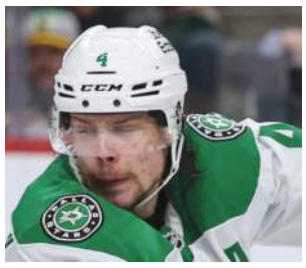
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STARS AND STRIPES

stripes.com

Volume 84 Edition 222 ©SS 2026 CONTINGENCY EDITION FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 2026 Free to Deployed Areas

IG: Troops at Djibouti base faced health risks

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

U.S. military officials put potentially thousands of deployed service members at risk to toxic exposure from an open-air burn pit near a remote Air Force base in east Africa, a Defense Department investigation concluded.

The inspector general probe validated a hotline complaint that personnel at Chabelley Airfield near Djibouti were routinely exposed to "a thick fog of smoke" from trash burning, which caused breathing difficulties and other symptoms, the report stated.

The complaint was prompted by an IG report released in December 2024 on air quality concerns at the Navy's Camp Lemonnier, which didn't consider the nearby airfield, the report said.

The IG's final report, which was published Feb. 20, did not say how many service members were potentially affected.

But the Air Force, which operates the airfield, told the audit team that most deployments to Chabelley are six months long and consist of about 120 airmen, a number that does not include personnel that may deploy from other services, according to the report.

Last fall, Air Force officials announced the opening of a new medical care facility at Chabelley and said at the time that the base supports nearly 1,000 personnel.

Used for drone operations and other Air Force missions, Chabelley has evolved from a small commuter airstrip into a more permanent installation and is poised to grow as threats in the region increase, officials said in October.

An eight-month IG review that included an April 2025 visit to the

SEE RISKS ON PAGE 4



VAHID SALEMI/AP

Boys stand on a launcher of an Iranian domestically-built missile during an annual rally Feb. 11, marking the 1979 Islamic Revolution at the Azadi (Freedom) square in Tehran, Iran.

Outgunned but still deadly

Despite US military buildup in Mideast, Iran still capable of inflicting pain

BY SAM METZ
Associated Press

JERUSALEM — As U.S. forces mass in the Middle East, Iran faces the threat of major strikes by the world's most powerful military, potentially targeting its leaders, military, nuclear sites and critical infrastructure.

Iran has nowhere near the same capabilities, and is even more vulnerable after last year's war launched by Israel and recent anti-government protests. But it could still inflict pain on American forces and allies, and may feel it has to if the Islamic Republic's survival is at stake.

RELATED
US, Iran hold hours of indirect nuclear talks in last chance diplomacy
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While Iran suffered major losses last June, it still has hundreds of missiles capable of hitting Israel, according to Israel's estimates. Iran boasts a much larger arsenal of shorter-range missiles capable of hitting U.S. bases in Gulf countries and offshore American forces, soon to be joined by a second aircraft carrier.

Iran has previously threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz, a vital waterway for the global oil trade, and claimed to have done so partially during military drills last week.

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei warned that Iran could sink American warships, and top officials have said a U.S. attack

SEE DEADLY ON PAGE 6

BUSINESS/WEATHER

NY sues video game firm for promoting gambling

Associated Press

NEW YORK — New York's attorney general has sued video game developer Valve, claiming the "loot boxes" found in Counter-Strike and other popular video game franchises illegally promote gambling.

State Attorney General Letitia James said in a lawsuit filed Wednesday in New York state court that games such as Counter-Strike 2, Team Fortress 2 and Dota 2 illegally charge users for the chance to win rare items held in the virtual containers.

In Counter-Strike, the process even resembles a slot machine, with an animated spinning wheel that eventually rests on a selected item, James' office said.

"Valve has made billions of dollars by letting children and adults alike illegally gamble for the chance to win valuable virtual prizes," James said in a statement. "These features are addictive, harmful, and illegal."

Messages seeking comment were left Wednesday for the Bellevue, Wash.,-based company.

"Loot box" items are generally cosmetic, such as a hat for a player's character or an artistic skin for weapons. They usually don't serve any vital function in the games, but James' office said the items can still be sold online for significant sums.

The attorney general argues that research has found children introduced to gambling are four times more likely to develop a gambling problem later in life than those who are not.

EXCHANGE RATES

Military rates	
Euro costs (Feb. 27)	0.83
British pound (Feb. 27)	$1.32
Japanese yen (Feb. 27)	151.00
South Korean won (Feb. 27)	1,384.00

Commercial rates	
Bahrain (Dinar)	0.3745
Britain (Pound)	1.3546
Canada (Dollar)	1.3690
China (Yuan)	6.8439
Denmark (Krone)	6.3258
Egypt (Pound)	47.9199
Euro	0.8466
Hong Kong (Dollar)	7.8234
Hungary (Forint)	318.00
Israel (Shekel)	3.1158
Japan (Yen)	155.92
Kuwait (Dinar)	0.3060
Norway (Krone)	9.5710
Philippines (Peso)	57.66
Poland (Zloty)	3.57
Saudi Arabia (Riyal)	3.7462
Singapore (Dollar)	1.2630
South Korea (Won)	1,429.02
Switzerland (Franc)	0.7735
Thailand (Baht)	31.08
Turkey (NewLira)	43.8788

(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	0.25
Federal funds market rate	3.62
3-month bill	3.68
30-year bond	4.70

WEATHER OUTLOOK

FRIDAY IN THE MIDDLE EAST



FRIDAY IN EUROPE



SATURDAY IN THE PACIFIC



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MILITARY

DODEA to increase school meal prices

BY JEREMY STILLWAGNER
Stars and Stripes

The cost of school meals at overseas Defense Department schools will rise for the first time in four years, with all paid breakfasts and lunches increasing by 25 cents starting next school year.

The increase will not apply to students who qualify for free or reduced-price meals, according to a Wednesday news release from Navy Exchange Service Command, which provides on-base school meals alongside the Army and Air Force Exchange Service.

Beginning with the 2026-27 school year, breakfast for all grade levels will cost $2.25. Lunches will be priced at $3.75 for primary school students and $4 for secondary school students.

The price increase is required for Department of Defense Education Activity to comply with the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, according to AAFES.

The law, enacted in 2010, required DODEA schools to gradually raise paid lunch prices to levels comparable with reimbursement rates set by the Department of Agriculture, the release said.

On average, school lunches on DODEA campuses are priced about $2 below the actual cost of each meal, according to AAFES.

Reaction to the announcement focused more on food quality and variety than on the price increase.

"My kids would rather go hungry than buy school lunch most days. It's not good, especially for the price. The quality isn't going to go up but the price is," Natalie Swanigan, a parent at Yokota Air Base, Japan, wrote Thursday in the Facebook group Yokota Community.

Another group commenter, Air Force Capt. Matthew Hughey, said he's "more interested to see how nutritional value, variety, student satisfaction with DODEA lunches has changed during this inflationary period more than a 6.5% price hike."

Overseas DODEA meal prices were increased in 2022 by 25 cents.



JEAN SANON/U.S. Army

Staff Sgt. Samuel Sacco receives a French medal from Maj. Gen. Michel Natali, the New York National Guard's assistant adjutant general, during a ceremony in Rochester, N.Y., on Feb. 22.

National Guard soldiers honored by France for 2023 rescue in Iraq

BY JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

Six U.S. soldiers were awarded the French equivalent of Bronze Stars this week for helping to save French commandos who were pinned down in battle against Islamic militants in Iraq.

Members of the New York National Guard, the soldiers were awarded the French National Defense Gold Medal with Bronze Star on Sunday in Rochester for their efforts in the 2023 rescue.

"The operation they were involved in happened in the dark of night," Maj. Gen. Michel Natali, the New York National Guard's assistant adjutant general, said in a statement. "The French government did not have to recognize our soldiers, but they went that extra mile."

The six Guard members, assigned to B Company of the 3rd Battalion, 126th General Support Aviation Battalion, sprang into action in August 2023 to provide rapid aerial support to French special operations forces who were involved in a firefight near Hawija, Iraq.

The French unit was conducting a mission against Islamic State militants, the Army statement said.

The U.S. soldiers were on standby at Irbil Air Base when they received word of French casualties and a call for reinforcements and extraction.

Two CH-47F Chinook helicopters crewed by the Rochester-based B Company were launched in support, the Army said.

"Within 30 minutes, the aircrews loaded about 30 French commandos to relieve them and flew nearly 70 miles to the objective area, then stayed nearby, ready to provide follow-on support," the statement said.

Chief Warrant Officer 4 Christopher Scott, who served as air mission commander during the operation, said the crew assembled quickly, unsure what would meet them once they arrived.

"The biggest challenge was not knowing the situation on the ground or what support we had until we got on station," Scott said.

Sgt. Jedediah Estrada, a door gunner during the mission, said the recognition from the French military brought back memories of Sgt. Nicolas Mazier, a French paratrooper who was killed in combat during the firefight.

"Being honored by the French government is a way for me to continue honoring his legacy, not just what our unit was able to do, but what we accomplished together with our partner force," Estrada said in the statement. "It really brings together why we were there and what we were working to defeat."

The other soldiers who received medals are:

- Chief Warrant Officer 3 Aaron Taylor
- Chief Warrant Officer 2 Jared Twigg
- Staff Sgt. Samuel Sacco
- Sgt. Zachary Albright

Philippines identifies US military plane that hit road barrier, injuring 5

BY SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

The Philippine military has identified the U.S. military aircraft that crashed during a Tuesday roadway exercise as an Air Force C-146 Wolfhound special operations plane, an incident that injured five crew members.

The short takeoff-and-landing aircraft struck a concrete barrier while attempting to depart from a roadway, The Associated Press reported Wednesday.

Two service members were treated at a local medical facility, according to an unsigned email Thursday from U.S. Indo-Pacific Command.

"One of the individuals has been discharged, while the other remains in medical care and is in stable condition," the command said.

The Wolfhound crashed during a joint roadway landing exercise in Laoac, Pangasinan, according to a Wednesday report by the state-run Philippine News Agency, citing the Armed Forces of the Philippines.

The area is slightly more than an hour's drive north of Clark Air Base, a former Air Force installation that continues to host U.S. military training in the Philippines.

The exercise was coordinated with Philippine authorities to practice operations in cases where airports and runways are inaccessible, such as during typhoons or earthquakes, the AP reported.

INDOPACOM confirmed that an accident occurred during training in central Luzon but did not provide additional details. No civilians were injured, and the incident remains under investigation, the command said.

Photos posted Tuesday on Facebook by the Philippine Department of National Defense showed a Wolfhound conducting what was described as the "first highway landing operation in the Philippines and only the second in Asia."



U.S. Air Force

Troops watch a U.S. Air Force C-146A Wolfhound take off from an austere location on Luzon, Philippines, Jan. 27.

Philippine Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro observed the highway landing in Pangasinan, according to the post.

Photos released last month by U.S. Special Operations Command Pacific showed a Wolfhound taking off from an austere location on Luzon on Jan. 27.

The Wolfhound is the military version of the Dornier 328 turboprop commuter aircraft and has been continuously deployed since October 2011, according to an Air Force fact sheet.

Its primary mission is to provide Special Operations Command with flexible, responsive transport for small teams and cargo.

"Airlift missions are conducted by Air Force Special Operations Command aircrews to prepared and semi-prepared airfields around the world," the fact sheet states.

The twin-engine, high-wing aircraft is capable of carrying passengers and cargo and conducting casualty evacuation missions, according to the Air Force.

MILITARY

Ex-Air Force pilot accused of illegal training in China

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

A former Air Force pilot who worked with nuclear weapons delivery systems on U.S. fighter jets was arrested Wednesday on suspicion of providing defense secrets to China.

Gerald Eddie Brown Jr., 65, was scheduled to appear Thursday in federal court in Indiana over charges that he violated the Arms Export Control Act, the Justice Department said in a statement Wednesday. He was arrested in Jeffersonville, Ind.

He served as a fighter pilot instructor and simulator instructor on such aircraft as the F-35 Lightning II, F-4, F-15, F-16 and A-10. During his military career, he commanded sensitive units responsible for nuclear weapons delivery systems and led combat missions, the statement said.

"As an Air Force officer, Brown took an oath to defend our nation against all enemies foreign and domestic," U.S. Attorney Jeanine Pirro said in the statement. "He broke that oath and betrayed the country, jeopardizing the safety of our service members and allies."

Also known by his callsign "Runner," Brown spent 24 years in the Air Force before leaving active duty as a major in 1996, the statement said.

Prosecutors say that in August 2023, Brown began negotiating a contract through a co-conspirator with Stephen Su Bin, a Chinese national who was sentenced to nearly four years in prison.

Su Bin pleaded guilty in 2016 to conspiring to hack into the computer systems of U.S. defense contractors on behalf of China.

Brown arrived in China in December 2023, the statement said. The training prosecutors say he provided is considered a defense service covered under the International Traffic in Arms Regulations.

A State Department license is required to provide training to foreign persons or foreign military units.

Brown listed his objective on the application as "instructor fighter pilot," prosecutors said.

"Now ... I have the chance to fly and instruct fighter pilots again!" he told a co-conspirator on arrival in China, the statement said.

On his first day there, Brown answered questions about the U.S. Air Force for three hours, the statement said. He remained in China until this month, when he returned to the U.S. for reasons that remain unknown.

U.S. allies and partners are likely to have some tough questions for the Pentagon as a result of Brown's arrest, aviation analyst and former Australian air force officer Peter Layton told CNN.

"If I was an allied nation flying the F-35, I would be very strongly requesting what the U.S. finds has been passed on to the Chinese and what changes to tactics and procedures the U.S. now suggests should be made," Layton said.

Brown's case calls to mind the charges against former Marine Corps pilot Daniel Duggan, who was arrested in Australia in October 2022. His extradition to the U.S. is pending the outcome of an appeal lodged in October.

Like Brown, Duggan is accused of providing unauthorized training to Chinese military pilots without authorization in violation of the Arms Export Control Act. He also faces charges of conspiring to engage in international money laundering.

In 2024, the U.S., U.K. Australia, Canada and New Zealand issued a bulletin saying China was actively targeting current and former military personnel from NATO and Western countries to strengthen its military.



JAYSON BURNS/U.S. Air Force

A KC-130 tanker aircraft descends upon Chabelley Airfield, Djibouti, in this undated photo.

Risks: Inspectors saw open burning

FROM PAGE 1

airfield found that U.S. Africa Command and U.S. Air Forces in Europe-Air Forces Africa officials did not properly manage the effects of poor air quality at Chabelley.

DOD contractors transport products such as petroleum and metals from Lemonnier and the air base to the Chabelley dump, where they often are burned despite a prohibition on incineration of those items, the IG said.

The visiting inspection team saw the open burning of solid waste at the dump, and service members living and working at the airfield described symptoms such as eye and throat irritation, difficulty breathing and nausea, according to the report.

Among other findings, AFRICOM did not identify the Chabelley dump to Pentagon staff as an open-air burn pit or work with Djibouti to reduce or eliminate use of the site, according to the report.

Further, officials with the USAFE-AFAFRICA office of the command surgeon did not implement an air quality mitigation plan or ensure air sampling including certain toxins, the report said.

As a result, service members who deployed to the installation from November 2019 through September 2025 weren't protected "from the increased exposure to harmful airborne hazards," the IG said.

That put them at risk of serious health conditions such as asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and cancer, the document stated, according to the report.

USAFE-AFAFRICA officials said they "misinterpreted" the Pentagon policy to read it as excluding the tracking of open-air burn pits operated by Djibouti and only reported local household burn locations in the area, the report stated.

But in November 2024, when the Chabelley dump came to AFRICOM's attention after a request for renewed open-air burn pit data, the command continued to omit the dump on its report to the Pentagon due to an "administrative error," according to report.

Six environmental assessments of the dump identified it as an open-air burn pit for destruction of all types of trash, including tires, appliances and cars, and operating on "almost a 24/7" basis.

AFRICOM should have been aware of the open burning operations at Chabelley as a result of these test reports, the IG stated.

USAFE-AFAFRICA, meanwhile, did not ensure more specific sampling in its air quality testing associated with open-burn pits, citing in part lack of proper equipment, the report said.

The lack of sampling prevented the further documentation of those exposures in the medical records of service members who deployed there, potentially delaying targeted treatment and benefit considerations.

AFRICOM and USAFE-AFAFRICA officials agreed with most of the recommendations from the audit.

AFRICOM said it was working with Djibouti to reduce the amount of solid waste sent to Chabelley and would request an exemption from the Pentagon as required by DOD policy.

The AFRICOM chief of staff, however, did not agree that the open-air burning at Chabelley met the exemption criteria, according to the report.

Air Force officials said the Navy at Camp Lemonnier had loaned them reading instruments that would alert commanders and personnel at Chabelley of periods of excessive air quality, the report stated.

The wing at Chabelley needs $20,000 to secure its own equipment, commanders told the IG.

