villages of Krynyky, Kozachi Laheri and Korsunka.

Additionally, Ukraine needs an "iron dome" worthy of the name to replace the mobile anti-aircraft units I accompanied in makeshift pickup trucks as they chased drones headed for major Ukrainian cities, trying to shoot them down with bazookas.

For the most part, these weapons are readily available in American and European stockpiles. They come at a cost, of course. But that cost is far lower than that of a defeated Ukraine, which could well embolden Russia to go after a NATO country and force a full-scale U.S. and European intervention.

Our defense budgets today are half what they were during the Cold War — and of what they will have to be if we allow Russia to become an offensive threat again. While we hesitate to pay our respects to international law in dollars, the Ukrainians are paying in blood.

Bernard-Henri Lévy is a philosopher, author and filmmaker. His latest documentary from the front lines of the war on Ukraine, "Glory to the Heroes," recently was released nationwide and follows two others, "Slava Ukraini" and "Why Ukraine."

Self-deception on Ukraine should not extend to Orban

By LEE HOCKSTADER

The Washington Post

PARIS

The West has fooled itself too often in the fight over Ukraine's survival. Now there are signs — in Europe, especially — that its crippling capacity for self-deception will continue into the new year.

The United States and its allies deluded themselves for years about Vladimir Putin's intentions, dismissing suggestions that the Russian leader would use force to reconstitute major parts of the former Soviet Union.

When he began pouring troops into Ukraine last year, magical thinking led the West to believe sanctions would bring Russia to its knees — despite the Kremlin's vast resources and relative immunity to domestic political pressure. Meanwhile, the West tricked itself into thinking that sloganeering could forge a consensus to back Kyiv — "for as long as it takes," as President Joe Biden put it — without explaining that sacrifice, setbacks and staggering sums of money would inevitably be needed. Biden's shift to the phrase "for as long as we can" during a recent news conference with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy signaled the apparent emptiness of that promise.

Europe also deceived itself — and Ukrainians in the bargain — by pledging last March to send Kyiv 1 million artillery shells over the next year. That goal was wishful thinking given the Continent's anemic military production capacity, sapped by decades of atrophy following the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Europe is now doubling down on its delusions by convincing itself that it can carry on as usual with its defining postwar peace project,

the European Union, even as its most basic values are subverted and attacked from within.

The risk of that particular self-deception has metastasized largely because of one man: Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who has made no secret of his intent to destroy Western unity on Ukraine.

It matters little that Orban has driven Hungary's economy into a ditch, or that its economic output and population of 10 million are tiny fractions of the EU's total. What counts is that Hungary, Putin's Trojan horse in the heart of Europe, has weaponized the EU's rules on Moscow's behalf.

Orban, a darling of U.S. Republicans, has gutted Hungary's democracy and made a sham of baseline EU expectations of its members: judicial independence, media freedom, minority rights, fair elections and tolerance.

That tragedy, for Hungarians and for Europe, will become farce next summer when Hungary takes over the rotating EU presidency, a role that grants Orban agenda-setting powers for a six-month term.

That bully pulpit will afford him the chance to embarrass the EU by showcasing his obstructionism, especially on Ukraine. But the broader threat he represents inside the alliance is real owing to the EU's antiquated voting rules.

This month, Orban wielded Hungary's veto to block a \$55 billion package of EU budget support for Ukraine, which would help Kyiv to pay its bills through 2027. He relented on allowing Ukraine to begin talks on eventual EU membership, but one of his top advisers warned that the lengthy approval process would give Orban at least 70 more chances to impede Ukraine's progress toward that goal.

Europeans might still scrounge the \$55 billion, perhaps through individual country-by-country deals with Ukraine. But it is folly to think the EU can carry on tolerating a veto-wielding tyrant within its ranks. Orban has done damage already; he can and will do more.

There are options for neutering him. European leaders could block Hungary's turn in the EU presidency or suspend its voting rights altogether within the bloc. But top officials have balked even at threatening to take those actions.

"That's an age-old thing," Daniel Freund, a German member of the European parliament aligned with the Green Party, told me. "Member states don't go against each other."

The EU did freeze roughly \$30 billion in funds for Budapest, citing Hungary's rule-of-law offenses, but seemed to cave by releasing more than \$10 billion shortly before Orban dropped his threat to block talks on Ukraine's EU membership. That looked like a payoff, likely to encourage new efforts at extortion.

Yet even if European officials stand fast by refusing to unlock billions more in funding, Orban is unlikely to be moved. As Daniel Hegeüs of the German Marshall Fund of the United States explained to me, "his main strategic priority is regime stability; he wants his regime to survive."

The EU has no mechanism to expel a member state. So if changing the rules to contain the damage Orban can do is what it takes to marginalize him, then it's time for the EU to change them. Let 2024 be the year the West removes the scales from its eyes.

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

SCOREBOARD/SKIING

PRO FOOTBALL

NFL American Conference

East						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
x-Miami	11	4	0	.733	463	314
Buffalo	9	6	0	.600	403	276
e-N.Y. Jets	6	9	0	.400	231	315
e-New England	4	11	0	.267	212	322

South						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Houston	8	7	0	.533	328	331
Indianapolis	8	7	0	.533	354	372
Jacksonville	8	7	0	.533	331	343
e-Tennessee	5	10	0	.333	274	321

North						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
x-Baltimore	12	3	0	.800	417	244
Cleveland	10	5	0	.667	345	311
Cincinnati	8	7	0	.533	318	345
Pittsburgh	8	7	0	.533	257	291

West						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Kansas City	9	6	0	.600	333	265
Denver	7	8	0	.467	327	377
Las Vegas	7	8	0	.467	285	294
e-L.A. Chargers	5	10	0	.333	325	369

National Conference

East						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
x-Philadelphia	11	4	0	.733	392	366
x-Dallas	10	5	0	.667	451	286
e-N.Y. Giants	5	10	0	.333	214	371
e-Washington	4	11	0	.267	309	453

South						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Tampa Bay	8	7	0	.533	326	302
Atlanta	7	8	0	.467	287	288
New Orleans	7	8	0	.467	331	297
e-Carolina	2	13	0	.133	236	381

North						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
y-Detroit	11	4	0	.733	412	355
Green Bay	7	8	0	.467	333	331
Minnesota	7	8	0	.467	314	299
Chicago	6	9	0	.400	314	345

West						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
y-San Francisco	11	4	0	.733	444	267
L.A. Rams	8	7	0	.533	357	332
Seattle	8	7	0	.533	320	352
e-Arizona	3	12	0	.200	275	403

e-Eliminated from playoffs
x-clinched playoff spot
y-clinched division

Thursday's game

N.Y. Jets at Cleveland

Saturday's game

Detroit at Dallas

Sunday's games

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

Sunday, Jan. 7

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

NFL calendar

Jan. 13-15 — Wild Card playoff games.
Jan. 20-21 — Division playoff games.
Jan. 28 — AFC and NFC championship games.
Feb. 11 — Super Bowl 58 at Allegiant Stadium in Las Vegas.

