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STARS AND STRIPES®

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50¢/Free to Deployed Areas

‘We need Greenland’



MAXIM DEWOLF/U.S. Air Force

A North American Aerospace Defense Command F-16 Fighting Falcon fighter aircraft takes off at Pituffik Space Base, Greenland, on Oct. 9. President Donald Trump has renewed his push for the United States to take control of Greenland, leaving NATO concerned.

Trump raises NATO alarms with latest wish for Danish territory

BY JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

President Donald Trump renewed his push for the United States to take control of Greenland, saying over the weekend that the Danish territory will be more of a focal point for his administration in a matter of months.

“We need Greenland from the standpoint of national security, and Denmark is not going to be able to do it,” Trump told reporters Sunday aboard Air Force One.

Alarms were raised in Denmark and elsewhere in NATO by Trump’s latest Greenland comments, which came one day after the capture of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro by American special operations forces.

The new U.S. national security strategy puts the Western Hemisphere at the top of the Pentagon’s agenda, and Trump has had an interest in the strategic Atlantic island since his first term.

The United States already has a military presence in Greenland, home to the Pituffik Space Base and a ballistic missile early warning mission that involves about 200 active-duty U.S. Air Force and Space Force personnel.

It’s unclear whether more military access would satisfy Trump or whether the White House is seeking complete political control.

“You know what Denmark did recently to boost up security in Greenland? They added one more dogsled,” Trump said.

Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen on Sunday lashed out at the remarks.

“I have to say this very directly to the United States: It makes absolutely no sense to talk about the need for the United States to take over Greenland,” Frederiksen said.

Frederiksen added that Greenland, as part of NATO, is protected by the alliance’s security guarantee and that the U.S. military already has extensive access to Greenland to carry out operations.

“I would therefore strongly urge the United States to stop the threats against a historically close ally,” she said, adding that the territory and its inhabitants have repeatedly made it clear “that they are not for sale.”

Finnish President Alexander Stubb voiced

SEE TERRITORY ON PAGE 9

Maduro defiantly professes innocence

BY MICHAEL R. SISAK, LARRY NEUMEISTER AND ERIC TUCKER
Associated Press

NEW YORK — A defiant Nicolás Maduro declared himself the “president of my country” as he protested his capture and pleaded not guilty on Monday to the federal drug trafficking charges that the Trump administration used to justify removing him from power.

“I was captured,” Maduro said in Spanish as translated by a courtroom reporter before being cut off by the judge. Asked later for his plea to the charges, he stated: “I’m innocent. I am not guilty. I am a decent man, the president of my country.”

The courtroom appearance, Maduro’s first since he and his wife were seized from their home in a stunning middle-of-the-night military operation, kick-starts the U.S. government’s most consequential prosecution in decades of a foreign head of state. The criminal case in Manhattan is unfolding against the diplomatic backdrop of an audacious U.S.-engineered regime change that President Donald Trump has said will enable his administration to “run” the South American country.

Maduro, wearing a blue jail uniform, was led into court along with his co-defendant wife just before noon for the brief, but required, le-

SEE INNOCENCE ON PAGE 9

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BUSINESS/WEATHER

Fans mourn end of Sprinkles Cupcakes vending machines

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Sprinkles Cupcakes, a company famous for selling sweet treats in vending machines known as "cupcake ATMs," has shut down after 20 years of operation around the United States, according to its former owner.

"Even though I sold the company over a decade ago, I still have such a personal connection to it, and this isn't how I thought the story would go," said Candace Nelson, who started the company after she lost her job in 2005. The closure was announced Dec. 30.

Nelson started Sprinkles Cupcakes in her own kitchen, and the first location was in a small Beverly Hills storefront that had previously been a sandwich shop. The brand would go on to ascend to national fame, and fans took to social media following the company's announcement to lament the closure.

The company's cupcake-dispensing machines in malls and airports briefly went viral on TikTok for the not-so-subtle "I love Sprinkles" jingle that played repeatedly while a mechanical arm delivered the dessert. The company no longer has any products for sale on its website, which also has removed all operational locations across the country.

Nelson sold her business to private equity firm KarpReilly LLC in 2012 after the company had expanded to 10 locations across the country. The firm owns dozens of other companies for products including a health food home delivery service, kombucha and protein wellness shakes.

EXCHANGE RATES

Military rates	
Euro costs (Jan. 6)	0.84
British pound (Jan. 6)	$1.314
Japanese yen (Jan. 6)	152.00
South Korean won (Jan. 6)	1410.00
Commercial rates	
Bahrain (Dinar)	0.3.744
Britain (Pound)	1.3474
Canada (Dollar)	1.3787
China (Yuan)	6.9931
Denmark (Krone)	6.3915
Egypt (Pound)	47.2911
Euro	0.8557
Hong Kong (Dollar)	7.7856
Hungary (Forint)	328.297
Israel (Shekel)	3.1606
Japan (Yen)	156.725
Kuwait (Dinar)	0.3068
Norway (Krone)	10.0787
Philippines (Peso)	59.091
Poland (Zloty)	3.6020
Saudi Arabia (Riyal)	3.7461
Singapore (Dollar)	1.2862
South Korea (Won)	1448.60
Switzerland (Franc)	0.795
Thailand (Baht)	31.318
Turkey (NewLira)	43.0359

(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	6.75
Interest Rates Discount rate	3.75
Federal funds market rate	3.62
3-month bill	3.62
30-year bond	4.87

WEATHER OUTLOOK

TUESDAY IN THE MIDDLE EAST



TUESDAY IN EUROPE



WEDNESDAY IN THE PACIFIC



This weather is compiled from weather.com reports.

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MILITARY



JOAQUIN CARLOS DELA TORRE/U.S. Marine Corps

Marine Corps Lance Cpl. James Ciccone, a drone operator, builds drones during a Dec. 8 competition at Camp Schwab on Okinawa, Japan. The service announced a new drone fighting doctrine, introducing six drone courses and eight certifications that will be available to all Marines.

All Marines eligible to apply for 6 new drone pilot courses

BY LYDIA GORDON
Stars and Stripes

The Marine Corps is adding six new piloting courses as the service prepares to field tens of thousands of commercial drones in the coming year.

The plan, announced last Monday in a memo from the service, outlines a two-and-a-half-year framework to standardize drone training across the Corps.

Under the new framework, Marines of any job specialty can apply through their commands for one of the courses, which include basic drone operator, attack drone operator, attack drone leader, payload specialist, attack drone instructor and payload specialist instructor.

Units at Camp Pendleton, Calif., and Camp Lejeune, N.C., and on the Japanese island of Okinawa were selected as regional training hubs for the courses, with Quantico, Va., serving as the current central training site, according to the release.

In addition to the six courses, eight new drone-related certifications will be introduced, broadening qualification pathways for Marines with varying experience levels, the Corps said.

Marines who have completed previous service drone training may be granted corresponding certifications under the new system, the memo said.

First-person view drones will be fielded to all infantry, reconnaissance and littoral combat teams across the Corps as early as May, according to a separate statement Tuesday.

The initiatives align with the Defense Department's broader effort to develop and field approximately $1 billion in autonomous and remotely operated systems across the services, the Marine Corps said.

Full operational capability for the Corps' drone program is expected by 2028, with initial fielding slated to begin in March.

The new program builds on efforts already underway by the Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory, which has begun delivering Neros Archer attack drones to select units.



MAURION MOORE/U.S. Marine Corps

Marines load a simulated warhead onto a drone during training at Camp Santiago, Puerto Rico, in November.

The Corps plans to maintain and expand its use of existing platforms as part of a diverse and adaptable drone portfolio, according to the message issued Monday.

Army launches AI career path for officers

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

A new career path for Army officers that focuses on artificial intelligence and machine learning further cements the service's doctrinal shift toward cutting-edge technology and autonomous warfare.

The occupational specialty "49B Artificial Intelligence/Machine Learning" officer will be phased in as an official area of concentration starting in January through the Army's Volunteer Transfer Incentive Program, according to an Army statement last week.

Officers with advanced academic and technical backgrounds in fields related to AI or machine learning are particularly sought to participate in the new program, the Army said.

The service is also considering offering the career path to warrant officers in the future, according to the statement.

"We're building a dedicated cadre of in-house experts who will be at the forefront of integrating AI and machine learning across our warfighting functions," Army spokesman Lt. Col. Orlandon Howard said in the statement.

"Ultimately, it's about building a force that can outthink, outpace and outmaneuver any adversary," the statement added.

The new job specialty will be offered initially to any officer eligible for the Volunteer Transfer Incentive Program, the statement said.

The program is designed to facilitate the transfer of officers into the new occupational specialties within Army manning requirements.

Those chosen for transfer to 49B will be reclassified by Sept. 30, the end of the current fiscal year, the statement said.

The new cadre will undergo rigorous graduate-level training and receive hands-on experience in constructing, maintaining and deploying the Army's AI-enabled systems, the statement said.

"We're building a dedicated cadre of in-house experts who will be at the forefront of integrating AI and machine learning across our warfighting functions."

Lt. Col. Orlandon Howard
Army spokesman

These "uniformed experts" will speed integration of advanced systems to expedite battlefield decision-making and streamline logistics, and they additionally will field and manage the next generation of battlefield robotics, the statement said.

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war has spurred the Army to embrace artificial intelligence and autonomous systems in recent years, as small, off-the-shelf drones deployed by both sides in the conflict proved transformational for future combat.

The service has tested a range of systems in the Grafenwoehr and Hohenfels training areas in Germany as part of initiatives like the revised Army fighting doctrine known as Transforming in Contact and the counter-drone Project Flytrap.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth recently launched the military-focused AI platform GenAI.mil, which is powered by Google Gemini, to further signal the "AI-driven culture change," according to a statement from the Pentagon.

Pentagon watchdog blames Lockheed for poor F-35 maintenance

BY IAIN MARLOW
Bloomberg

The U.S. fleet of F-35s, the most sophisticated stealth fighter jet in the world, was only available to fly half of the time because of poor maintenance by Lockheed Martin Corp., a government watchdog said.

The average availability rate of F-35s throughout fiscal year 2024 was just 50% partly because the Pentagon "did not consistently hold Lockheed Martin accountable for poor performance related to F-35 sustainment," according to a report from the Defense Department's Office of the Inspector General.

While "the aircraft were not available to fly half of the time" and the maintenance meant the jets didn't meet "minimum military service requirements," the Pentagon still paid Lockheed $1.7 billion without any economic adjustment, according to the report.

The audit is only the latest negative assessment of the F-35, a $2 trillion program that is the costliest Pentagon acquisition effort and has been beset by quality defects, engine issues and concerns around reliability.

In June, the Air Force slashed in half the number of F-35s it was requesting for 2026 as a result of the rising cost of upgrades to avionics and computing power. A blistering report from the Government Accountability Office in September highlighted that the Pentagon still paid Lockheed on-time payment bonuses when it delivered planes as much as two months late, with many jets beset by flaws that would take years to fix.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth has ramped up scrutiny of the F-35 program. President Donald Trump has also raised pressure on major defense contractors to invest more in innovation rather than stock buybacks and executive compensation.

MILITARY

Sailors charged in fake marriages to Chinese nationals

BY ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

Two Navy sailors are facing federal charges for what authorities say were sham marriages with Chinese immigrants seeking U.S. residency.

Jacinth Bailey and Morgan Chambers are charged with one count each of conspiracy to commit marriage fraud, federal court records show.

Bailey and Chambers were to receive $45,000 and $35,000, respectively, as part of the scheme to recruit American citizens, preferably U.S. service members, prosecutors said in separate filings last month in federal court in Jacksonville, Fla.

The Navy didn't immediately respond to questions about the rank and duty assignment of the sailors. The service has an air station in Jacksonville.

If convicted, Bailey and Chambers face up to five years in prison. Neither of them has appeared in court or entered a plea, but each waived their right to be formally indicted.

Their attorneys declined comment on Monday, citing the pending case.

At least two other sailors are involved in the case.

In August, former Navy recruiter Brinio Urena pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to commit marriage fraud, The New York Times reported on Friday.

As part of his plea deal, Urena admitted to marrying a Chinese woman for money in August 2024 and also admitted to helping recruit fellow service members to do the same.

His sentencing is scheduled for Jan. 21.

Navy reservist Raymond Zumba pleaded guilty in July to attempting to bribe a Naval Air Station Jacksonville official in exchange for fraudulent military identification cards for two ineligible people with links to China. Zumba's sentencing in that case is set for Jan. 14.

Separately, he also faces a charge of conspiracy to commit marriage fraud related to his April 2024 wedding to a Chinese national, according to a Dec. 5 federal court filing in Jacksonville.

A Dec. 12 court entry indicates that Zumba agreed to plead guilty in the case.

His attorney did not immediately respond Monday to a request for comment.

Urena and Zumba were not named in charging documents for Bailey and Chambers.

But in their Dec. 5 filing, prosecutors said Zumba recruited Urena in May 2024 to enter a sham marriage.

After Urena's wedding, Zumba asked him to obtain a military identification card for his new wife because it would help the immigration process, according to the filing.

He also asked Urena "to help him find and recruit other U.S. citizens who would be willing to marry Chinese nationals and facilitate their immigration status for money," the filing states.

In October 2024, Urena and an unidentified Navy sailor contacted another service member to recruit her for marriage to an unidentified Chinese national.

About a month later, Urena introduced the service member to Zumba, who specified the payment terms, according to the filing.

That marriage took place on Jan. 2, 2025, after Zumba and another unidentified co-conspirator drove the service member and her soon-to-be husband from New York City to a Connecticut courthouse, according to court documents.

The documents do not name the service member involved, but the dates and payment terms are consistent with information contained in a court filing for Bailey.

Afterward, Bailey attended a "sham wedding party," during which photographs were taken to substantiate the legitimacy of the marriage for immigration application purposes.

Bailey also was paid an additional $10,000 at the party, court documents show.

She also was asked to apply for and obtain a military identification card for the Chinese national that would allow him access to U.S. military facilities, prosecutors say.

Chambers flew to Las Vegas in October 2024 for her wedding and afterward was paid $10,000 cash in a restaurant restroom, court documents state.

A separate court document indicates that Urena flew with an unidentified co-conspirator to a sham wedding in Las Vegas that took place on the same October 2024 day.

The scheme came to light during a conversation between Zumba and a confidential informant, court records show.



ERIC KAYNE/Stars and Stripes

Sen. Mark Kelly, D-Ariz., joins veterans and other Democratic lawmakers in May on Capitol Hill.

Hegseth censures Sen. Kelly, moves to review retirement rank

BY MATTHEW ADAMS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth on Monday censured Sen. Mark Kelly and moved to demote his military rank after telling troops in a video they could refuse unlawful orders.

"The Department of War — and the American people — expect justice," Hegseth posted on X. The Department of War is the secondary name for the Defense Department after President Donald Trump signed an executive order in September.

In November, Kelly, a retired Navy captain, participated in a video alongside five other Democratic lawmakers who served in the military and intelligence community urging service members to remember their oaths to the Constitution and disobey illegal orders. Kelly, D-Ariz., retired from the Navy in 2011 and is a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, which conducts oversight of the Pentagon.

The Pentagon launched a review at the time.

In response to Kelly's "seditious statements," Hegseth said the Pentagon initiated retirement grade proceedings, which could result in grade and retirement pay reduction. Hegseth also issued a formal letter of censure, saying it "is a necessary step" and will be placed on Kelly's permanent military personnel file.

"Captain Kelly has been provided notice of the basis for this action and has 30 days to submit a response. The retirement grade determination process directed by Secretary Hegseth will be completed within 45 days," Hegseth wrote. "Captain Kelly's status as a sitting United States senator does not exempt him from accountability, and further violations could result in further action."

Hegseth added these actions are based on comments made by Kelly from June to December 2025 in which he "characterized lawful military operations as illegal and counseled members of the Armed Forces to refuse lawful orders."

Kelly responded on X by acknowledging he risked his life in more than 25 years of service, including 39 combat missions, to protect the country and defend the Constitution — including first amendment rights.

"I never expected that the President of the United States and the Secretary of Defense would attack me for doing exactly that," Kelly said. "Pete Hegseth wants to send the message to every single retired service member that if they say something he or Donald Trump doesn't like, they will come after them the same way. It's outrageous, and it is wrong. I will fight this with everything I've got."

In the video, Kelly addresses the military and intelligence community, saying "Like us, you swore an oath." He later states, "Our laws are clear: you can refuse illegal orders."

At the time, the Pentagon came under scrutiny after a Sept. 2 attack on a suspected drug boat in the Caribbean. Lawmakers called for investigations into the attack after news reports revealed the first strike had failed to destroy the boat and left two survivors clinging to the wreckage.

US soldier seriously injured in collision on highway in weather-beaten Bavaria

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

GRAFENWOEHR, Germany — A U.S. soldier in southern Germany was seriously injured over the weekend after losing control of his vehicle on slick, snowy roads.

The unidentified 27-year-old was driving his Dodge Challenger on the B85 highway between Pegnitz and Auerbach at 4:25 p.m. Sunday when he lost control due to icy conditions, Pegnitz police said.

The vehicle then crossed the median and collided with oncoming traffic. The crash site is about 20 miles west of U.S. Army Garrison Bavaria's Tower Barracks in Grafenwoehr.

It's unclear where the soldier is stationed and what his unit assignment is. A garrison spokeswoman acknowledged receipt of questions Monday but did not immediately provide further information.

The Challenger struck a BMW with three occupants ranging in age from 17 to 21 and another car that was carrying two people, police said. The injuries to those in the other vehicles were minor, according to the statement.

Police assessed the damage from the crash at about $60,000.

At least four other crashes occurred that same day, police said.

The region was pounded last week by bad weather that included freezing temperatures and several inches of snow.

The conditions led to weather advisories on bases in the region and early dismissals for certain soldiers and Defense Department civilians.

Stars and Stripes reporter Marcus Kloeckner contributed to this article.

MILITARY

NATO urged to use drones to track Russia

BY JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

NATO should build a fleet of polar-hardened drones to keep closer tabs on Russian submarines and military maneuvers in the Arctic, says a recent report that calls for a strategy of "deterrence by detection" in the region.

A wide range of aerial, ground-based and undersea unmanned systems is urgently needed to give allies an edge in the hotly contested High North, the Center for European Policy Analysis said.

To deter Russian aggression, NATO must be able to identify threats as they are gathering, the authors of the Dec. 16 report said.

"This means being able to track Russian submarine patrols leaving the Kola Peninsula, monitor aircraft flights across the Barents and Bering Seas, identify changes in Russia's Arctic force posture and infrastructure, and detect potential surface and subsurface threats to critical infrastructure," the report said.

Over the past decade, Russia has steadily been strengthening its position in the Arctic, adding military capabilities and expanding bases. China also has its eye on the region after declaring itself a "near-Arctic" state in 2018.

The melting of sea ice has opened the possibility for new sea routes, increased commercial activity and, with it, more military competition.

The United States and other NATO members also have stepped up in the region, with more drills focused on challenges related to operating in polar conditions.

U.S. naval deployments in the Arctic aimed at boosting situational awareness and deterring potential Russian aggression also have increased. Still, gaps persist, according to CEPA.

"To begin with, NATO doesn't have a formal Arctic strategy," the report said. "While this is a sensitive policy matter, the lack of a dedicated strategic framework for the region risks diluting resourcing and cooperation between regional allies on various levels."

Procurement of Arctic-capable drones across NATO remains "fragmented, slow, and risk-averse," the report said.

Most allies also treat Arctic-specific drone requirements as secondary modifications rather than purpose-built characteristics, which means limited numbers of reliable Arctic-ready drones, according to the think tank.

NATO should accelerate procurement of systems that consider the technical requirements for operating in the Arctic, the authors urged.

In addition, the alliance ought to establish new drone units with specialized training, which would free up manned aircraft and ships for other tasks, according to the report.

"The next decade is a decisive window of opportunity," the report stated, adding that those fastest to adapt to the challenges of the harsh High North terrain "will shape a future Arctic security architecture capable of deterring and defeating emerging threats."

B-52 maintainers win USAF innovation prize

BY JUAN KING
Stars and Stripes

Airmen who maintain B-52 Stratofortress bombers won the Air Force's top innovation prize after designing a simple adapter that makes one of their most dangerous maintenance jobs faster and safer.