North Korea warns it could destroy South if threatened

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — North Korean leader Kim Jong Un claimed his nuclear-armed country could "completely destroy" South Korea if its security were threatened, reiterating his refusal to engage with Seoul, state media said Thursday.

However, he left the door open to dialogue with Washington as he concluded a ruling party congress outlining his policy goals for the next five years.

Kim in recent years has sharpened his rhetoric toward Seoul and underscored his rejection of inter-Korean diplomacy.

Experts say that most likely doesn't presage military clashes but is intended as a broader effort to assert a more forceful regional role backed by North Korea's growing nuclear arsenal and relations with Beijing and Moscow.

South Korea's Unification Ministry said it was regrettable that the North continues to define inter-Korean relations as hostile and that Seoul will "patiently" pursue any efforts to stabilize peace.

Kim has issued increasingly hard-line views toward South Korea since 2024, when he discarded the North's long-standing goal of a peaceful reunification between the war-divided Koreas and declared the South as a permanent enemy.

Kim has recently been prioritizing Russia in his foreign policy, sending thousands of troops and large amounts of military equipment to support Moscow's war in Ukraine, possibly in exchange for aid and military technology.

But it would make sense to keep his options open as the war in Ukraine could wind down, potentially making North Korea less valuable to Moscow, experts say.

Kim told the congress his government was maintaining the "toughest stance" against Washington, but added there was "no reason we cannot get along" with the Americans if they withdrew their supposedly "hostile policy" toward the North.

MILITARY

2 charged in 2019 killing of Fort Hood soldier

BY ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

Two men have been arrested and charged with murder in the death of a Fort Hood soldier whose remains were found in a field in Killeen, Texas, nearly six years ago, according to local police.

Pvt. Gregory Wedel-Morales, 23, went missing in August 2019, just days before he was set to begin the process of leaving the Army. Ten months passed before his body was found and an autopsy revealed he had died from being shot in the head.

Darius Demarcus Nobles, 28, and Darion Lequan Brown, 27, were arrested and charged with murder in Wedel-Morales' death, Alex Gearhart, assistant chief of the Killeen Police Department, said Wednesday.

Nobles was booked Monday into a Harris County jail based on the Killeen warrant, according to online jail records. Brown was arrested in Parker County, west of Fort Worth, in December for a parole violation and was served the warrant while in custody.

The Bell County District Attorney's Office accepted the case Dec. 30, Gearhart said.

Kim Wedel, the soldier's mother, said the arrests sparked mixed feelings for her.

"I'm glad that they finally identified some people that are responsible. I personally think there's still more people involved," she said. "I'm very glad two people are off the street that they feel were involved."

Wedel said her son, after moving to Fort Hood, changed from the fun-loving, goofy kid whom she raised in Oklahoma. He began hanging out with people she did not approve of and keeping secrets from her, including marrying Penny Morales, 36. She was convicted of aggravated robbery and sentenced in 2023 to seven years in Texas prison.



Brown

"He was in the process of getting a divorce. He had plans to go do things with his life, so he had a plan to turn it all around," Wedel said. "He just didn't get that chance. I guess that's the hardest part of all of this. He was robbed of the chance to figure it out and get his life on track."

Wedel-Morales' disappearance and its handling was one of several that in 2020 initiated a policy review that led the Army to reshape its missing soldier protocols.



Wedel-Morales

His unit initially labeled him a deserter, which slowed early efforts to search for him. The soldier's mother also had to fight removal of the status so she could have her son returned home and buried in a veterans cemetery.

The Army now labels soldiers who do not show up for duty as "absent-unknown," and commanders must launch an immediate effort to find the missing soldier.

A Fort Hood spokesperson said officials at the base are aware of the arrests.

"This development is a testament to the diligent and persistent work of the Killeen Police Department, our own Criminal Investigation Division and the other law enforcement agencies involved. Our deepest condolences remain with the Wedel-Morales family, who have endured so much during this difficult time. We are grateful to all the agencies whose tireless efforts led to these charges," the spokesperson said.

The Army Criminal Investigation Division has been involved in the case and declined to comment because of the ongoing criminal charges.



Gyeongbuk Fire Service Headquarters

Firefighters work to extinguish a blaze after a South Korean air force F-16C fighter jet crashed in the mountains of South Korea's North Gyeongsang province, on Wednesday.

S. Korean air force pilot ejects from failing F-16

BY YOOJIN LEE
Stars and Stripes

A South Korean F-16C fighter jet crashed this week during nighttime aerial training in Yeongju, about 125 miles southeast of Seoul.

The aircraft, assigned to the South Korean air force's Chungju Base, went down in the mountains of North Gyeongsang province at 7:31 p.m. Wednesday, the air force said in a text message to reporters that day.

The solo pilot on board ejected successfully and was not injured. "No civilian damage has been reported so far," the air force said.

Emergency responders found the pilot at approximately 8:10 p.m., caught about 65 feet high in a tree by his parachute, according to a report Thursday by the Yonhap News Agency.

Gyeongbuk Fire Service Headquarters declined by phone Thursday to provide details.

The air force has launched a task force led by the vice chief of staff to investigate the cause of the accident, according to the text message.

Defense Minister Ahn Gyu-back was briefed on the accident while in Canada and ordered the military to make every effort to ensure the pilot's safety and conduct a thorough investigation, the ministry said in a text message Wednesday.

Ahn was in a ministerial meeting with Canadian Defense Minister David McGuinty at the time of the accident, according to the ministry.

Husband of late USO leader visits Japan to witness volunteer award

BY JUAN KING
Stars and Stripes

YOKOTA AIR BASE, Japan — Michael Emmert, husband of the late Janice Emmert and steward of her USO legacy, traveled to Japan this week to personally honor one of the organization's top volunteers.

Michael Emmert appeared at Yokota on Wednesday to congratulate Senior Airman Austin Wylie, who was named the overseas USO Volunteer of the Year for 2025. The award bears the name of Emmert's late wife, a longtime USO leader and advocate for military communities.

Scott Maskery, vice president for the USO in the Indo-Pacific, presented Wylie with the Janice K. Emmert Volunteer of the Year Award during a ceremony at the Yokota USO.

Wylie shares the honor with Army Sgt. 1st Class Loretta Streichert of Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., the stateside recipient and an operations sergeant and instructor at the Army Military Police School.

Michael Emmert, now a senior managing director at the Chicago-based consulting firm Ankura, said Wylie reflects the determination that defined his wife's service.

"They are leaders — they do not understand the word 'no' or that this can't get done," Emmert said at the ceremony.

Also attending were 5th Air Force deputy commander Brig. Gen. John Schutte, 374th Airlift Wing commander Col. Richard McElhaney and USO Japan area director Juliet Bucayo-Domingo.

The award "highlights volunteer work, leadership, and community support within the military," Josie Grenier, USO Yokota's operations manager, said in a Feb. 19 email.

Wylie said he was humbled by Emmert's presence, noting that he traveled roughly 18 hours for a visit lasting less than a day to attend the ceremony.

"The award itself is not so much a testimony to me as much as it is to the community that we have been able to build," he told Stars and Stripes at the event. "You can create a space where [visitors] can connect with people and feel like they belong."

Janice Emmert devoted decades to the USO, beginning in 1984 when she joined the USO Illinois board of directors, according to her obituary. She later held senior leadership roles and was elected to the USO World Board of Governors in 2003.

She died July 30, 2018, in Chicago at age 61.

Wylie said he has logged more than 1,550 volunteer hours with the organization.

"The USO had a profound impact on my transition into military life, and I have longed for a means to give back in the same way they've always supported me," he said.



JUAN KING/Stars and Stripes

Michael Emmert speaks with Senior Airman Austin Wylie, recipient of the USO's Janice K. Emmert Volunteer of the Year Award, on Yokota Air Base, Japan, on Wednesday.

MIDEAST

Iran: Nuclear talks so far 'very intense'

By Patrick Sykes and Eltaf Najafizada
Bloomberg News

Iran said nuclear talks with the United States have progressed "very intensely and very seriously" as the two sides continued negotiations over a deal into the early evening in Switzerland.

With days to go until President Donald Trump's deadline to reach an agreement, the two countries started their third round of Omani-mediated discussions in Geneva on Thursday morning. Trump has threatened military action against Iran unless its leaders agree to an accord, sparking fears of a new Middle East war embroiling Gulf Arab oil producers and Israel.

"We hope that going forward the discussion will focus on lifting sanctions and the nuclear issue," Esmail Baghaei, a spokesman for Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, told Iranian state TV. Diplomats resumed talks later in the day, The Associated Press reported.

The U.S. team is led by Middle East envoy Steve Witkoff and Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner. Iran Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi is heading the talks for the Islamic Republic.

Iranian state media said parts of the talks were conducted directly, suggesting the lead delegates met instead of dealing only via Omani officials. Iran stated it won't allow any of its highly enriched uranium to be moved out the country, Press TV said, citing Baghaei.

U.S. officials are yet to comment publicly, though have previously signaled Iran would have to send such stocks of uranium to another nation or dilute them.

The U.S. and Iran have been locked in a tense standoff over the Islamic Republic's atomic activities and have traded threats as Trump ordered a substantial military build-up in the Middle East, sending two carrier strike groups to the region as a warning to Iran. Trump had given the Islamic Republic a deadline of March 1-6 to reach a deal.

Oman's Foreign Minister Badr Albusaidi, who's mediating the talks, said "creative and positive ideas" had been exchanged earlier Thursday and there is "hope to make more progress."

Global markets are watching closely, with any prolonged conflict in the energy-rich Persian Gulf likely to elevate oil prices and stoke inflation. Benchmark Brent was steady on Thursday at around $71 a barrel as of 3:15 p.m. in London. But it's up more than 16% this year, largely because of the U.S.-Iran standoff.

Energy traders are focused on signs of disruption to shipments through the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow waterway off Iran's southern coast that connects key oil producers in the region to world markets. Iran has threatened to retaliate forcefully against any U.S. attack.

The U.S.'s vast military build-up in the region, the biggest since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, is set get a boost in coming days when a second aircraft carrier arrives that could join in any potential attack or help defend against Iranian counter-strikes. A member of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's security Cabinet, Avi Dichter, on Thursday confirmed media reports that the U.S. had stationed F-22 fighter jets as well as refueling planes in Israel. It's rare for Israel to host other countries' aircraft.

U.S. demands for a deal have varied, with Trump repeating that he won't allow Tehran to obtain a nuclear weapon despite its public position that it isn't seeking one. Washington has also expressed frustration at Iran's refusal to discuss its ballistic missile program.

Tehran's priority in the talks is the lifting of sanctions that have hobbled its economy, fueling a currency crisis that sparked widespread street protests against the Islamic Republic in December.

"We will not discuss our position on the nuclear issue except to affirm the Iranian people's right to peaceful nuclear energy, and any agreement must primarily include lifting these unjust sanctions," Baghaei said, emphasizing that Tehran won't forgo its nuclear program as a whole, including the right to enrich uranium.

Iran is considering offering the U.S. investment opportunities in oil, gas and mining, as well as aircraft purchases, as economic benefits to secure a deal, Deputy Foreign Minister Hamid Ghanbari told Iran's Chamber of Commerce, the Tasnim news agency reported.



VAHID SALEMI/AP

Vehicles pass a billboard depicting a U.S. aircraft carrier with damaged fighter jets on its deck and a sign in Farsi and English reading, "If you sow the wind, you'll reap the whirlwind," at Enqelab-e-Eslami (Islamic Revolution) Square in Tehran, Iran, on Sunday.

Deadly: US allies and oil trade routes may be targets of Iran's wrath if attacked

FROM PAGE 1

would spark regional war. Iran's U.N. ambassador Amir Saeid Iravani said "all bases, facilities and assets of the hostile force in the region" would be legitimate targets.

Lingering capabilities

Israel carried out heavy strikes on Iran's longer range missile arsenals — as well as its military leadership and nuclear program — during the 12-day war in June. The U.S. struck Iran's main nuclear sites, and President Donald Trump said at the time that they had been "obliterated."

But the extent of the damage — and how much has been rebuilt — is still unknown. Iran continued to strike Israel with missiles and drones until the fighting stopped, increasingly eluding its vaunted air defenses.

Iran's shorter-range missile arsenal was largely untouched, said Danny Citrinowicz, an Iran expert at Israel's Institute for National Security Studies. That could make Iran more inclined to retaliate against tens of thousands of U.S. forces based in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates and elsewhere.

"Iran may be weak. But it still has ways to inflict real pain on the United States — and much more incentive to try than it did before," Nate Swanson, head of the Atlantic Council's Iran Strategy Project, wrote in Foreign Affairs. "Iranian officials feel they need to give Trump a bloody nose or they will perpetually be at risk."

Iran launched missiles at a U.S. base in Iraq after the killing of its top general in 2020 and targeted a U.S. base in Qatar near the end of last year's war. Those strikes, which appeared to have been telegraphed in advance, caused damage but no fatalities, as early warning systems and missile defenses swung into action.

Iran could also carry out attacks farther afield. The country has been accused of using criminal gangs and armed groups to plan or carry out attacks around the world, including on dissidents, Israelis and Jewish targets.

Learning curve

Last year's Israeli strikes killed several top generals and nuclear scientists, revealing major vulnerabilities. At one point, Trump said the U.S. knew where Khamenei was hiding, calling him an " easy target."

Fresh off the capture of Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro, Trump may consider decapitation strikes aimed at bringing down Iran's decades-old Shiite theocracy, which he said "would be the best thing that could happen."

The Iranians had eight months to learn from their mistakes and firm up internal security. Citrinowicz said there are likely contingency plans if Khamenei were to be killed. Rather than naming a single successor, power would probably shift to a small committee until hostilities subsided.

Experts say the death of the 86-year-old Khamenei, who has ruled Iran for over three decades, would not in itself spell the end of the Islamic Republic. Power might eventually pass to a member of his inner circle, as it did in Venezuela, or to Iran's Revolutionary Guard.

US allies could be targets

American allies are clearly concerned about a regional war. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has warned of a heavy response to any Iranian attack on Israel.

Arab Gulf states have long viewed Iran with concern and leaned on the U.S. for defense, but do not want to be drawn into war. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which host thousands of American troops, have said they would not allow their airspace to be used.

Iran has its own allies, including Houthi rebels in Yemen, armed groups in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Palestinian territories. But its self-described Axis of Resistance suffered major losses in the fighting that rippled across the region after Hamas' October 2023 attack from Gaza.

A global pressure point

Another close-in target could allow Iran to inflict wider pain.

Around one-fifth of all traded oil passes through the Strait of Hormuz, just off Iran's shore. The U.S. Navy is committed to keeping it open, but Iranian attacks could disrupt trade, as the far-weaker Houthis managed to do in the Red Sea for much of the past two years.

Iranian officials have not explicitly threatened to target the strait in the current standoff, but Iranian forces partially closed it last week during military drills, signaling it could be vulnerable if war breaks out.

Other critical oil assets would also be within range. In 2019, strikes on oil infrastructure temporarily halved Saudi Arabia's production. Yemen's Houthis claimed responsibility, but U.S. officials later blamed Iran.

NATION

Hillary Clinton: I don't recall meeting Epstein

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told U.S. House lawmakers in New York on Thursday that she had no knowledge of Jeffrey Epstein's or Ghislaine Maxwell's crimes, starting off two days of depositions that will also include former President Bill Clinton.

"I had no idea about their criminal activities. I do not recall ever encountering Mr. Epstein," Hillary Clinton said in an opening statement she shared on social media.

The closed-door depositions in the Clintons' hometown of Chappaqua, a typically quiet hamlet north of New York City, come after months of tense back-and-forth between the former high-powered Democratic couple and the Republican-controlled House Oversight Committee. It will be the first time that a former president has been forced to testify before Congress.

Yet the demand for a reckoning over Epstein's abuse of underage girls has become a near-unstoppable force on Capitol Hill and beyond.

President Donald Trump, a Republican who has expressed regret that the Clintons are being forced to testify, bowed last year to pressure to release case files on Epstein, who killed himself in a New York jail cell in 2019 while awaiting trial. The Clintons, too, agreed to testify after their offers of sworn statements were rebuffed by the Oversight panel and its chairman, Rep. James Comer, R-Ky., threatened criminal contempt of Congress charges against them.



ANDRES KUDACKI/AP

Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton speaks during the Clinton Global Initiative, in September, in New York. Clinton told U.S. House lawmakers Thursday that she had no knowledge of Jeffrey Epstein's or Ghislaine Maxwell's crimes.

"Like every decent person," Hillary Clinton added in her opening statement, "I have been horrified by what we have learned about their crimes."

She had said that her husband had flown with Epstein for charitable trips but that she did not recall meeting Epstein. She had interacted with Maxwell, Epstein's former girlfriend and confidant, at conferences hosted by the Clinton Foundation.