PRO HOCKY

NHL

Eastern Conference

Atlantic Division							
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Boston	33	20	7	6	46	104	86
Florida	34	20	12	2	42	99	89
Toronto	32	17	9	6	40	117	109
Tampa Bay	36	17	14	5	39	120	123
Detroit	35	16	15	4	36	124	119
Montreal	33	15	13	5	35	95	112
Buffalo	36	14	18	4	32	107	125
Ottawa	30	13	17	0	26	104	105

Metropolitan Division							
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
N.Y. Rangers	33	24	8	1	49	113	90
N.Y. Islanders	34	16	9	9	41	104	115
Philadelphia	33	18	11	4	40	101	92
Carolina	35	18	13	4	40	116	112
Washington	32	17	10	5	39	78	91
New Jersey	33	18	13	2	38	113	118
Pittsburgh	33	16	13	4	36	100	90
Columbus	36	11	18	7	29	111	132

Western Conference

Central Division							
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Colorado	35	21	11	3	45	129	109
Winnipeg	33	20	9	4	44	110	84
Dallas	33	20	9	4	44	115	102
Arizona	34	18	14	2	38	108	99
Nashville	35	19	16	0	38	109	109
St. Louis	34	18	15	1	37	102	112
Minnesota	33	16	13	4	36	106	106
Chicago	34	11	22	1	23	82	124

Pacific Division							
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Vancouver	35	23	9	3	49	135	89
Vegas	36	21	10	5	47	124	101
Los Angeles	31	20	7	4	44	112	74
Seattle	36	13	14	9	35	97	113
Calgary	35	14	16	5	33	103	117
Edmonton	31	15	15	1	31	108	106
Anaheim	34	13	21	0	26	91	113
San Jose	35	9	23	3	21	74	145

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

Tuesday's games

No games scheduled

Wednesday's games

N.Y. Rangers 5, Washington 1
Florida 3, Tampa Bay 2
New Jersey 4, Columbus 3, OT
Ottawa 4, Toronto 2
Boston 4, Buffalo 1
Pittsburgh 7, N.Y. Islanders 0
Minnesota 6, Detroit 3
St. Louis 2, Dallas 1
Carolina 5, Nashville 2
Chicago 2, Winnipeg 1, OT
Arizona 5, Colorado 4, OT
Seattle 2, Calgary 1
Anaheim 5, Vegas 2
Los Angeles 5, San Jose 1

Thursday's games

Montreal at Carolina
Los Angeles at Vegas
Philadelphia at Vancouver
Edmonton at San Jose

Friday's games

N.Y. Rangers at Florida
Nashville at Detroit
New Jersey at Ottawa
Toronto at Columbus
Washington at N.Y. Islanders
Chicago at Dallas
Colorado at St. Louis
Arizona at Anaheim
Philadelphia at Seattle

Saturday's games

Minnesota at Winnipeg
Columbus at Buffalo
Carolina at Toronto
Montreal at Florida
N.Y. Rangers at Tampa Bay
Nashville at Washington
New Jersey at Boston
St. Louis at Pittsburgh
Edmonton at Los Angeles

Sunday's games

Winnipeg at Minnesota
Boston at Detroit
Buffalo at Ottawa
N.Y. Islanders at Pittsburgh
Montreal at Tampa Bay
Chicago at Dallas
Edmonton at Anaheim
Philadelphia at Calgary
San Jose at Colorado

Scoring leaders

Through Wednesday				
	GP	G	A	PTS
Nikita Kucherov, TB	35	24	34	58
Nathan MacKinnon, COL	35	19	37	56
J.T. Miller, VAN	35	15	33	48
Artemi Panarin, NYR	33	19	27	46
William Nylander, TOR	32	16	30	46

DEALS

Wednesday's transactions

BASEBALL Major League Baseball American League

MINNESOTA TWINS — Agreed to terms with RHP Josh Staumont on a one-year contract.

TEXAS RANGERS — Agreed to terms with RHPs Gerardo Carrillo, Diego Castillo and Jesus Tinoco. OFs Sandro Fabian, Elier Hernandez and Derek Hill and C Andrew Knapp on minor league contracts.

National League

LOS ANGELES DODGERS — Agreed to terms with RHP Yoshinobu Yamamoto on a 12-year contract.

FOOTBALL National Football League

ARIZONA CARDINALS — Signed DL Phil Hoskins to the practice squad. Designated DL Leki Fotu to return from injured reserve to practice. Placed DL Jonathan Ledbetter on injured reserve. Promoted LB Caleb Johnson from the practice squad to the active roster.

ATLANTA FALCONS — Signed OT Ryan Swoboda to the practice squad.

BUFFALO BILLS — Reinstated CB Kairi Elam from injured reserve.

CAROLINA PANTHERS — Placed LB Amare Barno on injured reserve. Reinstated RB Tarik Cohen from the practice squad injured reserve.

CINCINNATI BENGALS — Designated CB Cam Taylor-Britt to return from injured reserve to practice. Signed DT Dominique Davis to the practice squad.

DALLAS COWBOYS — Reinstated OT Matt Waletzko from injured reserve. Released LB Rashaan Evans.

DENVER BRONCOS — Signed DB Keidron Smith to the practice squad.

GREEN BAY PACKERS — Placed CB Jaire Alexander on the reserve/suspended list for one game for conduct detrimental to the team.

HOUSTON TEXANS — Signed CB Troy Pride to the practice squad. Released WR Davion Davis from the practice squad.

JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS — Designated LT Cam Robinson to return from injured reserve to practice.

LAS VEGAS RAIDERS — Signed TE Zach Gentry from the Cincinnati practice squad. Placed TE Jesper Horsted on injured reserve. Waived T Justin Herron.

LOS ANGELES CHARGERS — Re-signed QB Maxx Duggan to the practice squad.

MINNESOTA VIKINGS — Placed TE T.J. Hockenson and OLB D.J. Wonnum on injured reserve.

NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS — Claimed CB Marco Wilson off waivers from Arizona. Placed RB Rhamondre Stevenson on injured reserve. Signed TE La'Michael Pettway to the practice squad.

NEW YORK JETS — Placed OT Duane Brown on injured reserve. Promoted TE Zack Kuntz from the practice squad to the active roster. Signed K Austin Seibert to the practice squad.

PITTSBURGH STEELERS — Signed LB Jaylon Smith and S Nate Meadors to the practice squad.

SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS — Signed DL Sebastian Joseph-Day and OL Matt Pryor to one-year contracts. Waived RB Jeremy McNichols. Signed OL Sebastian Gutierrez and WR Willie Snead IV to the practice squad. Designated WR Danny Gray to return from injured reserve to practice.

SEATTLE SEAHAWKS — Reinstated LB Levi Bell from the practice squad injured reserve.

TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS — Designated DL Mike Greene to return from injured reserve to practice.

WASHINGTON COMMANDERS — Designated LB De'Jon Harris to return from injured reserve to practice.

HOCKEY National Hockey League

BOSTON BRUINS — Recalled C Patrick Brown, D Mason Lohrei and D Parker Wotherspoon from Providence (AHL).

LOS ANGELES KINGS — Recalled D Jacob Moverare from Ontario (AHL).

MINNESOTA WILD — Recalled D Daemon Hunt and LW Jake Lucchini from Iowa (AHL). Recalled F Maxim Cajkovic from Iowa (ECHL) to Iowa (AHL).

NASHVILLE PREDATORS — Recalled G Yaroslav Askarov from Milwaukee (AHL).

NEW JERSEY DEVILS — Recalled G Nico Daws from Utica (AHL).

NEW YORK ISLANDERS — Recalled D Grant Hutton from Bridgeport (AHL).

PHILADELPHIA FLYERS — Recalled C Rhett Gardner from Lehigh Valley (AHL).

ST. LOUIS BLUES — Recalled LW Mackenzie MacEachern from Springfield (AHL).

SAN JOSE SHARKS — Recalled G Magnus Chrona from San Jose (AHL).

TAMPA BAY LIGHTNING — Recalled D Sean Day from Syracuse (AHL).

WASHINGTON CAPITALS — Recalled D Hendrix Lapierre and LW Ivan Miroshnichenko from Hershey (AHL).