The team from Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana took first place at Air Force Spark Tank, the service's championship round for innovators, for a work platform that cuts pylon-loading time from four hours to about 30 minutes while reducing the risk of injury and aircraft damage.

The event, held at the Pentagon in mid-November, featured six finalist projects pitched by airmen. It was delayed more than a month because of the 43-day federal government shutdown, according to a Dec. 19 news release from the Air Force Research Laboratory. The finalists were selected from 441 projects submitted worldwide.

The Barksdale team won with its Airborne Launcher for Expendables-25 Pylon Load Adapter. The device attaches to an existing lift truck and holds an avionics pylon securely beneath a B-52's wing while maintainers work, according to an Instagram video posed by the 307th Bomb Wing.

"We just had to create an adapter … to basically fix it to the lift truck, so it would interface between the pylon and the lift truck," Senior Master Sgt. John Slaughter, 307th Maintenance Squadron production superintendent, said in the video.

Slaughter said the adapter reduces the risk of injury to airmen and damage to aircraft.

"The ALE 25 Pylon Loading Adapter was born out of real-world challenges faced by maintainers," the research lab release said. "By cutting task times from four hours to just 30 minutes and eliminating risky manual lifts, it's transforming safety and efficiency for B-52H Stratofortress operations."

Another finalist, Tech. Sgt. Tylar Cravens, a C-130J Super Hercules engine mechanic at Yokota Air Base in western Tokyo, represented his team at the competition. His project, Star Forge, uses advanced 3D printing to produce full-scale composite engine models, allowing maintainers to train without removing aircraft from service.

Cravens — assigned to 373rd Training Squadron Detachment 15 — said Star Forge grabbed plenty of attention at the event.

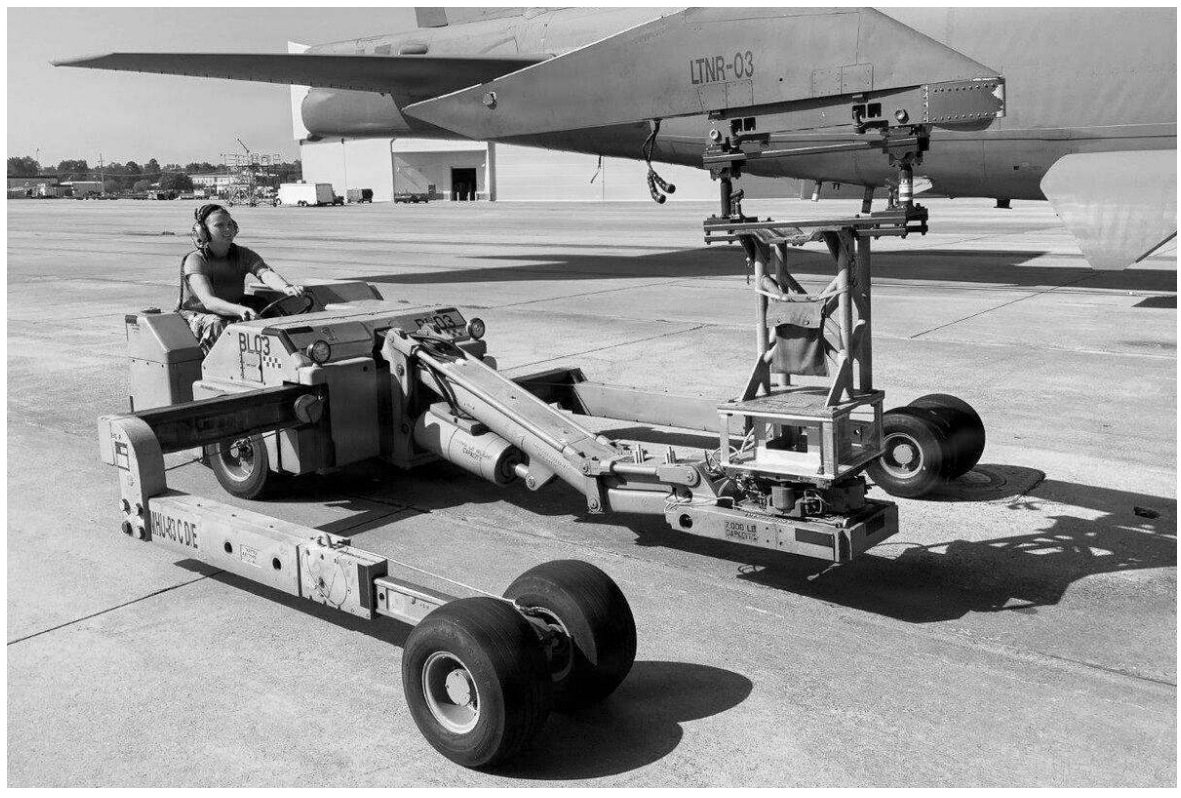
"We weren't selected as the winner, but leadership is interested in funding and pursuing the project," he told Stars and Stripes in a Dec. 14 email.

Developed through Yokota's YokoWerx innovation cell, the idea grew from Cravens' personal 3D-printing efforts into a system refined by airmen in Japan, the United States and Europe.

Star Forge reduced training equipment costs dramatically — in one case from $89,000 to $1 — and is expected to improve training for about 2,300 aircraft maintainers, according to the research lab.

Spark Tank — modeled after the television show "Shark Tank" — provides finalists exposure and potential funding. Winners receive support to further develop their ideas.

"I had a great time presenting to the Air and Space Force leadership," Cravens wrote. "I look forward to continue pushing forward with the future of training!"



THEODORE DAIGLE/U.S. Air Force

An airman with the 307th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron field tests the pylon-loading fixture at Barksdale Air Force Base, La., in August 2021.

Restrictions lifted on access to Seoul city park, once a US Army base

BY YOOJIN LEE
Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — A former section of the U.S. Army's base in Seoul, now a public park, has removed access restrictions imposed when the South Korean presidential offices were located nearby.

The Yongsan Children's Garden, formerly a part of the Yongsan Garrison, opened to the public last Tuesday without the need for inspections and reservations, according to a statement that day from the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport.

South Korean presidential offices occupied an adjacent site beginning in 2022. Those offices returned last Monday to the Blue House, for more than 70 years the presidential office building, according to a Blue House news release.

The Yongsan Children's Garden will be open 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday, except 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Saturday. The park is closed on Monday. Daily shuttles between the main entrance and interior areas are also available, according to the park's website.

In addition, the government will launch a renaming campaign to reflect the park's opening to people of all ages sometime next year, according to the ministry release.

The ministry installed a soil monitoring system inside the park and will be regularly checking air and soil quality and publicly sharing the results, according to the ministry.

"We want the public to freely experience the temporarily opened Yongsan Park without the inconvenience of reservations," Jung Woojin, head of the planning team for Yongsan Park development, said in the release.

The property includes the 5th Military Officer's Housing Complex, part of the garrison left as a vestige that has turned into a popular attraction in the city.

The park, occupied first by the Japanese military and then by the U.S., was inaccessible to Korean citizens for more than 120 years, according to a ministry statement in 2023.

U.S. Forces Korea began the phased return of the garrison to South Korea in December 2020, after the headquarters for U.S. Forces Korea and the United Nations Command relocated in 2018 to Camp Humphreys in Pyeongtaek, followed by the Combined Forces Command in 2022.

PACIFIC

China increased presence near Japan islands

By Brian McElhiney and Keishi Koja
Stars and Stripes

Chinese coast guard vessels sailed near the Senkaku Islands 357 times last year, setting a record for the fourth year in a row amid increased tension between Beijing and Tokyo.

In 2024, China's coast guard was spotted 355 times in the contiguous zone around the uninhabited island group, which is administered by Japan, a spokeswoman for Japan's coast guard said Monday. That year in turn broke 2023's record of 352 sightings.

The contiguous zone is a 24-mile-wide band beyond the 12-mile territorial limit. Countries may exercise limited control in their contiguous zones, according to the United Nations.

The Senkakus, also claimed by China and Taiwan, include five islets and three reefs 105 miles east of Taiwan and 254 miles west of Okinawa.

"The situation surrounding the Senkaku Islands is becoming increasingly severe, and the situation remains unpredictable," Seishiro Sakamoto, commander of Japan's 11th Regional Coast Guard, said in a statement Monday.

"We will continue to conduct surveillance and vigilance activities with a high sense of urgency so as not to miss even the slightest change and will take all possible measures to protect our territorial waters," Sakamoto said.

China refers to the islands as Diaoyu and maintains that its activities in the adjacent waters are "legitimate and lawful," then-Foreign Ministry spokesman Lijian Zhao told reporters in July 2022.

"The Japanese side has no right to point fingers over these activities," he said.

Last year, the Chinese coast guard sailed 27 times into territorial waters around the Senkakus, most recently on Dec. 10, the Japanese coast guard spokeswoman said. On eight instances, the Chinese ships chased Japanese fishing vessels past the territorial limit.

China's coast guard entered the Senkakus' territorial waters 39 times in 2024, she said. The record is 52 times in 2013, according to the coast guard.

China also set a record in 2024 and 2025 for consecutive days sailing within the Senkakus' contiguous zone.

Vessels were spotted there for 335 days between Nov. 19, 2024, and Oct. 19, according to the spokeswoman.

The previous record was 215 days between Dec. 22, 2023, and July 23, 2024, according to the coast guard.

The area is believed to contain oil reserves and other resources, fueling Chinese challenges to Japan's claim over the islands since the 1970s, according to Japan's Foreign Affairs Ministry.

Tensions between the two countries escalated when Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi during a November parliamentary session warned that Japan could use military force if China attacks Taiwan. Chinese President Xi Jinping has vowed to unify the self-governing island with the mainland, by force if necessary.

The Pentagon has identified China as an aggressive presence in the East and South China seas and a global "pacing challenge" in its 2022 National Defense Strategy.

The 2025 National Security Strategy includes a focus on "competing with China economically and militarily in the Indo-Pacific region," by prioritizing acquiring weapons such as long-range manned and un-manned aircraft.

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

Experts: Military boost in Japan due to fears over economy, defense

By Brian McElhiney
Stars and Stripes

Japan's military buildup in the Nansei region is sending a message to an increasingly aggressive China that it will defend its economic interests and its people, according to defense experts recently.

Since 2022, Tokyo has worked toward committing 2% of Japan's gross domestic product to defense. Much of that has focused on the Nansei, or Ryukyu, Islands that include Okinawa and stretch southwest from Kyushu to Taiwan.

Japan is concerned about the economic and defense ramifications of a conflict over Taiwan, according to experts in Asian studies and international politics. Chinese President Xi Jinping has vowed to unify self-governing Taiwan with the mainland, by force if necessary.

A successful invasion of Taiwan by China would "completely reorder the geostrategic calculation of the region and arguably the world," according to Mark Davidson, former director of the U.S. Global Counterterrorism Communications Center.

"China would have unfettered access to the Indo-Pacific region; it would be in a position directly and easily to impede the flow of commerce and Japan's economic lifelines," Davidson, a professor of international politics at Temple University's Japan Campus, said by phone Nov. 14.

Included in Japan's record $58 billion defense budget for next year is approximately $1.14 billion for upgraded surface-to-ship missiles like the Type-12s Japan deployed in 2023 on Ishigaki Island, less than 200 miles from Taiwan.

In November, Defense Minister Shinjiro Koizumi reiterated the ministry's intent, announced in 2022, to position a Type-03 medium-range surface-to-air missile unit at Camp Yonaguni on Japan's westernmost island, about 70 miles from Taiwan.

Success in Taiwan could embolden China "to continue its expansionism both toward the South China Sea … and potentially toward Japanese administered territories such as Senkaku Islands or Okinawa prefecture proper," Davidson told Stars and Stripes.

China condemns Japan's increased defense spending as resurgent militarism.

The Nansei Islands buildup "clearly goes beyond Japan's 'exclusively defense-oriented' policy,'" Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Lin Jian told reporters Dec. 26.

"Terms such as 'self-defense' and 'counterstrike' are used by Japanese right-wing forces to gloss over their attempt to breach the postwar international order …," he said, according to a transcript of his remarks.

Last Monday, Chinese forces encircled Taiwan for a military exercise that included actual missile launches.

This aggression "makes it clear to me that Japan is right to orient its defenses in this direction," Davidson said.

If the U.S. gets involved in a potential Taiwan conflict, it could lead to "direct conflict expansion in Japan or a major blow to Japan's economic and energy activities," said Junjiro Shida, professor of international studies at Meio University in Nago city.

Japan's response would depend on the situation, but "would likely involve, for example, a missile attack on Chinese ships attempting to land on Taiwan," he said Dec. 23.

However, even in a situation considered an existential threat, Japan's use of force would be limited, he said.



Photos by Brian McElhiney/Stars and Stripes

Lt. Gen. Roger Turner, commander of the III Marine Expeditionary Force, center, shakes hands with Lt. Gen. Seiji Toriumi, commander of Japan's Western Army, at Camp Ishigaki on Ishigaki Island, Okinawa, on Sept. 17.



Launchers for Type 03 surface-to-air missile, left, and Type 12 surface-to-ship missile are displayed.

Japan's moves are consistent with "preserving a rules-based international order," said Sayuri Romei, senior fellow for Japan in the Indo-Pacific Program at the U.S. nonpartisan think tank German Marshall Fund.

"[Tokyo] has stated countless times that any attempts at changing it by force will not be accepted," she said Nov. 30. "That is why Japan cares about the trajectory of the war in Ukraine, as it knows that Beijing will be watching that outcome closely."

Japan's buildup in its southernmost islands sends a message to China "that these capabilities mean that attempts to change the status quo will not be successful," Shida said.

Stars and Stripes reporters Keishi Koja and Alex Wilson contributed to this report.

MILITARY

Military ends 'painful' experiments on cats, dogs

By Linda F. Hersey
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The defense bill that President Donald Trump signed into law puts an end to many military experiments on cats and dogs and declares a ceasefire to shooting animals in "trauma" exercises.

The 2026 National Defense Authorization Act, enacted Dec. 18, includes a provision that bans the Defense Department from continuing to conduct and sponsor "painful research" on domestic cats and dogs as live test subjects.

The bill also orders the Defense Department to ensure that it will not engage in "live-fire trauma training" that targets dogs, cats, nonhuman primates and marine mammals.

Supporters said the bill ends exercises that involved shooting, critically wounding and killing goats and pigs to help educate medics in treating combat injuries. The legislation directs the military to use technologically advanced human simulators instead.

The shift is part of a government-wide effort to phase out the use of live animals in federally sponsored tests, studies and training, with pressure growing from the Trump administration, Congress and animal welfare groups to end the practice.

The Navy in May implemented a total ban on experiments using cats and dogs. The Department of Veterans Affairs is phasing out research on cats, dogs and non-human primates.

The defense secretary can make exceptions in the interests of national security. Exemptions also may be made for training and studies related to military or service animals.

Lawmakers from both parties welcomed the restrictions on live-animal tests and training in the 2026 defense bill.

"It is indefensible to waste tax dollars designed to boost our national security on cruel and pointless experiments on cats and dogs," said Sen. Jodi Ernst, R-Iowa, a retired lieutenant colonel in the Army National Guard.

"Research and testing methods involving dogs and cats are outdated. We must adopt more scientific approaches to improve lives," said Rep. Don Davis, D-N.C., a former first lieutenant in the Air Force. The military, for example, increasingly uses technologically advanced human simulators that physicians say better prepare medics for battlefield injuries.



Audrey Chappell/U.S. Air National Guard

The 139th Medical Group partnered with the Naval Medical Center in San Diego to practice emergency simulations in July. The 2026 National Defense Authorization Act orders the Defense Department to ensure that it will not engage in "live-fire trauma training" that targets animals, instead directing the military to use human simulators.

New restrictions on using domestic cats and dogs in military studies target research that is "painful" but does not end all experiments.

Defunded are animal experiments that cause significant and unrelieved pain and distress, under criteria set by the Agriculture Department.

"Our investigation has identified at least 10 active military contracts worth roughly $29 million that are funding painful experiments on dogs and cats in laboratories around the world. These projects — and any others now or in the future — are prohibited from spending taxpayer dollars for painful tests on cats and dogs," said Justin Goodman, senior vice president for advocacy and public policy at White Coat Waste Project, a nonprofit that works to end animal testing by federal agencies.

The bill's language banning the military from conducting live-fire trauma tests on animals identifies dogs, cats, nonhuman primates and marine mammals. But advocates say the prohibition applies to all animals. The defense secretary is directed to use alternatives that include advanced simulators, mannequins and cadavers.

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, which advocated for the ban, said it has worked for years to replace animals in trauma training with "superior human-relevant simulators."

Live-fire trauma tests using animals have been banned in full by the Coast Guard and greatly reduced by the other armed forces, said Shalin Gala, PETA vice president.

"But pigs and goats are still used for this training. With the passage of the NDAA, for the first time no live animals, including goats and pigs, will be shot for trauma training in 2026," Gala said.

Aviator celebrates 101st birthday in plane he flew in WWII

By Kaylyn Barnhart Batista
Stars and Stripes

An Army veteran who served as an aviator during World War II was given the chance to fly again for his 101st birthday, creating an unforgettable moment for himself and his family.

B.L. Craighead Jr., of San Antonio, flew in a vintage open-cockpit Stearman biplane — an aircraft he piloted during his World War II service — at Castroville Municipal Airport in Texas on his birthday Dec. 30.

The flight experience was coordinated by Dream Flights, a nonprofit organization that takes America's senior veterans on open-air flights in WWII-era biplanes. Since 2011, Dream Flights has flown in 49 states, honoring nearly 8,000 WWII, Korean and Vietnam veterans with free flights.

About 40 of Craighead's family and friends gathered at the runway to witness the moment, and Julie, his granddaughter, said everyone cried throughout the day as they watched his reactions because "it was so magical."

"He was so happy, and it was just the best thing I could ever imagine," Julie said Wednesday. "I can't ask for a better gift in the whole wide world."

Julie also got the chance to be in another plane and taxi alongside Craighead to the end of the runway before he took off. She said he was overjoyed to see his granddaughter in a plane he had flown years ago during the war.



Dream Flights

World War II veteran B.L. Craighead Jr., of San Antonio, sits in the open cockpit of a Stearman biplane at Castroville Municipal Airport in Texas, on Dec. 30, his 101st birthday. He also flew in the plane.

"I was waving to him, and he had both of his hands up in the air, and he was waving and wanting to stand up," Julie said. "I've never seen him like that in my life."

Though Craighead is usually nervous about getting into bed for fear of falling, he was full of determination and excitement when it was time to climb into the plane.

Hunter Stuckey, the pilot who flew Craighead, said that once Craighead was seated in the cockpit, memories of flying 80 years ago came flooding back to him.

"He started saying, 'I remember,' " said Stuckey. "When we got up in the air, he was super animated and was just looking out the side the whole time."

Craighead, at 17, joined the newly formed Army Air Forces in 1941. He trained as a pilot at Sheppard Field, which is now Sheppard Air Force Base. He then became an instructor and flew out of Randolph Field, which is now Joint Base San Antonio-Randolph, and other airfields across Texas. He flew many different types of planes during his service.

Stuckey flew Craighead over the lake near where he grew up and then circled a nearby veterans community, where residents looked up and waved, recognizing the plane. They were in the air for 30 minutes.

"The whole experience was just as good for me as it was for him," Stuckey said. "He had a blast and so did I, which is awesome."

When they landed, Craighead's family and friends lined the runway and saluted as he taxied past. Stuckey said Craighead started "crying out loud" as he watched each of his loved ones display a sign of respect toward him.

"I hope that the family saw him in his glory days," Stuckey said. "He's not sitting in a wheelchair. He's in front of this cool airplane that he actually flew, and he's in here, looking cool with his helmet on and everything. This is the real dude right here."

Craighead is one of more than 1,000 WWII veterans who have been honored by Dream Flights. Following the flight, he took part in a tradition reserved for members of the "Greatest Generation" — signing his name on the aircraft's tail.

"I'm super thankful for all the freedoms that we have here in the country, and it's all because of these dudes," Stuckey said. "I just hope he (Craighead) knows that we all support him. We're on his team and everybody loves him."

NATION

Trump faces GOP pushback on Maduro mission

Intervention in Venezuela could test president's ability to unite his party

BY STEVEN SLOAN
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump's military intervention in Venezuela will pose a fresh test of his ability to hold together a restive Republican coalition during a challenging election year that could be defined by domestic concerns like health care and affordability.