Maxwell, a British socialite, also attended the 2010 wedding of their daughter, Chelsea Clinton.

Bill Clinton, however, has emerged as a top target for Republicans amid the political struggle over who receives the most scrutiny for their ties to Epstein. Several photos of the former president were included in the first tranche of Epstein files released by the Department of Justice in January, including a number of him with women whose faces were redacted. Clinton has not been accused of wrongdoing in his relationship with Epstein.

Comer has also pointed to Hillary Clinton's work as secretary of state to address sex trafficking as another reason to insist on her deposition. Clinton defended her work to address sex trafficking around the world, saying that it remained important to help the millions of survivors of sex trafficking.

The committee's investigation has also sought to understand why the Department of Justice under previous presidential administrations did not seek further charges against Epstein following a 2008 arrangement in which he pleaded guilty to state charges in Florida for soliciting prostitution from an underage girl but avoided federal charges.

Hillary Clinton accused Comer of running a one-sided investigation that has failed to hold Trump and other Republican officials to account. "This institutional failure is designed to protect one political party and one public official," she said.

Yet conspiracy theories, especially on the right, have swirled for years around the Clintons and their connections to Epstein and Maxwell, who argues she was wrongfully convicted. Republicans have long wanted to press the Clintons for answers.

Comer pledged lengthy days of questioning for both Clintons.

"We have a lot of questions, and the purpose of the whole investigation is to try to understand many things about Epstein," he told reporters outside the convention center where the depositions were being held. "How did he accumulate so much wealth? How was he able to surround himself with some of the most powerful men in the world?"

Democrats, now being led by a new generation of politicians, have prioritized transparency around Epstein over defending the former leaders of their party. Several Democratic lawmakers joined with Republicans on the Oversight panel to advance the contempt of Congress charges against the Clintons last month. Several said they had no relationship with the Clintons and owed no loyalty to them.

DOJ says it's reviewing if Epstein records were withheld

BY ERIC TUCKER
Associated Press

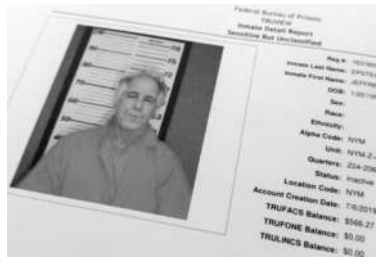
WASHINGTON — The Justice Department said Wednesday that it was looking into whether it had improperly withheld documents from the Jeffrey Epstein files after several news organizations reported that some records involving uncorroborated accusations made by a woman against President Donald Trump were not among those released to the public.

The announcement followed news reports saying that a massive tranche of records released by the Justice Department did not include several summaries of interviews that the FBI conducted with an unidentified woman who came forward after Epstein's 2019 arrest and claimed to have been sexually assaulted by both Trump and Epstein when she was a minor in the 1980s.

"Several individuals and news outlets have recently flagged files related to documents produced to Ghislaine Maxwell in discovery of her criminal case that they claim appear to be missing," the Justice Department said in a post on X. "As with all documents that have been flagged by the public, the Department is currently reviewing files within that category of the production." Maxwell, Epstein's longtime confidant, is serving a 20-year prison sentence on a sex trafficking conviction.

It said that if any document is found to have been improperly withheld and is responsive to the federally enacted law mandating the files' release, "the Department will of course publish it, consistent with the law."

At issue is a series of interviews said to have been conducted in 2019 with a woman who made an allegation against Trump, who has consistently denied any wrongdoing in connection with Epstein. News reports from recent days say the accuser was interviewed by the FBI four times as it sought to assess her account but a summary of only one of those interviews was included in the publicly released files.



JON ELSWICK/AP

The U.S. Department of Justice release of the Jeffrey Epstein files includes this photo of Epstein on an inmate report from the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

The missing records were earlier reported by the journalist Roger Sollenberger on Substack and NPR, and have since been documented by The New York Times, MS Now, CNN and other news organizations.

Rep. Robert Garcia, the top Democrat on the House Oversight Committee, said in a statement that Democrats on the panel would investigate the withheld records. He said he had reviewed unredacted evidence logs and "can confirm that the DOJ appears to have illegally withheld FBI interviews" with the accuser.

VA files notice to revoke disability rating rule after backlash

BY LINDA F. HERSEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A new rule that altered how the Department of Veterans Affairs determines disability compensation for millions of veterans will be revoked, according to a formal VA notice scheduled to be published Friday in the Federal Register.

Titled "Rescission of Interim Final Rule, Evaluative Rating: Impact of Medication," the notice states that the VA is rescinding a final interim rule published Feb. 17 and restoring the prior standard for calculating veterans' disability ratings and related compensation.

The unpublished notice appeared in the Federal Register on Thursday for public viewing before its official publication. The notice states: "This rescission is effective immediately upon publication."

Known as a "public inspection document," the unpublished notice was made available for public viewing in the Federal Register one business day before its scheduled publication date, which is standard protocol, according to the Federal Register.

The goal is to "allow transparency" before a document becomes official, according to the Federal Register.

The VA did not immediately respond to a request for comment about the unpublished notice.

VA's move to officially rescind the rule follows VA Secretary Doug Collins' abrupt announcement on social media that he was halting enforcement of the interim final rule — just 48 hours after it took effect — following intense public backlash.

The rule was sharply criticized for linking a veteran's disability rating to how well medication manages symptoms, instead of on the severity of a service-connected injury or illness, which had been the standard practice.

Veterans and their advocates flooded a government website — regulations.gov — collecting feedback on the new rule, which received more than 20,000 comments in little over a week.

The new rule was condemned for potentially lowering disability ratings for veterans who sought treatment and for sidestepping the standard rule-making process, which requires advance notification, review and public feedback.

VA's move Thursday to officially revoke the interim final rule marks the first step in the government's rule-making process to restore the court-ordered practice for determining disability with a clinical evaluation of a service-connected injury or illness without consideration of medication or other treatments.

NATION

Vance: Pause set for Minn. Medicaid funds

Administration aims to root out fraud

BY MICHELLE L. PRICE AND ALI SWENSON
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Vice President JD Vance announced Wednesday that the Trump administration would "temporarily halt" some Medicaid funding to Minnesota over fraud concerns, as part of what he described as an aggressive crackdown on misuse of public funds.



Vance

Vance, who made the announcement with Dr. Mehmet Oz, the administrator for the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, said the administration was taking the action "in order to ensure that the state of Minnesota takes its obligations seriously to be good stewards of the American people's tax money."

Oz, who referred to people committing fraud as "self-serving scoundrels," said the federal government would hold off on paying $259.5 million to Minnesota in funding for Medicaid, the health care safety net for low-income Americans.

Wednesday's move is part of a larger Trump administration effort to spotlight fraud around the country. That effort comes after allegations of fraud involving day care centers run by Somali residents in Minneapolis prompted a massive immigration crackdown in the Midwestern city, resulting in widespread protests. President Donald Trump, in his State of the Union address on Tuesday, announced Vance would spearhead a national "war on fraud."

Oz said the administration was simultaneously notifying Minnesota's Democratic Gov. Tim Walz.

Walz, former Vice President Kamala Harris' 2024 running mate, said in a pair of social media posts that the administration's move had nothing to do with fraud.

"This is a campaign of retribution. Trump is weaponizing the entirety of the federal government to punish blue states like Minnesota," Walz said. "These cuts will be devastating for veterans, families with young kids, folks with disabilities, and working people across our state."

Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison said in a statement that his team has secured over 300 Medicaid fraud convictions since he took office in 2019. And he noted that he called on the Legislature earlier Wednesday to give him more staff and new legal tools to combat Medicaid fraud.

"Courts have repeatedly found that their pattern of cutting first and asking questions later is illegal, and if the federal government is unlawfully withholding money meant for the 1.2 million low-income Minnesotans on Medicaid, we will see them in court," Ellison said.

The Office of the Inspector General for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services found last year that Medicare improperly paid suppliers nearly $23 million for durable medical equipment from 2018 through 2024. But it found that most of that was before January 2020, when changes to the system were implemented.



TOM BRENNER/AP

Dr. Casey Means takes her seat at the start of a Senate Health, Education Labor and Pension Committee Confirmation Hearing for U.S. Surgeon General on Capitol Hill on Wednesday in Washington.

Senators have sharp questions for surgeon general nominee

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Wellness influencer, author and entrepreneur Dr. Casey Means on Wednesday shared a vision for addressing the root causes of chronic disease instead of feeding into "reactive sick care" during her confirmation hearing to become the nation's next surgeon general.

"Our nation is angry, exhausted and hurting," the 38-year-old said in Washington before the Senate health committee Wednesday. "If we're addressing shared root causes, we're going to be able to stop the whack-a-mole medicine that's not working for us."

It's a message that dovetails with that of Means' ally, Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., and his "Make America Healthy Again" movement. It also has some bipartisan support, with many Democrats and Republicans agreeing that the rise in chronic disease is a problem that needs solving.

But Means also faced tough questions from senators about topics that have become divisive in recent years, such as vaccines and hormonal birth control, as well as about her qualifications and potential conflicts. The Stanford-educated physician's disillusionment with traditional medicine drove her to a career in which she has promoted various products, at times without disclosing how she could benefit financially. She has no government experience, and her license to practice as a physician is not currently active.

"I have very serious questions about the ability of Dr. Means to be the kind of surgeon general this country needs," Sen. Bernie Sanders, D-Vt., the ranking member of the Senate health committee, said Wednesday.

Next, the committee will consider whether to advance Means' nomination, in which case it would go to a vote in the full Senate.

As the nation's doctor, the surgeon general is a leader for Americans on public health issues. If confirmed, Means could issue advisories that warn of public health threats. She also would be tasked with promoting Kennedy's sprawling MAHA agenda, which calls for removing food additives, rooting out conflicts of interest and promoting healthier eating.

After graduating from Stanford University with a doctor of medicine degree, Means dropped out of her surgical residency program at Oregon Health and Science University in 2018. She later cited her belief that the health care system was broken and exploitative as the reason for her withdrawal.

Means then turned to alternative approaches to address what she has described as widespread metabolic dysfunction driven largely by poor nutrition and an overabundance of ultraprocessed foods.

Because she had completed enough postgraduate training to obtain a medical license, she did so and started her own functional medicine practice in Oregon, which later closed. She co-founded Levels, a nutrition-, sleep- and exercise-tracking app that can give users insights from blood tests and continuous glucose monitoring.

FBI fires agents who worked on Trump classified documents probe

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The FBI has fired additional agents who worked on an investigation into President Donald Trump, this time terminating employees who participated in the probe into the Republican's hoarding of classified documents, people familiar with the matter said Wednesday.

The firings are part of a broader personnel purge under the leadership of Director Kash Patel, a Trump appointee who, over the last year, has pushed out dozens of employees who either contributed to investigations of the president or who were perceived as not in alignment with the administration's agenda. The Justice Department has engaged in similarly sweeping firings of prosecutors since Trump took office last year.

The FBI Agents Association condemned the firings as unlawful and endangering national security.

"These actions weaken the Bureau by stripping away critical expertise and destabilizing the workforce, undermining trust in leadership and jeopardizing the Bureau's ability to meet its recruitment goals — ultimately putting the nation at greater risk," the association said in a statement.

The latest round of terminations included employees who helped investigate Trump's retention of classified documents at his Mar-a-Lago resort, a case that involved a high-profile FBI search of the Florida property and resulted in a federal prosecution charging the now-president with holding onto top-secret records from his first term in office and obstructing government efforts to get them back.

The firings were confirmed to The Associated Press by multiple people familiar with the matter who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Several of the people said a total of 10 employees were fired, and one said at least 10 were fired.

The FBI has also fired agents who participated in a separate investigation into Trump's efforts to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election. That investigation also led to criminal charges, but like the Mar-a-Lago case, was abandoned by special counsel Jack Smith after Trump won the White House in November 2024 because of longstanding Justice Department legal opinions that say sitting presidents cannot be indicted.

NATION

DHS official: ICE won't be at polling places



RYAN MURPHY/AP

Activists are approached by federal agents for following agent vehicles Feb. 3, in Minneapolis.

BY NICHOLAS RICCARDI
Associated Press

DENVER — A Department of Homeland Security official on Wednesday told state election administrators that immigration agents will not be stationed at the polls during November's midterm elections, trying to swat down one of Democrats' greatest fears about possible election interference from the Trump administration.

Heather Honey, who serves as deputy assistant secretary for election integrity, told the group of secretaries of state that "any suggestion that ICE will be present at any polling location is simply not true," according to a statement from Arizona Secretary of State Adrian Fontes, a Democrat.

A spokeswoman for Oregon Secretary of State Tobias Read also said Honey made the pledge, and Kentucky Secretary of State Michael Adams, a Republican, posted on X that the promise came from "DHS."

The Department of Homeland Security did not respond to a request for comment.

Honey, an election conspiracy theorist who has backed false claims that President Donald Trump did not lose the 2020 election, was on the call along with representatives of the FBI, U.S. Election Assistance Commission, Postal Service and other federal agencies to talk about coordination for the midterms.

Such a call normally would be routine, but this year several moves by the Trump administration have unnerved Democratic secretaries of state.

His Department of Justice has been filing lawsuits to get detailed voter data, without explaining why it wants the information. Trump also has been renewing his false claims that widespread fraud marred the 2020 election and has urged his administration to investigate.

Relying on long-debunked election conspiracy theories, the FBI earlier this month raided an election office in Fulton County, Ga., a Democratic stronghold that includes Atlanta, to seize ballots and other voting records from 2020.

Democratic officials and public interest lawyers around the country have been strategizing for months about how to react to possible Trump meddling in the midterms voting and ballot counting.

Honey's presence on the call was a reminder of the new environment for election officials. The U.S. Constitution provides that states, not the federal government, run elections. Most states vest that power in the elected office of the secretary of state.

Participants on the call said Democratic secretaries of state asked Honey several questions about Trump administration cuts to election security funding, its campaign to root out noncitizen voting — something that is already illegal and rarely occurs — as well as fears about federal law enforcement officers appearing at polling places in the fall.

The White House has scoffed at those fears before, noting there was no disruption during last year's election, when Democrats performed well. During a congressional hearing earlier this month, the heads of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Customs and Border Protection both answered "No, sir" when asked if they are involved in any efforts to guard voting precincts.

Kilmar Abrego Garcia asks judge to dismiss human smuggling case

Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Attorneys for Kilmar Abrego Garcia are trying to persuade a federal judge in Tennessee on Thursday to throw out human smuggling charges against him.

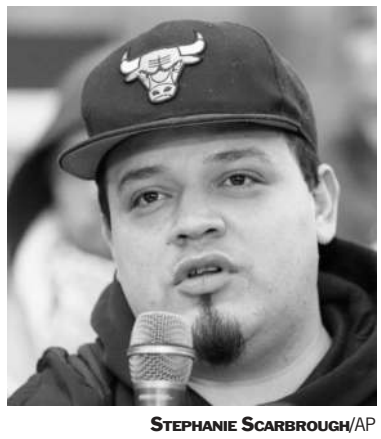
Abrego Garcia, whose mistaken deportation has galvanized both sides of the immigration debate, claims that the criminal prosecution is vindictive, pushed by officials from President Donald Trump's administration to punish him after they were forced to bring him back to the United States.

While Abrego Garcia is a Salvadoran citizen, a court order from 2019 prevents him from being deported to that country. That's because an immigration judge determined he faced danger in El Salvador from a gang that had threatened his family. Abrego Garcia, 30, immigrated to the U.S. illegally as a teenager but has an American wife and child. He has lived and worked in Maryland for years under the supervision of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

After he was deported to El Salvador last year, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled the Trump administration had to work to bring him back. He was eventually returned to the U.S. only to face criminal charges of human smuggling based on a 2022 traffic stop in Tennessee. He has pleaded not guilty.

Body camera footage from a Tennessee Highway Patrol officer shows a calm exchange with Abrego Garcia after he was pulled over for speeding. There were nine passengers in the car, and the officers discussed among themselves their suspicions of smuggling. However, Abrego Garcia was eventually allowed to continue driving with only a warning.

U.S. District Judge Waverly Crenshaw previously found some evidence that the prosecution against Abrego Garcia "may be vindictive." The judge said many statements by Trump administration officials "raise cause for concern." He cited a statement by



STEPHANIE SCARBROUGH/AP

Kilmar Abrego Garcia speaks during a rally at the Immigration and Customs Enforcement office in Baltimore on Dec. 12.

Deputy Attorney General Todd Blanche that seemed to suggest the Department of Justice charged Abrego Garcia because he won his wrongful-deportation case.

Abrego Garcia's attorneys have been sparring with prosecutors for months over whether officials like Blanche would be required to testify at Thursday's hearing and what emails Department of Justice officials would have to turn over to them. First Assistant U.S. Attorney for the Middle District of Tennessee Rob McGuire has argued that he alone made the decision to prosecute, so the motives of other officials were irrelevant.