WINNIPEG JETS — Recalled C Dominic Toninato from Manitoba (AHL).

AP SPORTLIGHT

Dec. 29

1961 — Wilt Chamberlain of the Philadelphia Warriors scores 60 points against the Los Angeles Lakers at Hershey, Pa., the future site of his 100-point game.

1984 — Wayne Gretzky of the Edmonton Oilers scores his 100th point in the 35th game of the season, a 6-3 victory over the Detroit Red Wings.

2020 — The Milwaukee Bucks break NBA record for most 3-pointers made in a game with 29 in a 144-97 victory over the Miami Heat.

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

Bowl glance

Friday, Dec. 22 Gasparilla Bowl Tampa, Fla.

Georgia Tech 30, UCF 17

Saturday, Dec. 23 Camellia Bowl Montgomery, Ala.

N. Illinois 21, Arkansas St. 19

Birmingham Bowl Birmingham, Ala.

Duke 17, Troy 10

Armed Forces Bowl Fort Worth, Texas

Air Force 31, No. 24 James Madison 21

Famous Idaho Potato Bowl Boise, Idaho

Georgia St. 45, Utah St. 22

68 Ventures Bowl Mobile, Ala.

South Alabama 59, Eastern Michigan 10

Las Vegas Bowl Las Vegas

Northwestern 14, Utah 7

Hawaii Bowl Honolulu, Hawaii

Coastal Carolina 24, San Jose St. 14

Tuesday, Dec. 26 Quick Lane Bowl Detroit

Minnesota 30, Bowling Green 24

####

NBA

Morant has gotten Grizzlies rolling

By **BRETT MARTEL**
Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — Ja Morant's return to NBA play has the Memphis Grizzlies facing a new set of questions.

Namely, could they have reasonably expected their All-Star guard to be so productive, so soon?

Or, did they suspect that having Morant back in the lineup would make winning — and contending — look so achievable for a club that managed just six victories in its first 25 games?

"You have a player like that, he makes everybody better, from our top guys to our role-playing guys," Grizzlies shooting guard Desmond Bane said. "So you can't overestimate how good he is and how much impact he has."

Morant has averaged 28.8 points through his first four games since returning from an NBA suspension that stemmed from his antics with guns on social media. Memphis has won all four of those games to improve to 10-19, leaving them just 4½ games out of a Western Conference play-in spot with 53 games to play.

"I don't really look at where we're at in the standings right now with all these games left," Memphis coach Taylor Jenkins said. "I'm just focused on all the momentum that we've built up over the last week or so."

There's no denying that momentum, or who's primarily responsible for it.

Hours before his 31-point performance in a 116-115 overtime victory in New Orleans on Tuesday night, Morant had been named Western Conference Player of the Week — for his first week back on the court.

"It's awesome that he got recognized for his stellar play, for the team's stellar play over the past week," Jenkins said. "But he didn't come back focused on trying to win Player of the Week. He just wanted to be back out there



GERALD HERBERT/AP

Memphis Grizzlies guard Ja Morant, right, celebrates after his slam dunk in the final seconds of overtime against the Pelicans in New Orleans on Tuesday. The Grizzlies won 116-115 for their fourth victory in a row.



BRANDON DILL/AP

Morant has averaged 28.8 points through his first four games back after a suspension stemming from his antics with guns on social media.

with his teammates and compete in the game that he loves.

"Obviously I think he's been having tons of fun throughout this process, as difficult as it was when he was sidelined for 25 games," Jenkins added. "But then you saw the joy that he was playing with that first game back ... and we expect nothing less."

Given the reason for his suspension, however, Morant's choice of celebratory dance moves after an alley-oop dunk in overtime in New Orleans has led to some criticism of him on social media. While facing his father, who was sitting courtside, a smiling Morant executed a move which vaguely resembled firing guns and holding a bazooka over his shoulder.

A performing artist from New Orleans who goes by the stage name Subtweet Shawn posted on social media that the dance is his creation and has nothing to do with guns.

Morant has not commented on the significance of the dance move after the dunk, and the Grizzlies did not appear bothered by it, posting clips of the play and celebration on social media.

In his first game back on Dec. 19, also played in New Orleans, Morant scored 34 points, capped by a game-winning basket as time expired. He scored 20 in a home victory over Indiana and then had 30 points and 11 assists in a victory at Atlanta.

"The biggest thing is that he brings a level of confidence to their team that they were waiting for and a swagger to the team," said Pelicans coach Willie Green, whose club won in Memphis back in October, when Morant's suspension was just beginning.

"That's what makes them dangerous, is now that they have their leader, best player, on the floor, they're playing much more confident," Green continued. "They're a better defensive team. They're getting in the paint and they're attacking. He allows everybody to kind of get to their rightful spots on the floor, so that makes them better."

Jenkins sought to ease Morant's return by telling him to focus on enjoying the game and not letting wins or losses define the success of his return to the club from the outset.

"He and I talked about, you know, there should be no undue burden about you going out there to have to do this or that or the other to get us some wins," Jenkins recalled.

Jenkins advised his best player to, "Just go out there, play your brand of basketball, be Ja and the rest will follow — and that's what's happened."

If any aspect of Morant's game has looked rusty, it's been his outside shot. He's hit just 3 of 18 3-point attempts and joked Tuesday night that his points per game average might be close to 40 if he could hit from deep. In the meantime, he's been effective driving into the paint and using his trademark, lateral jump-step to get off a floater in a crowd of defenders. He's also finished explosive drives to the rim with contested layups and a few dunks.

"I'm just really going out there and just trying to be Ja as much as possible, doing whatever I can," Morant said. "Sometimes it's scoring, sometimes it's facilitating."

"I pretty much just take what the defense gives me but stay aggressive at the same time," he added. "If it's 30, it's 30, but if I have 8 and we win, I'm cool with that, too."

Scoreboard

Eastern Conference

Atlantic Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Boston	23	6	.793	—
Philadelphia	21	9	.700	2½
New York	17	13	.567	6½
Brooklyn	15	16	.484	9
Toronto	12	18	.400	11½

Southeast Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Miami	18	12	.600	—
Orlando	18	12	.600	—
Atlanta	12	18	.400	6
Charlotte	7	21	.250	10
Washington	5	25	.167	13

Central Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Milwaukee	23	8	.742	—
Cleveland	18	13	.581	5
Indiana	15	14	.517	7
Chicago	14	18	.438	9½
Detroit	2	28	.067	20½

Western Conference

Southwest Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Dallas	18	13	.581	—
New Orleans	17	14	.548	1
Houston	15	14	.517	2
Memphis	10	19	.345	7
San Antonio	4	25	.138	13

Northwest Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Minnesota	22	7	.759	—
Oklahoma City	20	9	.690	2
Denver	22	10	.688	1½
Utah	13	18	.419	10
Portland	8	21	.276	14

Pacific Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
L.A. Clippers	18	12	.600	—
Sacramento	17	12	.586	½
L.A. Lakers	16	15	.516	2½
Phoenix	15	15	.500	3
Golden State	15	15	.500	3

Tuesday's games

Orlando 127, Washington 119
Brooklyn 118, Detroit 112
Oklahoma City 129, Minnesota 106
Indiana 123, Houston 117
Utah 130, San Antonio 118
Chicago 118, Atlanta 113
Memphis 116, New Orleans 115, OT
Portland 130, Sacramento 113
L.A. Clippers 113, Charlotte 104

Wednesday's games

Toronto 132, Washington 102
Philadelphia 112, Orlando 92
Milwaukee 144, Brooklyn 122
Phoenix 129, Houston 113
Oklahoma City 129, New York 120
Cleveland 113, Dallas 110