While most Republicans lined up behind the president in the immediate aftermath of the stunning U.S. mission to capture Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro and bring him to New York to face criminal charges, there were signs of unease across the spectrum within the party. In particular, Trump's comments about the U.S. positioning itself to "run" Venezuela have raised concerns that he is abandoning the "America First" philosophy that has long distinguished him from more traditional Republicans and helped fuel his political rise.

"This is the same Washington playbook that we are so sick and tired of that doesn't serve the American people, but actually serves the big corporations, the banks and the oil executives," said Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia, a former Trump ally who is resigning on Monday, in an interview with NBC's "Meet the Press" on Sunday.

Those concerns were shared by some who are not associated with the party's far-right flank.

Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick of Pennsylvania, a moderate who is one of the most vulnerable Republicans in the November midterms, said in a statement that "the only country that the United States of America should be 'running' is the United States of America."



Fitzpatrick

Those comments reflect the sensitive dynamics between Trump and his fellow Republicans at the outset of an election year in which their party risks losing control of Congress. While the president's dominance remains undisputed, the ironclad grip that he has held over the party has faced unusual challenges in recent months. Blocs of Republicans have banded together to pressure Trump to release the Jeffrey Epstein files. Others have been vocal in encouraging Trump to take concerns about affordability more seriously.



Greene



ALEX BRANDON/AP

President Donald Trump listens to a question during a news conference at Mar-a-Lago, on Saturday, in Palm Beach, Fla., as Secretary of State Marco Rubio watches.

Few issues are as central to Trump's political brand as ensuring that the U.S. does not get entangled in seemingly endless foreign conflicts at the expense of domestic goals. During a 2016 Republican presidential debate, for instance, he described the war in Iraq as a "big, fat mistake."

But on Saturday, Trump said he was "not afraid of boots on the ground" in Venezuela if that was deemed necessary, and he framed his actions as prioritizing the safety and security of Americans.

He remained confident on Sunday, telling reporters aboard Air Force One that his supporters are "thrilled."

"They said this is what we voted for," Trump said.

However, much like the Iraq War, a president's early optimism after a dramatic military action can sometimes meet more sobering realities that drain domestic political support.

In Venezuela, U.S. troops could be placed in harm's way again as Trump warns that more military operations may be in the works. An ongoing conflict could worsen the hemisphere's refugee crisis, something the White House has tried to tamp down with stricter border controls. In addition, there are questions about how much cooperation the U.S. will receive from officials still in Venezuela or how easily the country's oil reserves could be tapped to fulfill Trump's goal of extracting more energy with Maduro out of the picture.

Trump's comments this weekend about revitalizing the oil industry in Venezuela are in line with some of the earliest critiques he made of the handling of the Iraq War. During a 2013 speech before the Conservative Political Action Conference, Trump said the U.S. should "take" oil from Iraq and "pay ourselves back."

Frustration with the handling of the Iraq War contributed to major gains for Democrats in the 2006 election and helped create the conditions for Barack Obama to be elected to the presidency two years later. Given the baggage surrounding those wars, Trump allies insist that the actions this weekend in Venezuela are different.

"Venezuela looks nothing like Libya," Secretary of State Marco Rubio said on "Meet the Press. "It looks nothing like Iraq. It looks nothing like Afghanistan. It looks nothing like the Middle East other than the Iranian agents that are running through there plotting against America, okay?"

Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Tom Cotton argued that the 1989 ouster of Manuel Noriega in Panama is a better comparison.

"That was a successful operation," Cotton said on CNN's "State of the Union." "I believe, in the long run, this will be too."

Capture of Maduro thrills Trump's regional allies, threatens his foes

BY ISABEL DEBRE AND MEGAN JANETSKY
Associated Press

MEXICO CITY — In his celebratory news conference on the U.S. capture of Venezuelan strongman leader Nicolás Maduro, President Donald Trump set out an extraordinarily forthright view of the use of U.S. power in Latin America that exposed political divisions from Mexico to Argentina as Trump-friendly leaders rise across the region.

"American dominance in the Western Hemisphere will never be questioned again," Trump proclaimed just hours before Maduro was perp-walked through the offices of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration in New York.

The scene marked a stunning culmination of months of escalation in Washington's confrontation with Caracas that has reawakened memories of a past era of blatant U.S. interventionism in the region.

Since assuming office less than a year ago — and promptly renaming the Gulf of Mexico as the Gulf of America — Trump has launched boat strikes against alleged drug traffickers in the Caribbean, ordered a naval blockade on Venezuelan oil exports and meddled in elections in Honduras and Argentina. Through a combination of tariffs, sanctions and military force, he has pressured Latin American leaders to advance his administration's goals of combating drug trafficking, halting immigration, securing strategic natural resources and countering the influence of Russia and China.

The new, aggressive foreign policy — which Trump now calls the "Donroe Doctrine," in reference to 19th-century President James Monroe's belief that the U.S. should dominate its sphere of influence — has carved the hemisphere into allies and foes.

"The Trump administration in multiple different ways has been trying to reshape Latin American politics," said Gimena Sanchez, Andes director for the Washington Office on Latin America, a think tank. "They're showing their teeth in the whole region."

Saturday's dramatic events — including Trump's vow that Washington would "run" Venezuela and seize control of its oil sector — galvanized opposite sides of the polarized continent.

Argentine President Javier Milei, Trump's ideological soulmate, characterized one side as supporting "democracy, the defense of life, freedom and property."

"On the other side," he added, "are those accomplices of a narcoterrorist and bloody dictatorship that has been a cancer for our region."

Other right-wing leaders in South America similarly seized on Maduro's ouster to declare their ideological affinity with Trump.

In Ecuador, conservative President Daniel Noboa issued a stern warning for all followers of Hugo Chávez, Maduro's mentor and the founder of the Bolivarian revolution: "Your structure will completely collapse across the entire continent."

In Chile, where a presidential election last month marked by fears over Venezuelan immigration brought down the leftist government, far-right President-elect José Antonio Kast hailed the U.S. raid as "great news for the region."

But left-wing presidents in Latin America — including Brazil's Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Mexico's Claudia Sheinbaum, Chile's Gabriel Boric and Colombia's Gustavo Petro — expressed grave concerns over what they saw as U.S. bullying.

Lula said the raid set "an extremely dangerous precedent." Sheinbaum warned it "jeopardizes regional stability." Boric said it "violated an essential pillar of international law." Petro called it "aggression against the sovereignty of Venezuela and of Latin America."

Trump has previously punished or threatened all four leaders for failing to fall in line with his demands, while boosting and bailing out allies who show loyalty.

For Lula — among the last surviving icons of the so-called "pink tide," the leftist leaders who dominated Latin American politics from the turn of the 21st century — Trump's military action in Venezuela "recalls the worst moments of interference in the politics of Latin America."

Those moments range from American troops occupying Central American and Caribbean nations to promote the interests of U.S. companies like Chiquita in the early 1900s to Washington supporting repressive military dictatorships in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay to fend off Soviet influence in the 1970s.

The historical echoes in Maduro's downfall fueled not only harsh condemnations and street protests among Trump's left-wing opponents but also uneasy responses from some of his close allies.

Usually effusive in his support for Trump, President Nayib Bukele was oddly quiet in El Salvador, a nation still scarred by a brutal civil war between a repressive U.S.-allied government and leftist guerrillas. He posted a meme mocking Maduro after his capture Saturday, but expressed none of the jubilation seen from regional counterparts.

NATION

Innocence: Lawyers are expected to contest legality of arrest

FROM PAGE 1

gal proceeding. Both put on headsets to hear the English-language proceeding as it is translated into Spanish.

The couple were transported to the Manhattan courthouse under armed guard early Monday from the Brooklyn jail where they've been detained since arriving in the U.S. on Saturday.

The trip was swift. A motorcade carrying Maduro left jail around 7:15 a.m. and made its way to a nearby athletic field, where Maduro slowly walked to a waiting helicopter. The chopper flew across New York harbor and landed at a Manhattan heliport, where Maduro, limping, was loaded into an armored vehicle.

A few minutes later, the law enforcement caravan was inside a garage at the courthouse complex, just around the corner from the one where Trump was convicted in 2024 of falsifying business records. Across the street from the courthouse, the police separated a small but growing group of protesters from about a dozen pro-intervention demonstrators, including one man who pulled a Venezuelan flag away from those protesting the U.S. action.

As a criminal defendant in the U.S. legal system, Maduro will have the same rights as any other person accused of a crime — including the right to a trial by a jury of regular New Yorkers. But he'll also be nearly — but not quite — unique.

Maduro's lawyers are expected to contest the legality of his arrest, arguing that he is immune from prosecution as a sovereign head of state.

Panamanian strongman Manuel Noriega unsuccessfully tried the same defense after the U.S. captured him in a similar military invasion in 1990. But the U.S. doesn't recognize Maduro as Venezuela's legitimate head of state — particularly after a much-disputed 2024 reelection.

Venezuela's new interim president, Delcy Rodríguez, has demanded that the U.S. return Maduro, who long denied any involvement in drug trafficking — although late Sunday she also struck a more conciliatory tone in a social media post, inviting collaboration with Trump and "respectful relations" with the U.S.

Before his capture, Maduro and his allies claimed U.S. hostility was motivated by lust for Venezuela's rich oil and mineral resources.

The U.S. seized Maduro and his wife in a military operation early Saturday, capturing them in their home on a military base. Trump said the U.S. would "run" Venezuela temporarily, but Secretary of State Marco Rubio said Sunday that it would not govern the country day-to-day other than enforcing an existing "oil quarantine."

Trump suggested Sunday that he wants to extend American power further in the Western Hemisphere.

Speaking aboard Air Force One, he called Colombia's president, Gustavo Petro, "a sick man who likes making cocaine and selling it to the United States. And he's not going to be doing it very long."

He called on Venezuela's Rodriguez to provide "total access" to her country, or else face consequences.

Trump has suggested that removing Maduro would enable more oil to flow out of Venezuela, but oil prices rose a bit more than 1% in Monday morning trading to roughly $58 a barrel. There are uncertainties about how fast oil production can be ramped up in Venezuela after years of neglect and needed investments, as well as questions about governance and oversight of the sector.

A 25-page indictment made public Saturday accuses Maduro and others of working with drug cartels to facilitate the shipment of thousands of tons of cocaine into the U.S. They could face life in prison if convicted.

He and his wife, Cilia Flores, have been under U.S. sanctions for years, making it illegal for any American to take money from them without first securing a license from the Treasury Department.

While the indictment against Maduro says Venezuelan officials worked directly with the Tren de Aragua gang, a U.S. intelligence assessment published in April, drawing on input from the intelligence community's 18 agencies, found no coordination between Tren de Aragua and the Venezuelan government.

Maduro, his wife and his son — who remains free — are charged along with Venezuela's interior and justice minister, a former interior and justice minister and Hector Rusthenford Guerrero Flores, an alleged Tren de Aragua leader who has been criminally charged in another case and remains at large.

Among other things, the indictment accuses Maduro and Flores of ordering kidnappings, beatings and murders of those who owed them drug money or undermined their drug trafficking operation. That included a drug boss' killing in Caracas, the indictment said.

Flores is also accused of accepting hundreds of thousands of dollars in bribes in 2007 to arrange a meeting between "a large-scale drug trafficker" and the director of Venezuela's National Anti-Drug Office, resulting in additional monthly bribes, with some of the money going to Flores, according to the indictment.

Territory: Trump officials say Russia, China activity in Arctic drives policy plan

FROM PAGE 1

support for Denmark and Greenland on X late Sunday.

"No one decides for Greenland and Denmark but Greenland and Denmark themselves," Stubb said.

The developments could pose a major test for NATO unity in the coming year, according to some security analysts.

Mujtaba Rahman, an expert with the political risk consultancy firm the Eurasia Group, called the possibility of American intervention in Greenland the biggest source of risk to cohesion in the alliance. The risks are "arguably far greater than those presented by Russia's invasion of Ukraine," Rahman said in a statement on LinkedIn.

His comments were a response to posts on X by Katie Miller, wife of Trump's deputy chief of staff Stephen Miller, that featured an image of Greenland colored with the American flag and the word "soon."

Since taking office, Trump and other top administration officials have repeatedly argued that the U.S. needs to take over Greenland, citing increased Russian and Chinese activity in the Arctic as one of the driving factors.

All U.S. national security issues with Greenland could be addressed through existing agreements, said Luke Coffey, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute.

"If Denmark can't handle the security situation like President Trump is suggesting then we should help them, not annex them," Coffey said Sunday on X.

The Danish ambassador to the U.S., Jesper Moeller Soerensen, had a similar reaction in response to Miller's post, replying on X that Denmark and the U.S. should coordinate their efforts to secure Greenland together.

"And yes, we expect full respect for the territorial integrity of the Kingdom of Denmark," Soerensen added.



JAIME SANCHEZ/U.S. Space Force

Vice President JD Vance and his wife, Usha Vance, share a meal with service members at Pituffik Space Base in Greenland on March 28. President Donald Trump raised alarm bells in NATO over the weekend with remarks about U.S. interest in the Danish territory.

US grants initial approval of Danish bid to buy trio of P-8As

BY ZADE VADNAIS
Stars and Stripes

A proposed $1.8 billion sale of three Boeing P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft to Denmark was given a State Department green light just ahead of the new year.

The sale, which still requires congressional approval, would put Denmark in the company of the U.S., the United Kingdom, Norway and Germany as NATO allies flying the 737-based surveillance and reconnaissance jet. Germany received its first P-8A in October.



SAMANTHA JETZER/U.S. Navy

A Navy P-8A Poseidon takes off from Diego Garcia on Oct. 24. The State Department recently approved the sale of three such aircraft and associated equipment to Denmark.

The package includes joint tactical radio systems, navigation systems and components for the Northrop Grumman Guardian AN/AAQ-24(V)N laser-based missile countermeasures system, according to a Defense Security Cooperation Agency statement Monday.

Denmark would also receive mission software, electro-optical and infrared systems, missile warning sensors and radar, according to the statement.

The P-8A Poseidon is designed to detect, track and engage submarines and surface vessels, according to Boeing. It uses radar, sonobuoys, electronic support measures, torpedoes and an advanced acoustic sensor suite to conduct anti-submarine warfare.

The announcement follows another major U.S. arms deal with Denmark, a $900 million purchase of medium-range missiles.

It also comes just weeks after former President Donald Trump named a special envoy to Greenland, reigniting tensions over Washington's interest in the Danish territory.

NATION

LA battles hazards a year after wildfires

By Dorany Pineda and Jae C. Hong
Associated Press

ALTADENA, Calif. — "DANGER: Lead Work Area" reads a sign on a front door of an Altadena home. "May damage fertility or the unborn child. Causes damage to the central nervous system."

Block after block there are reminders that contaminants still linger.

House cleaners, hazardous waste workers and homeowners alike come and go wearing masks, respirators, gloves and hazmat suits as they wipe, vacuum and power-wash homes that weren't burnt to ash.

It's been a year of heartbreak and worry since the most destructive wildfires in the Los Angeles area's history scorched neighborhoods and displaced tens of thousands of people. Two wind-whipped blazes that ignited on Jan. 7, 2025, killed at least 31 people and destroyed nearly 17,000 structures, including homes, schools, businesses and places of worship. Rebuilding will take years.

The disaster has brought another wave of trauma for people afraid of what still lurks inside their homes.

Indoor air quality after wildfires remains understudied, and scientists still don't know the long-term health impacts of exposure to massive urban fires like last year's in Los Angeles. But some chemicals released are known to be linked to heart disease and lung issues, and exposure to minerals like magnetite has been associated with Alzheimer's disease.

Ash in the area is a toxic soup of incinerated cars, electronics, paints, furniture and every other kind of personal belonging. It can contain pesticides, asbestos, plastics, lead or other heavy metals.



Jae C. Hong/AP

Two workers in protective suits clean up fire debris at a home that survived the Eaton Fire, Dec. 2, in Altadena, Calif.

Many with homes still standing are now living with the hazards left by the fires.

Nina and Billy Malone considered their home of 20 years a safe haven before smoke, ash and soot seeped inside, leaving behind harmful levels of lead even after professional cleaning. Recent testing found the toxin is still on the wooden floors of their living room and bedroom.

They were forced to move back home in August anyway, after insurance cut off their rental assistance.

Since then, Nina wakes up almost daily with a sore throat and headaches. Billy had to get an inhaler for his worsening wheezing and congestion. And their bedroom, Nina said, smells "like an ashtray has been sitting around for a long time." She worries most about exposure to unregulated contaminants that insurance companies aren't required to test.

"I don't feel comfortable in the space," said Nina, whose neighbors' homes burned down across the street.

They're not alone.

According to a report released in November by the Eaton Fire Residents United, a volunteer group formed by residents, six out of 10 homes damaged from smoke from the Eaton Fire still have dangerous levels of cancer-causing asbestos, brain-damaging lead or both. That's based on self-submitted data from 50 homeowners who have cleaned their homes, with 78% hiring professional cleaners.

Of the 50 homes, 63% have lead levels above the Environmental Protection Agency's standard, according to the report. The average lead levels were almost 60 times higher than the EPA's rule.

Even after fires were extinguished, volatile organic compounds from smoke, some known to cause cancer, lingered inside of people's homes, according to a recent study.

To mitigate these risks, residents returning home should ventilate and filter indoor air by opening windows or running high-efficiency particulate air purifiers with charcoal filters.

Zoe Gonzalez Izquierdo said she can't get her insurance company to pay for an adequate cleanup of her family's Altadena home, which tested positive for dangerous levels of lead and other toxic compounds.

"They can't just send a company that's not certified to just wipe things down so that then we can go back to a still contaminated home," Gonzalez said, who has children ages 2 and 4.

Experts believe the lead, which can linger in dust on floors and windowsills, comes from burned lead paint. The University of Southern California reported that more than 70% of homes within the Eaton Fire were built before 1979, when lead paint was common.

"For individuals that are pregnant, for young children, it's particularly important that we do everything we can to eliminate exposure to lead," said pediatrician Dr. Lisa Patel, executive director for the Medical Society Consortium on Climate and Health and a member of the climate group Science Moms.

Residents are at the mercy of their insurance companies, who decide on what they cover and how much. It's a grueling, constant battle for many. The state's insurer of last resort, known as the California Fair Access to Insurance Requirements Plan, has been scrutinized for years over its handling of fire damage claims.

Homeowners want state agencies to enforce a requirement that insurance companies return a property to pre-fire condition.

VA imposes near-total ban on abortions, drawing ire

By Linda F. Hersey
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Department of Veterans Affairs has imposed a ban on most abortions, ending a Biden administration policy that made exceptions in cases of rape, incest or when the mother's health was at risk.

The move was immediately condemned by several Democratic lawmakers who accused the VA of trying to avoid public scrutiny in bypassing the formal rule change process.

"A policy issued by VA Secretary [Doug] Collins stops this reproductive care even for women who are victims of rape or incest or whose health is at risk. He's done it by internal memo, not by open rule making, avoiding public attention and scrutiny," said Rep. Richard Blumenthal, of Connecticut, the top Democrat on the House Veterans' Affairs Committee.

Abortions now will be provided only when a physician certifies that the life of the mother is endangered if the fetus is carried to term, according to the VA.

Under former President Joe Biden's administration, the VA had been providing abortions since September 2022 in limited circumstances.

About 100 to 140 abortions were provided by the VA since 2022, according to the VA. The number is far fewer than the 1,000 that the Biden administration had projected.

President Donald Trump's administration initially proposed reinstating abortion restrictions as a rule change, which it announced in the Federal Register in August.

But the administration did not wait for the internal regulation to be finalized and published, which was expected soon.

The rule-change process includes a public comment period, a review of comments and revisions as needed.

The VA said it was reinstating the abortion restrictions based on an opinion from the Justice Department.

"DOJ's opinion states that VA is not legally authorized to provide abortions, and VA is complying with it immediately," said Peter Kasperowicz, VA press secretary. "DOJ's opinion is consistent with VA's proposed rule, which continues to work its way through the regulatory process."

The VA website, however, continues to list abortion as a service offered at VA facilities under limited circumstances.

Democratic lawmakers were quick to oppose the change, and many Republicans voiced their support.