Judge: 'Third country' deportation policy from White House is unlawful

BY MICHAEL KUNZELMAN
Associated Press

The Trump administration's latest policy of deporting immigrants to "third countries" to which they have no ties is unlawful and must be set aside, a federal judge ruled Wednesday in a case that already reached the nation's highest court.

U.S. District Judge Brian E. Murphy in Massachusetts agreed to suspend his decision for 15 days, giving the government time to appeal his latest ruling in the case. Murphy noted that the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the administration's favor last year, pausing Murphy's previous decision and clearing the way for a flight carrying several migrants to complete its trip to war-torn South Sudan, where they had no ties.

Murphy said migrants challenging the Department of Homeland Security's policy have the right to "meaningful notice" and an opportunity to object before they are removed to a third country. The policy "extinguishes valid challenges to third-country removal by effecting removal before those challenges can be raised," the judge concluded.

"These are our laws, and it is with profound gratitude for the unbelievable luck of being born in the United States of America that this Court affirms these and our nation's bedrock principle: that no 'person' in this country may be 'deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law,' " Murphy wrote.

In June, the Supreme Court's conservative majority found that immigration officials can quickly deport people to third countries. Liberal justices Sonia Sotomayor and Ketanji Brown Jackson dissented, saying the ruling gives the government special treatment.

Murphy said Trump's administration has repeatedly violated — or tried to violate — his orders. Last March, he noted, the Defense Department deported at least six class members to El Salvador and Mexico without providing the process required under a temporary restraining order that Murphy issued.

NATION



BILL INGALLS, NASA/AP

NASA astronaut Mike Fincke is helped out of the SpaceX Crew-11 capsule after they re-entered the Earth in a middle-of-the-night splashdown near San Diego, on Jan. 15.

Fincke IDs himself as astronaut who prompted space evacuation

Associated Press

NASA's Mike Fincke identified himself Wednesday as the astronaut whose medical condition prompted the space agency's first medical evacuation.

In a written statement, the 58-year-old spaceflight veteran revealed he was the ailing crew member last month aboard the International Space Station. He did not say what was wrong with him but explained that his condition quickly stabilized thanks to his crewmates and flight surgeons on the ground.

Fincke said he's doing well now. "Spaceflight is an incredible privilege, and sometimes it reminds us just how human we are," he said in the statement.

Fincke launched with three others on a SpaceX flight last summer. Their mission came to an early end on Jan. 15, a week after he experienced what he called a "medical event that required immediate attention" by his fellow astronauts.

Following their splashdown in the Pacific, all four astronauts were taken to a San Diego hospital. They flew home to Houston the next day.

With the sick astronaut's identity still a secret, Fincke said at a news conference a week after returning that the space station's ultrasound machine came in handy during the medical crisis.

He elaborated Wednesday, stressing that his situation was not an emergency but that everyone wanted "to take advantage of advanced medical imaging not available on the space station."

Fincke, a retired Air Force colonel who became an astronaut in 1996, has logged 549 days in space over four missions.

Instagram to notify parents of searches related to suicide

Associated Press

Instagram said Thursday it will start alerting parents if their kids repeatedly search for terms clearly associated with suicide or self-harm. The alerts will only go to parents who are enrolled in Instagram's parental supervision program.

Instagram says it already blocks such content from showing up in teen accounts' search results and directs people to helplines instead.

The announcement comes as Meta is in the midst of two trials over harms to children. A trial underway in Los Angeles questions whether Meta's platforms deliberately addict and harm minors. Another, in New Mexico, seeks to determine whether Meta failed to protect kids from sexual exploitation on its platforms. Thousands of families — along with school districts and government entities — have sued Meta and other social media companies claiming they deliberately design their platforms to be addictive and fail to protect kids from content that can lead to depression, eating disorders and suicide.

Meta executives including CEO Mark Zuckerberg have disputed that the platforms cause addiction. During questioning by the plaintiff's lawyer, in Los Angeles, Zuckerberg said he still agrees with a previous statement he made that the existing body of scientific work has not proved that social media causes mental health harms.



Zuckerberg

The alerts will be sent via email, text or WhatsApp, depending on the parent's contact information available, as well as a notification through the parent's Instagram account.

"Our goal is to empower parents to step in if their teen's searches suggest they may need support. We also want to avoid sending these notifications unnecessarily, which, if done too much, could make the notifications less useful overall," Meta said in a blog post.

Meta said it is also working on similar notifications to parents about their kids' interactions with artificial intelligence.

"These will notify parents if a teen attempts to engage in certain types of conversations related to suicide or self-harm with our AI," Meta said. "This is important work and we'll have more to share in the coming months."

NYC police arrest man after officers were pelted by snowballs

BY THOMAS TRACY
New York Daily News

NEW YORK — A suspect has been arrested for the giant snowball fight in Washington Square Park that left two police officers hurt — an incident New York Mayor Zohran Mamdani said should not result in criminal charges, angering NYPD officials.

Gusmane Coulibaly, 27, was nabbed by police early Thursday after he was identified as one of four men shown in social media video throwing snowballs at police responding to the disorderly crowd in the Greenwich Village park.

"(He) was arrested for assaulting our officers," NYPD Commissioner Jessica Tisch announced on X. "Mr. Coulibaly was previously arrested less than three weeks ago for an attempted robbery in the transit system."

For the transit robbery, Coulibaly was arrested in the Bronx on Feb. 6. He was released without bail after being arraigned in Bronx Criminal Court on robbery, petty larceny and harassment charges, officials said.

Coulibaly was allegedly recorded hitting police with a small boulder of snow during the Monday afternoon incident near the park's comfort stations.

Several people hit a group of police officers with snowballs. As a result, two officers were treated at a local hospital for bruises, cuts to their face and complaints of head and neck pain.

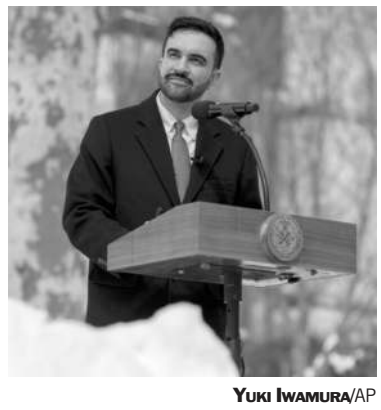
Charges against Coulibaly were not immediately disclosed.

Three other young men are still being sought for pelting two officers with snowballs during the 4 p.m. incident Monday. The snowball fight was organized on social media in the aftermath of the historic blizzard that blew into town Sunday.

The NYPD released images of all four men taken from social media and asked the public's help identifying them and tracking them down.

The police response drove a wedge between Mamdani and NYPD brass, who consider the incident a straightforward assault on the officers.

Mamdani sees it differently, describing the incident as "a snowball fight that got out of hand, and it should be treated accordingly."



YUKI IWAMURA/AP

Mayor Zohran Mamdani speaks during a news conference Wednesday in New York.

Police: 3rd victim dies from wounds suffered in ice rink attack

Associated Press

PROVIDENCE, R.I. — A deadly shooting during a youth hockey game in Rhode Island last week has claimed a third victim, a grandfather whose daughter and grandson were also killed in the attack, authorities said.

Gerald Dorgan, who had been in critical condition, has died from his injuries, Pawtucket police said Wednesday.

Pawtucket Mayor Donald Grebien said he was heartbroken that another person has died because of the shooting.

"Our thoughts and prayers remain with the victim's family, friends, and all those impacted by this tragic act of violence," he said in a statement.

Dorgan's daughter, Rhonda Dorgan, and grandson, Aidan Dorgan, were also killed in the shooting.

Police identified the shooter as Robert Dorgan, 56, who died from an apparent self-inflicted gunshot wound. Dorgan also went by the names Roberta Esposito and Roberta Dorgano, authorities said. Robert Dorgan's ex-wife was Rhonda Dorgan and adult son was Aidan Dorgan. Officials have said the shooter was specifically targeting family members.

Rhonda Dorgan's mom, Linda Dorgan, and a family friend, Thomas Geruso, were wounded.

Law enforcement have credited several people who intervened and quickly stopped the attack. At least three bystanders were able to contain the shooter in the middle of the stands as the crowd fled and ran around them.

WORLD



KATERYNA KLOCHKO/AP

Local residents walk a dog near a damaged apartment building hit by a Russian drone in Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine, Thursday.

Ukraine: Russia launched major aerial attack ahead of US talks

BY ILLIA NOVIKOV
Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russia launched a barrage of 420 drones and 39 missiles at Ukraine overnight, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Thursday, as U.S. and Ukrainian envoys prepared to hold more talks in Geneva on ending the war that is now in its fifth year.

The bombardment, which included 11 ballistic missiles, targeted critical infrastructure and residential areas across eight regions of Ukraine, Zelenskyy said.

Dozens of people, including children, were injured, officials said, though authorities did not immediately publish a confirmed total.

Zelenskyy said late Wednesday he had spoken by phone with U.S. President Donald Trump and thanked him for his "efforts and engagement" in pursuing peace negotiations.

The U.S.-brokered talks between Moscow and Kyiv are continuing but are deadlocked on the issue of the future of Ukrainian territory that Russia claims as its own.

Zelenskyy has pushed for a summit with Russia's President Vladmir Putin, saying a face-to-face meeting could be decisive in unlocking an agreement, but the Kremlin has rebuffed that proposal beyond inviting the Ukrainian president to Moscow, which Zelenskyy refused.

Trump representatives Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner, who were also discussing nuclear negotiations with Iran in Geneva before turning to the war in Europe, were due to meet with Rustem Umerov, the head of Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council. They also joined Trump's call with Zelenskyy.

Ukrainian and European officials have accused Putin of feigning interest in peace negotiations, hoping to avoid punitive U.S. measures such as additional sanctions while pressing forward with the invasion.

Thursday's talks between the American and Ukrainian envoys were to address details of a possible postwar recovery plan for Ukraine and discuss preparations for an upcoming trilateral meeting with Moscow officials, perhaps next week, according to Zelenskyy.

He said he has also tasked Umerov with discussing a possible prisoner exchange.

Russia struck gas infrastructure in the Poltava region and electrical substations in the Kyiv and Dnipropetrovsk regions, Zelenskyy said.

Emergency crews responded in five other regions, as well as in the capital.

Ukraine's air defenses shot down most of the Russian missiles, Zelenskyy said, crediting Western partners for timely delivery of additional air defense interceptors. Ukraine needs foreign help to sustain its fight against Russia's bigger forces.

Hong Kong court quashes fraud conviction of ex-media mogul Lai

Associated Press

HONG KONG — A Hong Kong appellate court on Thursday quashed fraud convictions against onetime media magnate Jimmy Lai, a rare victory in the prominent activist's legal battles.

Lai, 78, an outspoken critic of China's ruling Communist Party who founded the now-defunct Apple Daily, will stay in prison because he was sentenced to 20 years weeks ago after being convicted in another case brought under a China-imposed national security law.

That came more than five years after he was arrested under the law, which was used in a years-long crackdown on many of Hong Kong's leading activists. His plight has evoked grief over the city's loss of press freedom and sparked an international outcry, though the city's authorities insist his case had nothing to do with media independence.

The conviction that was overturned Thursday was from an earlier fraud case in which prosecutors alleged that a consultancy firm controlled by Lai had used office space that his media business rented for publication and printing purposes.

Lai was sentenced to five years and nine months in prison in 2022 after being found guilty of two fraud charges.

Kenyan man accused of recruiting fighters for Russian military

Associated Press

NAIROBI, Kenya — Police in Kenya have arrested a man named in an alleged scheme that duped Kenyans with promises of skilled work in Russia, only for them to end up on the front lines of the fighting in Ukraine.

Festus Omwamba was arrested on suspicion of human trafficking in the northern Kenyan town of Moyale, near the border with Ethiopia. He was charged Thursday in an antiterror court in the capital, Nairobi, with trafficking 25 Kenyans to Russia last year. Police spokesperson Michael Muchiri said Omwamba sought to flee after returning from Russia.

Omwamba, who was identified by three Kenyan recruits who spoke to The Associated Press, had gone missing after families started protesting the disappearances and deaths of their relatives in the war in Ukraine.

The Kenyan government last week said more than 1,000 Kenyans were recruited to fight for Russia in Ukraine and that at least 89 Kenyans were still on the front line, 39 were hospitalized, 28 were missing in action and others had returned home. It has confirmed one death.

An intelligence report presented to Kenya's Parliament by the majority leader said Kenyan and Russian government officials colluded with rogue job recruitment agencies to lure Kenyans to the front lines.

The Russian Embassy in Nairobi has denied the allegations, saying last week that it never issued visas to anyone intending to travel to Russia to fight in Ukraine.

Kenya's Foreign Minister Musalia Mudavadi told the AP on Feb. 9 that he would travel to Russia for what he called a "diplomatic approach to rein in any dubious entities that are taking advantage of anyone in this misadventure." He said efforts to secure the release of Kenyans in Ukrainian prisons and repatriate those in Russia were ongoing.

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WORLD

Rubio defends ouster of Maduro to Caribbean leaders

By Matthew Lee and Dánica Coto,
Associated Press

BASSETERRE, St. Kitts and Nevis — U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio on Wednesday defended the Trump administration's military operation to capture Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro, telling Caribbean leaders, many of whom objected to that move, that the country and the region were better off as a result.

Speaking to leaders from the 15-member Caribbean Community bloc at a summit in the country of St. Kitts and Nevis, Rubio brushed aside concerns about the legality of Maduro's capture last month that have been raised among Venezuela's island-state neighbors and others.



Jonathan Ernst/AP

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio waits to meet with Prime Minister Terrance Drew in Basseterre, Saint Kitts and Nevis, which is hosting the Caribbean Community meeting, Wednesday.

"Irrespective of how some of you may have individually felt about our operations and our policy toward Venezuela, I will tell you this, and I will tell you this without any apology or without any apprehension: Venezuela is better off today than it was eight weeks ago," Rubio told the leaders in a closed-door meeting, according to a transcript of his remarks later distributed by the U.S. State Department.

Rubio said that since Maduro's ouster and the effective takeover of Venezuela's oil sector by the United States, the interim authorities in the South American country have made "substantial" progress in improving conditions by doing "things that eight or nine weeks ago would have been unimaginable."

The Caribbean leaders have gathered to debate pressing issues in a region that President Donald Trump has targeted for a 21st-century incarnation of the Monroe Doctrine meant to ensure Washington's dominance in the Western Hemisphere.

The Republican administration has declared a focus closer to home even as Washington increasingly has been preoccupied by the possibility of a U.S. military attack on Iran.

In his remarks to the group, America's top diplomat tried to play down any antagonistic intent in what Trump has referred to as the "Donroe Doctrine." Rubio said the administration wants to strengthen ties with the region following the Venezuela operation and ensure that issues such as crime and economic opportunities are jointly addressed.

"I am very happy to be in an administration that's giving priority to the Western Hemisphere after largely being ignored for a very long time," Rubio said. "We share common opportunities, and we share some common challenges. And that's what we hope to confront."

He said transnational criminal organizations pose the biggest threat to the Caribbean while recognizing that many are buying weapons from the United States, a problem he said authorities are tackling.

Rubio also said the U.S. and the Caribbean can work together on economic advancement and energy issues, especially because many leaders at the four-day summit have energy resources they seek to explore. "We want to be your partner in that regard," he said.

Rubio said the U.S. recognizes the need for fair, democratic elections in Venezuela, which lies just miles away from Trinidad and Tobago at the closest point.

"We do believe that a prosperous, free Venezuela who's governed by a legitimate government who has the interests of their people in mind could also be an extraordinary partner and asset to many of the countries represented here today," he said.

Cuba says 4 killed in speedboat shooting were attempting to infiltrate

Associated Press

HAVANA — Cuba's government said late Wednesday that the 10 passengers on a boat that opened fire on its soldiers were armed Cubans living in the U.S. who were trying to infiltrate the island and unleash terrorism.

The announcement came hours after Cuba said its soldiers killed four people and wounded six others aboard a Florida-registered speed boat that had entered Cuban waters and opened fire on the soldiers first, injuring one Cuban officer.

Cuba's government said the majority of the 10 people on the boat "have a known history of criminal and violent activity."

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio had told reporters earlier that he was made aware of the incident and that the U.S. is now gathering its own information to determine if the victims were American citizens or permanent residents.

"We have various different elements of the U.S. government that are trying to identify elements of the story that may not be provided to us now," Rubio said while at the airport in Basseterre, St. Kitts.

The Cuban government identified two of the boat passengers as Amijail Sánchez González and Leordan Enrique Cruz Gómez, who are wanted by Cuban authorities "based on their involvement in the promotion, planning, organization, financing, support or commission of actions carried out in the national territory or in other countries, in connection with acts of terrorism."

The government said it also had arrested Duniel Hernández Santos.