Thursday's games

Detroit at Boston
Dallas at Minnesota
Indiana at Chicago
Utah at New Orleans
Memphis at Denver
Miami at Golden State
San Antonio at Portland
Charlotte at L.A. Lakers

Friday's games

Brooklyn at Washington
New York at Orlando
Milwaukee at Cleveland
Sacramento at Atlanta
Toronto at Boston
Philadelphia at Houston
Charlotte at Phoenix
Oklahoma City at Denver
San Antonio at Portland
Memphis at L.A. Clippers

Saturday's games

Miami at Utah
Toronto at Detroit
New York at Indiana
L.A. Lakers at Minnesota
Philadelphia at Chicago
Dallas at Golden State

Scoring leaders

Through Wednesday					
	G	FG	FT	PTS	AVG
Embiid, PHI	25	294	258	874	35.0
Doncic, DAL	29	334	194	978	33.7
Gil-Alex., OKC	28	316	211	872	31.1
Antetokoun., MIL	30	342	230	925	30.8
Fox, SAC	23	244	128	694	30.2
Durant, PHO	26	270	188	784	30.2
Young, ATL	28	246	194	786	28.1
Curry, GS	28	246	155	781	27.9
Mitchell, CLE	22	212	118	610	27.7
Booker, PHO	21	193	143	567	27.0

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

Schrader goes from D-II star to folk hero

Missouri RB key in leading Tigers to Cotton Bowl

BY DAVE SKRETTA
Associated Press

COLUMBIA, Mo. — There were very few people willing to wager that Missouri would be playing in a New Year's Six bowl game this season.

Still fewer probably bet that Cody Schrader would someday be an All-American running back.

He received precisely zero Division I scholarship offers coming out of Lutheran South High School in St. Louis, and wound up at Truman State. The Division II school about a three-hour drive from home is known just as much for its accounting school and renowned women's swimming and diving program as it is for the Bulldogs football team.

Schrader never stopped believing in his ability, though. After leading Division II with 2,074 yards rushing two years ago, he bet on himself by entering the transfer portal, and ultimately agreeing to an invitation to walk on at Missouri.

Tigers coach Eli Drinkwitz never met Schrader until he stepped on campus.

Two years later, Schrader has not only taken over the starting job, but etched his name in Missouri lore. He ran for 1,625 yards and 13 touchdowns, highlighted by a record-setting day against Tennessee. He led the Tigers to a 10-2 record and a spot opposite perennial heavyweight Ohio State in the Cotton Bowl on Friday.

"It's a dream come true for me



Missouri running back Cody Schrader celebrates next to the Battle Line trophy after the team's win over Arkansas on Nov. 24 in Fayetteville, Ark.

MICHAEL WOODS/AP

and this team," Schrader admitted.

The 5-foot-8 bowling ball of a running back is exactly the kind of dream — the kind of lightning-in-a-bottle success story — that programs such as Missouri rely upon to compete against college football's powerhouses.

Sure, the Tigers have recruited better under Drinkwitz than they have in years, landing five-star prospects such as Luther Burden III, who was among the nation's leading receivers this season. They still lag far behind programs such as Alabama, Georgia and, yes, Ohio State, when it comes to reeling in top prospects from high school and the portal.

Yet players such as Schrader, who are willing to work harder and

longer and suffer more than most other players, can bridge that gap between good and great. While the Buckeyes have prospects galore — wide receivers Marvin Harrison Jr. and Emeka Egbuka, defensive ends J.T. Tuimoloau and Jack Sawyer and defensive tackle Mike Hall Jr. could all be first-round picks in the April draft — the Tigers counter with players every bit as capable who have overachieved to reach that point.

"I'm sure we're going to be a big underdog in the game. I'm sure people are going to write us off," Drinkwitz acknowledged. "I don't love it, but I embrace it if it is what it is."

Sort of like how Schrader, who won the Burlsworth Trophy awarded to the nation's top former walk-

on, embraced the underdog mentality to rise from Division II afterthought to national sensation.

Drinkwitz certainly learned his name by the time Schrader methodically passed Stanford transfer Nathaniel Peat on the depth chart last year, helping the Tigers to a 6-6 record and a spot in the Gasparilla Bowl. And the rest of the nation likely learned his name when the Tigers faced Tennessee in a revenge game for a whipping they took last season.

Schrader piled up 207 yards rushing and 116 yards receiving to become one of 10 players at college football's highest level to reach 200 and 100 in the same game. He was just the second to do it against a ranked opponent, helping the Tigers to a 36-7 rout of the Vols, and his



Cotton Bowl
No. 9 Missouri (10-2)
vs. No. 7 Ohio State (11-1)
AFN-Sports
2:10 a.m. Saturday CET
10:10 a.m. Saturday JKT

total yards from scrimmage were just shy of Devin West's school record.

That was part of a stretch of five straight games to finish the regular season in which Schrader topped 100 yards rushing. He had 217 in their finale against border rival Arkansas to help the Tigers clinch a New Year's Six bowl game, and he will take a nine-game streak of reaching the end zone into the showdown with the Buckeyes.

In the Cotton Bowl. At Cowboys Stadium. Before a national TV audience.

That's a long way from the America's Crossroads Bowl, the annual Division II game that Truman State played in a couple of years ago, when Schrader ran for 219 yards in a win over Hillsdale College at a high school stadium in Hobart, Indiana.

"It's extremely special," Schrader said, "and nobody wanted to be (with the Tigers) on the outside before the season, right? I think this brotherhood, the culture we've built with the guys in this room — it's cool that people might want to transfer here, that other people might want to be a part of it. But my question to a lot of people is: Where were you guys at the start of the year?"

Virginia Tech tops No. 23 Tulane in Military Bowl

BY NOAH TRISTER
Associated Press

ANNAPOLIS, Md. — As long as he could hold onto the ball and keep his footing on a slippery day, Kyron Drones found plenty of room to run.

Drones rushed for 176 yards and a touchdown and also threw for two TDs as Virginia Tech withstood a second-half downpour to beat No. 23 Tulane 41-20 in the Military Bowl on Wednesday.

Drones fumbled three times in the wet weather, but the Hokies (7-6) only lost one of them. The sophomore quarterback passed for just 91 yards, but he and Bhayshul Tuten were tough to stop on the ground.

"It was tough conditions. You can't really simulate it like that," Virginia Tech coach Brent Pry said. "They had the same weather we did. Both teams had to deal with it."

Tuten finished with 136 yards



Virginia Tech quarterback Kyron Drones carries the ball in the second half of the Military Bowl against Tulane on Wednesday in Annapolis, Md.

Nick Wass/AP

and two touchdowns on 18 carries to help Virginia Tech snap a four-game losing streak in bowls.

"Anytime we've had success this year, really, we've been able to run

the ball," Pry said. "That's who we need to be. That's who we want to be."

Tulane (11-3) was without star quarterback Michael Pratt. Both

Kai Horton and Justin Ibieta played in his place, but Ibieta was carted off in the second quarter with an apparent leg injury. Makhi Hughes rushed for 88 yards.

An unforced fumble by Drones gave the Green Wave an early lead when Tyler Grubbs scooped up the ball and returned it 21 yards for a touchdown.

"It was the first drive of the game and we still had a long way to go," Drones said. "It was a next-play mentality."

After a muffed punt gave Virginia Tech the ball at the Tulane 11, Drones ran for a TD on the first play to put the Hokies up 10-7.

Drones also lost the ball on that run, but he was ruled to have reached the end zone first.

Tulane had first-and-goal from the 1 when Horton was hit by Pheldarius Payne as he tried to hand off the ball. The Hokies recovered that fumble to stave off a great

scoring opportunity.