"This back-door move by the Trump administration to impose a near-total abortion ban at VA is an outrageous assault on veterans health care and a profound betrayal of veterans who have put their lives on the line for our country," said Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., a member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee.

But Rep. Mike Bost, R-Ill., who is chairman of the House Veterans Affairs' Committee, said it was wrong for the Biden administration to offer abortion services at the VA. Bost said that taxpayer funds should not be used to pay for abortions.

The near-total ban on abortions is effective immediately. The restrictions extend to all VA health facilities, including hospitals and clinics located in states where abortion services are legal, the VA said.

Rep. Julia Brownley, D-Calif., has introduced legislation to overturn the new restrictions.

The Reproductive Freedom for Veterans Act would guarantee veterans and their eligible family members "a protected legal right" to receive abortion services from the VA.

The bill has collected 118 cosponsors and was referred to the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Health.

TECHNOLOGY

AI still center stage at CES show

Companies show off new gadgets for health and entertainment purposes

By Shawn Chen
Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — With the start of the New Year squarely behind us, it's once again time for the annual CES trade show to shine a spotlight on the latest tech that companies plan to offer in 2026.

The multiday event, organized by the Consumer Technology Association, kicks off this week in Las Vegas, where advances across industries like robotics, health care, vehicles, wearables, gaming and more are set to be on display.

Artificial intelligence will be anchored in nearly everything, again, as the tech industry explores offerings consumers will want to buy. AI industry heavyweight Jensen Huang will be taking the stage to showcase Nvidia's latest productivity solutions, and AMD CEO Lisa Su will keynote to "share her vision for delivering future AI solutions." Expect AI to come up in other keynotes, like from Lenovo's CEO, Yuanqing Yang.

The AI industry is tackling issues in health care, with a particular emphasis on changing individual health habits to treat conditions — such as Beyond Medicine's prescription app focused on a particular jaw disorder — or addressing data shortages in subjects such as breast milk production.

Expect more unveils around domestic robots too. Korean tech giant LG already has announced it will show off a helper bot named "CLOiD," to handle a range of household tasks. Hyundai also is announcing a major push on robotics and manufacturing advancements. Extended reality, basically a virtual training ground for robots and other physical AI, is also in the buzz around CES.

In 2025, more than 141,000 attendees from over 150 countries, regions, and territories attended CES. Organizers expect around the same numbers for this year's show, with more than 3,500 exhibitors across the floor space this week.

The AP spoke with CTA Executive Chair and CEO Gary Shapiro about what to expect for CES 2026.

What are the main themes we can expect this week?

Well, we have a lot at this year's show.

Obviously, using AI in a way that makes sense for people. We're seeing a lot in robotics. More robots and humanoid-looking robots than we've ever had before.

We also see longevity in health, there's a lot of focus on that. All sorts of wearable devices for almost every part of the body. Technology is answering health care's gaps very quickly and that's great for everyone.

Mobility is big with not only self-driving vehicles but also with boats and drones and all sorts of other ways of getting around. That's very important.

And of course, content creation is always very big.

Is 2026 the year we finally see humanoid robots in people's homes?

You are seeing humanoid robots right now. It sometimes works, sometimes doesn't.

But yes, there are more and more humanoid robots. And when we talk about CES five, 10, 15, 20 years now, we're going to see an even larger range of humanoid robots.

Obviously, last year we saw a great interest in them. The number one product of the show was a little robotic dog that seems so lifelike and fun, and affectionate for people who need that type of affection.



Photos by Abbie Parr/AP

A Tombot robotic puppy at a Tombot booth during the CES Unveiled tech show Sunday, in Las Vegas.



A Luka AI cube for kids seen at the CES Unveiled tech show.



A chess-playing robot at a SenseRobot booth.



A Coro breastfeeding monitor and application at a Coroflo booth.

But of course, the humanoid robots are just one aspect of that industry. There's a lot of specialization in robot creation, depending on what you want the robot to do. And robots can do many things that humans can't.

Will we start seeing more innovative use of AI tools in entertainment?

AI is the future of creativity.

Certainly AI itself may be arguably creative, but the human mind is so unique that you definitely get new ideas that way. So I think the future is more of a hybrid approach, where content creators are working with AI to craft variations on a theme or to better monetize what they have to a broader audience.

Any interesting AI-powered devices or services that consumers will want to buy?

We're seeing all sorts of different devices that are implementing AI. But we have a special focus at this show, for the first time, on the disability community.

Verizon set this whole stage up where we have all different ways of taking this technology and having it help people with disabilities and older people.

Are you concerned about a potential AI bubble?

Well, there's definitely no bubble when it comes to what AI can do. And what AI can do is perform miracles and solve fundamental human problems in food production and clean air and clean water. Obviously in health care, it's gonna be overwhelming.

But this was like the internet itself. There was a lot of talk about a bubble, and there actually was a bubble. The difference is that in the late 1990s, there were basically no revenue models. Companies were raising a lot of money with no plans for revenue.

These AI companies have significant revenues today, and companies are investing in it.

What I'm more concerned about, honestly, is not Wall Street and a bubble. Others can be concerned about that. I'm concerned about getting enough energy to process all that AI. And at this show, for the first time, we have a Korean company showing the first-ever small-scale nuclear-powered energy creation device. We expect more and more of these people rushing to fill this gap because we need the energy, we need it clean and we need a kind of all-of-the-above solution.

WORLD

China, S. Korea bolster ties as regional tensions rise

BY SIMINA MISTREANU
Associated Press

BEIJING — China and South Korea's leaders pledged to boost trade and safeguard regional stability on Monday during a visit to Beijing by the South Korean president that was overshadowed by North Korea's recent ballistic missile tests.

South Korean President Lee Jae Myung met Chinese President Xi Jinping as part of his four-day trip to China — his first since taking office in June.

As Xi hosted Lee at the imposing Great Hall of the People, the Chinese president stressed the two countries' "important responsibilities in maintaining regional peace and promoting global development," according to a readout of their meeting broadcast by state-run CCTV.

Lee spoke about opening "a new chapter in the development of Korea-China relations" during "changing times."

"The two countries should make joint contributions to promote peace, which is the foundation for prosperity and growth," Lee said.



SHEN HONG/AP

Visiting South Korean President Lee Jae Myung, center, and Chinese President Xi Jinping are welcomed by children waving both countries national flags and flowers during a ceremony in Beijing on Monday.

The visit comes as China wants to shore up regional support amid rising tensions with Japan. Beijing and South Korea's ties themselves have fluctuated in recent years, with frictions over South Korea's hosting of U.S. military troops and armaments.

Just hours before Lee's arrival in China, North Korea launched several ballistic missiles into the sea, including, it said, hypersonic missiles, which travel at five times the speed of sound and are extra-difficult to detect and intercept.

The tests came as Pyongyang criticized a U.S. attack on Venezuela that included the removal of Nicolás Maduro.

North Korea, which has long feared the U.S. might seek regime change in Pyongyang, criticized the attack as a wild violation of Venezuela's sovereignty and an example of the "rogue and brutal nature of the U.S."

China had also condemned the U.S. attack, which it said violated international law and threatened peace in Latin America.

China is North Korea's strongest backer and economic lifeline amid U.S. sanctions targeting Pyongyang's missile and nuclear program.

Lee's visit also coincided, more broadly, with rising tensions between China and Japan over recent comments by Japan's new leader that Tokyo could intervene in a potential Chinese attack on Taiwan, the island democracy China claims as its own.

In his meeting with Lee, Xi mentioned China and Korea's historical rivalry against Japan, calling on the two countries to "join hands to defend the fruits of victory in World War II and safeguard peace and stability in Northeast Asia."

Regarding South Korea's military cooperation with the U.S., Lee said during an interview with CCTV ahead of his trip that it shouldn't mean that South Korea-China relations should move toward confrontation.

He added that his visit to China aimed to "minimize or eliminate past misunderstandings or contradictions (and) elevate and develop South Korea-China relations to a new stage."

Paris court convicts 10 for claiming French first lady was born a man

BY STEVE HENDRIX
The Washington Post

A Paris court on Monday found 10 defendants guilty of cyberbullying Brigitte Macron, the wife of President Emmanuel Macron — a victory in the couple's ongoing legal battles against conspiracy theorists in France and the United States who have spread false claims about her gender and sexuality.

The trial in France is seen as a forerunner to a much bigger legal claim the Macrons are making in the United States against MAGA influencer Candace Owens for promoting similar false allegations. In a defamation suit filed last summer in Delaware, they contend that Owens's eight-part podcast series "Becoming Brigitte" and other posts asserting that Brigitte Macron was secretly born male were knowingly untruthful and part of a "campaign of global humiliation."

The defendants found guilty Monday, eight men and two women ranging in age from 41 to 65, received sentences spanning from mandatory cyberbullying awareness training to eight-month suspended prison terms. One was jailed for failing to attend the trial and five were restricted from posting on the social media platform X for six months, according to local media reports.

The court cited "degrading, insulting and malicious" comments alleging that Brigitte Macron, 72, was transgender and connecting the 24-year age gap between her and her husband, 48, to pedophilia. In posts and videos seen by tens of thousands, the defendants repeated claims that the French first lady had changed gender.



Macron

The Macrons first met at the high school where he was a student and she was his drama teacher and a married mother of three. They married in 2007 when she was in her mid-50s and the up-and-coming politician was 29.

Their age split has been a subject of salacious commentary since Emmanuel Macron was elected president in 2017, but the scrutiny has intensified in recent years with the spread of demonstrably false accusations about her identity.

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The Daily Guide to Navigating The Military Business Market

Transportation 944

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	GERMANY	UNITED KINGDOM	U.S.A
Phone:	+49-(0)6134-2592730	+44-(0)1638-515714	+1-972-602-1670 Ext. 1701
Toll-free:	0800-CARSHIP (Germany only)		+1-800-264-8167 (US only)
E-Mail:	info@transglobal-logistics.de	enquiries@carshipuk.co.uk	info@tgal.us
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WORLD



LOUISE DELMOTTE/AP

A bluefin tuna that won the highest bid at an annual auction is carried to a restaurant in Tokyo on Monday.

Bluefin tuna sells for a record $3.2 million

Associated Press

TOKYO — A massive 535-pound bluefin tuna sold for a record $3.2 million at the first auction of 2026 at Tokyo's Toyosu fish market.

The top bidder for the prized tuna at the predawn auction on Monday was Kiyomura Corp., whose owner Kiyoshi Kimura runs the popular Sushi Zanmai chain. Kimura, who has won the annual action many times in the past, broke the previous record of $2.1 million he set in 2019.

Kimura later told reporters he was hoping to pay a bit less for it, but "the price shot up before you knew it."

The auction started when the bell rang, and the floor was filled with torpedo-shaped fish with their tails cut off so bidders could examine meat details such as color, texture and fattiness while walking around the rows of tuna.

The pricey fish was caught off the coast of Oma in northern Japan, a region widely regarded for producing some of the country's finest tuna, and costs $6,060 per pound.

"It's in part for good luck," Kimura said. "But when I see a good looking tuna, I cannot resist ... I haven't sampled it yet, but it's got to be delicious."

Trump: Ukraine didn't target Putin residence

Associated Press

ABOARD AIR FORCE ONE — President Donald Trump on Sunday told reporters that U.S. officials have determined that Ukraine did not target a residence belonging to Russian President Vladimir Putin in a drone attack last week, disputing Kremlin claims that Trump had initially greeted with deep concern.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov last week said Ukraine launched a wave of drones at Putin's state residence in the northwestern Novgorod region that the Russian defense systems were able to defeat. Lavrov also criticized Kyiv for launching the attack at a moment of intensive negotiations to end the war.

The allegation came just a day after Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy had traveled to Florida for talks with Trump on the U.S. administration's still-evolving 20-point plan aimed at ending the war. Zelenskyy quickly denied the Kremlin allegation.

Trump said that "something happened nearby" Putin's residence but that Americans officials didn't find the Russian president's residence was targeted.

"I don't believe that strike happened," Trump told reporters as he traveled back to Washington on Sunday after spending two weeks at his home in Florida. "We don't believe that happened, now that we've been able to check."

Trump addressed the U.S. determination after European officials argued that the Russian claim was nothing more than an effort by Moscow to undermine the peace effort.

But Trump, at least initially, had appeared to take the Russian allegations at face value. He told reporters last Monday that Putin had also raised the matter during a phone call he had with the Russian leader earlier that day. And Trump said he was "very angry" about the accusation.

By Wednesday, Trump appeared to be downplaying the Russian claim. He posted a link to a New York Post editorial on his social media platform that raised doubt about the Russian allegation.



AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Coast Guard halts search for overboard woman

FL MIAMI — The U.S. Coast Guard has suspended its search for a 77-year-old woman who went overboard on a cruise ship near Cuba on New Year's Day.

Crews searched for eight hours over 690 square miles for the woman, whose name had not been made public, the Coast Guard said. She was aboard the Holland America Line cruise ship Nieuw Statendam when she went overboard Thursday, about 40 miles northeast of Sabana, Cuba. Details about how the woman went overboard were not immediately available.

The Coast Guard said it had deployed helicopters and a large vessel called a cutter to help with the search.

"Our family assistance team is supporting the guest's family, and our thoughts are with the guest's loved ones during this difficult time," Holland America Line said in a statement.

The ship departed from Fort Lauderdale, Fla., last Saturday for a seven-day cruise in the eastern Caribbean. It was scheduled to dock Friday in Key West, Fla., but the stop was canceled because of the search, the cruise line said.



BRONTË WITTPENN, SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE/AP

Skiing down the slope

South Lake Tahoe resident and international fruit importer Meg Dowley skis Palisades at Kirkwood Ski Resort in Kirkwood, Calif., on Saturday.

Player hits 'massive' poker jackpot on $5 bet

CA SACRAMENTO — A gambler at Hard Rock Hotel & Casino near Sacramento hit a $290,112 jackpot on a $5 bet in a table game, casino officials reported.

The player hit the progressive jackpot on Ultimate Texas Hold 'Em on Dec. 27, the resort said in a Dec. 31 news release.

The gambler hit a royal flush on the flop in the poker game.

"Great win," read one comment on the casino's Facebook post.

Hard Rock Hotel & Casino is at 3317 Forty Mile Road in Wheatland, about a 35-mile drive north from downtown Sacramento.

Firefighters save dog from pond on New Year's Day

RI WESTERLY — A yellow Labrador out for a walk with his owner in Rhode Island had to be rescued by firefighters on New Year's Day after he wandered onto a thin layer of ice covering a pond and fell through the center.

According to the Misquamicut Fire Department, volunteer firefighters and other emergency officials were dispatched early Thursday morning for a water rescue.

Once on scene, firefighters saw a dog named Phoenix struggling and unable to move to shore in the slushy, icy water.

Members from both the Misquamicut and Watch Hill fire departments donned ice rescue suits, which help protect the body from frigid temperatures, to enter the pond and successfully rescue Phoenix. The National Weather Service reported it was 26 degrees Fahrenheit around 9 a.m. on Thursday, with the wind chill dropping the temperature to 14 degrees.

Phoenix was declared free of injuries.

"He got a little bit of extra food last night," said Steve Howard, deputy chief of the Misquamicut Fire Department. "And he took a little nap."

No mass exodus despite return-to-office warning

VT MONTPELIER — When Vermont Gov. Phil Scott announced that state workers would need to return to offices at least three days per week starting Dec. 1, the state employees' union warned the initiative could cause a mass exodus of top staff.

So far, that doesn't appear to be the case.

Comparing mid-September to mid-December of 2025 to the same period in 2024, retirements are up slightly from 66 to 76, according to data from the Vermont Department of Human Resources. Resignations, on the other hand, have fallen from 205 to 185, a drop of nearly 10% compared to last year.

Sarah Clark, Vermont's secretary of administration, said in a recent interview that the number of applicants for state jobs has actually risen.

"When you look out at what's happening both in the federal government and the private sector, I think state government is a very attractive employer," Clark said, crediting in part the state's health and pension benefits.

Famed college football coach picked for board

FL SARASOTA — College football Hall of Famer Urban Meyer has been appointed to the board of trustees at a small public liberal arts college that Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis has transformed from a progressive institute into a staging ground for the Republican governor's war on "woke."

DeSantis last week named Meyer to the board at New College in Sarasota, which the governor's allies took over two years ago by packing the board with DeSantis supporters and conservative figures.

Meyer currently is a college football analyst for FOX Sports. As head football coach at the University of Florida, Meyer led the Gators to two national championships in 2006 and 2008. Meyer also steered Ohio State's football team to a national championship in 2014. Meyer was the head coach of the Jacksonville Jaguars in 2021 during his only season leading an NFL team.

Urban's appointment, which is subject to confirmation by the state Senate, was announced Tuesday along with the reappointment of two other New College trustees.

Ex-baseball player faces drug charges after stop

PA BLOOMING GROVE — Retired professional baseball player Lenny Dykstra faces charges after Pennsylvania State Police said a trooper found drugs and paraphernalia in his possession during a traffic stop on New Year's Day.

Dykstra, 62, was a passenger when the vehicle was pulled over by a trooper with the Blooming Grove patrol unit in Pike County, about 25 miles east of Scranton, where Dykstra lives.

Police said in a statement that charges will be filed but did not specify what they may be or what drugs were allegedly involved.

Matthew Blit, Dykstra's lawyer, said in a statement that the vehicle did not belong to Dykstra and any charges brought against him "will be swiftly absolved."

Likely fatal mountain lion attack not first encounter

CO GLEN HAVEN — A solo hiker who authorities believe was killed by a mountain lion on a remote Colorado trail on New Year's Day was not the first person to encounter a big cat in the area in recent weeks.

Gary Messina said he was running along the same trail on a dark November morning when his headlamp caught the gleam of two eyes in the nearby brush. Messina pulled out his phone and snapped a quick photo before a mountain lion rushed him.

Messina said he threw his phone at the animal, kicked dirt and yelled as the lion kept trying to circle behind him. After a couple of harrowing minutes he broke a bat-sized stick off a downed log, hit the lion in the head with it and it ran off, he said.

The woman whose body was found Thursday on the same Crosier Mountain trail had "wounds consistent with a mountain lion attack," said Kara Van Hoose with Colorado Parks and Wildlife. Officials were awaiting confirmation.

Wildlife officials tracked down and killed two mountain lions in the area — one at the scene and another nearby. A necropsy will determine if either or both of those animals attacked the woman.

Based on the aggressiveness of the animal that attacked him on Nov. 11, Messina suspects it could be the same one that killed the woman on New Years Day.

"I had to fight it off because it was basically trying to maul me," Messina told The Associated Press.

From wire reports

FACES



CHRIS PIZZELLO, INVISION/AP

Teyana Taylor, left, and Chase Infiniti accept the Desert Palm Achievement Award, Actor, Jan. 3 on behalf of Leonardo DiCaprio during the International Film Awards in Palm Springs, Calif.

Cinema over content

DiCaprio makes a plea for the communal experience from afar during the award season-launching Palm Springs Film Festival

BY LESLIE AMBRIZ
Associated Press

Leonardo DiCaprio emphasized the importance of creating cinema over content Jan. 3 at the Palm Springs Film Festival.

"Movies are still meant to be experienced, together, in a theatre. Right now, that belief matters more than ever. Original films are harder to make and harder to protect. But movies still matter; not content, but cinema. Stories made by people meant to be shared in a dark room in a communal experience," he said.

The "One Battle After Another" actor accepted the award via a pre-recorded video. Variety reported that he was be unable to attend the film festival due to the ongoing political conflict with Venezuela, which led to the cancellation of multiple flights out of the Caribbean, where the actor was spotted vacationing over the holiday season. His co-stars, Chase Infiniti and Teyana Taylor, accepted the award on his behalf.

The 37th annual International Film Awards at the festival in Palm Springs, Calif., kicked off Hollywood's whirlwind award season, honoring some of the film industry's most anticipated award contenders.

The glamorous night was full of long, heartfelt speeches, each emphasizing the importance of unity among artists and the importance of keeping original storytelling and movie theaters alive.

While accepting the Icon Award, actor Michael B. Jordan told his colleagues to continue to tell original stories that build unity.

"The films we're honoring tonight inspire each other to do more, to be better, to see each other more clearly and make the world a brighter place. And maybe when the lights come up in the theater, we could step back into the sun together," the actor said.