Cuba's government said it obtained the details about the passengers aboard the boat from the suspects detained following the shootout.

It identified seven of the 10 passengers, including Conrado Galindo Sariol, José Manuel Rodríguez Castelló, Cristian Ernesto Acosta Guevara and Roberto Azcorra Consuegra.

Cuba's government said that one of the four killed was Michel Ortega Casanova.

Three others have not yet been identified.

Mobile



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STARS AND STRIPES

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TRAVEL

No kids allowed

Resorts and cruise lines are launching controversial adults-only policies, areas

By Ethan Beck and Hannah Sampson
The Washington Post



ANDREA SACHS/The Washington Post

Passengers gather around the pool for the sail-away party on Scarlet Lady, Virgin Voyages' first cruise ship, which started cruising in early October. Virgin is one of the major cruise lines with an adults-only policy.

Jack Lord is no stranger to traveling with family. But on a recent trip to New York with his kids and grandkids, he returned home to Sedona, Ariz., exhausted.

"Quite frankly, we needed a vacation after the stay," said Lord, 70, a forensic pathologist who works in health care innovation. "Kids just have a lot of energy."

It was a far cry from a trip that he and his wife took in 2024 to the Naviva resort in Punta Mita, Mexico. The Four Seasons property boasts coastal forest, luxury bungalows — and an adult-only policy.

For some travelers, getting away from it all includes escaping the noise and needs of children. The idea isn't without controversy: Parents have been chided for going to Disney theme parks without their kids. Nearly every week, a new debate erupts on social media when an annoyed passenger suggests airlines offer child-free flights. A California hotel's decision to ban kids sparked a statewide debate over age discrimination.

Still, resorts and cruise lines are eager to capture the no-kid market, with some companies recently pivoting to serve the niche group of grown-ups who want to be surrounded solely by other adults.

Oceania Cruises, an upscale line with nine ships, announced in January that it was restricting sailings to 18 and older as it entered "a new era of tranquility and sophistication at sea."

Even Carnival Cruise Line, a famously family-focused brand, started dabbling in adult-exclusive sailings last year with more planned this year.

"It is a differentiator," said Colleen McDaniel, editor in chief of Cruise Critic. "And for some cruisers, that is exactly the kind of lure that would get them to a particular cruise line."

Viking and Virgin Voyages, major cruise lines with longtime adult-only policies, have seen steady growth, keeping in line with the overall cruise market, according to Larry Pimentel, the cruise executive in residence at Florida International University.

Both cruise companies make their child-free status a major part of their marketing, sometimes cheekily. Virgin Voyages, which launched in 2021, featured an ad full of sad, angry children singing about being excluded from their ships.

There is also a vast selection of kid-friendly cruises and resorts that carve out space for adults, setting aside pools, events and dining options exclusively for the 18-plus crowd.

Paws Up, a Montana resort, started planning its adult-only Green O section before the pandemic. Manager director Steve Hurst — who prefers adult-only vacations when he travels — heard from traveling couples who wanted a more isolated, quiet experience, sparking the idea.

"It's really important for my wife and I to have that time, to feel like we can remember what brought us together in the first place," said Hurst, 53. "These very romantic settings, such as the Green O, certainly lend to that and bring that feeling back. But also you want to be an adult a little bit. You just want to take a break from all the kids' engagement and have your own time."

"It is a differentiator. And for some cruisers, that is exactly the kind of lure that would get them to a particular cruise line."

Cruise Critic Editor-In-Chief Colleen McDaniel
referring to how some cruise companies are restricting sailings to adults

Some resorts have moved away from accepting everyone — leading to controversy.

The Alila Marea resort in Encinitas, Calif., announced last year that it would be transitioning to an adult-only resort, leading to controversy about whether it's legal to refuse service to people under 18 in the state. (A maximum of two people are allowed in a room, and children are only allowed at specific events as part of an "adults-focused" policy).

The transition to an adult-only environment has gone smoother elsewhere.

When Mike and Cindy Watts sought to reopen the spa resort Castle Hot Springs, they thought about how to build a tranquil environment in the Arizona desert and settled upon restricting service to adults. It's also opened up different activities that might not be suitable for the whole family, said Kevin Maguire, the general manager at Castle Hot Springs, including e-bike explorations, ATV tours and horseback riding.

Coming from an early career working in hotel restaurants in Boston, Maguire particularly appreciates that the resort's Harvest restaurant is based on an exploratory farm-to-table model.

"You can do some really good kids' culinary adventures if you wanted to, if the kids wanted to," Maguire said. "But most kids don't. Some want their grilled cheese with the crust cut off."

There are risks to starting an adult-only resort or cruise line. Intentionally limiting the customer base might thwart growth. But for Viking, which began transitioning to an adult-only cruise model in 2013, the policy helped set it apart while fueling growth in both its river and ocean cruises.

With destination-inspired cultural performances, TED Talks and even resident historians, Viking has targeted travelers who are 55 years old and over. Focusing on travelers who are at similar life stages is how Richard Marnell, executive vice president of marketing at Viking, believes the operator has become the largest adult-only cruise line.

"Being able to travel with like-minded travelers, you have central things that are immediately relatable to each other, a shared history, a perspective on life," said Marnell, 59.

But adult-only destinations aren't always dominated by older demographics. Whereas Viking attempts to cultivate a highbrow experience, Virgin Voyages' four vessels are "an edgy, popular product, particularly appealing to couples," said Pimentel, complete with a tattoo parlor, various options for live music and drag performances.

McDaniel, of Cruise Critic, said the line has become popular with older millennials and Generation X travelers.

On paper, Virgin seemed like the ideal fit for Jasmine Kovalevich, 20, a student at Pennsylvania's Mercyhurst University who typically travels with her cousin. The two like to connect with other young adults, which left them disappointed that their Virgin trip was largely populated with older adults.

Still, Kovalevich remains curious about adult-only travel.

"The idea of kids is overstimulating when you're just trying to, like, relax and have a good time," said Kovalevich, noting that she'd be open to going on another adult-only cruise. "I'm not a big kid person. I'm not gonna lie."

TELEVISION

Enduring the test of time

Two early 'Survivor' contestants, host Probst reflect on their experiences on the reality series 50 seasons later

By Emily Yahr
The Washington Post

Before "Survivor" made its TV debut in May 2000, the skeptics were out in full force.

"Viewers might get tired of watching mud-splattered bedraggled contestants slapping mosquitoes or hunting for bird eggs," a Newsday TV reporter predicted.

"This show caters to all the worst qualities of mankind: elitism, selfishness and sneaky behavior," a writer for South Carolina's Post and Courier complained.

Another dismissed it as a "stunt show."

But as everyone would learn, America actually adored watching bedraggled contestants acting selfish and sneaky, especially when it involved 16 castaways marooned on a remote island in the South China Sea as they voted each other off one by one.

The series premiere captured 15 million viewers and grew all summer until more than 51 million watched as Richard Hatch — a 39-year-old corporate communications consultant — was crowned the champion, winning $1 million and a place in the TV history books.

Though broadcast network ratings aren't what they used to be, the loyal "Survivor" fan base has never tuned out. And on Wednesday, the show will kick off its landmark 50th season on CBS.

In the beginning, the network and executive producer (and future "Apprentice" creator) Mark Burnett touted the show as a grand social experiment — contestants from a wide array of backgrounds and viewpoints, a microcosm of society coming together to collaborate and compete in a mission of survival.

Yet fans ultimately did thrill to the less-exalted stuff — the dining on bugs and rats, the sometimes comical attempts to build shelters while being pummeled by thunderstorms, the quirky characters and trash-talking, the soap-operatic plotting and scheming that took place between the self-serious staged "challenges" — which were often just relay races with whimsical set design.

Much has been written about how the series — based on the Swedish show "Expedition Robinson" — changed TV forever, kick-starting decades of reality competition shows and teaching executives that there's nothing more fascinating than putting ordinary people in extraordinary situations. The show has also changed hundreds of lives over the years, and none more so than the people who signed up that first season with no real idea what they were in for.

We talked to Kelly Wiglesworth (Hatch's runner-up) and Jenna Lewis (now Lewis-Dougherty, who was voted off in Week 9) via Zoom and host Jeff Probst by email about the unexpected impact of being on that legendary first season.

The psychological impact

Even in recent years, contestants admit to being unprepared for the psychological toll of reality shows — so it was especially magnified for the Season 1 "Survivor" cast whose only comparison was MTV's "The Real World," which had regular meals and significantly fewer insects.

Wiglesworth, a river guide from Las Vegas, expected a "super gnarly physical" competition. She wasn't quite ready for the mind games.

"That was something that I had to really navigate on the fly there," said Wiglesworth, who was in her early 20s at the time. "No food, no sleep, no comfort, you know, just brutal living environments. Everyone's out to get you. You're constantly shifting and scheming scenarios all day long."

Wiglesworth was also an integral part of a scene that is still cited as one of reality TV's most iconic moments: Fourth-place finisher Sue Hawk's famously scathing "snakes and rats" speech. Unhappily forced to cast a vote for either Wiglesworth or Hatch as the season's winner, Hawk denounced Wiglesworth, whom she felt had betrayed her earlier in the season.

"If I were to ever pass you along in life again and you were laying there, dying of thirst, I would not give you a drink of water," Hawk said in her speech. "I would let the vultures take you and do whatever they want with you, with no ill regrets."

What was it like hearing that on national television, knowing that tens of millions of people were hearing it, too?

"It sucks when someone says horrible things to you, but you know, there was no merit to what she said," Wiglesworth told The Post. "But it stung, especially with how vulnerable I was in the moment."

However, Wiglesworth said, it turned into a defining moment for her, personally. She calmly responded that she was sorry that Hawk felt that way — no one emerged from the game with clean hands, after all, and Hawk did her own share of backstabbing, Wiglesworth noted — adding that she just hoped the others would vote how they felt was best.

"I felt sorry for her," Wiglesworth told The Post. "I saw her as this pathetic, angry person ... and I was like, I have two options: I can go full Jerry Springer with this, or I can take the high road."

Even though she lost, she remains proud of how she reacted in the moment: "I was surprised at myself, but impressed that I handled it the way I did. ... And that made the experience amazing."

To this day, Wiglesworth said, she re-

SEE ENDURING ON PAGE 15



CBS photos

Twenty-four returning players are abandoned on the islands of Fiji with the chance to win $1 million on the 50th season of "Survivor," which airs Wednesday.



Richard Hatch (left), Rudy Boesch (right) and Kelly Wiglesworth compete in an immunity challenge on the first season of "Survivor" in 2000. Hatch became the first champion.



Kelly Wiglesworth raises her arms on an episode of the first season of "Survivor."

TELEVISION

Enduring: Early cast say show helped them prove themselves

FROM PAGE 14

ceives Instagram messages from people who admired her gameplay on that first season. She returned to compete on Season 31 with other former contestants getting a second chance.

"It's not just a female thing, but I definitely get a lot of praise and messages from females," she said. "Saying, like, 'Wow, you were an inspiration and you're a great role model to women and little girls.'"

The real-life impact

One of the media narratives during summer 2000 was the question of whether CBS could keep the winner a secret: The entire season had filmed off the coast of Borneo in March and April, four months before the finale was to air in August. Theories swirled, but the network managed to keep a lid on things — though not for a lack of effort by sleuth-minded fans.

Jenna Lewis-Dougherty, then a single mom and student in her early 20s, recalled going to an event where actor Richard Dreyfuss stopped her in an elevator and tried to get her to tell him who won. This was not an isolated incident as the cast made the high-profile promotional press rounds.

"Whenever we showed up there were celebrities — huge celebrities — but the celebrities would run over to *us*," Lewis-Dougherty said. This was years before stars developed direct lines of communication with the public via social media, so this first generation of reality TV characters seemed like some kind of mesmerizing hybrid — famous but accessible, everyday people who showed their raw selves and personalities on TV every week.

"It's a Pandora's box, man. I think it was the precursor to social media ... there's good and bad, right?" she told The Post. "I think about this all the time."

Lewis-Dougherty was on Season 8 for "All-Stars," and will return again for Season 50 — this time, she knows better what to expect. During the first season, she remembers signing contracts that warned them the show wasn't 100% guaranteed to air, so it was easy to sort of forget the cameras were around. During one challenge where the contestants had to eat squirming beetle larvae, she started seriously questioning whether anyone would want to watch this: "Are they going to be like, 'This is awful for society; look at what they're willing to do for a million bucks!' or are they going to be like, 'Yay, this was amazing; look at what these people are willing to do for a million bucks!'"

The season drew back the curtain on contestants' personal lives, from Hatch talking about his life as a gay man to dairy farmer Dirk Been openly reading his Bible. Lewis-Dougherty spoke about wanting to show herself as a strong single young mother, a demographic that rarely got positive exposure in the media, and she still gets messages from women who thank her for this representation. In one memorable episode, all of the castaways received VHS tapes from family members wishing them well — except for Lewis-Dougherty, who missed out on seeing videos of her baby twin daughters who were staying with her parents.



CBS

Season 1's Jenna Lewis-Dougherty appears in a scene from the first episode of Season 50. She was also on Season 8 for "All Stars."

It had the potential to be a gripping moment of television, but Lewis-Dougherty didn't want to reveal her vulnerabilities. She knows that things have evolved for reality show contestants, some of whom use their emotions as leverage; but at the time, she wanted to keep her feelings private.

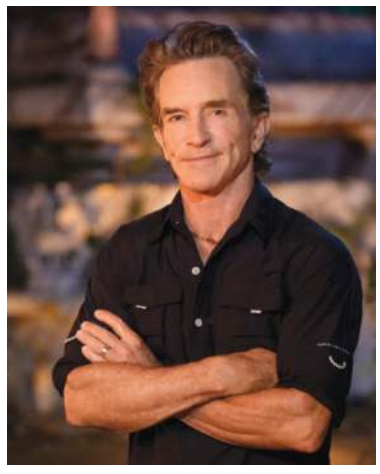
"I remember pushing people off when my video didn't come and tears running down my face," she said. "And I was just thinking, 'You cannot look weak or they will vote you off.'"

The TV impact

When Jeff Probst was hired on "Survivor," he was in his late 30s and had worked most recently as an "Access Hollywood" correspondent and host of VH1's "Rock & Roll Jeopardy!" He had never seen anything like "Survivor" — but neither had anyone else. At the time, ABC's "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" was steamrolling everything else in the ratings — until CBS took the plunge with its new show.

"It premiered in the summer, a time when networks rarely took big swings, and it showed that audiences would show up for something genuinely new — not a variation on an existing format, but a bold, risky experiment built around real people, real stakes and real uncertainty," Probst said. "'Survivor's' success didn't just change how networks thought about summer programming; it widened the aperture on what kinds of shows could work in prime time at all."

He remembers the rawness of Season 1 when the show was finding its footing: You can see the cameras in some shots. The torches representing each voted-off contestant ("The tribe has spoken," in Probst's immortal catchphrase) were extinguished with a half coconut shell attached to a stick. The host had to cut his own hair. But no matter how slick and routinized the show ultimately became, it still feels to him like an unfolding experiment.



ROBERT VOETS/CBS

Jeff Probst has served as host of "Survivor" since the beginning and now also serves as executive producer and showrunner.

"We still don't script outcomes or chase perfection," said Probst, who was eventually promoted to executive producer and showrunner. "We trust the players and we let the format do the work."

Even now, he said, it's difficult to grasp the enormity of the show, though various moments stick with him: The time he hosted the "All-Stars" season finale in 2004 at Madison Square Garden, or when he realized that journalists stopped referring to him as "the host of 'Survivor'" and just cited him as "Jeff Probst," no descriptor needed.

The show changed his life professionally (he's a four-time Emmy winner) and personally (he met his wife at a Christmas party thrown by Burnett) and he also still thinks about how the series reflects human nature. He was genuinely stunned when Hatch, considered the villain of the first season, was voted the winner; he thought viewers would be too angry to watch a second season. But it was a valuable lesson about humanity itself.

"At the time, I didn't understand what the game had just revealed. Richard's win showed that once you put people under real pressure, the outcome becomes unpredictable, because human behavior is unpredictable," Probst said. "People don't vote based on a single value system. They vote based on relationships, self-interest, fear, respect, resentment and often all at once."

"And in many ways," he added, "That unpredictability is what 'Survivor' has been about ever since."

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MUSIC

Q&A

Learning to listen to herself

Hilary Duff returns to making music with the bracingly honest 'Luck... or Something'

By Mikael Wood
Los Angeles Times

A sparkly pink electric guitar hangs on a wall of the recording studio where Hilary Duff made her new album. The cozy, gear-filled joint near California's Van Nuys Airport belongs to her husband, Matthew Koma, who produced "Luck… or Something," the singer and actor's first LP in more than a decade. But as Duff points out on a recent afternoon, the paisley-print guitar is all hers.