Virginia Tech took a 17-10 lead on Drones' 1-yard scoring pass to Harrison Saint Germain with 8 seconds left in the half.

Then the rain really seemed to pick up.

Jaylin Lane lost a fumble in the first minute of the second half, and Tulane took advantage of that short field, tying the game on a 6-yard scramble by Horton. But Drones broke loose for a 51-yard gain on the next drive, and Tuten's 9-yard scoring run put the Hokies up 24-17.

"We've been strong against the run all year. I think when you add the quarterback into it, that gives it a little bit different element," said Slade Nagle, who was Tulane's interim coach after Willie Fritz left to take the job at Houston earlier this month. "He's a dynamic player that had a huge impact on the game."

YEAR IN REVIEW

Some big states still resistant to legalized sports betting's rise

By MARK ANDERSON
Associated Press

LAS VEGAS—Legalized sports betting continued its expansion this year while also factoring into scandals in college athletics and suspensions in the NFL for players who violated the league's gambling policy.

Six states either passed legislation to legalize sports wagering or allowed sportsbooks to begin accepting bets. Another state, Florida, relaunched sports betting after a two-year legal battle ended when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in October in the casinos' favor.

Still on the sidelines, however, are the nation's two most populous states — California and Texas. Sports betting proponents will hope to make progress against significant headwinds in both states in 2024.

There was no apparent movement in California this year to legalize sports betting after two competing measures, including one backed financially by Native American tribes, went down in flames in 2022 at the ballot box.

Baird Fogel, a California attorney who works with the sports betting industry, said the key is getting the full support of the tribes.

"Remember, the tribes don't need this," Fogel said. "They can wait forever. That's the trick here, what everybody needs to get their heads around. You've got to proactively come to them with an idea of how to get their support because without their support, this is going nowhere."

He said the tribes could be receptive if approached correctly. Connecticut and New Jersey reached deals, Fogel said, because those states made agreements with the tribal casinos.

Some kind of revenue split, Fogel said, could get a similar deal done in California.

"It's got to happen," Fogel said. "The tax revenue alone is insane."

Any casino is already generating nearly \$9 billion a year in California alone. I can't even imagine what that number would balloon to if you were able to do this from the comfort of your own home on a mobile device."

In Texas, any push for casino gambling is a matter of playing a potentially yearslong game.

Proponents have poured millions into political action committees and campaign donations. Casino magnate Miriam Adelson, who in November entered into an agreement to buy the NBA's Dallas Mavericks, donated \$1 million to Republican Gov. Greg Abbott's 2022 campaign.

Gaming measures have slowly picked up support, but a spending wave has yet to deliver a Texas-sized jackpot in a Legislature where resistance to legalizing casinos still runs deep. The Texas Republican Party passed a resolution that showed renewed opposition to casino gambling among party activists.

There has been no bigger obstacle than Republican Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, who controls the state Senate and wields enormous influence over what bills even come up for a vote. A gambling measure that would have allowed mobile sports betting passed the House last spring, but never even got a vote in the Senate.

"The Republican electorate controls Texas," longtime Republican consultant Bill Miller said. "I don't think right now they are enamored of casino gaming. It's daunting task to turn that around."

Texas lawmakers do not meet again in regular session until 2025 and Patrick may run for re-election in 2026.

"Over time, gaming is going to come to Texas in all versions. Casinos will be the last version," Miller said. "You have to have patience and you have to have money. You have to have the financial standing to stay in the game."



CHRIS TROTMAN, LIV GOLF/AP

LIV Golf CEO Greg Norman, caddies and the Qualifiers Kieran Vincent of Zimbabwe, Kalle Samooja of Finland and Jinichiro Kozuma of Japan celebrate on stage at the trophy ceremony after the final round of the LIV Golf Promotions at the Abu Dhabi Golf Club on December 10 in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.

Saudis likely to dive even further into sports in 2024

By EDDIE PELLIS
Associated Press

At the dawn of 2023, the specter of Saudi Arabia's growing influence on pro golf — and sports in general — served not only as a moral conundrum for players and their fans, but also, some argued, as an existential threat to the multibillion-dollar professional-sports industry itself.

Twelve months later, it's a different conversation, now virtually devoid of concern about the supposed menace of "sportswashing" and the line between "right" and "wrong," and more fixed on just how rich the Saudis might make all these athletes before they're done investing.

Two major events sparked the change: The June 6 announcement that the PGA Tour was looking to go into business with the very Saudi group that was paying for the kingdom's LIV Golf, which the tour had labeled as a threat. Then, six months later, the decision by the world's third-ranked player and an early resister of LIV, Jon Rahm, to move to that league for a contract reported in the neighborhood of \$500 million.

Making less-dramatic but almost equally important headlines were the continuing talks between the Saudis and leaders in pro tennis — and Saudi Arabia's ongoing push into global soccer, reflected most vividly by a decision that smoothed the way for the Saudis to host the sport's biggest event, the World Cup, in 2034.

"You're investing in sports, which is one of the few growth industries in the world," Dan Durbin, director of the Institute of Sports, Media and Society at USC, said of the Saudi strategy. "It is, as far as we can see, an almost endless growth industry."

The conversation over golf went front-and-center when Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund, or PIF, the nation's sovereign wealth fund, was laying the groundwork for LIV in early 2022. Six-time major winner Phil Mickelson's interview, in which he called the Saudis "scary (expletives)" — a reference, in part, to the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi — set the dividing line in what was viewed as a good vs. evil stare-down between the status quo and the Saudi disrupters.

All but ignored in the debate was how ingrained Saudi Arabia is in virtually all parts of the world economy — the Saudis gain most of their influence by supplying around 15% of the world's petroleum — and the inroads the kingdom was already making into sports.

One of soccer's biggest stars, Cristiano Ronaldo, had joined a Saudi team backed by the same investment fund that supported LIV in a deal worth a reported \$200 million a year. The Saudis made a reported \$500 million-a-year play to recruit another soccer icon, Lionel Messi, to its upstart domestic league. (Messi turned them down.) The PIF wealth fund owns the Premier League's Newcastle

soccer club.

As the calendar turns to 2024, there's no sign of this slowing. The Saudis host a Formula One auto race that has come under scrutiny and had reportedly been considering buying the entire league from Liberty Media Corporation — a deal that didn't take off because Liberty didn't want to sell. They are looking to invest some \$5 billion into cricket's Indian Premier League with an eye on expanding it into other countries.

The ATP, which runs men's professional tennis, has a five-year deal to hold one of its biggest events in the Saudi port city of Jeddah. Talks between the Saudis and the women's tour are reportedly ongoing. In a sign of how the conversation has shifted, Billie Jean King, who began the fight for equal pay for women in sports in the 1970s, has said bringing the sport to the kingdom might not be all bad despite its long record of repressing women's rights.

"I don't think you really change unless you engage," she said earlier this year.

Durbin sees the kingdom's embrace of sports as a move for Saudi Arabia to be viewed as more than an oil-producing kingdom with a bad human-rights record. Some might call that the quintessential definition of "sportswashing."

"For decades, sports has been the center of soft diplomacy," he said. "You try to create a positive response and feeling about your ethics because you're holding to the rules of sports."



CAROLYN KASTER/AP

A TV screen at the entrance of Churchill's Bourbon & Brew Bar & Grille, flanked by electronic gaming machines, promotes sports betting at Turfway Park Racing & Gaming on Dec. 22 in Florence, Ky.

YEAR IN REVIEW



AP

The Atlantic Coast Conference and Duke logos are affixed to a pylon at the back of an end zone during a 2019 Duke-Pittsburgh football game in Durham, N.C. The ACC, with the addition of Cal, Stanford and SMU, will expand to 17 teams next season.