Miley Cyrus accepted the Outstanding Artistic Achievement Award for her song "Dream As One" in "Avatar: Fire and Ash." The recording artist hopes artists will pivot to becoming more community-focused instead of seeing each other as competitors.

"Numbers can make it feel like a sport, but performance runs so much deeper than a scoreboard, because each artist can bare their soul in a completely unique way and every contribution leaves its own mark on history," she said.

Jane Fonda briefly led the audience in a breathing exercise before presenting "Hamnet's" Chloé Zhao, Paul Mescal and Jessie Buckley with the Vanguard Award. Fonda credited the call to the action to director Zhao, who would routinely lead similar exercises before festival screenings of "Hamnet."

Guillermo del Toro stood alongside his "Frankenstein" cast to receive the Visionary Award.

The director reflected on the relevance of Mary Shelley's classic novel as the world continues to grapple with emerging technology and division. For del Toro, its relevance means two things: "We never learn, and sometimes the only way to talk about humanity is through monsters."

Timothèe Chalamet received the Spotlight Award, and focused his speech on his "Marty Supreme" character's pursuit of greatness and making his dreams come true.

Mahershala Ali presented Ethan Hawke with the Career Achievement Award, reminiscing on how Hawke's performance in "Reality Bites" was one of many films that inspired his early acting days.

Hawke made his way to the stage a second time for a "First Reformed" reunion with former co-star Amanda Seyfried to present her with the Desert Palm Achievement Award, Actress.

Laura Dern presented actor and comedian Adam Sandler with the Chairman's Award. Sandler accepted his award with a short stand-up routine about what his life would have looked like if he had chosen a quieter life instead of working in entertainment.

"I'd probably still have a deal with Netflix. But I'd be paying them a monthly fee so I can watch 'Stranger Things' ' last season," said the comedian.

The show concluded with Kate Hudson accepting the Icon Award, Actress, for her work in "Song Sung Blue."

Award season continued with Sunday's Critics' Choice Awards and the Golden Globes on Jan. 12.

'Fire and Ash' becomes first $1B movie of 2026

BY JAKE COYLE
Associated Press

Hollywood kicked off 2026 with "Avatar: Fire and Ash" atop the box office for the third straight week and with hopes for a blockbuster-filled year after a disappointing 2025.

In three weeks of release, "Fire and Ash" has cleared $1 billion worldwide. The third chapter in James Cameron's Pandora epic collected $40 million over its third weekend in North American theaters, according to studio estimates Sunday.

"Fire and Ash" is doing its biggest business overseas; it's grossed $777.1 million internationally thus far.

The entire holiday week was a lucrative one for Hollywood, with most schools still out. What drove ticket sales, beyond "Avatar"? Sydney Sweeney, Timothée Chalamet and "Zootopia 2."

Disney's "Zootopia 2" has had remarkable staying power. It landed in second place with $19 million, dipping a mere 4% from the previous weekend.

The animated sequel has amassed $1.59 billion in six weeks. That makes "Zootopia 2" Disney's second-highest-grossing animated movie ever, trailing only 2019's photorealistic "The Lion King" ($1.66 billion).

"The Housemaid," the twisty thriller starring Sweeney and Amanda Seyfried, also emerged as a holiday-season hit for Lionsgate. It collected $14.9 million over the weekend, giving it $75.7 million domestically over three weeks. It dipped only 3% from last weekend. Internationally, "The Housemaid" added $57.3 million.

The A24 release "Marty Supreme" starring Chalamet also held well in its third weekend, grossing an estimated $12.6 million. After two weeks of wide release, Josh Safdie's frenetic table tennis tale has grossed $56 million in North America, passing the director's previous film, "Uncut Gems" ($50 million worldwide).

Sony's action comedy "Anaconda," starring Jack Black and Paul Rudd, dipped only 31% to collect $10 million in its second weekend. Focus Features' "Song Sung Blue" dropped only 17% in its second weekend with $5.9 million. The Hugh Jackman-Kate Hudson Neil Diamond cover band movie has earned $25 million domestically.

Duffer Brothers rule out 'Stranger Things' sequel

New York Daily News

[This article contains spoilers from the "Stranger Things" series finale.]

The Duffer Brothers have effectively ruled out further adventures of the main characters of "Stranger Things" as a "gross cash grab," despite a spinoff of the Netflix hit on the horizon.

Matt Duffer said that "there's no plan or intention to tell the story because it's a coming-of-age story. Ultimately, that's what it's supposed to be. That's what the show always was."

The Emmy-winning show's conclusion arrived Dec. 31, and featured the expansive gang defeating Henry/Vecna (Jamie Campbell Bower). Eleven (Millie Bobby Brown) sacrificed herself to collapse the Upside Down and eradicate all its horrors. Eighteen months later, new high school graduates Mike (Finn Wolfhard), Lucas (Caleb McLaughlin), Max (Sadie Sink), Dustin (Gaten Matarazzo) and Will (Noah Schnapp) play one last round of Dungeons & Dragons, during which Mike theorizes that Eleven faked her death and is living somewhere remote and beautiful.

"I mean, Mike's closing the basement door. We're closing the door on the story," said Matt Duffer. "He's closing the door on his childhood and he's moving onto adulthood."



KATE GREEN/TNS

Ross Duffer, left, and Matt Duffer, shown Nov. 13, say that revisiting the wildly popular world of "Stranger Things" would amount to a "gross cash grab."

Though Duffer acknowledged there could be a follow-up exploring "a midlife crisis" for the group, he decided it "just sounds really uninteresting! [Laughs] Grandpa Hopper? I don't know how that would read as anything but a gross cash grab to me."

Then again, there is a "Stranger Things" Broadway show and a spinoff in the works, which Duffer said will center on "new characters and a new mythology."

But, he added, "It feels like ... we finished saying everything we wanted to say about these characters, this story and the Upside Down."

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Max D. Lederer Jr., Publisher
Laura Law, Chief Operating Officer
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John Albaugh, Pacific chief of staff

EDITORIAL

Erik Slavin, Editor in Chief
slavin.erik@stripes.com

Sean Moores, Managing Editor for Presentation
moores.sean@stripes.com

Ann Pinson, Digital Managing Editor
pinson.ann@stripes.com

BUREAU STAFF

Europe/Mideast
+49(0)631.3615.9324; DSN (314)583.9324

Pacific
Aaron Kidd, Pacific Bureau Chief
kidd.aaron@stripes.com
+81.42.552.2511 ext. 88380; DSN (315)227.7380

Washington
Joe Fleming and Sean Moores,
Washington Bureau Chiefs (acting)
fleming.joe@stripes.com
moores.sean@stripes.com

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

CIRCULATION

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

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

Pacific
Mari Mori, customerhelp@stripes.com
+81-3 6385.3171; DSN (315)229.3171

CONTACT US

Washington
tel: (+1)202.886.0003
633 3rd St. NW, Suite 500, Washington, DC 20001-3050

Reader letters
letters@stripes.com

Additional contacts
stripes.com/contactus

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Jacqueline Smith

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OPINION

Trump goes monster-hunting, untainted by legality

BY GEORGE F. WILL
The Washington Post

There is a constant tug toward universalism in U.S. foreign policy, and hence a recurring temptation for crusading. The strength of the tug waxes and wanes, responding to the perceived success or failure of the most recent undertaking to reorder realities abroad.

Universalism flows from the ninth word of the most important sentence in this creedal nation's catechism: "all." All human beings are endowed with unalienable rights, including the right to government legitimated by consent. The perennial American argument concerns what, if anything, this catechism commits the nation to do.

Twenty-one years ago, George W. Bush's second inaugural address proclaimed "the calling of our time" to be nothing less than "ending tyranny in our world." This project has not fared well since then.

The 1823 Monroe Doctrine declared the Western Hemisphere closed to further European colonization, and, implicitly, open to U.S. intervention to guarantee … Here things become murky. Commercial considerations (long ago, bananas; today, oil) and geopolitics have driven interventions.

The doctrine, although promulgated by President James Monroe, should be called the Adams Doctrine, for his secretary of state, John Quincy Adams. (The Marshall Plan, announced in a brief Harvard commencement speech by Harry S. Truman's secretary of state, George Marshall, is not known as the Truman Plan.)

Although European colonization in this hemisphere long ago subsided, perhaps the Monroe Doctrine is still apposite. But two years before the Monroe Doctrine was enunciated, Secretary Adams said of our nation:

"Wherever the standard of freedom and independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will her heart, her benedictions and her prayers be. But she goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own."

Many presidents, and most recent ones, have rightly disagreed. The current one, who also disagrees, speaks so often and so imprecisely, as in his meandering babble late Saturday morning, a cloud of confusion envelopes everything. Dissipating it can begin with this:

That Nicolás Maduro is a monster is patent, as was the illegitimacy of his government, which disdained respect for the consent of the governed. But the urgent argument begins, not ends, with those two facts.

Heartbreak, a risk inherent in puppy love, today afflicts those who believed this president's reiterated disparagements of U.S. involvement in regime changes, wars of choice and nation-building. The lovers will recover.

Remember, however, what Colin Powell, before the invasion of Iraq, called "the Pottery Barn rule" ("You break it, you own it") regarding the use of U.S. force to restructure other countries. We owned Iraq and Afghanistan for many unhappy years. Perhaps this time things will go smoothly as U.S. officials, in the president's insouciant words, "run" Venezuela until "we can do a safe, proper and judicious transition."

Transition to what? Presumably the administration has plans. Certainly there is an aphorism: "If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans."

Meanwhile, the Trump administration must devise justifications for the Venezuelan intervention without employing categories by which Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping can give a patina of faux legality to forcibly ending nearby regimes they dislike. The Trump administration's incantations of its newly minted and nonsensical phrase "narco-terrorism" will not suffice.

Andrew C. McCarthy, the conservative lawyer who prosecuted the 12 terrorists convicted of the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center, says this phrase "has no standing as a legal term — no significance in the extensive bodies of federal law defining narcotics trafficking and terrorism."

As Bishop Joseph Butler (1692-1752) said, "Everything is what it is, and not another thing." Narcotics trafficking is a serious crime. It is not a terrorist activity. Neither is the self-"poisoning" of Americans who ingest drugs.

So, the administration must improvise post facto rationalizations for the forcible regime change in Venezuela, rationalizations harmonious with the president's recent pardoning of Juan Orlando Hernández, the former Honduran president convicted in a U.S. court of shipping here more than 400 tons of cocaine. "The Honduran regime," McCarthy writes in National Review, "figures prominently in the indictment of Maduro brought by the first Trump administration." Maduro's lawyers will have fun with this.

And perhaps with this: When Theodore Roosevelt asked Attorney General Philander Knox to concoct a legal justification for the unsavory U.S. measures that enabled construction of the Panama Canal, Knox replied, "Oh, Mr. President, do not let so great an achievement suffer from any taint of legality."

Justice in the age of algorithms – guardrails for AI

BY JESSE ROTHMAN
The Fulcrum

Artificial intelligence is already impacting the criminal justice system, and its importance is increasing rapidly. From automated report writing to facial recognition technology, AI tools are already shaping decisions that affect liberty, safety and trust. The question is not whether these technologies will be used, but how — and under what rules.

The Council on Criminal Justice (CCJ) Task Force on Artificial Intelligence, in late October, released a framework designed to answer that question. The panel, which includes technologists, police executives, civil rights advocates, community leaders and formerly incarcerated people, is urging policymakers to adopt five guiding principles to ensure AI is deployed safely, ethically and effectively.

The principles are straightforward, but critically important:

■ Safe and reliable: Systems must be tested, monitored and managed to prevent errors that could jeopardize liberty or safety.

■ Confidential and secure: AI must protect sensitive personal data, preserve privacy, and operate transparently.

■ Effective and helpful: Tools should only be adopted when they demonstrably improve outcomes or efficiency.

■ Fair and just: Bias must be identified and mitigated, with systems designed to promote fairness.

■ Democratic and accountable: Decision-making must remain transparent and under meaningful human and democratic control.

Nathan Hecht, former chief justice of the Texas Supreme Court and chair of the Task Force, put it plainly: "AI has the power to make the justice system more efficient, fair, and effective, but also to cause significant harm if misused."

That tension is at the heart of the debate. AI can reduce human error, improve resource allocation, and enable more data-driven decisions. But without guardrails, it can just as easily calcify suboptimal practices, threaten due process, and erode democratic accountability. The very scale and complexity of these systems make errors harder to detect, and small mistakes can have lasting consequences for individuals and communities.

The Task Force reminds us that tradeoffs are inherent in criminal justice. Yet certain principles — due process, human dignity, equal protection — are non-negotiable. No efficiency gain can justify sacrificing them.

"These principles provide a framework for making deliberate, transparent decisions that balance competing interests in ways that strengthen public safety, protect individual rights, and build confidence in the integrity of the justice system."

The group, supported by Rand researchers and funded by a coalition of foundations, plans to release further reports in the coming year on standards and best practices for AI in criminal justice.

Our work is not just technical. We are tasked with engaging with the core questions of democracy: How do we protect individual rights and communal well-being simultaneously? What kind of procedures deserve respect and trust? What can we collectively agree is fair? It asks us to decide what kind of justice system we want in an age of algorithms.

AI is not simply a tool; it is a force that can reshape power, accountability and trust. If deployed wisely, it can strengthen justice. If misused, it can undermine it.

The CCJ framework is a reminder that technology must serve people, and that in criminal justice, principles must always come before convenience.

As artificial intelligence accelerates across every corner of society, the criminal justice system cannot afford to lag behind. Without a clear and proven oversight framework, the risks of injustice, error, and erosion of constitutional rights will grow alongside the technology itself. Policymakers must act now to ensure that AI serves justice and safety simultaneously before the pace of innovation outstrips the guardrails of democracy.

Jesse Rothman is director of the Council on Criminal Justice Task Force on Artificial Intelligence.

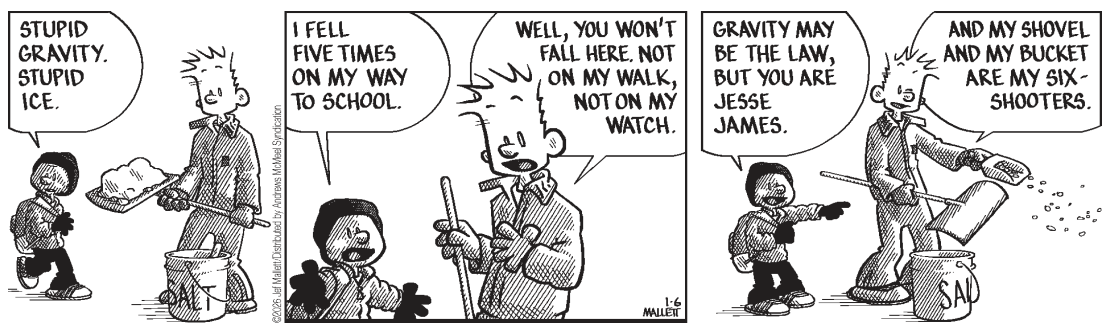
Bizarro



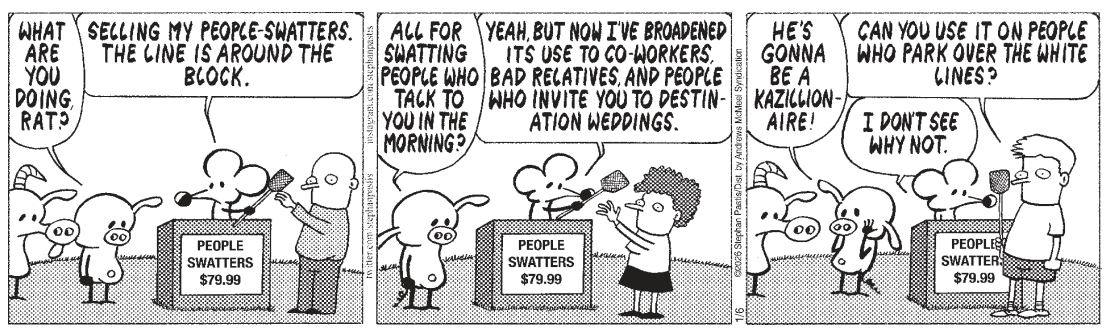
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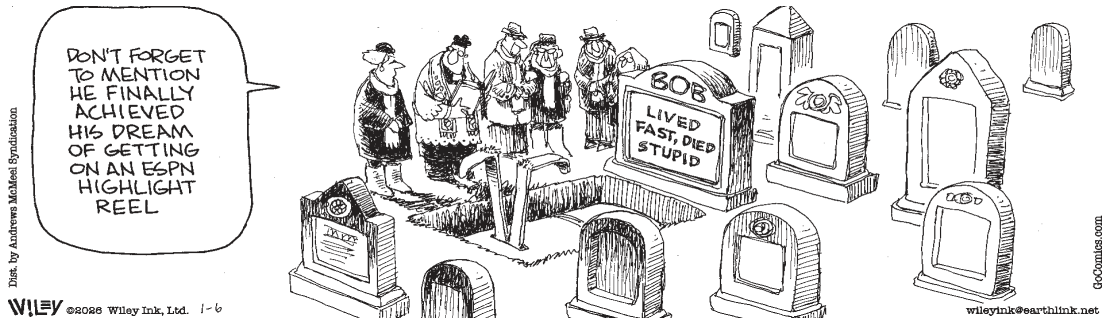
Frazz



Pearls Before Swine



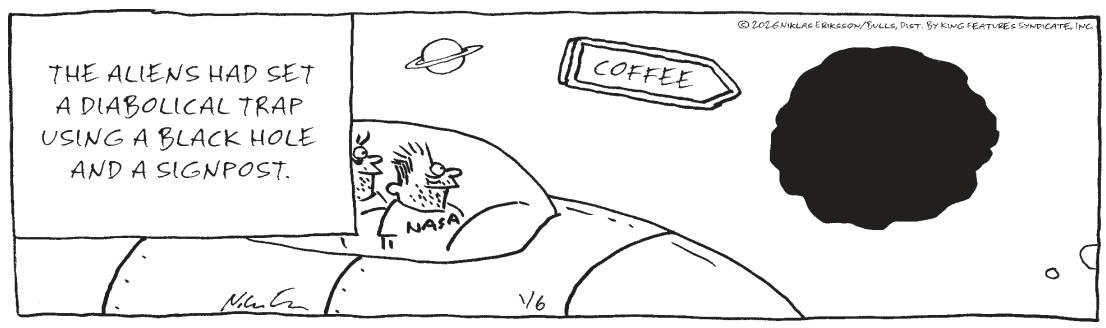
Non Sequitur



Wumo



Carpe Diem



Beetle Bailey



Eugene Sheffer Crossword

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

ACROSS

1 Umps
5 Some printers
8 Criminal, to cops
12 Jai —
13 Sushi fish
14 During
15 Gold depository
17 Elizabethan collar
18 Succor
19 Coin flips
21 Brainy
24 "Auld Lang —"
25 Scene stealers
26 Jewelry container, often
30 Wagerers' site (Abbr.)
31 Maximum
32 Leading lady?
33 Chicago baseball team
35 Hammer part
36 Eternities
37 Oscar-winning director Frank
38 "Heaven forbid!"
41 "— Blue?"
42 "The Kite Runner" boy
43 "Transformers" actress
48 Arizona river
49 Blunder
50 Small combo
51 Envelope abbr.
52 Stephen of "Still Crazy"
53 Missile shelter

DOWN

1 U.K. military fliers
2 "Xanadu" band
3 Distant
4 Indian instruments
5 Royal flush, e.g.
6 Saigon soup
7 Famous route
8 3.26 light-years
9 Flightless birds
10 Teeming
11 Shareable PC files
16 DIY buy
20 "Step —!"
21 Broadway offering
22 Algebra or trig
23 Both (Pref.)
24 Japanese wrestlers
26 Incorrect term
27 Gridlock sound
28 Done with
29 TV's "Warrior Princess"
31 Author Uris
34 Capital of Iran
35 Emulates Monet
37 Nashville awards org.
38 Lady — ("Poker Face" singer)
39 Skip
40 River deposit
41 Taj Mahal site
44 Before
45 Thurs. follower
46 Peanut product
47 Tic-tac-toe loser

Answer to Previous Puzzle

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

1-6 CRYPTOQUIP

UT X JXLMF THZCGL OGGWR PLZCUDP AXBO GXBJ YUKG FZE WUBO UY, RJZEHM FZE BXHH UY X AHZZKGLXDP?