"I got it for my 16th birthday," she says proudly — a gift from the Fender company. "I found it in the storage unit and Matt was like, 'Oh, that's going up there.'"

Before Miley Cyrus, before Sabrina Carpenter, before Olivia Rodrigo, Duff arrived in the early 2000s as a Disney kid with pop-idol ambitions. She broke out in the endearingly awkward title role of the Disney Channel's "Lizzie McGuire," then went on to star in family-friendly movies like "Agent Cody Banks" and "Cheaper by the Dozen." By the time she got that guitar, she'd topped the Billboard 200 with her album "Metamorphosis," which sold 4 million copies and spawned hit singles like "So Yesterday" and "Come Clean."

Duff stepped away from music for most of her 20s to focus on acting and starting a family. (An attempted comeback album in 2015, "Breathe In. Breathe Out.," didn't really go anywhere.) Now, at 38, she's returned with a bracingly honest record full of the texture and detail of her life as a wife, sister and mother of four.

In frank yet wordy songs that layer guitars and synths over shimmering grooves, Duff sings about trying to overcome old habits and about her fear that her best times are behind her. "We Don't Talk" appears to address her estrangement from her older sister, Haylie, while "Weather for Tennis" describes her tendency to keep the peace as a child of divorce. In "Holiday Party," she recounts a recurring dream in which Koma cheats on her with her friends.

"I wake up in a rage and he's like, 'I didn't do anything!'" she says, laughing. "And I'm like, 'But you want to.' A lot of this stuff came out of the hormonal boom of: I've just had a baby and I'm nursing and I'm trying to get my feet back on the ground again." (Duff and Koma have three daughters aged 7, 4 and 1, while Duff shares a 13-year-old son with her ex-husband, former hockey player Mike Comrie.)

Asked how he hopes the album fares commercially, Koma says, "I don't give a f—. Public perception or sales, that's all cool, but it's a separate experience from why we did it." The producer, who's known for his work with Zedd and Shania Twain, adds, "The whole purpose was to make something that Hilary could feel good about stepping into."

SEE LISTEN ON PAGE 17

Hilary Duff
Atlantic Records

MUSIC

Listen: Duff finding herself as singer, mom

FROM PAGE 16

Yet early-2000s nostalgia led to a recent run of sold-out theater gigs, and this summer it'll carry her into arenas around the world. (Less happily for Duff, it also made a viral sensation of an essay in the Cut by her fellow millennial Ashley Tisdale in which Tisdale wrote about leaving a "toxic mom group" that allegedly included Duff and Mandy Moore.)

Curled on a sofa in the studio's control room, Duff says, "I'm finally at this place where I'm zero percent ashamed of my past and any of the things that used to embarrass me" — one reason she made the bold choice to open a set last month with two of her biggest hits, "Wake Up" and "So Yesterday."

After those songs came "Roommates," perhaps the most vulnerable track on Duff's new album. It's about navigating a dry patch in a marriage, and the language is as vivid as it is unsparing: "I only want the beginning / I don't want the end," she sings, adding that she longs to be in the "back of a dive bar, giving you h—."

Los Angeles Times: A surprising word choice.

Duff: How would you have said it? Sometimes you need to make the lyrics fit — you need it to rhyme with something. [Laughs] It's meant to be polarizing because it's such a desperate plea. I can say I haven't actually given h— in the back of a dive bar. But it's just trying to capture the feeling of a time when you felt alive.

Like all teen stars, you had to figure out how to grow up and talk about sex as a public figure. Now there's the idea that it's better left to the young.

I finally feel like I know a lot about sex. My whole 20s, sex was not always enjoyable — it was so much to figure out. Now I finally understand it. Maybe that's a female thing, but I'm not ready to be put out to pasture. People come up to me all the time and they're like, "Wow, you aged really well." I'm like, "I'm only 38! Just because you've known me since I was 9…"

You're handling senior citizenship well.

When do I start getting the discounts? I feel like 38 is not old, although when I thought about my parents at 40, they looked so different than we look now.

I always stop at those TikToks where it shows what 35 looked like in 1982.

I don't think anyone drank water back then. They were, like, dusty-crusty.

You borrow the chorus of Blink-182's "Dammit" for your song "Growing Up." Why?

Blink is one of my favorite bands. I remember getting my driver's license, and that was what was playing on my iPod. "Growing Up" is such a deeply personal song to me, talking about sitting in the backyard with one of my best friends and just needing to drink too much wine and unload about life. But it also feels like a love letter to my fans. I don't like saying that word, but I genuinely feel like I've had fans for 25 years, and getting to see them now in adulthood — I didn't know I was going to have this opportunity.



Atlantic Records

Hilary Duff says, at 38, she's learned to not be embarrassed by events from her past.

What's the problem with "fan"?

It puts me on a pedestal that makes me feel uncomfortable. If you were to talk to Matt or someone close to me, they'd probably say, "Hilary doesn't understand what she's meant to some people." And I think that's true. When I think of myself, I'm not like a grand pop star — I feel more like a woman of the people.

A woman of the people?

Am I allowed to say that? [Laughs] Is that offensive in any way? My feet hit the ground in the morning, and I've got a million things to do. Sometimes my baby's still sleeping. And I have a teenager to get ready for school that we're always all waiting on.

Why do you have four children?

I know — we're sick.

Did you expect to have four?

I thought I would have at least three. I always wanted a big family because I come from a super small family and I always wanted more siblings. I had Luca obviously pre-Matt, and then we had Banks before we got married. Then the pandemic hit — we had a pandemic baby like everybody else. The fourth was just a crazy-a— decision. Matt was like, "Everybody's gonna think we're really Christ-y if we go for No. 4." We also have three dogs, two cats and eight chickens.

As two artists, how do you sort out the work of child-rearing?

I don't know if I've actually said this out loud — to Matt I have, for sure — but I think that part of my wanting to make a record was coming out of having my fourth child. I love motherhood, obviously — I wouldn't have four kids if I didn't. But I think I felt really jealous that he got to go to work every day and just be alone with his thoughts. I was like, I need to stretch. That's what it felt like after the fourth baby: I'm either gonna lose myself completely and just become a stay-at-home mom and wait for the phone to ring, or I'm gonna go make something that moves me.

You don't need me to tell you that our culture is always happy to make moms feel guilty. Was it a journey to accept that it's OK to do something for yourself?

That's what the healthy part of the brain says. But the other part that's wired to be with the children you birthed — sometimes that part overshadows it. And it's very hard to fight that. I could probably cry right now thinking about all the things I'm gonna miss this year.

You've got a line in "Roommates" where you say, "Life is life-ing and pressure is pressuring me." At the shows you just played, did you think of your audience as being at the same place in life as you?

For sure. When they were scream-singing it back to me, I was like, "Oh, you know." That doesn't mean you have to be a parent. "Life is life-ing" is the bills and the monotony and the traffic and the family — it's all the things. I knew that if it's bumping around inside my head, and I've been living a pretty normal life for 10 years — normal as I can get — then people would see themselves in it.

The last decade has been a golden age for young female songwriters: Taylor Swift, Billie Eilish, Olivia Rodrigo.

You forgot Chappell Roan.

"Luck… or Something" feels aligned with that deepening craft. But maybe your early stuff felt sophisticated to you.

I don't think the intent back then was sophisticated songwriting. There was no Taylor Swift yet — it's like before Christ and after Christ.

She changed the game?

On all the levels.

The story about the toxic mom group blew up just as you were launching this album. Did that experience give you pause about reentering the pop world?

I mean, this is not new for me. I've had this since I was maybe 15 and starting to get followed around by paparazzi. Everything starts getting documented and everyone knows my life and all the players in it. So the stories that get news pickup — it's not what happens to a normal person who maybe became an actor as an adult. And now it's escalated by the talking heads on TikTok that need clickbait.

Can you ignore the chatter about you on social media?

It just depends on the day. Knowing that I get to open up the backdoors and play soccer as a family and take a hot tub and go get our chicken eggs — that's the purpose of life. On the days when crazy s— happens, I go home and quiet the noise.

Hilary Duff

Luck…or Something (Atlantic)



Hilary Duff is a pop star once more. That is, if a pop star ever really stops being a pop star.

Over 10 years since her last record — 2015's "Breathe In. Breathe Out." — Duff is back with "Luck… or Something," a witty, and glittery, set of 11 pop songs that track the years that have passed since her teenage stardom. That brings existential questions, haunting what-ifs, some self-deprecating reflection and a healthy dose of cringe and nostalgia.

Once a Disney Channel darling known best for playing the sometimes-illustrated middle schooler Lizzie McGuire, Duff is now 38 and married with four kids. There's been a perspective shift since she was making shimmery dance-pop and angsty breakup tunes in the early 2000s (think: "What Dreams Are Made Of," "Come Clean," "So Yesterday"). "Mature," the album's lead single, makes that clear with cutting lyrics that recall an unfortunately familiar dynamic, between a young woman and an older man: "Bet she loves when she hears you say / You're so mature for your age, babe." As present-day Duff reminisces, she's making it clear to the listener that she is older and wiser — but also forgiving of her younger self.

That's because nostalgia is still key here, and Duff is well aware of that. Her return to the pop stage was launched with a mini-tour that saw her preview some of these new songs alongside those old hits to the delight of fans in Toronto, London, New York, Los Angeles and Las Vegas. Her promotional videos have featured old costumes, props and flip phones.

The album, like her overall relaunch, attempts to balance this nostalgia with that perspective. Matthew Koma, Duff's husband and a songwriter and producer who's worked with pop artists including Pink, Carly Rae Jepsen and Britney Spears, produces and writes across the project, which employs engaging but synth-heavy beats across the tracks.

On album opener "Weather For Tennis," Duff contemplate arguments. The lyrics, simple but multisyllabic tongue-twisters like, "You calling me bats—'s / The fastest antibiotic for thinking / You're different this time," don't feel far off, spiritually, from the zingers of her earlier radio hits. Muffled drums give "Holiday Party," about a partner's imagined affair, a darker clubby beat, while booming drums and claps make "Future Tripping," about needing a partner's grounding abilities, bubbly. Laughs and dialogue layered into the track put the listener in the room with Duff, to a charming effect. But "Tell Me That Won't Happen" has a too-similar conceit, the pace steady while the lyrics spiral through more worries: "Are we 80 years proof? Are we really immune? Will I want something new? Will you want something new?"

Still, the tracks are accessible and catchy, the lyrics reliant on simple vocabulary that makes them feel like gossip or worries shared among friends (see Duff's ode to chosen family, "Growing Up"). That closeness, built by fans' nostalgia and Duff's accessible, laid-back, adult persona, is her not-so-secret weapon.

— Elise Ryan
Associated Press

VIDEO GAMES

Requiem breathes new life into the infected

Monsters, weapons in newest Resident Evil continue to evolve

BY GIESON CACHO
The Mercury News

For Resident Evil, zombies were just the beginning, and the franchise has challenged players with a diverse set of monstrosities. Through its 30-year history, players have fought Hunters, the nearly unkillable Nemesis and an array of gigantic mutated creatures.

Despite all the horrors dreamed up by developers, the series' workhorse has always been the infected. Those subsumed by viruses or mold have been at the core of the experience, and Capcom has always worked to upgrade them.

The infected don't just mindlessly follow players as they did in the original. In Resident Evil 4, they learned to use tools and corner Leon Kennedy. Developers made them stronger and regenerative in the sequels after that. The Lycan even have werewolflike traits in Resident Evil Village. Now in Resident Evil Requiem, the infected have evolved even further.



CAPCOM/TNS photos

Leon Kennedy has to defeat a chain-saw-wielding infected in Resident Evil Requiem. Then, in order to use the machine against other enemies, he has to wait for it to turn off while at the same time avoiding the other creatures who also want to grab it.



Grace Ashcroft kneels over a dead infected patient in Resident Evil Requiem. The default camera perspective alternates between the two characters, but players can choose to go through the campaign all in the first person (Grace) or third person (Leon).

Differing perspectives

In a three-hour demo, I checked out the upcoming survival-horror title from Leon and Grace Ashcroft's shoes. Interestingly, the default camera perspective alternates between the two characters, though players can choose how they want to play the campaign. They can pick to go through it all in the first person or third person.

As Leon, you see the game from a third-person perspective, a nod to his previous solo adventure. Meanwhile, as Grace, you see the game from a first-person perspective, which echoes that of recent entries starring Ethan Winters. The two characters reflect different aspects of the series. The Leon portions were more action-packed. The demo takes place in a Rhodes Hill hospital full of cameras. The facility embraces the classic Resident Evil architecture. The place looks more like an old hotel than one that medically treats people. It has a gambling den, a bar and other strange places that don't seem conducive to health care. It also has its share of curious puzzles with doors that need gems to open or unusual keys.

Leon vs. zombies

When it comes to combat and fighting zombies in the first phase of the game, players find Leon stuck in a room full of infected. He has a Division of Security Operations-issued large assault revolver called Requiem that packs a punch with 12.7x55mm rounds. The problem players face is that they don't have enough ammo to eliminate the waves coming at him.

Worse yet, there's a chain saw-wielding infected, and that was my first target, but as I eliminated the threat, the power tool spun on the ground and damaged Leon. I left it on the ground, but that was a mistake because other zombies can pick it up and turn it into another dangerous threat. I discovered later that players can pick up the chain saw, and that solves all those problems. The trick is getting to the machine: Players must wait for it to stop spinning and damaging Leon while avoiding the swarm of hungry creatures.

Eventually, Leon escapes and runs into Grace, who was escaping another problem of her own. It was a creature that appeared in a previous demo. They meet for the first time, but they're then separated by Dr. Victor Gideon, whose the apparent mastermind of the facility, which focuses on experimental therapies.

Surviving with grace

The second phase of the demo stars Grace. It's slower-paced and more methodical as players quickly discover she's not as physically gifted as Leon. The DSO agent hands her the Requiem as they're split up.

When she fires it, the recoil knocks her back, and the ammo in this part of the Resident Evil Requiem is extremely limited. Eventually, players find smaller handguns that don't have the huge kick and have plentiful bullets. Despite that, players will still have to conserve ammo, and one of the best ways to do it is to shoot enemies until they're stunned enough for a melee or shove. With the infected on the ground, players can double-tap them in the head to finish them off. It's a way to efficiently use ammo because missing a target is painful.

Grace's section is also where players explore the hospital, and they quickly figure out that the infected have personalities. They aren't as mindless as they seem, as many go through the routines of their past lives. A cook will mill in the kitchen, blindly slashing at meat. A disruptive patient will chase after an out-of-place sound, and a nurse will chase after him. The zombielike inhabitants aren't just nameless fodder. They're pieces of storytelling.

Exploring the hospital, that fact became clearer as I ran across more specialized infected. Dr. Gideon was busy, and players will encounter an enormous creature named Thomas Jackson, one of two brothers who have eaten so much they squeeze through the hallways like a writhing snake, becoming both an obstacle and an enemy. Elsewhere, a lounge singer next to a piano has a scream that can knock Grace back.

Crafting component

Despite their seemingly boss-like status, all the infected can be killed, even the behemoths. One of the most surefire ways is through Resident Evil Requiem's crafting system. Grace can find scraps and extract blood from zombies, buckets and viscera. These are a few components that players need to craft special weapons and power-ups.

To craft these items, players have to insert special vials of blood into a machine that analyzes them. These act as blueprints and unlock tools Grace will need to survive. The best one I found was the Hemolytic Injector. The issue is that players have to sneak up on the infected and stab them from behind. The tool also prevents the infected from resurrecting into more dangerous creatures.

Unlike Leon, Grace has to use her guile, smarts and stealth to progress through her survival-horror experience. It may not be efficient to kill every zombie in sight. It's sometimes best to figure out their routine and avoid them or try to lure them into a more advantageous position.

Shades of Resident Evil 2

It seems as though Resident Evil Requiem will feature situations reminiscent of Resident Evil 2. Players will switch off between Grace and Leon, and they'll discover that some of the actions of one impact the playthrough of another. I suspect that will happen with power-ups and other items.

For example, a key power-up is empty injectors because they can be used for steroids or stabilizers — they offer permanent buffs to one character. Steroids dramatically strengthen muscles and increase max health, while stabilizers boost firepower and stability of shots by increasing focus. In another area, ancient coins can be used at vending machines, and grabbing one item likely means that the other character won't be able to.

Players will have to figure out which is the best option for each protagonist. I discovered this in the third phase, in which I took control of Leon. He escapes and explores some of the areas that players already explored with Grace. He also has a tool and the strength to open doors and cabinets that Grace couldn't.

In this third action-packed scenario, Leon had to fight Timothy Jackson, the flesh-eating brother of the other monster. This was a legit boss battle that required more shotgun blasts and careful observation of the environment. He also faces more of the mutated infected that resurrect even after being killed once. If I were Grace facing them, she would have a harder time, but with Leon's weapons and ax, he had an easier time handling them. Both characters can parry an attack if they have a melee weapon on hand, but Leon's weapon is more durable.