A brief history of conference realignment

Scores of schools have changed conference affiliation over the past century, but the pace has quickened over the past three decades and certainly over the past year. It is no longer a surprise to see storied programs leave their longtime conference homes in search of more stability and more revenue in the college athletics arms race.

A look at football membership in the Power Five and the Group of Five, largely dating from the launch of the Big 12 in 1996:

ACC

1996 (9): Clemson, Duke, Florida State, Georgia Tech, Maryland, North Carolina, North Carolina State, Wake Forest, Virginia.

2023 (14): Boston College, Clemson, Duke, Florida State, Georgia Tech, Louisville, Miami, North Carolina, North Carolina State, Pittsburgh, Syracuse, Virginia, Virginia Tech, Wake Forest.

2024 (17): Boston College, California, Clemson, Duke, Florida State, Georgia Tech, Louisville, Miami, North Carolina, North Carolina State, Pittsburgh, SMU, Stanford, Syracuse, Virginia, Virginia Tech, Wake Forest.

BIG TEN

1996 (11): Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Michigan State, Minnesota, Northwestern, Ohio State, Penn State, Purdue, Wisconsin.

2023 (14): Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Maryland, Michigan, Michigan State, Minnesota, Nebraska, Northwestern, Ohio State, Penn State, Purdue, Rutgers, Wisconsin.

2024 (18): Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Maryland, Michigan, Michigan State, Minnesota, Nebraska, Northwestern, Ohio State, Oregon, Penn State, Purdue, Rutgers, Southern California, UCLA, Washington, Wisconsin.

BIG 12

1996 (12): Baylor, Colorado, Iowa State, Kansas, Kansas State, Missouri, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Oklahoma State, Texas, Texas A&M, Texas Tech.

2023 (14): BYU, Baylor, Cincinnati, Central Florida, Houston, Iowa State, Kansas, Kansas State, Oklahoma, Oklahoma State, TCU, Texas, Texas Tech, West Virginia.

2024 (16): Arizona, Arizona State, BYU, Baylor, Cincinnati, Central Florida, Colorado, Houston, Iowa State, Kansas, Kansas State, Oklahoma State, TCU, Texas Tech, Utah, West Virginia.

PAC-12

1996 (10): Arizona, Arizona State, California, Oregon, Oregon State, Southern California, Stanford, UCLA, Washington, Washington State.

2023 (12): Arizona, Arizona State, California, Colorado, Oregon, Oregon State, Stanford, Southern California, UCLA, Utah, Washington, Washington State.

2024 (2): Oregon State, Washington State.

SEC

1996 (12): Alabama, Arkansas, Auburn, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, LSU, Mississippi, Mississippi State, South Carolina, Tennessee, Vanderbilt.

2023 (14): Alabama, Arkansas, Auburn, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, LSU, Mississippi, Mississippi State, Missouri, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas A&M, Vanderbilt.

2024 (16): Alabama, Arkansas, Auburn, Florida, Georgia,

Kentucky, LSU, Mississippi, Mississippi State, Missouri, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Texas A&M, Vanderbilt.

AMERICAN ATHLETIC

2013 (10, first season): Central Florida, Cincinnati, Connecticut, Houston, Louisville, Memphis, Rutgers, SMU, South Florida, Temple.

2023 (14): Charlotte, East Carolina, Florida Atlantic, Memphis, Navy, North Texas, Rice, SMU, South Florida, Temple, Tulane, Tulsa, UAB, UTSA.

2024 (14): Army, Charlotte, East Carolina, Florida Atlantic, Memphis, Navy, North Texas, Rice, South Florida, Temple, Tulane, Tulsa, UAB, UTSA.

CONFERENCE USA

1996 (6): Cincinnati, Houston, Louisville, Memphis, Southern Mississippi, Tulane.

2023 (9): Florida International, Jacksonville State, Liberty, Louisiana Tech, Middle Tennessee State, New Mexico State, Sam Houston State, UTEP, Western Kentucky.

2024 (10): Florida International, Jacksonville State, Kennesaw State, Liberty, Louisiana Tech, Middle Tennessee State, New Mexico State, Sam Houston State, UTEP, Western Kentucky.

2025 (11): Delaware, Florida International, Jacksonville State, Kennesaw State, Liberty, Louisiana Tech, Middle Tennessee State, New Mexico State, Sam Houston State, UTEP, Western Kentucky.

MID-AMERICAN

1996 (10): Akron, Ball State, Bowling Green, Central Michigan, Eastern Michigan, Kent State, Miami (Ohio), Ohio, Toledo, Western Michigan.

2023 (12): Akron, Ball State, Bowling Green, Buffalo, Central Michigan, Eastern Michigan, Kent State, Miami (Ohio), Ohio, Northern Illinois, Toledo, Western Michigan.

BIG WEST/WAC/MOUNTAIN WEST

1996 (Big West, 6): Boise State, Idaho, Nevada, New Mexico State, North Texas, Utah State.

1996 (WAC, 16): Air Force, BYU, Colorado State, Fresno State, Hawaii, New Mexico, Rice, San Diego State, San Jose State, SMU, TCU, Tulsa, UNLV, Utah, UTEP, Wyoming.

2024 (MWC, 12): Air Force, Boise State, Colorado State, Fresno State, Hawaii, Nevada, New Mexico, San Diego State, San Jose State, UNLV, Utah State, Wyoming.

SUN BELT

2001 (7, first season): Arkansas State, Idaho, Louisiana-Lafayette, Louisiana-Monroe, Middle Tennessee State, New Mexico State, North Texas.

2024 (14): Appalachian State, Arkansas State, Coastal Carolina, Georgia Southern, Georgia State, James Madison, Louisiana-Lafayette, Louisiana-Monroe, Marshall, Old Dominion, South Alabama, Southern Mississippi, Texas State, Troy.

INDEPENDENTS

1996 (11): Arkansas State, Army, Central Florida, East Carolina, Louisiana-Lafayette, Louisiana-Monroe, Louisiana Tech, Navy, Northern Illinois, Notre Dame, UAB.

2023 (4): Army, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Notre Dame.

2024 (3): Connecticut, Massachusetts, Notre Dame.

From The Associated Press

Story: '24 season will be historically transformative

FROM PAGE 32

accelerated when the Pac-12 couldn't secure a media rights deal to match its competitors.

The redrawing of the college sports map and demise of the Pac-12, a conference that claims the most NCAA championships and a legacy that includes the likes of Jackie Robinson, Bill Walton, Aaron Rodgers, Katie Ledecky, Tiger Woods and Cheryl Miller, made conference realignment The Associated Press Sports Story of the Year.

All of the moves will take effect in 2024, which will go down as one of the most transformative in the history of college athletics.

Oregon and Washington agreed to join the Big Ten, where Southern California and UCLA had already committed. Arizona, Arizona State, Colorado and Utah fled for the Big 12. Stanford and California found a lifeline in the Atlantic Coast Conference, a league with all football-playing members currently in the Eastern time zone.

The four new West Coast Big Ten schools will be no closer than 1,500 miles from any of their new conference rivals.

Along with Texas and Oklahoma relocating from the Big 12 to the Southeastern Conference, all will join their new leagues before the start of next college football season.

"These are seismic moves," former Fox Sports executive Bob Thompson said.

The end of the Pac-12 ushered in the super conference era and laid bare the bottom line of college sports.

"I don't know what the institutions that are involved will say was the motivation, but it was money in every case," former Big 12 Commissioner Bob Bowsby said.