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: WHEN I WOULD LIKE A BOOSTER TO HELP ME TIDY UP WITH A BROOM, I MIGHT TAKE MY SWEEPING PILLS.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: B equals C

SCOREBOARD/NHL

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Sunday men's scores

EAST

Canisius 82, Sacred Heart 78
Central Connecticut 72, New Haven 61
Delaware 67, Kennesaw State 52
Fairfield 83, Niagara 75
Marist 83, Iona 38
Mercyhurst 74, Le Moyne 60
Merrimack 73, Manhattan 66
Quinnipiac 80, Mount St. Mary's 69
Richmond 83, Fordham 75
Seton Hall 56, Creighton 54
Siena 74, Rider 65
St. Francis (PA) 85, Fairleigh Dickinson 82
Stonehill 69, Wagner 60
UConn 73, Marquette 57

SOUTH

Florida International 76, UTEP 64
Liberty 78, Jacksonville State 69
Middle Tennessee 68, Sam Houston 67
Murray State 86, Bradley 66
N. Kentucky 94, Youngstown St. 79
Southern Illinois 68, Belmont 67
Tulane 69, Florida Atlantic 66
UAB 109, South Florida 106, 2OT
Western Kentucky 66, Louisiana Tech 61

MIDWEST

Drake 74, Indiana State 72
Indiana 90, Washington 80
Missouri State 89, New Mexico State 82
Northern Iowa 62, Evansville 48
Oakland 96, Robert Morris 73
Purdue Fort Wayne 74, Cleveland St. 71
St. Thomas 92, Denver 88
Valparaiso 66, UIC 59
Wright State 81, IU Indianapolis 77

SOUTHWEST

North Texas 72, Tulsa 67

FAR WEST

Gonzaga 82, Loyola Marymount 47
LIU 74, Chicago State 55
Pacific 74, Pepperdine 69
Saint Mary's 93, Seattle 76
San Francisco 73, Portland 68
Santa Clara 98, San Diego 70
Washington State 81, Oregon State 67

Men's Top 25 fared

No. 1 Arizona (14-0) beat South Dakota State 99-71; beat Utah 97-78.
No. 2 Michigan (13-0) beat McNeese 112-71; beat No. 24 USC 96-66.
No. 3 Iowa State (14-0) beat Houston Christian 89-61; beat West Virginia 80-59.
No. 4 UConn (14-1) beat Xavier 90-67; beat Marquette 73-57.
No. 5 Purdue (13-1) beat Kent State 101-60; beat Wisconsin 89-73.
No. 6 Duke (13-1) beat Georgia Tech 85-79; beat Florida State 91-87.
No. 7 Gonzaga (16-1) beat San Diego 99-93; beat Seattle 80-72, OT; beat Loyola Marymount 82-47.
No. 8 Houston (13-1) beat Middle Tennessee 69-60; beat Cincinnati 67-60.
No. 9 Michigan State (12-2) beat Cornell 114-97; lost to No. 13 Nebraska 58-56.
No. 10 BYU (13-1) beat Kansas State 83-73.
No. 11 Vanderbilt (14-0) beat New Haven 96-53; beat South Carolina 83-71.
No. 12 North Carolina (13-2) beat Florida State 79-66; lost to SMU 97-83.
No. 13 Nebraska (14-0) beat New Hampshire 86-55; beat No. 9 Michigan State 58-56.
No. 14 Alabama (11-3) beat Yale 102-78; beat Kentucky 89-74.
No. 15 Texas Tech (11-3) beat Oklahoma State 102-80.
No. 16 Louisville (11-3) beat California 90-70; lost to Stanford 80-76.
No. 17 Kansas (10-4) lost to UCF 81-75.
No. 18 Arkansas (11-3) beat James Madison 103-74; beat No. 19 Tennessee 86-75.
No. 19 Tennessee (10-4) beat South Carolina State 105-54; lost to No. 18 Arkansas 86-75.
No. 20 Illinois (11-3) beat Southern University 90-55; beat Penn State 73-65.
No. 21 Virginia (12-2) lost to Virginia Tech 95-85, 3OT; beat North Carolina State 76-61.
No. 22 Florida (9-5) beat Dartmouth 94-72; lost to Missouri 76-74.
No. 23 Georgia (13-1) beat LIU 89-74; beat Auburn 104-100, OT.
No. 24 USC (12-2) lost to No. 2 Michigan 96-66.
No. 25 Iowa (12-2) beat UMass Lowell 90-62; beat UCLA 74-61.

Sunday women's scores

EAST

Campbell 62, Drexel 51
Fairleigh Dickinson 73, St. Francis (PA) 28
LIU 60, Chicago State 51
Maryland 82, Indiana 67
Mercyhurst 89, Le Moyne 72
New Haven 70, Central Connecticut 51
Pittsburgh 64, Boston College 61
Wagner 62, Stonehill 59
Xavier 52, Georgetown 51

SOUTH

Alabama 77, Arkansas 48
Belmont 75, Illinois State 68
Charleston 85, Northeastern 58
Clemson 70, Miami (FL) 55
Duke 82, Notre Dame 68
Elon 84, Hampton 75
George Mason 68, VCU 58
Georgia 64, Texas A&M 56, OT
Hofstra 54, UNC Wilmington 46
Kansas 83, UCF 68
Kennesaw State 78, Western Kentucky 64
Kentucky 74, Missouri 52
Louisville 85, Virginia Tech 60
Middle Tennessee 69, Jacksonville St. 52
Missouri St. 80, Florida International 69
Monmouth 61, North Carolina A&T 55
Murray State 93, Bradley 82, 2OT
North Carolina State 71, California 60
Northern Kentucky 75, Detroit Mercy 57
South Carolina 74, Florida 63
Stanford 77, North Carolina 71, OT
Stony Brook 73, William & Mary 57, OT
Syracuse 73, Wake Forest 58
Tennessee 73, Auburn 56
Vanderbilt 65, LSU 61
Virginia 91, Florida State 87, 2OT

MIDWEST

Baylor 72, Iowa State 70
Creighton 67, Butler 59
Green Bay 64, Robert Morris 43
Marquette 85, Villanova 69
Michigan State 81, Illinois 75
Milwaukee 66, Cleveland State 58
Nebraska 78, Purdue 62
Northern Iowa 91, Southern Illinois 64
Ohio State 71, Rutgers 49
Providence 69, DePaul 59
UIC 70, Indiana State 57
West Virginia 60, Kansas State 58
Wisconsin 74, Penn State 73

SOUTHWEST

Georgia Tech 67, SMU 59
Liberty 86, UTEP 66
Oklahoma 95, Mississippi State 47
Texas 67, Ole Miss 64

FAR WEST

New Mexico State 64, Delaware 57, OT
Portland 74, Pacific 53
Saint Mary's 57, San Diego 49
San Francisco 85, Loyola Marymount 82, OT
Santa Clara 77, Gonzaga 73
UC San Diego 65, Hawai'i 54
Washington State 73, Seattle 69

DEALS

Sunday's transactions

BASEBALL
Major League Baseball
American League

KANSAS CITY ROYALS — Agreed to terms with manager Matt Quatraro on a contract extension and with SS Michael Braswell III on a minor league contract.
TORONTO BLUE JAYS — Agreed to terms with INF Kazuma Okamoto on a four-year, $60 million contract. Designated RHP Paxton Schultz for assignment.

FOOTBALL
National Football League

ATLANTA FALCONS — Fired Head Coach Raheem Morris and General Manager Terry Fontenot.

HOCKEY
National Hockey League

CALGARY FLAMES — Suspended F John Beecher for one game.
DALLAS STARS — Sent D Luke Krys to Texas (AHL).
DETROIT RED WINGS — Recalled F John Leonard from Grand Rapids (AHL).
FLORIDA PANTHERS — Recalled D Tobias Björnfot from Charlotte (AHL).
SAN JOSE SHARKS — Signed F Alexander Wennberg to a three-year contract extension.
WINNIPEG JETS — Suspended D Logan Stanley for one game.

SOCCER
Major League Soccer

D.C. UNITED — Signed F Gabriel Segal to a two-year contract.

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

College Football Playoffs

Semifinals
Thursday, Jan. 8
At Fiesta Bowl
Glendale, Ariz.

No. 10 Miami (12-2) at No. 6 Mississippi (13-1)

Friday, Jan. 9
At Peach Bowl
Atlanta

No. 5 Oregon (13-1) at No. 1 Indiana (12-3)

FCS playoffs

Championship
Monday, Jan. 5

Illinois St. vs. Montana St.

NCAA Division III playoffs

Championship
Sunday, Jan. 4

Wis.-River Falls 24, North Central 14

AP SPORTLIGHT

Jan. 6

1994 — Nancy Kerrigan is attacked after practice at the U.S. Figure Skating Championships in Detroit. Shane Stant clubs Kerrigan on the knee and flees the scene. Later that evening, Scott Davis wins the men's U.S. Figure Skating title.
2014 — Patrick Maher of Division III Grinnell College breaks the NCAA record with 37 assists in a 164-144 victory over College of Faith.

NHL scoreboard

Eastern Conference

Atlantic Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Tampa Bay	41	25	13	3	53	142	110
Montreal	42	23	13	6	52	141	141
Detroit	43	24	15	4	52	131	138
Florida	41	22	16	3	47	129	130
Buffalo	40	21	15	4	46	125	126
Boston	42	22	18	2	46	133	136
Ottawa	40	20	15	5	45	133	129
Toronto	41	19	15	7	45	137	138

Metropolitan Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Carolina	42	25	14	3	53	141	128
N.Y. Islanders	42	23	15	4	50	120	120
Philadelphia	40	21	12	7	49	124	116
Pittsburgh	41	20	12	9	49	135	131
Washington	42	21	15	6	48	135	121
New Jersey	42	22	18	2	46	114	124
N.Y. Rangers	43	20	18	5	45	114	117
Columbus	41	18	16	7	43	127	137

Western Conference

Central Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Colorado	41	31	3	7	69	165	93
Dallas	42	25	9	8	58	146	117
Minnesota	43	25	10	8	58	138	115
Nashville	41	19	18	4	42	118	136
St. Louis	43	17	18	8	42	107	146
Utah	42	19	20	3	41	127	122
Chicago	42	17	18	7	41	118	134
Winnipeg	40	15	21	4	34	115	126

Pacific Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Vegas	40	17	11	12	46	124	126
Edmonton	42	20	16	6	46	139	143
Anaheim	41	21	17	3	45	139	146
Seattle	39	18	14	7	43	103	115
Los Angeles	40	17	14	9	43	107	111
San Jose	41	20	18	3	43	127	146
Calgary	41	18	19	4	40	111	121
Vancouver	41	16	20	5	37	117	143

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.

Sunday's games

Montreal 4, Dallas 3, OT
Pittsburgh 5, Columbus 4, OT
Florida 2, Colorado 1
Chicago 3, Vegas 2, OT
Carolina 3, New Jersey 1

Monday's games

Anaheim at Washington
Utah at N.Y. Rangers
Detroit at Ottawa
Seattle at Calgary
Minnesota at Los Angeles

Tuesday's games

Anaheim at Philadelphia
Colorado at Tampa Bay
Dallas at Carolina
Vancouver at Buffalo
Florida at Toronto
New Jersey at N.Y. Islanders
Vegas at Winnipeg
Nashville at Edmonton
Boston at Seattle
Columbus at San Jose

Wednesday's games

Dallas at Washington
Calgary at Montreal
Ottawa at Utah
St. Louis at Chicago
San Jose at Los Angeles

Thursday's games

Calgary at Boston
Florida at Montreal
Vancouver at Detroit
Buffalo at N.Y. Rangers
Toronto at Philadelphia
New Jersey at Pittsburgh
Anaheim at Carolina
N.Y. Islanders at Nashville
Edmonton at Winnipeg
Ottawa at Colorado
Columbus at Vegas
Minnesota at Seattle

Scoring leaders

Through Monday

	GP	G	A	PTS
Nathan MacKinnon, COL	41	35	39	74
Connor McDavid, EDM	42	25	47	72
Macklin Celebrini, SJ	41	22	41	63
Nikita Kucherov, TB	37	20	39	59
Mikko Rantanen, DAL	41	16	41	57
Leon Draisaitl, EDM	42	20	37	57
Martin Necas, COL	41	19	34	53
Jason Robertson, DAL	42	24	25	49
Kirill Kaprizov, MIN	43	24	25	49
Kyle Connor, WPG	40	19	29	48



PAUL BEATY/AP

The Blackhawks' Tyler Bertuzzi, left, scores the winning goal against Vegas Golden Knights goalie Akira Schmid (40) during overtime Sunday in Chicago. The Blackhawks won 3-2.

ROUNDUP

Bertuzzi's hat trick propels Blackhawks past Knights in OT

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Tyler Bertuzzi scored at 1:18 of overtime for his second hat trick of the season and fifth in the NHL to give the Chicago Blackhawks a 3-2 victory over the Vegas Golden Knights on Sunday night.

Arvid Soderblom made 13 saves to help Chicago win its third straight game and fourth in its last six. The Blackhawks extended Vegas' losing streak to six.

Ilya Mikheyv set up the winner with a pinpoint pass, and Bertuzzi directed it in past goalie Akira Schmid.

Bertuzzi's second goal, from the right crease with 8:24 left tied it at 2, and the Golden Knights, who dominated early, could muster only two shots the rest of the way.

Mark Stone and Brandon Saad scored for Vegas. Stone had his fourth goal in four games to give the Golden Knights a 2-1 lead 42 seconds into the second period.

Schmid stopped 17 shots, highlighted by close-in saves on Artyom Levshunov and Ryan Greene in the third period before Bertuzzi tied it.

Penguins 5, Blue Jackets 4 (OT): Sidney Crosby set up Ricard Rakell's tying goal with 13.7 seconds left in regulation, then scored at 2:22 of overtime to give visiting Pittsburgh a comeback victory over Columbus.

The Penguins overcame a three-goal deficit to win their fifth straight game overall and third in a row in the road. Ville Koivunen, Noel Acciari and Tommy Novak also scored, and Ben Kindel had two assists. Arturs Silovs made 25 saves.

Kirill Marchenko and Zach Werenski each had a goal and an assist for the Blue Jackets, and Dmitri Voronkov and Mason Marchment also scored as they raced to a 4-1 lead. Denton Mateychuk added two assists, and Jet Greaves stopped 43 shots.

Canadiens 4, Stars 3 (OT): Defenseman Lane Hutson scored with 1:20 left in overtime and visiting Montreal beat Dallas.

Wyatt Johnston had two goals and Quebec native Mavrik Bourque also scored for the Stars, who have lost five straight games for the first time this season (0-2-3). Jake Oettinger stopped 25 shots and has lost three straight starts (0-1-2) for the second time this season.

Panthers 2, Avalanche 1: Sam Bennett and Aaron Ekblad scored unassisted goals, Daniil Tarasov made 27 saves and host Florida snapped Colorado's second 10-game winning streak of the season by topping the Avalanche.

Artturi Lehkonen scored midway through the second period for Colorado, which lost captain Gabriel Landeskog early in that period with what the team said was an upper-body injury.

Hurricanes 3, Devils 1: Taylor Hall had a goal and an assist against his former team, rookie Brandon Bussi stopped 28 shots and visiting Carolina beat New Jersey.

Nikolaj Ehlers and Logan Stankoven also scored as the first-place Hurricanes snapped a three-game losing streak. The 27-year-old Bussi, claimed off waivers from Florida on Oct. 5, improved to 14-2-1 on the season.

NBA/COLLEGE BASKETBALL

NBA scoreboard

Eastern Conference

Atlantic Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
New York	23	12	.657	—
Boston	22	12	.647	½
Toronto	21	15	.583	2½
Philadelphia	19	14	.576	3
Brooklyn	11	22	.333	11

Southeast Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Orlando	20	16	.556	—
Miami	20	16	.556	—
Atlanta	17	20	.459	3½
Charlotte	12	23	.343	7½
Washington	9	25	.265	10

Central Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Detroit	26	9	.743	—
Cleveland	20	17	.541	7
Chicago	17	18	.486	9
Milwaukee	16	20	.444	10½
Indiana	6	30	.167	20½

Western Conference

Southwest Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
San Antonio	25	10	.714	—
Houston	21	11	.656	2½
Memphis	15	20	.429	10
Dallas	13	23	.361	12½
New Orleans	8	29	.216	18

Northwest Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Oklahoma City	30	6	.833	—
Denver	23	12	.657	6½
Minnesota	23	13	.639	7
Portland	16	20	.444	14
Utah	12	22	.353	17

Pacific Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
L.A. Lakers	22	11	.667	—
Phoenix	21	14	.600	2
Golden State	19	17	.528	4½
L.A. Clippers	12	22	.353	10½
Sacramento	8	28	.222	15½

Sunday's games

Detroit 114, Cleveland 110
Orlando 135, Indiana 127
Brooklyn 127, Denver 115
Miami 125, New Orleans 106
Minnesota 141, Washington 115
Phoenix 108, Oklahoma City 105
Milwaukee 115, Sacramento 98
L.A. Lakers 120, Memphis 114

Monday's games

New York at Detroit
Atlanta at Toronto
Chicago at Boston
Charlotte at Oklahoma City
Phoenix at Houston
Denver at Philadelphia
Golden State at L.A. Clippers
Utah at Portland

Tuesday's games

Cleveland at Indiana
Orlando at Washington
L.A. Lakers at New Orleans
Miami at Minnesota
San Antonio at Memphis
Dallas at Sacramento

NBA ROUNDUP

Pistons get rare win vs. Cavaliers

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Cade Cunningham scored 27 points, Daniss Jenkins added 25 — 21 in the second quarter alone — and the Detroit Pistons held on down the stretch for a rare road win at Cleveland, beating the Cavaliers 114-110 on Sunday.

Despite playing without two starters, the Eastern Conference-leading Pistons snapped a nine-game losing streak at Rocket Arena and beat Cleveland for just the second time in 15 games.

Donovan Mitchell scored 30 — 23 after halftime — to pace the Cavs, who trailed by 13 with less than five minutes to go before cutting Detroit's lead to 108-106 on Darius Garland's basket with 1:16 left.

Pistons forward Ausar Thompson scored on a tip-in with 17.2 seconds remaining, however, and Jenkins made four free throws in the final 5.7 seconds to put Cleveland away.

Cunningham went 11 for 11 from the line and Detroit made all 21 free-throw attempts.

The Cavaliers' Darius Garland scored 16 but went 0 for 7 on 3-pointers. Evan Mobley and Sam Merrill added 15 points apiece for Cleveland, which saw its winning streak stopped at three.

Suns 108, Thunder 105: Devin Booker hit the go-ahead 3-pointer with 0.7 seconds remaining, Jordan Goodwin scored 26 points with a career-high eight 3-pointers and host Phoenix beat Oklahoma City.

Booker took the late inbounds pass and drilled the long 3-pointer over Alex Caruso, shaking a season-long slump from long range. Ajay Mitchell missed a corner 3 at the buzzer that would have tied it.

The Thunder's four-game winning streak was snapped and the team fell to 30-6, which is still the best record in the NBA. Shai Gilgeous-Alexander led OKC with 25 points.

Magic 135, Pacers 127: Desmond Bane scored 31 points, Paolo Banchero added 28 points and 12 rebounds and host Orlando handed Indiana its 12th straight loss.

Anthony Black had 27 points and 10 assists for the Magic, who beat the Pacers for the second time in five days.

Nets 127, Nuggets 115: Michael Porter Jr. had 27 points, 11 rebounds and five assists in his first game against his former team, and host Brooklyn beat Denver to snap a three-game losing streak.



SUE OGROCKI/AP

Pistons guard Cade Cunningham, center, shoots between Cavaliers center Evan Mobley, left, guard Lonzo Ball and forward Nae'qwan Tomlin (35) in the second half Sunday in Cleveland.

The Nuggets got Aaron Gordon and Christian Braun back from lengthy injury absences and a huge game from Jamal Murray, who finished with 27 points, a career-high 16 assists and six rebounds. They still fell to 1-2 since Nikola Jokic was lost for perhaps a month with a hyperextended left knee.

Timberwolves 141, Wizards 115: Anthony Edwards scored 35 points, Julius Randle added 22, and visiting Minnesota completed a season sweep of Washington.