From what I played, Resident Evil Requiem is shaping up to be an ideal way to celebrate the franchise's 30th anniversary this year. It's an amalgam of some of the best concepts of the franchise, creating a scary-good experience.

Platforms: PlayStation 5, Nintendo Switch 2, PC and Xbox Series X and S

Online: residentevil.com/requiem/en-us

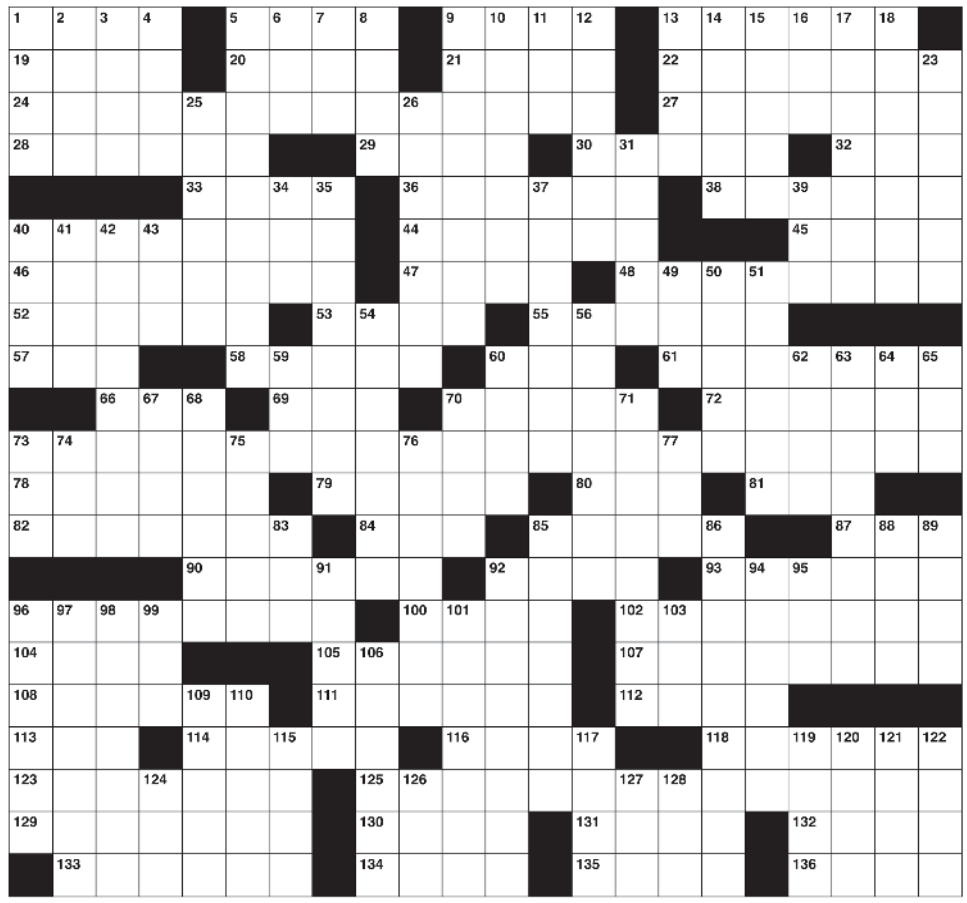
CROSSWORD AND COMICS

NEW YORK TIMES CROSSWORD

GOOD TO THE LAST DROP

BY MICHAEL LIEBERMAN AND REBECCA GOLDSTEIN / EDITED BY WILL SHORTZ

Michael Lieberman, of Washington, is an attorney at Fairmark Partners, an antitrust firm. Rebecca Goldstein, of Albany, Calif., is a research scientist at Merck, developing cancer immunotherapies. While they have many mutual friends and have exchanged messages for years, they met for the first time at a crossword tournament in 2024. Rebecca's favorite part of this puzzle is its theme density. Mike's favorite part is the title. — W.S.



ACROSS

1 Do a little too well?
5 Tops
9 Resident of Ayrshire or Lanarkshire
13 No time at all
19 Discouraged action
20 Mouthy?
21 ''What a relief!''
22 Brought (out)
24 *Completely destroy with a blast*
27 *Gaia, by another name*
28 Something typically taken every 10 years
29 Doodled
30 Certain bridge positions
32 Segment of a timeline, perhaps
33 The moon's ''maria''
36 Circa
38 ''Rhoda'' actress Valerie
40 *Version of a textbook designed for instruction*
44 Salon substance
45 Muppet who loves pigeons
46 ''My life is over''
47 Sharpness
48 Sarcastic response to a show-off
52 Walked gingerly
53 Product with Pro, Air and Mini varieties
55 Conical shelter
56 Look into
59 Contribute
60 Chicago paper, informally
62 N.Y.C. neighborhood that's home to the Grey Art Museum
63 Lower-body exercise
64 Occupational suffix
65 J.F.K. predecessor
67 Aromatic herb
68 Hold tightly
70 Mariner's greeting
71 Natural attraction
73 Two peas ____ pod
74 Pitch
75 French wine region
76 LeBron James or Nikola Jokic
77 Delivery person's assignment: Abbr.
83 ''Wheels''
85 Beverage infused with THC
86 Fixed, as a ''m-i-t-s-a-k-e''
88 County in western New York
89 Deck out?
91 Shoe with a thick sole
92 Part of an equestrian's ensemble
94 Small songbird
95 Benefit plan option, in brief
96 Wealthy sort
97 Stretchy
98 ''Next on my list''
99 ____ chi
101 Lit up, in a way
103 ____ Valley (San Francisco neighborhood)
106 Less challenging
109 Shell out
110 Video game character aptly celebrated on Mar. 10
115 Bicyclist's setting
117 Latin list ender
119 Lead-in to a conclusion
120 ____ Millions (multistate lottery)
121 Some addresses
122 Dos + cuatro
124 China's largest ethnic group
126 Wellness resort offering
127 Horn contents at a Viking feast
128 Depressed
57 Use salt instead of sugar while baking, say
58 Skewered Indonesian dish
60 ____ Winter, basketball coach who famously innovated the ''triangle offense''
61 Had a brain fart
66 Top-left PC key
69 Like some simple repair jobs, in brief
70 Grilled South American fare
72 Smoothed (out)
73 ''Things are only going to get worse'' ... or a hint to answering the seven italicized clues in this puzzle
78 Science-and-nature magazine, familiarly
79 Muckety-muck
80 Frequently, poetically
81 Fair-hiring inits.
82 Chemical element whose use led to the first known law against poisoning
84 Herman ____ (potato chip entrepreneur)
85 More sardonic
87 Rest area?
90 Speeds of slow-moving traffic
92 ''It's ____ real''
93 *Delicate, as beauty*
96 *Photo-editing technique used to create a smooth transition*
100 Wear (out)
102 Middle-of-the-night woe
104 Duchess of ____ (noted Spanish title)
105 Made younger looking in an editing studio, say
107 Reality TV franchise created by Tyra Banks
108 Philosophy symbolized by yin and yang
111 Ruby look-alike
112 Throw, in modern slang
113 Fort Collins sch.
114 Calls to task?
116 Company behind the machine used to make Slurpees
118 Kind of paper in a lab
123 *In back*
125 *''Wait, are we done?''*
129 Queen of the fairies
130 Dueling weapon
131 Skin softener
132 Fruit also known as a ''uniq''
133 Largest bird in North America
134 X-ray units
135 Immodest
136 ''You can't make me!,'' e.g.

DOWN

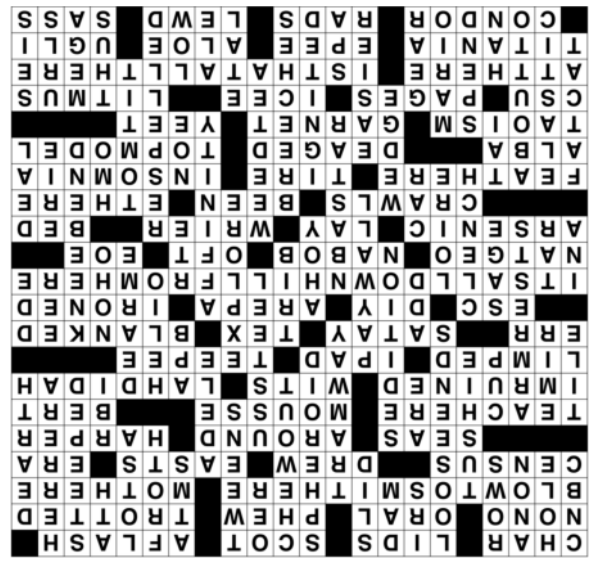
1 ''The Exchange'' airer
2 Flaw in an argument
3 Unknown author, for short
4 Squabbles
5 Unresolved parts of a plot
6 Org. to which you might provide your bank account info
7 Renewable energy structure
8 Lost traction
9 Globelike shape
10 Dress down
11 Poetic contraction
12 Many middle schoolers
13 Ones pressed for cash?
14 Top of a latte
15 Mucho
16 M.L.B. team that once went by OAK on scoreboards
17 In hot water?
18 Fashion designer Carolina
23 Shortage
25 Behind
26 Certain public transit network
31 Singer whose ''Hello'' was the fastest video ever to reach 1 billion views on YouTube
34 ''People ____ Strange'' (the Doors song)
35 Conduct inciting an insurrection
37 World's first billion-dollar corporation
39 Sac fly result
40 Game piece in Rummikub
41 Royal title
42 Where jet-setters may rub elbows
43 Chalice
49 P.D. alert
50 Prefix meaning ''sun''
51 ''Heavens to Betsy!''
54 Subscription-only website feature

GUNSTON STREET



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

RESULTS FOR ABOVE PUZZLE






iStock

Taking talk therapy outdoors

Clinicians say having sessions in nature helps patients with comfort, mood and memory

BY MAGGIE PENMAN
The Washington Post

Jennifer Udler has been a practicing therapist for 25 years. A little over a decade ago, she started training for a marathon, running with a group near her home in Montgomery County, Md.

"I noticed that people were more comfortable, less inhibited, opening up and talking during our group training runs," Udler said. "And I started to wonder if there was a way to do a practice where people are moving."

Udler sees children and adolescents as well as adults, and she suspected that her younger clients especially might feel more comfortable talking while walking on a nature trail rather than sitting in a therapist's office. She decided to try it with one of her young clients with his mom's permission.

"We met at a park, and we walked around, and he was a different kid," Udler said. "He was running around, and he was showing me stuff in nature. And he talked." She said they made more progress in one session outside than they had in two years meeting in her office.

"That was in the snow in February," she added. "So I was like, it's only going to get better."

Udler started reading more about outdoor therapy, which is also known as walk-and-talk or nature-informed therapy. At that time she couldn't find any formal training or certification programs, but she did learn that other therapists had tried it and found many of the same benefits she had.

"You've got the movement, you've got nature, which is extremely grounding and stabilizing for people, and you have the co-regulation, walking side-by-side," Udler said. For her younger clients or anyone uncomfortable with therapy, it also helped to be walking while talking about difficult topics because they didn't always have to make eye contact with her.

She wrote her own informed consent for her clients, establishing the additional risks of outdoor therapy and how confidentiality would work in a public park. She started a practice called Positive Strides, specializing in walk-and-talk therapy sessions outdoors in nature.

"As I did the work and saw different types of people with different kinds of mental health issues, I realized how amazing it is," Udler said.

Trading the couch for the outdoors

In March of 2020, when many therapists moved their practices online, a smaller number brought their practices outside. The benefits were not felt only by the clients. Nature acts as a sort of "buffer against burnout," said Heidi Schreiber-Pan, the executive director and founder of the Center for Nature Informed Therapy, where she trains clinicians in how to bring their practices outdoors.

"What we're hearing from people is that they can see more clients when they have outdoor sessions or nature-informed sessions," Schreiber-Pan said.

The American Psychological Association put out new guidelines this past fall for how clinicians can implement walk-and-talk therapy into their practice.

The number of therapists working outside is still small. Schreiber-Pan believes that's in part because therapists don't realize that nature is all around us. One of the first questions she asks in her trainings is: When you think of nature, what comes to mind?

"They talk about, like, these beautiful national parks or the mountains or the ocean," Shreiber-Pan said. "And where is your therapy office? Not there." She said that part of the training is helping practitioners recognize that nature is all around us — even in a city park.

Miki Moskowitz is a clinical psychologist who practices in a primary care setting, which means she sometimes sees a patient only a couple of times.

"We're trying to make a difference, even in one single session," she said.

For Moskowitz, practicing outside has improved her own mental health and increased her capacity, but she also sees the immediate impact for her patients.

"What I've seen that's so encouraging is that sometimes just that first session we go for the walk, and patients are, like: 'Wow, I didn't know this trail was here. This is so beautiful. This feels so great. This is totally something I can do on my own,'" Moskowitz said. "That is so much more powerful than if we're sitting in my office, which has no windows, just talking about the idea of going outside."

Brain benefits of getting outside

When Marc Berman was doing research at the University of Michigan, he helped devise a study to look at the brain benefits of time in nature. Participants did a challenging task testing their memory and attention, and then they were sent on a walk either through downtown Ann Arbor or in the area arboretum. Those who walked in nature showed a 20% improvement in their short-term memory, while those who walked in an urban environment did not.

Berman and his colleagues did this experiment in June and January. In the winter, the nature walk was less enjoyable — but just as beneficial.

"That was pretty cool because it suggested that you didn't have to enjoy the nature walk to get these cognitive benefits. There was something deeper going on," Berman said.

One explanation for why nature is so good for our brains is called the attention restoration theory. The idea is that our ability to pay attention is finite, and spending time in nature can replenish our capacity. Nature is also "softly fascinating" — it captures our attention without overwhelming our senses.

"I can kind of mind-wander and think about other things when I'm looking at a waterfall," Berman said. "I can't really mind-wander or think about other things when I'm in Times Square."

Berman is now a psychology professor at the University of Chicago and author of the new book "Nature and the Mind: The Science of How Nature Improves Cognitive, Physical, and Social Well-Being."

How to make the most of your time outdoors

Whether or not you are in therapy, your brain can benefit from a dose of nature, especially during the colder months when many of us are inclined to stay indoors. Here are some science-backed tips for how to get the benefits:

■ Nature can be found anywhere. You just have to look for it. Research has shown that noticing nature and paying attention to it can have positive effects even in an urban environment.

Psychologists recommend noting the bird song you hear on the walk to your car, looking at the leaves on the trees and the clouds in the sky, and just taking a moment to appreciate nature's beauty — even if it's just a small plant poking through the sidewalk.

■ You don't have to like it. Nature can be an acquired taste, especially when it's cold. But you don't have to be a backpacker or love camping to benefit from time outside. Researcher Marc Berman and others have found that we get the brain benefits whether or not we enjoy a walk in the woods.

■ Try a mindfulness exercise. Many people struggle to sit still and meditate, despite its benefits — but clinical psychologist Miki Moskowitz said that mindfulness practices can come more easily outside.

"Just look up at the treetops and notice what you see, notice what you hear," Moskowitz said. "Look for something that's moving, and watch the branches sway in the breeze. Look at something close up, or look at something far away. You're doing a mindfulness practice, and you're tuning into your senses, and you are focusing your attention, but it's not hard work."

■ Bring nature inside. If you aren't able to get outside as often as you would like, you can still get some of the benefits.

Put a plant in your office — even a fake one — or look at pictures of beautiful landscapes. Listen to bird songs at your desk.

"It's not as strong as the real thing, but you can get benefits from the simulated nature," Berman said.

■ Embrace the winter. When it's cold and snowy outside, our impulse is to stay inside. But less time outside can contribute to seasonal depression.

Therapist Heidi Schreiber-Pan recommends following the Scandinavian practices of "friluftsliv" — or "open-air living," getting outside no matter the weather — and hygge, or embracing the cozy indoors when you come back in.

"The happiest people on this planet are the Scandinavians," Schreiber-Pan said. "They also have the longest winters."

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Drivers seeking CDL must take test in English

DC WASHINGTON — All truckers and bus drivers will have to take their commercial driver's license tests in English as the Trump administration expands its aggressive campaign to improve safety in the industry and get unqualified drivers off the road.

Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy announced the latest effort Friday to ensure that drivers meet the federal requirements to understand English well enough to read road signs and communicate with law enforcement officers. Florida already started administering its tests in English.

Currently, many states allow drivers to take their license tests in other languages even though they are required to demonstrate English proficiency. California offered tests in 20 other languages. Duffy said that a number of states have hired other companies to administer commercial driver's licenses tests, and those companies aren't enforcing the standards that drivers are supposed to meet to demonstrate their driving and English skills.

The Transportation Department has been aggressively going after states that handed out commercial driver's licenses to immigrants who shouldn't have qualified for them ever since a fatal crash in Florida in August.