Next year, the Big Ten will have 18 schools, the Big 12 and SEC 16 each and the ACC will have 17 football-playing members, including SMU in Dallas. The Pac-12 is likely to survive with Oregon State and Washington State rebuilding the conference, but it will no longer reside among college sports' super wealthy.

The Power Five is now a Power Four, but within that there is a Big Two. The Big Ten and SEC have media rights deals that will allow them to provide yearly payouts to their members of upwards of \$70 million. The ACC and Big 12 are hoping to stay within \$30 million per year per school of those stratospheric numbers.

This comes as the prospect of major college football players being directly paid by schools becomes more realistic. NCAA President Charlie Baker has proposed a plan to do exactly that.

The frantic culmination of this round of realignment came from late July to early September, but the first domino was tipped in the summer of 2021 when it was revealed that Texas and Oklahoma were bolting the Big 12 for the SEC. That, said ACC Commissioner Jim Phillips, cleared the decks for schools eager to "take advantage of free agency."

When the best the Pac-12 could do was a partnership with Apple that had a smaller annual guarantee than those of the ACC and Big 12, it sent schools shopping for a better deal.

"I don't know that the four members that came to the Big 12 were moving toward something as much as they were trying to ensure that they didn't go down with the ship, relative to the Pac-12," Bowsby said.

Conference realignment has been a part of college sports for about as long as games have been game on campus, primarily driven by schools and leagues jockeying for prestige, better competition and more robust revenue streams.

The most recent round of realignment felt more predatory. Survival of the fittest.

"In short, I think it was unnecessary," Bowsby said. "I don't I don't think the college athletics ecosystem is better with the absence of the Pac-12."

The top of college sports should be heading into a few years of relative peace when it comes to realignment. Each of the remaining power conferences is locked into a media rights deal through at least the 2029-30 school year.

Thompson said he believes the future of major college football could be a super league similar to what has been proposed in European soccer.

"So, let's say it's the top 40 brands or the top whatever brands in football only, they go off and they do the super league and everything else stays at the conference level," Thompson said.

"People may decide that maybe that regionality we had a while ago wasn't a bad thing for all the other sports."

A new competitive reality is also coming to college football and it could be harsh for some schools.

"I think there are some in the larger conferences that will clearly be marginalized, and the money won't be worth it because they'll there'll be traditional losers on a regular basis," Bowsby said.

"And I think there will institutions that have been traditional winners that will be turn into institutions that are playing in the middle of the pack most of the time, that's going to be a big adjustment."

YEAR IN REVIEW

AP FEMALE ATHLETE OF THE YEAR

Yes, again

Gymnastics star Biles wins for 3rd time after dazzling return

By WILL GRAVES
Associated Press

There were jitters, of course. Considering all that happened, how could there not be?

When Simone Biles walked onto the floor at a suburban Chicago arena in late July for her first gymnastics competition in two years, she knew plenty of people were wondering how it was going to go.

"I thought that too, don't worry," Biles said with a laugh.

By the end of one rotation, the most decorated gymnast of all time realized she was back in her safe space. By the end of August, she was a national champion. Again. By October, she was a world champion. Again.

And by December, she was The Associated Press' Female Athlete of the Year.

Yes, again.

Her triumphant return that included her record eighth U.S. national championship and a sixth world all-around gold made Biles the sixth woman to claim the AP honor for a third time. The 26-year-old seven-time Olympic medalist was followed by Iowa basketball star Caitlin Clark and Ballon d'Or winner Aitana Bonmati of the World Cup champion Spanish soccer team in voting by a panel of sports media professionals.

And to think, she wasn't really sure what awaited her on that summer night in front of a packed arena that supported her at every turn, a response she said she didn't anticipate.

Hard to blame her.

The last time Biles had saluted the judges, she was earning a bronze medal on the balance beam at the end of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, the end of a tumultuous two weeks where her decision to pull out of multiple finals due to "the twisties" (think mid-air vertigo) dragged the sometimes uncomfortable conversation about athletes and their mental health into the white-hot spotlight only the Games provide.

Though she drew near-universal acclaim for her courage to put her safety first, a quick check of her mentions on social media showed not everyone agreed.

She took a two-year hiatus in the aftermath, going into what she called a "protective shell." She

dove deeper into therapy while eyeing a return on her terms.

Still, that didn't stop self-doubt from creeping in. Only this time, instead of letting the anxiety gnaw at her confidence, she accepted its presence, took a deep breath and put on the kind of show that is hers and hers alone.

"I did a lot better than I thought I would do," Biles said.

Same as it ever was.

Biles previously won the AP honor in 2016 and 2019, times in her life she now barely recognizes.

She was still a teenager following her star-making performance at the Rio Olympics. Still living at home with her parents. Her world still revolved around the spaceship of a gym her family built in the Houston suburbs.

Thinking about it, she can't help but shake her head a little bit. Biles remembers thinking she only had time to practice and—if she was lucky—get her nails done.

It's not that way anymore. She's made it a point to make sure the sport she's redefined no longer defines her.

Biles married Green Bay Packers safety Jonathan Owens in the spring. Her time is split between getting to Packers games when her schedule allows, working with her corporate partners and poring over the details of the house she and her husband are building.

Part of her evolution is organic.



PHOTOS BY GEERT VANDEN WIJNGAERT/AP

Simone Biles poses with her gold medal on the floor exercise during at the Artistic Gymnastics World Championships in Antwerp, Belgium, on Oct. 8. Biles won a record eighth US national title in August.

Part of it is intentional. For too long, she let herself get too caught up in the outcome of every turn, every flip, every twist, every practice in a discipline where perfection is literally unattainable.

"Whenever I was 19, it was the end of the world if I had bad days," she said. "Now I'm like, 'It's OK, it's just gymnastics and I'll come back tomorrow and we'll get it started again.'"

Biles isn't kidding when said she's trying to take more of a "one day at a time" approach, not easy for someone who admits she has a habit of "best case/worst case" every little thing. She didn't really get serious about returning until late spring when coach Cecile Landi suggested over margaritas that maybe it was time to give the world a peek at what Biles had been working on.

Her response was somewhere along the lines of "sure, OK" even though there was a part of her that felt she might not ever be ready.

"I didn't know what I was ex-

pecting," said Biles, who credited the people she has surrounded herself with for believing in her when she was still grappling with her belief in herself. "People were like, 'No, we've seen you in training, this is what was supposed to happen.'"

And what was supposed to happen quickly became what has almost always happened since Biles began taking the norms of her sport and bending them to her will.

It wasn't just that she won but how she did it. Her intricate and gravity-defying tumbling has become more precise. A full decade into her elite career, her routines for all four events are still packed with remarkable difficulty.

Nowhere is that difficulty more apparent than on vault, where she became the first woman to perform a Yurchenko double-pike in international competition. The move—a breathtaking combination of power and more than a little guts—is now the fifth element

to carry her name in the sport's code of points.

She doesn't have to do it to win. She does it anyway, because, as she put it a few years ago, she can.

Barring injury or the unforeseen, a third trip to the Olympics awaits next summer. She knows this. She'd just prefer not to talk about it. She only begrudgingly uses the words "Paris" or "Olympics" in interviews, a very conscious choice.

It's telling of where Biles is in her life that she recently shared an Instagram story in which followers were asked to post their best moment of 2023. The picture she chose wasn't taken from a routine or a medal podium but of her and Owens dancing at their wedding reception, the picture of a life finding its balance.

"At the end of the day I did worlds and all that stuff, but I did get married, I got to support him," she said. "It's just like, it's kind of nice that gymnastics isn't the main revolving piece."



The United States' Simone Biles celebrates winning the gold medal during the women's all-around final at the Artistic Gymnastics World Championships in Antwerp, Belgium, on Oct. 6. It was her sixth world all-around gold.