Rudy Gobert had 18 points and 14 rebounds for his 15th double-double of the season for the Timberwolves, who outscored the Wizards 76-48 in the paint. Minnesota went 3-1 on its road trip and won on consecutive days for the third time this season.

Heat 125, Pelicans 106: Norman Powell made a career high nine 3-pointers in a 34-point performance as host Miami beat New Orleans, extending the Pelicans' losing skid to seven.

Powell shot 11 of 15 from the field and 9 of 12 from behind the arc. Nikola Jovic finished with 19 points and Kel'el Ware had 16 points and 12 rebounds for the Heat. Pelle Larsson added 16 points and six assists.

Lakers 120, Grizzlies 114: Luka Doncic scored 36 points with nine rebounds and eight assists, LeBron James added 26 points with 10 assists and host Los Angeles rallied for a victory over Memphis.

Jake LaRavia also scored 26 points against his former team and Deandre Ayton had 15 points as the Lakers earned their second home victory over the Grizzlies in three days.

Bucks 115, Kings 98: Giannis Antetokounmpo had 37 points and 11 rebounds as visiting Milwaukee sailed to a victory over Sacramento.

Antetokounmpo made 13 of 17 shots from the field and 11 of 13 at the free-throw line in 31 minutes as the Bucks won for the fifth time in their last seven games. Kevin Porter Jr. added 25 points and 10 assists, while Myles Turner scored 15 points.

TOP 25 ROUNDUP

No. 7 Gonzaga tops Loyola Marymount for 9th straight win

Associated Press

SPOKANE, Wash. — Graham Ike scored 16 points as No. 7 Gonzaga overcame early shooting trouble to beat Loyola Marymount 82-47 on Sunday night for its ninth consecutive victory.

Mario Saint-Supery added 13 points and Jalen Warley 12 points for the Bulldogs (16-1, 4-0 West Coast Conference), who were coming off an 80-72 overtime win over Seattle on Friday night, and had a slow start against the Lions.

Rodney Brown scored 11 points to lead Loyola Marymount (10-7, 1-3), which defeated Gonzaga in Spokane during the 2022-23 season. The Lions shot just 30% in the game, compared to 54% for the Zags.

Gonzaga's only loss this year was to No. 2 Michigan in Las Vegas.

The Bulldogs made the first basket of the game, then missed their next nine shots to fall behind 10-2. But Gonzaga went on a 12-0 run to take a 16-14 lead midway through the first.

Loyola Marymount was scoreless for more than eight minutes, missing 11 consecutive shots, before Brown's basket broke the drought.

The Lions tied the score at 19-19, but Gonzaga scored the final 14 points of the first half to take a 33-19 lead at the break.

No. 4 UConn 73, Marquette 57: Solo Ball scored 11 of his 17 points in the second half and Tarris Reed Jr. finished with 13 points and nine rebounds as the host Huskies rolled to a win over the Golden Eagles to extend their winning streak to 10 games.

Silas Demary Jr. had 14 points for UConn (14-1, 4-0 Big East).

Nigel James had 13 points and Chase Ross added 11 points for Marquette (5-10, 0-4), which opened conference play with four consecutive losses for the first time since dropping its first five Conference USA contests during the 1998-99 season.

Ball had seven points in the first 5:15 of the second half as the Huskies began to pull away. He took an outlet pass from Reed and converted on a three-point play to put them up 48-33 with 14:45 left in the second half. Baskets by Reed and Eric Reibe pushed the lead to 19. Their first 20-point lead came on a Jaylin Stewart dunk with 8:12 remaining.

UConn took its largest lead in the first half on a 3-pointer by Demary to go ahead 31-19 with 4:12 left in the first half. Ross had five points as the Golden Eagles chipped away at the lead. Baskets by Ross and Joshua Clark pulled them within five points.

NFL

Scoreboard

American Conference

East

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
y-New England	14	3	0	.824	490	320
x-Buffalo	12	5	0	.706	481	365
e-Miami	7	10	0	.412	347	424
e-N.Y. Jets	3	14	0	.176	300	503

South

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
y-Jacksonville	13	4	0	.765	474	336
x-Houston	12	5	0	.706	404	295
e-Indianapolis	8	9	0	.471	466	412
e-Tennessee	3	14	0	.176	284	478

North

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
y-Pittsburgh	10	7	0	.588	397	387
e-Baltimore	8	9	0	.471	424	398
e-Cincinnati	6	11	0	.353	414	492
e-Cleveland	5	12	0	.294	279	379

West

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
*-Denver	14	3	0	.824	401	311
x-L.A. Chargers	11	6	0	.647	368	340
e-Kansas City	6	11	0	.353	362	328
e-Las Vegas	3	14	0	.176	241	432

National Conference

East

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
y-Philadelphia	11	6	0	.647	379	325
e-Dallas	7	9	1	.441	471	511
e-Washington	5	12	0	.294	356	451
e-N.Y. Giants	4	13	0	.235	381	439

South

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
y-Carolina	8	9	0	.471	311	380
e-Tampa Bay	8	9	0	.471	380	411
e-Atlanta	8	9	0	.471	353	401
e-New Orleans	6	11	0	.353	306	383

North

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
y-Chicago	11	6	0	.647	441	415
x-Green Bay	9	7	1	.559	391	360
e-Minnesota	9	8	0	.529	344	333
e-Detroit	9	8	0	.529	481	413

West

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
*-Seattle	14	3	0	.824	483	292
x-L.A. Rams	12	5	0	.706	518	346
x-San Francisco	12	5	0	.706	437	371
e-Arizona	3	14	0	.176	355	488

e-Eliminated from playoffs
x-clinched playoff spot
y-clinched division
*-clinched home-field advantage

Saturday's games

Tampa Bay 16, Carolina 14
Seattle 13, San Francisco 3

Sunday's games

Atlanta 19, New Orleans 17
Cleveland 20, Cincinnati 18
Houston 38, Indianapolis 30
Jacksonville 41, Tennessee 7
Minnesota 16, Green Bay 3
N.Y. Giants 34, Dallas 17
Buffalo 35, N.Y. Jets 8
Denver 19, L.A. Chargers 3
Detroit 19, Chicago 16
L.A. Rams 37, Arizona 20
Las Vegas 14, Kansas City 12
New England 38, Miami 10
Washington 24, Philadelphia 17
Pittsburgh 26, Baltimore 24

Playoffs

WILD-CARD
Saturday, Jan. 10

LA Rams at Carolina
Green Bay at Chicago

Sunday, Jan. 11

Buffalo at Jacksonville
San Francisco at Philadelphia
LA Chargers at New England

Monday, Jan. 12

Houston at Pittsburgh

DIVISIONAL
Saturday, Jan. 17 and Sunday, Jan. 18

Lowest remaining seed at Denver
Lowest remaining seed at Seattle
Two remaining seeds at higher seed
Two remaining seeds at higher seed

CONFERENCE CHAMPIONSHIPS
Sunday, Jan. 25
AFC

AFC lowest remaining seed at AFC highest remaining seed

NFC

NFC lowest remaining seed at NFC highest remaining seed

Raiders fire Carroll after 1 season

Browns, Cardinals, Falcons also let coaches go after multiple years of failure

Associated Press

The Las Vegas Raiders fired Pete Carroll on Monday after just one year, meaning they will enter their third consecutive season with a new coach in charge.

Carroll expressed high hopes upon taking over, saying he was used to double-digit victories and he expected the same in Las Vegas. But the Raiders went 3-14, going on a 10-game losing streak before finishing with a 14-12 victory over Kansas City on Sunday.

Now the question is where Las Vegas heads next under the direction of owner Mark Davis, minority owner Tom Brady and general manager John Spytek. Davis said in a statement that Spytek would work with Brady to find the next coach.

"Together, they will guide football decisions with a shared focus on leadership, culture and alignment with the organization's long-term vision and goals," Davis said.

The Raiders are not alone in looking for a new coach.

The Cleveland Browns fired coach Kevin Stefanski after six seasons; Jonathan Gannon was fired by the Arizona Cardinals following a dismal third season; and the Atlanta Falcons fired Raheem Morris and general manager Terry Fontenot, announcing the moves Sunday night, hours after the team completed its second straight 8-9 finish.

Las Vegas is the only one of those four teams seeking a new coach the second straight year.

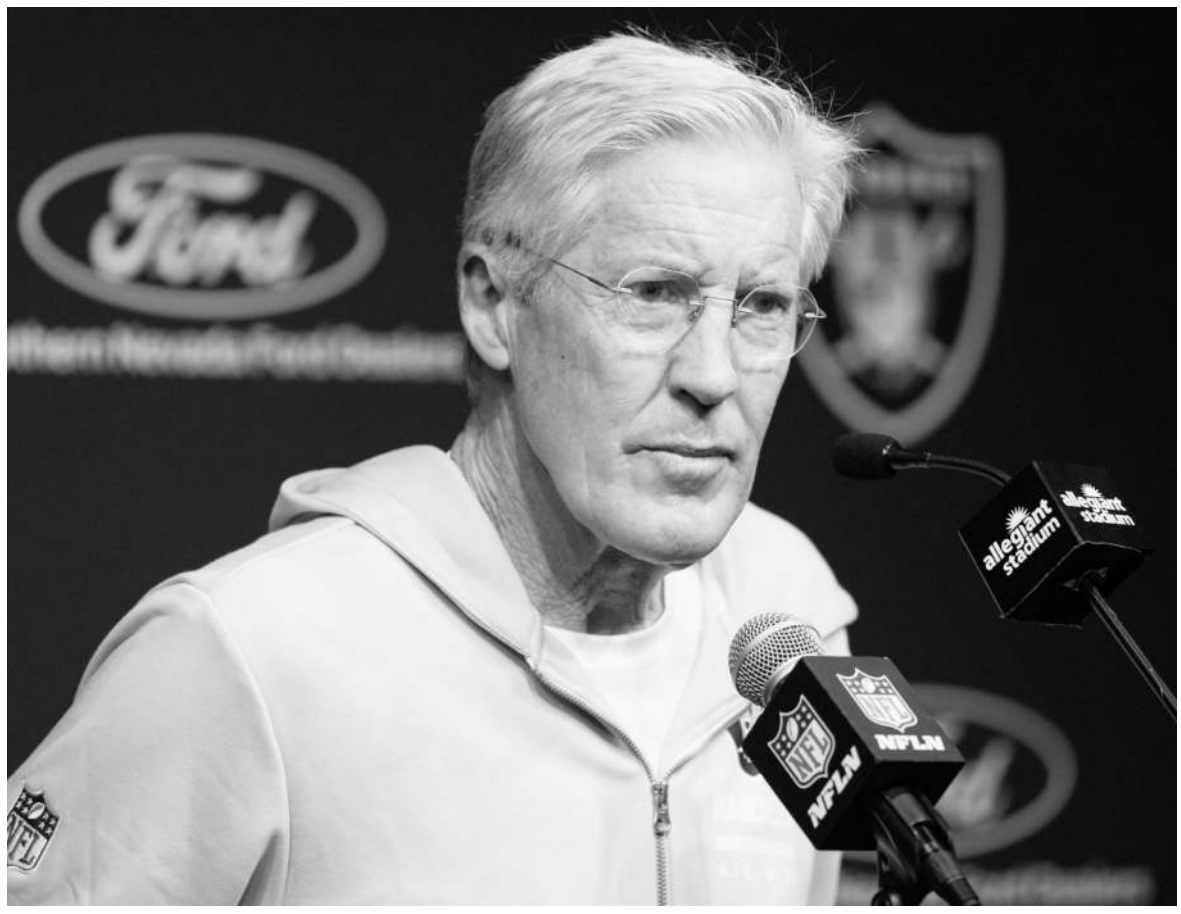
The Raiders could seek an offensive-minded coach to work with a young quarterback should they draft Heisman Trophy winner Fernando Mendoza or Dante Moore with the first overall pick.

That formula worked well this season in Chicago with coach Ben Johnson and quarterback Caleb Williams, and in Jacksonville with coach Liam Coen and QB Trevor Lawrence. Both teams are playoff bound after experiencing losing seasons the year before.

There is no one path to success, however. New England hired a defensive coach in Mike Vrabel, and he worked well with quarterback Drake Maye to helped the Patriots go from a 4-13 record to 14-3 and the No. 2 seed in the AFC playoffs.

Carroll, 74, was the NFL's oldest head coach, and he came to Las Vegas with the intent of winning right away. He got his wish of bringing in quarterback Geno Smith, whom he coached in Seattle. Neither got the success they expected, with Smith throwing a league-high 17 interceptions as the losses piled up.

The 43-year-old Stefanski is a two-time AP NFL Coach of the Year and had a 46-58 overall record. He led Cleveland to playoff appearances in 2020 and 2023. Cleveland's 48-37 victory over Pittsburgh in an AFC wild-card round game at the end of the 2020 season was the franchise's first playoff win since 1993.



JOHN LOCHER/AP

Las Vegas Raiders head coach Pete Carroll speaks during a news conference following a win against the Kansas City Chiefs on Sunday in Las Vegas. Carroll's firing was announced Monday.



Morris

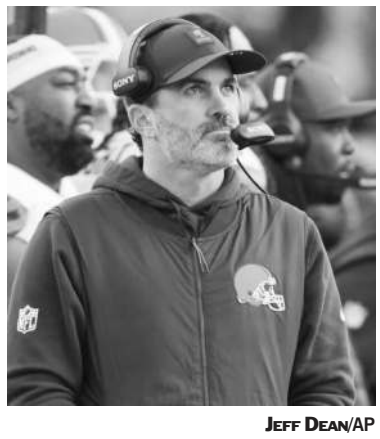


Gannon

"I leave with an immense sense of gratitude. A sincere 'Thank You' to everyone who I have been so blessed to work for and with over these six seasons," Stefanski said in a statement released through the Browns. "I'd like to especially thank my coaching staff and the players who did everything that was ever asked of them. They fought through injury and adversity, while always putting the team first."

Stefanski is credited with establishing a positive culture to a franchise epitomized by dysfunction. He was done in, however, by something that has plagued Cleveland since its return in 1999 — the lack of a franchise quarterback.

Stefanski had 13 starting quarterbacks during his tenure, including seven the past two seasons. Both were the most in the league.



JEFF DEAN/AP

Kevin Stefanski led the Cleveland Browns to two postseason appearances and won AP Coach of the Year twice during his six seasons with the team.

The Browns thought they had their quarterback in 2022 when they released Baker Mayfield and acquired Deshaun Watson from Houston for five draft picks, including three in the first round. Instead, the trade for Watson has set Cleveland back for years.

Stefanski is the sixth coach fired since owners Jimmy and Dee Haslam bought the franchise in 2012. The five coaches hired by the Haslams have a 73-139-1 regular-season record, the second-worst mark in the NFL.

The 43-year-old Gannon finished his tenure in Arizona with a 15-36 record, including 3-14 this season. His firing was not necessarily surprising, but the speed of his downfall was still jarring.

The Cardinals had an 8-9 record last year in Gannon's second season and the franchise appeared on the upswing. Two-time Pro Bowl quarterback Kyler Murray was in his prime and Ossenfort spent much of the offseason upgrading the defense, adding veteran pieces like Josh Sweat, Dalvin Tomlinson and Calais Campbell.

But nothing has gone as planned.

Now a new coaching staff will get the chance to rebuild a franchise that will have the No. 3 overall pick in April, but has been to the playoffs just once since 2016.

Morris said after Atlanta's 19-17 win over New Orleans on Sunday that he expected to return for a third season. Instead, his 16-18 record was not enough for him to keep his job after the year began with optimism that the Falcons would reach the playoffs for the first time since 2017.

Atlanta finished with four straight wins and in a three-way tie for first place in the NFC South, but the streak came after the team had been eliminated from playoff contention. Carolina won the division because it had a better record in divisional games.

"I have great personal affinity for both Raheem and Terry and appreciate their hard work and dedication to the Falcons, but I believe we need new leadership in these roles moving forward," owner Arthur Blank said in a statement.

NFL



KYUSUNG GONG/AP

Los Angeles Rams head coach Sean McVay celebrates the team's touchdown with quarterback Matthew Stafford against the Arizona Cardinals on Sunday in Inglewood, Calif.

Stafford, Rams beat Cards to secure No. 5 NFC seed

BY GREG BEACHAM
Associated Press

INGLEWOOD, Calif. — To prepare for the playoffs, the Los Angeles Rams dressed their starters for a fairly meaningless regular-season finale against an opponent that hadn't won in two months.

The Rams didn't even look ready for this modest test, let alone the postseason, when Sean McVay's players found themselves trailing the Arizona Cardinals late in the third quarter Sunday.

That's when Los Angeles made a dynamic late surge that it'll attempt to repeat on a larger, longer scale over the next few weeks.

"It was what needed to happen," Matthew Stafford said. "Kind of put our minds to it."

Stafford passed for 259 yards and threw two of his four touchdown passes to Colby Parkinson, and the Rams rallied to secure the No. 5 seed in the NFC playoffs with a 37-20 victory.

Tyler Higbee returned from injury with five receptions for 91 yards and a key fourth-quarter TD for LA (12-5), which will visit the NFC South champion Carolina Panthers (8-9) in the wild-card round.

Puka Nacua made a one-handed TD grab shortly before halftime among his 10 catches for 76 yards for the Rams, who snapped their first two-game skid of the season despite taking plenty of time to seize control. Los Angeles didn't return to top form while making major mistakes on defense and special teams yet again, but Stafford's offense made three straight touchdown drives to avoid any embarrassment before the games that matter much more.

The Rams clinched their third straight playoff berth last month, but blew the No. 1 overall seed with road losses to Seattle and Atlanta in their past two games. Now they will have to win in Charlotte, where they lost 31-28 on Nov. 30.

"I like where we're at right now," McVay said. "Now we move forward, and what a great opportunity we've got to go to Carolina and see what the hell we can do."

Stafford passed Dan Marino for seventh place on the NFL's career TD passes list while finishing his MVP-caliber season leading the NFL with 4,707 yards passing and 46 TDs — the second-most in league history by a quarterback at least 37 years old.

"Felt like I had a nice season, and really just proud of our team," Stafford said. "It's an award that's earned by everybody, (but) I've got bigger fish to fry at the moment, so that's what I'm going to be worried about."

Jacoby Brissett passed for 243 yards and hit Michael Wilson with a 43-yard TD pass in the second half for the Cardinals, who put a fright into LA despite finishing coach Jonathan Gannon's third season with nine consecutive losses and 14 of 15.

"We're gonna keep swinging, man," Gannon said. "Everybody in there has been through tough times in their careers, and the main thing that I was happy about today was they maximized the last opportunity to play. And they're not going to be happy watching these (playoff) games, but we did that to ourselves, and it starts with me."

Gannon dropped to 15-36. He agreed that Arizona is likely to make significant changes, but didn't speculate on his own future.

Trey McBride made seven catches to extend his NFL single-season record for a tight end to 126 receptions for the Cardinals, who lost 14 games in a season for the first time in the history of a franchise that started in Chicago in 1920.

Josiah Deguara caught a go-ahead TD pass in the third quarter from Brissett, who started Arizona's final 12 games after a foot injury sidelined Kyler Murray. The former No. 1 pick's future is also up in the air in Phoenix.

"Obviously came up a little short, but I'm pretty sure (the Rams) probably came in here and thought they were gonna roll us and get ready for the playoffs," Brissett said. "And no, we gave them a run for their money. Guys came out and battled."

Indeed, Los Angeles didn't find urgency in its final regular-season game until deep in the second half.

The Cardinals surged after halftime with two electrifying plays: Emari Demercado caught a 28-yard pass from punter Matt Haack on a fourth down fake from the Arizona 29, immediately followed by Wilson's 43-yard TD catch.

But Stafford and the Rams quickly drove for Parkinson's catch-and-run TD from 21 yards, following five minutes later by the first TD catch since Nov. 2 by Higbee, the 10-year veteran who returned from a six-game injury absence.

Eagles backups lose to Commanders, costing them shot at No. 2 seed

BY DAN GELSTON
Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Nick Sirianni understood the risks associated with his decision to rest Jalen Hurts, Saquon Barkley and most of Philadelphia's key starters with the No. 2 seed in the NFC at stake.

His backup plan backfired in the moment, and the Super Bowl champions will start their postseason defense of the title as the 3 seed.