YEAR IN REVIEW

AP MALE ATHLETE OF THE YEAR

2-way star Ohtani a 2-time winner

From dazzling MVP performance in WBC to unanimous AL MVP award to record contract with Dodgers

BY GREG BEACHAM

Associated Press

Before Shohei Ohtani stepped into the bright lights of Hollywood and signed the most lucrative contract in professional sports history, baseball's two-way superstar put together yet another season of unparalleled brilliance from Tokyo to Anaheim.

What can this singular talent possibly do next? The Los Angeles Dodgers are eagerly paying \$700 million to see for themselves.

But what Ohtani already did in 2023 — both for the Los Angeles Angels and for Japan's team in the World Baseball Classic — is the reason he was selected as The Associated Press' Male Athlete of the Year for the second time in three years.

"Shohei is arguably the most talented player who's ever played this game," said Andrew Friedman, the Dodgers' president of baseball operations, after signing Ohtani to a 10-year contract last week.

Ohtani edged Inter Miami superstar Lionel Messi and tennis great Novak Djokovic for the AP honor in voting by a panel of sports media professionals.

Ohtani received 20 of 87 votes, while Messi and Djokovic got 16 apiece. Nikola Jokic, the Denver Nuggets' NBA Finals MVP, got 12 votes.

After winning his first AP Male Athlete of the Year award in 2021, Ohtani has joined an impressive list of two-time winners of the honor, which was first handed out in 1931.

Multiple-time winners include Don Budge, Byron Nelson, Carl Lewis, Joe Montana, Michael Jordan, Michael Phelps and four-time honorees Tiger Woods and Lance Armstrong. Four-time winner LeBron James is another generational superstar who chose Los Angeles as a free agent, while two-time honoree Sandy Koufax remains one of the greatest players to wear Dodger Blue.

Ohtani has upended decades of conventional wisdom during his six years in the majors, even surpassing most achievements of Babe Ruth while playing in an infinitely more difficult era. Ohtani has toppled barriers that stood for a century with peerless skills, confidence and hard work.

Ohtani unanimously won the AL MVP award in 2021, and he repeated the feat in 2023 after finishing second in 2022 to Yankees slugger Aaron Judge, last year's AP Male Athlete of the Year.



WILFREDO LEE/AP

Shohei Ohtani, center, celebrates with his teammates after Japan beat the United States in the World Baseball Classic championship game March 2 in Miami. Ohtani hit .435 and had an ERA of 1.86 in the event.



CHARLES REX ARBOGAST/AP

Shohei Ohtani watches a home run in May. He led the AL with 44 homers, 78 extra-base hits, 325 total bases and a 1.066 OPS.

This year began with Ohtani's dazzling MVP performance for Japan's championship team in the World Baseball Classic — complete with a clinching strikeout of Angels teammate Mike Trout. He then turned in his third consecutive spectacular season both on the mound and at the plate in Anaheim despite an early end after he injured his pitching elbow in August.

Ohtani led the AL with 44 homers, 78 extra-base hits, 325 total bases and a 1.066 OPS as the Halos' designated hitter. He also held hitters to an AL-best .184 batting average while ranking second in the league with 11.39 strikeouts per nine innings and third with a 3.14 ERA at the time of his injury.

"There's nobody like him, and there's nothing that you would say

a homer despite getting walked 10 times. He also pitched 9⅓ innings, with 11 strikeouts and a 1.86 ERA.

The championship game ended in storybook fashion with Ohtani striking out Trout, the three-time AL MVP and Ohtani's longtime Angels teammate, for the final out in Japan's victory over the United States.

Ohtani then turned in another outstanding, unique season with the Angels before he hurt his elbow and eventually had a second surgery that will almost certainly prevent him from pitching in 2024, just as he missed nearly all of 2019 and 2020 as a pitcher.

His injury history did nothing to suppress his free-agent value, partly because Ohtani can remain one of the majors' best hitters while he waits to see if his pitching elbow will heal again.

"One of the many things we've come to appreciate over the years about Shohei is watching him never take a pitch off, no matter the score of the game," Friedman said. "I've seen him in games where his team is up big or down big, grinding each pitch late in an at-bat — hustling, doing everything he can to leg out an infield hit late in a game."

While Ohtani has redefined what's possible in modern baseball, he accomplished another unprecedented feat by signing his record-setting contract. The deep-pocketed Dodgers eagerly invested in the 29-year-old Ohtani's next decade while knowing his worldwide fame generates revenue no other baseball player can touch.

"I'm still in the pinch-me phase, to be honest," Dodgers manager Dave Roberts said. "Can't believe we're going to have the opportunity to have him wear a Dodger uniform."

Ohtani did nearly everything except win with the Angels, who haven't had a winning season since 2015. When he hit free agency this winter, he eventually chose the nearby club that has had only two losing seasons in the 21st century and none since 2010.

The Dodgers won the aggressive competition for Ohtani's services by offering that gargantuan contract, but also a supportive environment on the West Coast, supremely talented teammates — along with a winning culture.

"I can't wait to join the Dodgers," Ohtani said through his translator, Ipe Mizuhara. "They share the same passion as me. They have a vision and history all about winning. I share the same values."

"There's nobody like him, and there's nothing that you would say he can't do."

Phil Nevin
Former Angels manager

he can't do," former Angels manager Phil Nevin said late in the season. "Anything is possible with Sho. I don't know who else you could say that about in baseball history."

Ohtani left Japan in late 2017 to pursue his dreams at his sport's highest level, and his exploits are followed in microscopic detail by his fans in his homeland. When he got his first chance to play for Japan in the World Baseball Classic last spring, Ohtani seized the moment with both hands.

Ohtani was outstanding in Japan's games in Tokyo and Miami, batting .435 with four doubles and

SPORTS



Memphis gains momentum
Grizzlies rolling with Morant back from 25-game suspension » **NBA, Page 26**

THE YEAR IN REVIEW



YOUNG KWAK/AP

An Oregon State fan, front, and a Washington State fan hold "Pac-2" signs during a game Sept. 23 in Pullman, Wash. The schools will be the only two remaining in the Pac-12 after the 2023-2024 academic year. The other 10 schools fled for other conferences when the Pac-12 could not secure a competitive media rights deal.

'These are seismic moves'

AP Sports Story of the Year: Realignment, stunning demise of Pac-12 usher in super conference era

By RALPH D. RUSSO
Associated Press

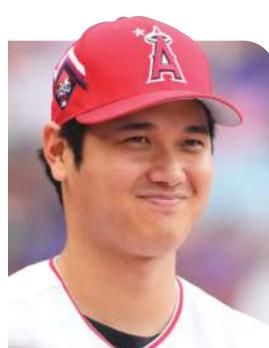
The commissioners from three of the remaining power conferences in college sports appeared together in a crowded convention center ballroom and were asked to ponder what was wrought by three tumultuous years of realignment that culminated in the destruction of a 108-year-old institution.

"Obviously, not happy about the ultimate outcome to the Pac-12, but I'm in this posi-

tion to give us the best options and future possible and we took advantage of the moment." Big 12 Commissioner Brett Yormark explained during the session in Las Vegas.

That moment came over a span of six weeks this summer. The Pac-12 was ripped apart and redistributed by its competitors, regardless of geography. The stunning demolition, set in motion a year earlier, was

SEE STORY ON PAGE 29



AP ATHLETES OF THE YEAR

Ohtani earns male honor for 2nd time; Biles tops female voting for 3rd time
Pages 30-31

Virginia Tech handles rain, Tulane in Military Bowl » College football, Page 27