With Hurts and Barkley on the bench and the Eagles' second-stringers failing to meet the moment, the Washington Commanders got fourth-quarter passing and rushing touchdowns from Josh Johnson and beat Philadelphia 24-17 on Sunday.

"I knew this was an outcome, that these things could happen," said Sirianni, who has coached the Eagles to two of the last three Super Bowls. "One thing I could guarantee was giving them rest. I couldn't guarantee them anything else. Being healthy and going into the playoffs healthy is a big deal for us."

NFC East champion Philadelphia (11-6) will open the playoffs at home next weekend against San Francisco.

The final outcome of Sirianni's call won't be determined until the Eagles' postseason run is over. Perhaps a physical and mental break — essentially a bye week for the core starters — was what they needed to gear up for a Super Bowl run.

"I know there will be debate on that," Sirianni said.

Good call.

Philadelphia would've needed help to earn the No. 2 seed. The Eagles had to beat Washington and Detroit needed to win at Chicago. Sure enough, the Lions beat the Bears 19-16 to add another gut punch to Philly's loss.

With Jayden Daniels shut down and Marcus Mariota dealing with a leg injury, the Commanders (5-12) started Johnson, their 39-year-old third-stringer. He rallied them from a 17-10 hole with a 2-yard touchdown pass to John Bates and then scored on a 1-yard run with 2:32 left.

With Hurts, Barkley, wide receiver A.J. Brown and tight end Dallas Goedert sitting out, the Eagles couldn't rally late.

Philadelphia defensive end Brandon Graham, who came out of retirement in midseason to chase another Super Bowl, defended Sirianni's decision.

"It's valuable because you get an extra week to get your body together, especially if you've been dealing with some stuff," Graham said. "Now it don't matter. We've got to try and go win every game. First one at home, take care of business and on to the next."

The Eagles had to watch and root — for Detroit, too — like everyone else.

Philly fans cheered when each Lions score against Chicago was shown on the videoboard. Sirianni said during the week he would also be scoreboard-watching, though he kept the cheering to his team's own plays, such as Tanner McKee's 15-yard TD pass to Grant Calcaterra for a 7-0 lead in the second quarter.

Washington, also playing backups in a forgettable season a year after it faced the Eagles in the NFC championship game, refused to roll over and twisted the stomachs of Philadelphia fans into knots — and got them ready to light up talk radio this week.

"I didn't really think too much about the negatives of it," Sirianni said.

McKee had been impressive in limited action as Hurts' backup over the last two seasons, but did little to improve his stock in the finale.

He was 21-for-40 for 241 yards with an interception and was sacked on the final drive to end the Eagles' shot at the 2 seed and the possibility of two home playoff games that would come with it.



CHRIS SZAGOLA/AP

Eagles quarterback Tanner McKee looks to pass under pressure from Washington Commanders linebacker Frankie Luvu during the second half Sunday in Philadelphia. The Commanders won 24-17.

NFL

Steelers win AFC North after Ravens miss kick



GENE J. PUSKAR/AP

Steelers safety Jabrill Peppers, left, celebrates after Baltimore Ravens kicker Tyler Loop (33) missed a field goal attempt in the second half Sunday in Pittsburgh. The Steelers won 26-24 to clinch the AFC North.

BY WILL GRAVES
Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — The way Aaron Rodgers looks at it, part of his job is to be a "magnetic force."

This is, after all, why the Pittsburgh Steelers signed the four-time NFL MVP to a one-year deal last summer. And why Rodgers opted to return for a 21st season after two miserable years with the New York Jets, eager to prove he could still sling it. Still deliver. Still win.

Turns out, there's some life in Rodgers' right arm yet. And in his team's season, too.

The 42-year-old Rodgers threw for a season-high 294 yards, the last 26 coming on a go-ahead touchdown pass to Calvin Austin III with 55 seconds left, and the Steelers claimed their first AFC North title in five years with a 26-24 victory that wasn't assured until Baltimore's Tyler Loop missed a 44-yard field goal as time expired.

Pittsburgh (10-7) will host Houston (12-5) in the opening round of the playoffs Monday, hoping to end a postseason victory drought that stretches back nearly a decade.

"The belief level in the locker room after a win like this is exponentially greater," Rodgers said.

Considering the way the Steelers kept bouncing back against Lamar Jackson and the Ravens, maybe it should be.

Even with Rodgers' late heroics, Baltimore (8-9) was poised to swing the lead back its way one last time when Jackson connected with Isaiah Likely for a 28-yard gain that put the Ravens within Loop's range.

The rookie's kick never had a chance, sailing well to the right of the goalposts as Pittsburgh players poured onto the field in somewhat jubilant disbelief.

Loop placed the blame squarely on his 24-year-old shoulders.

"Just mishit the ball," Loop said while being flanked by holder Jordan Stout and long snapper Nick Moore. "We call it hitting it thin."

A perhaps fitting way for a Baltimore season that began with Super Bowl expectations but never seemed to quite get right to end.

Jackson, dealing with a painful back contusion, passed for 238 yards and three scores, including a pair to Zay Flowers in the fourth quarter. Each of Flowers' TDs — from 50 and 64 yards — put the Ravens in front.

It just wasn't enough. And now a long and potentially turbulent offseason awaits.

The Steelers trailed by 10 early, and a repeat of the bludgeoning they took at the hands of Baltimore in the first round of the playoffs last season seemed in the offing.

The defense, pushed around repeatedly by Derrick Henry since he joined the Ravens last season, finally pushed back, and the offense — playing without suspended wide receiver DK Metcalf — slowly found its footing.

Henry ran for 126 yards for Baltimore and became the ninth player in NFL history to reach 13,000 career yards rushing, but was held mostly in check during a second half that morphed into an improbable shootout.

Jackson's first touchdown pass to Flowers was a thing of beauty. The two-time MVP ducked out of the reach of two would-be tacklers before floating a pass to a streaking Flowers to put the Ravens up 17-13.

Pittsburgh running back Kenny Gainwell sprinted in from 2 yards out with 3:49 remaining to put the Steelers back in front.

Baltimore, looking to become the first team since the creation of the AFC North in 2003 to win the division three consecutive years, needed all of three plays to reclaim the lead when Jackson lofted a pass to a wide-open Flowers for a 64-yard score.

Yet on the Pittsburgh sideline, there wasn't much panic. Steelers linebacker T.J. Watt, who had an interception in his return from a three-game absence while recovering from surgery to repair a collapsed lung, saw that there was still over 2 minutes to play.

Plenty of time for someone with 36 game-winning drives on his resume.

"(I thought), 'This is the best dude in the NFL for this moment,'" Watt said.

A 37th game-winning drive followed.

Rodgers deftly guided Pittsburgh 65 yards in six plays, the last a rainbow down the left sideline to Austin, who was alone after a Ravens defender fell.

ROUNDUP

Broncos beat Chargers to lock up AFC's top seed

Associated Press

DENVER — The Denver Broncos secured the AFC's top playoff seed with a 19-3 win over the Los Angeles Chargers' bevy of backups Sunday, a victory fueled by Ja'Quan McMillian's 45-yard interception return for a touchdown.

Wil Lutz was 4-for-4 on field goals as the Broncos (14-3) tied their franchise record for most victories in a season and earned their first No. 1 playoff seed since 2015, which they parlayed into a third Super Bowl title.

They'll get a week off before hosting their first playoff game in a decade, which could be against these same Chargers (11-6) if Los Angeles beats the Patriots (14-3) at New England in the wild-card round next weekend.

Denver quarterback Bo Nix had one of his worst games of the season, throwing for just 38 yards in the first half and 141 overall, but he tied Russell Wilson's record of 24 wins in his first two NFL seasons.

With no chance to win the division, the Chargers treated this game much like a bye week as they prepare to hit the road for the playoffs in the wild-card round. Coach Jim Harbaugh sat several of his starters, most notably quarterback Justin Herbert, safety Derwin James and OLB Tuli Tuipulotu.



DAVID ZALUBOWSKI/AP

Broncos quarterback Bo Nix passes against the Los Angeles Chargers during the second half Sunday in Denver.

Jaguars 41, Titans 7: Trevor Lawrence threw three touchdown passes, breaking the franchise's single-season record for total scores, and host Jacksonville won the AFC South and earned a home playoff game with a win over Tennessee. It was most lopsided outcome in series history.

The Jaguars (13-4) clinched their third division title in nine years, swept the Titans (3-14) for the third time in four seasons and topped a dozen wins for just the second time in the team's 31-year history.

Vikings 16, Packers 3: J.J. McCarthy had a productive first half before he was injured again, fullback C.J. Ham rushed for a short touchdown and host Minnesota finished a frustrating season by beating a resting Green Bay.

The Packers (9-7-1) were locked into the No. 7 seed in the NFC playoffs and had nothing to play for.

Giants 34, Cowboys 17: Jaxson Dart threw the 14th and 15th touchdown passes of his rookie year and host New York ended its lost season on a two-game winning streak by beating Dallas.

That and other results around the NFL took the Giants (4-13) out of the running for a top-two pick and clinched No. 1 for Las Vegas. New York routed the Raiders last week to end a nine-game skid.

Texans 38, Colts 30: C.J. Stroud accounted for two touchdowns and Ka'imi Fairbairn made a go-ahead field goal with 12 seconds left to lift host Houston over Indianapolis and extend its winning streak to nine games.

The victory gives the Texans (12-5) the No. 5 seed in the AFC playoffs.

Patriots 38, Dolphins 10: Rhamondre Stevenson ran for two touchdowns and caught another from MVP contender Drake Maye, and host New England completed its remarkable turnaround season with a win over Miami.

The Patriots finished 14-3, their most victories since they won the Super Bowl to cap the 2016 season. The AFC East champions will be the No. 2 seed in the playoffs and host the seventh-seeded Los Angeles Chargers in the wild-card round next weekend.

Raiders 14, Chiefs 12: Daniel Carlson made a career-long 60-yard field goal with eight seconds left as host Las Vegas snapped its 10-game losing streak with a win over Kansas City.

This was the first victory for the Raiders (3-14) over the Chiefs (6-11) at Allegiant Stadium. Kansas City, which had won all five previous meetings in Las Vegas, lost its sixth straight game and eighth in 10.

Lions 19, Bears 16: Jared Goff led five scoring drives, Jake Bates kicked a 42-yard field goal as time expired and visiting Detroit regrouped to beat NFC North champion Chicago after blowing a 16-point lead in the fourth quarter.

The Bears (11-6) stumbled into the playoffs with back-to-back losses, though they secured the No. 2 seed in the NFC with Washington beating Philadelphia.

Bills 35, Jets 8: After taking the first snap, Josh Allen headed to the sideline and joined the 70,000-plus fans to watch backup Mitch Trubisky throw four touchdown passes as host Buffalo bid a likely farewell to its long-time home with a rout of New York.

The win, coupled with the Chargers' loss at Denver, led to Bills moving up one spot in clinching the No. 6 seed. Buffalo will travel to play AFC South champion Jacksonville in the wild-card round next weekend.

NFL



JOSHUA A. BICKEL/AP

Cleveland Browns defensive end Myles Garrett, top, takes down Bengals quarterback Joe Burrow to set an NFL record for sacks in a season during the second half Sunday in Cincinnati.

Garrett records 23rd sack, breaks single-season mark

BY JOE REEDY
Associated Press

CINCINNATI — The night before Myles Garrett got his 23rd sack to break the NFL single-season record, he had a nightmare that he fell short of the mark.

Garrett instead made his sweetest dreams come true.

The All-Pro Cleveland Browns pass rusher took down Bengals quarterback Joe Burrow with 5:09 remaining in the fourth quarter on Sunday to finish his extraordinary season with 23 sacks.

"Despair. I was scared as hell," Garrett said of the nightmare. "We got to deny fate, whatever it is, we got to make it happen. And I just went into it and still had the utmost confidence in myself and my preparation and in my guys."

The record came in a victory that concluded an otherwise difficult season for the Browns (5-12). Andre Szmyt kicked a 49-yard field goal as time expired as Cleveland rallied past Cincinnati 20-18.

Garrett came into the game needing one sack to surpass the mark of 22½ shared by Pro Football Hall of Famer Michael Strahan (in 2001 in a 16-game season with the New York Giants) and Pittsburgh's T.J. Watt in 2021.

Burrow was in the shotgun formation on first-and-10 at the Browns 45-yard line when he saw Garrett coming and went down.

According to Next Gen Stats, Garrett crossed the line of scrimmage 0.23 seconds after the snap from Bengals center Ted Karras, the fastest on any sack this season.

"He's the sack king," said ex-Cleveland coach Kevin Stefanski, who was fired Monday. "They've been playing this game for a long time, and for him to go get that in the circumstances with the degree of difficulty in which he got it this season is unbelievable."

The sack in some ways was similar to Strahan's record-breaking sack of the Packers' Brett Favre in the 2001 season finale. Both quarterbacks didn't put up much of a challenge when they saw an oncoming pass rusher.

Garrett's teammates celebrated his milestone even though Cincinnati tried to go no-huddle on the next play. Bengals coach Zac Taylor wasn't pleased that the game was briefly stopped, even though it is standard protocol for an officiating crew to do that when a record-breaking moment occurs.

"The refs just said they had made the decision as a crew that they were going to stop the game. It didn't matter when it happened, they were going to stop the game," Taylor said. "They said they tried to do it as quickly as possible. I feel that. (But) we didn't sub. We're trying to be on the ball and go, play tempo and the umpire just held the ball so that we couldn't do anything."

Once Garrett got to the Browns sideline, tight end David Njoku placed a fake crown on his teammate's head. There was also a boisterous celebration in Cleveland's locker room after the game.

Garrett has sacked 51 players over his nine-year NFL career. Burrow is at the top of the list at 12 in 10 meetings.

"He's the focus of the game plan every time we play them. It's challenging because you have to commit resources to that and that takes away resources from elsewhere," Burrow said. "For the most part, I thought we were pretty good against him today. But you can see how impactful he is. We have no help on him one time and he gets one. He's an elite player."

Garrett recorded six pressures against Cincinnati, but he was chipped or double-teamed on most of his 39 pass rushes.

He thought he had a chance to get Burrow midway through the third quarter, but Burrow scrambled around right end for an 8-yard gain and at one point looked back at Garrett and was likely relieved.

It was Garrett who was the most relieved after the game.

"It was everything I expected. It was so tough. I knew they were going to make it difficult," he said. "I don't think I saw more than three singles on a real drop-back the whole game. And I just knew that if I did, I have to make that moment count. And the feeling couldn't be better."

The NFL did not start counting sacks as an official statistic until 1982. Mark Gastineau of the New York Jets had 22 in 1984, and Strahan surpassed him 17 seasons later. Watt tied the record during the final game in 2021 by taking down Baltimore's Tyler Huntley.

Garrett has recorded at least half a sack in 13 games this season, including 11 of the last 12.

Field: Panthers in first postseason since 2017

FROM PAGE 24

pearance under owner David Tepper and first since 2017, when they lost a wild-card game two years after they went 15-1 and lost the Super Bowl.

"I'm so grateful to have one more opportunity to get back to work where we can get on the grass, go through the preparation and have our meetings," Canales said Sunday. "Once we are in cleats and on that grass it's like the next thing becomes clear, the focus of what we are doing. ... It's like here we go, we get one opportunity and let's make this statement true: 1-0 with a chance to win a championship. How long can we keep that statement true?"

Tampa Bay (8-9) beat Carolina on Saturday to stay alive for an extra day, but lost a three-team tiebreaker with Atlanta also finishing 8-9. The Bucs started 6-2 before losing seven of nine, failing to win their fifth straight division title.

While Sam Darnold and Seattle (14-3) earned a first-round bye, Brock Purdy, Christian McCaffrey and injury-depleted San Francisco missed an opportunity to play at home the rest of the way. Levi's Stadium, which is the Niners' home field, hosts the Super Bowl on Feb. 8.

Wild-card weekend will feature these matchups:

- Los Angeles Rams (12-5) at Carolina Panthers (8-9), Saturday.
- Green Bay Packers (9-6-1) at Chicago Bears (11-6), Saturday.
- Buffalo Bills (12-5) at Jacksonville Jaguars (13-4), Sunday.
- San Francisco 49ers (12-5) at Philadelphia Eagles (11-6), Sunday.
- Los Angeles Chargers (11-6) at New England Patriots (14-3), Sunday.
- Houston Texans (12-5) at Pittsburgh Steelers (10-7), Monday.

AFC East

The Patriots won their first division title since Tom Brady led the franchise to 11 straight from 2009-19.

The Bills' run of five consecutive division crowns ended, and they will go on the road in the playoffs.

AFC North

The Steelers won their first division title since 2020.

AFC South

The Jaguars won the division for the first time since 2022, when first-year coach Doug Pederson guided them to a 9-8 record and a wild-card playoff victory over the Chargers, overcoming a 27-0 deficit.



CHRIS O'MEARA/AP

Carolina Panthers quarterback Bryce Young throws a pass against the Buccaneers on Saturday in Tampa, Fla.

The Texans secured the No. 5 seed with a 38-30 victory over the Colts. Houston is in the playoffs for the third straight season under coach DeMeco Ryans and QB C.J. Stroud.

AFC West

The Broncos ended the Chiefs' nine-year run. Denver hasn't been the No. 1 seed since Peyton Manning and a stifling defense beat the Panthers in the Super Bowl 10 years ago.

The Chargers are in the playoffs for the second straight season under Jim Harbaugh.

NFC East

The defending Super Bowl champion Eagles became the first team to win this division in consecutive seasons in two decades. They missed a chance to be the No. 2 seed when they rested starters and lost 24-17 to the Commanders.

NFC North

The Bears clinched their first division championship since 2018. They lost 19-16 to the Lions but secured the No. 2 seed because Philadelphia lost.

The Packers were locked into the No. 7 seed after Week 17.

NFC South

Carolina backed into a division title but is ahead of schedule in its rebuilding process.

NFC West

The Seahawks earned the No. 1 seed for the fourth time in team history. They reached the Super Bowl the first three, winning once.

The Rams beat the Cardinals 37-20 to secure the No. 5 seed and a rematch at the Panthers. Carolina beat them 31-28 on Nov. 30.

After falling to secure a bye, San Francisco dropped to the No. 6 seed and will face the Eagles in a rematch of the NFC championship game following the 2022 season.

SPORTS



Black Monday

Raiders part ways with Carroll; three other head coaches fired ›› NFL, Page 20

NFL PLAYOFFS

THE FIELD IS SET



GENE J. PUSKAR/AP

Steelers quarterback Aaron Rodgers runs with the ball during the final game of the regular season against the Baltimore Ravens on Sunday in Pittsburgh. The Steelers won 26-24.



ERIC LUTZENS/AP

Broncos running back Tyler Badie looks to avoid Los Angeles Chargers cornerback Tarheeb Still in the first half Sunday in Denver.

Steelers, Panthers, Jaguars secure division titles as Broncos clinch AFC's No. 1 seed

BY ROB MAADDI
Associated Press

Aaron Rodgers and the Steelers sent Lamar Jackson and the Ravens home for the playoffs. The Panthers are NFC South champions for the first time in 10 years. The Broncos are the AFC's No. 1 seed.

Rodgers threw a 26-yard touchdown pass to Calvin Austin III with 55 seconds left and Pittsburgh secured the AFC North title with a 26-24 victory when Baltimore's Tyler Loop missed a 44-yard field goal wide right as time expired Sunday night in the final game of the NFL's regular season.

"It's pretty emotional," said Rodgers, who is heading to the playoffs for the first time since the 2021 season. "I'm thankful for these guys. ... It's been an absolute blessing to be here."

Carolina clinched its division title when the Falcons beat the Saints 19-17 on Sunday to eliminate the Buccaneers.

Denver secured a first-round bye and home-field advantage throughout the playoffs with a 19-3 victory over the Chargers. The Seahawks earned the NFC's No. 1 seed Saturday night, defeating the 49ers 13-3.

The Jaguars won the AFC South with a 41-7 rout of the Titans. Rookie coach Liam Coen and Trevor Lawrence led Jacksonville to a major turnaround after going 4-13 in 2024.

Led by second-year coach Dave Canales and third-year quarterback Bryce Young, the Panthers are making their first playoff ap-

SEE FIELD ON PAGE 23

Garrett sets single-season record for sacks ›› NFL, Page 23

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