Lawmakers seek $1.5B for transportation work

WA SEATTLE — The state Senate's top Democratic and Republican transportation leaders joined hands Monday to propose $1.5 billion in new spending, mainly for safety and maintenance.

State Sens. Marko Liias, D-Edmonds, and Curtis King, R-Yakima, described the work as necessary, and stressed that their proposed transportation budget could create tens of thousands of jobs.

Most of the new money — $1.38 billion over six years — is slated for preservation work as well as projects aimed at recovering from December's destructive floods.

At a news conference, Liias said he was "confident and hopeful" the federal government will eventually help pay for that work, but the state couldn't wait to get the repairs done.

Schools blocked from enforcing anti-DEI law

TX DALLAS — A federal judge temporarily blocked three school districts, including Plano Independent School District, from implementing parts of a new Texas law restricting diversity, equity and inclusion programming in public schools last week.

Judge Charles Eskridge with the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Texas in Houston barred the districts — Houston, Katy and Plano ISDs — on Friday from enforcing portions of Senate Bill 12. The law, which took effect Sept. 1, prohibits public schools from sponsoring gender and sexuality alliance clubs and rolls back programming related to race, gender and sexual orientation.

The temporary block only applies to those three districts. Plano ISD did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The federal judge's ruling applies to four sections of the law: the bans on gender and sexuality alliance clubs; "diversity, equity and inclusion duties"; assistance with students' "social transitioning"; and instruction, guidance and activities related to sexual orientation or gender identity.

Eskridge ordered Plano, Houston and Katy ISDs to state their positions on the law within the next two weeks and whether they plan to seek representation from Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton's office.

School shooter's bid for release in legal limbo

CA SAN DIEGO — Santana High School shooter Charles "Andy" Williams will continue to remain in custody as the courts sort out his case, which sits in a legal limbo between adult and juvenile courts.

A San Diego Juvenile Court judge revealed during a hearing Monday that another judge has put on pause Williams' bid to be released from custody until an appeals court can take a look at his case. That pause came six days after yet another judge vacated Williams' lengthy sentence for the deadly 2001 shooting on the Santee campus, a decision that could clear the way for his release.

Next week — March 5 — will mark 25 years since a 15-year-old Williams brought a gun to school and opened fire between class periods. Two people — Bryan Zucker, 14, and Randy Gordon, 17 — were killed. Eleven other students and two staffers were wounded.

Williams was sentenced in adult court to 50 years to life in prison. Over the last several years, changes in the law and an evolving approach regarding youth offenders cleared the way for Williams to ask to have his sentence vacated.

Last month, San Diego Superior Court Judge Lisa Rodriguez found that, based on case law, Williams' sentence was equal to life without parole. She granted his request and recalled his sentence. His murder conviction still stands.

With Rodriguez's ruling, Williams' case was sent to Juvenile Court for resentencing, because he was 15 at the time of the crime.

Once his case is in Juvenile Court, Williams will get the benefits of current sentencing laws — and that means he could be released from custody, because the court generally can't jail him past age 25. Williams is 40.

Immediately following Rodriguez's decision to vacate Williams' sentence, the District Attorney's Office appealed.

During a status hearing Monday, Juvenile Court Judge Ana Espana acknowledged that Williams "is in a standstill, sort of in a pause. A foot in both courts at the moment."

Bridge owner donates to MAGA days before threat

MI DETROIT — Matthew Moroun, whose family owns the Ambassador Bridge, gave $1 million to a political action committee that supports Republican President Donald Trump less than a month before Trump threatened to block the opening of a new, competing span between Detroit and Canada.

The $1 million receipt for the super PAC MAGA Inc. was revealed in a monthly campaign finance disclosure covering January and submitted to the Federal Election Commission last week.

Brendan Fischer, director of strategic investigations for the nonprofit Campaign Legal Center, identified the receipt in a post on X.

Moroun gave the money on Jan. 16, according to the disclosure. Twenty-four days later, on Feb. 9, Trump used a social media post to threaten to prevent the new Gordie Howe International Bridge between Detroit and Windsor from opening until Canada treats the United States with what he described as "fairness and respect."

The Gordie Howe bridge, which was expected to open in the coming months, is co-owned by Canada and Michigan and is the result of a $4.7 billion project financed by Canada. It has been under construction since 2018 and would directly compete with the Moroun-owned Ambassador Bridge.

Escaped police K-9 found shacked up with goats

NC THOMASVILLE — A potentially "aggressive" police dog defied stereotypes when he escaped his kennel and joined up with a gang of goats, according to investigators in North Carolina.

The dog, named K-9 Macho, went on the run after high winds seriously damaged his kennel in the Lexington area, the Thomasville Police Department reported in a Feb. 23 news release.

"While he is not believed to be aggressive without cause, he is a working police dog and may be cautious or defensive if approached," police said. "For your safety, do not attempt to approach, capture, or call out to him. If you see K-9 Macho: Call 911 immediately."

Tips from the community led to the dog being found about a mile from home, and the circumstances were unusual.

"Macho had made friends with a resident's goats and stayed warm in her barn," police said. "He is safe, unharmed, and back with his K-9 handler."

From wire reports



ANNA MONEYMAKER, GETTY IMAGES/TNS

Pup pawrade proves bipawtisanship

Dogs dressed in Mardi Gras attire attend "Bipawtisan Doggi Gras Pawrade" hosted by outgoing U.S. Sen. Thom Tillis, R-N.C., in the Hart Senate Office Building on Wednesday in Washington. The annual event was canceled in the fall because of the partial government shutdown.

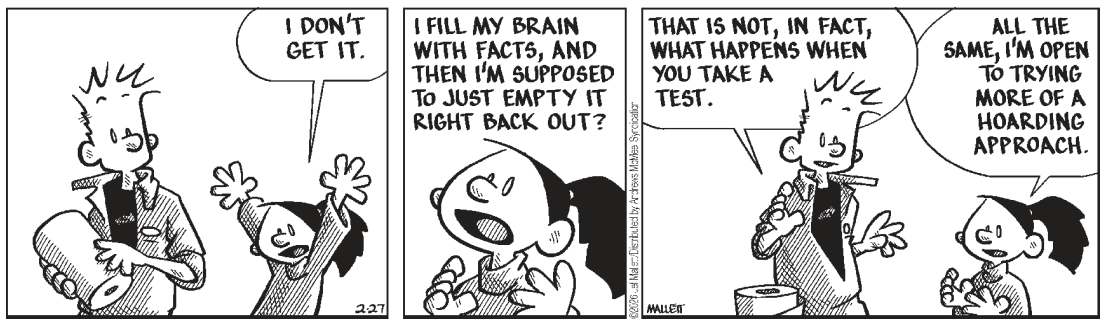
Bizarro



Loose Parts



Frazz



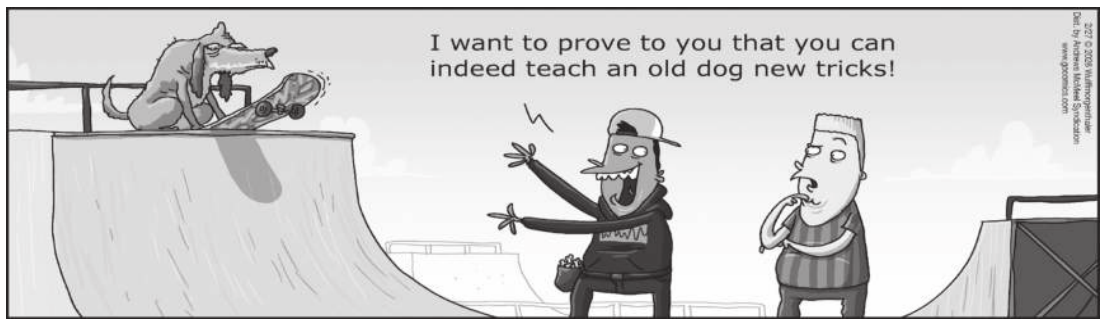
Pearls Before Swine



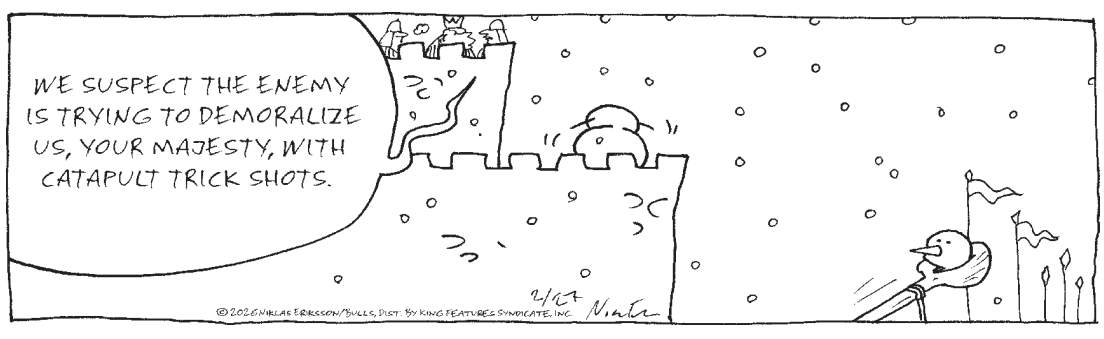
Non Sequitur



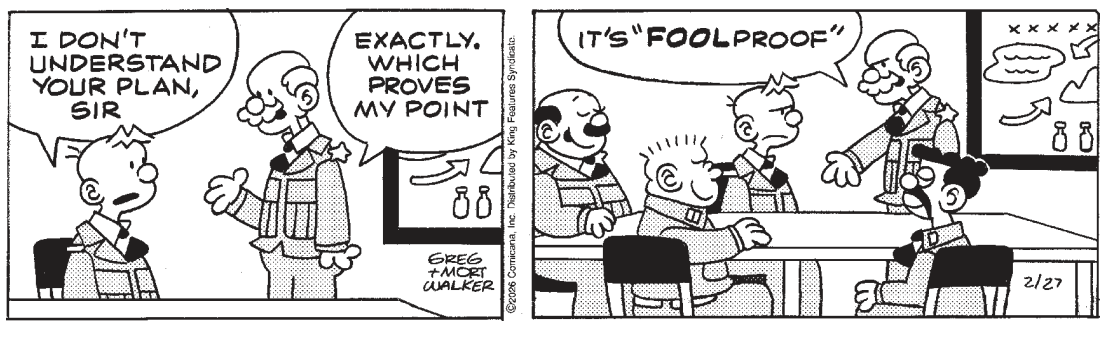
Wumo



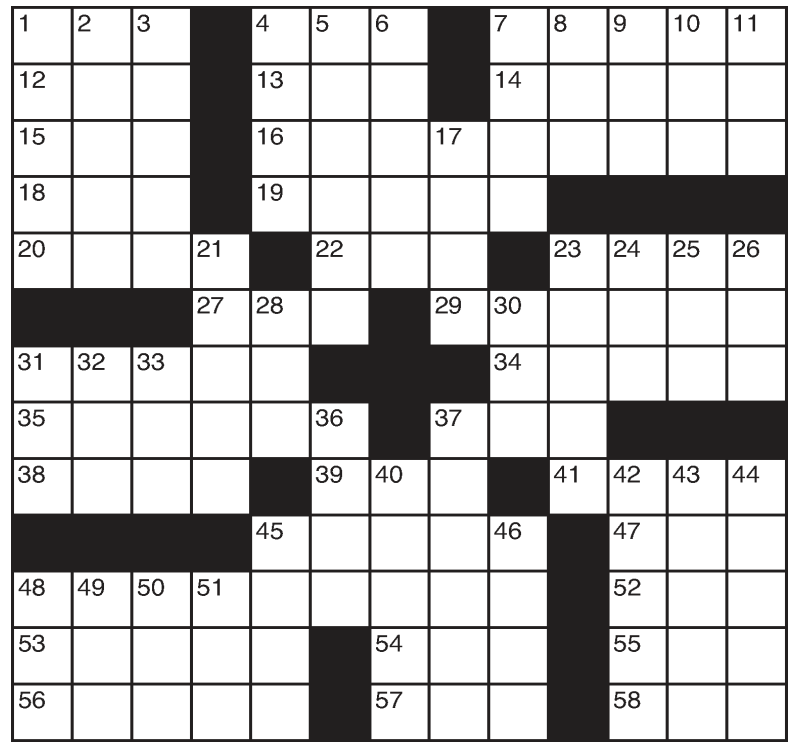
Carpe Diem



Beetle Bailey



Eugene Sheffer Crossword



ACROSS

1 Ref
4 #2 execs
7 Sulk
12 French salt
13 Debtor's letters
14 First lady before Michelle
15 Aduba of "The Residence"
16 Lab container
18 HIV-treating drug
19 Purse part
20 Misplace
22 "— the Walrus"
23 Hendrix hairdo
27 Film buff's network
29 Hall & Oates, e.g.
31 Show indifference
34 Pirate's cry
35 Dab with a towel
37 Tolkien monster
38 Downwind
39 Poetic dusk
41 Leave a lasting impression
45 Titled women
47 Fair hirer, in ads
48 Teen's formalwear
52 Roman 16
53 Lebanon's neighbor
54 Slowing, in music (Abbr.)
55 — Lingus
56 Visibly upset
57 "Indeed!"
58 Rds.

DOWN

1 Standard
2 Opera's Christa Ludwig, for one
3 Story lines
4 Hotshots
5 Written in verse
6 Kama —
7 Radar image
8 "Way cool!"
9 Gigi's "yes"
10 Choice words?
11 Doo follower
17 Wheelchair access
21 Chopin's "Butterfly," for one
23 Quickly
24 Dime portrait
25 Floor cover
26 "What a cute puppy!"
28 Store boss (Abbr.)
30 Rowing need
31 Hot tub
32 "2001" computer
33 Hwy.
36 Calendar quota
37 Infant's outfit
40 Nail smoother
42 Plano's state
43 Break a Commandment
44 Names in a will
45 June 6, 1944
46 Bygone fleet
48 Calif. clock setting
49 Reuben bread
50 "... man mouse?"
51 Russian space station

Answer to Previous Puzzle

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

2-27

CRYPTOQUIP

GRBB-SZHGZ KBXVS KRDPTMXZC PRRZDCR CXMBO GEH VDZ ZRFRM KXZJ DJEROXFR OPTKK: "CBTRBROO."

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: WHAT KIND OF BUS CAN BE HOLDING TWO FULL TIERS OF WEB-FOOTED SWIMMING BIRDS? A DOUBLE-DUCKER.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: G equals W

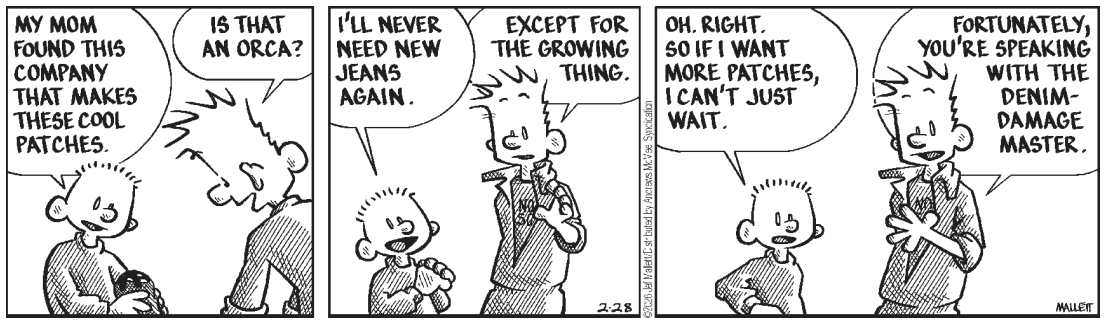
Bizarro



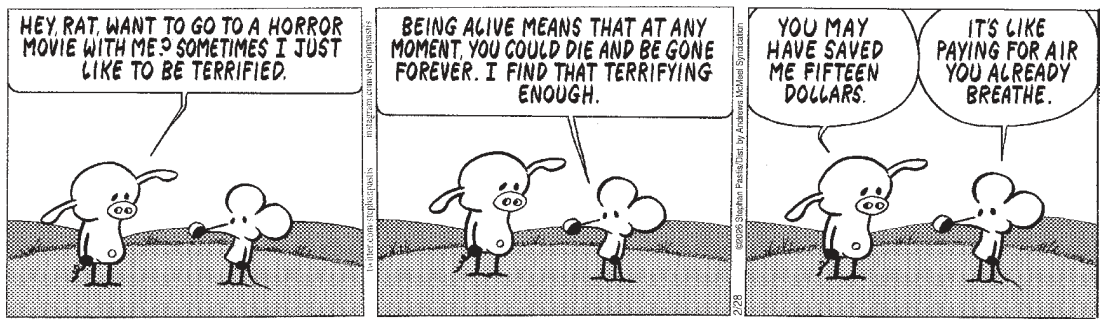
Loose Parts



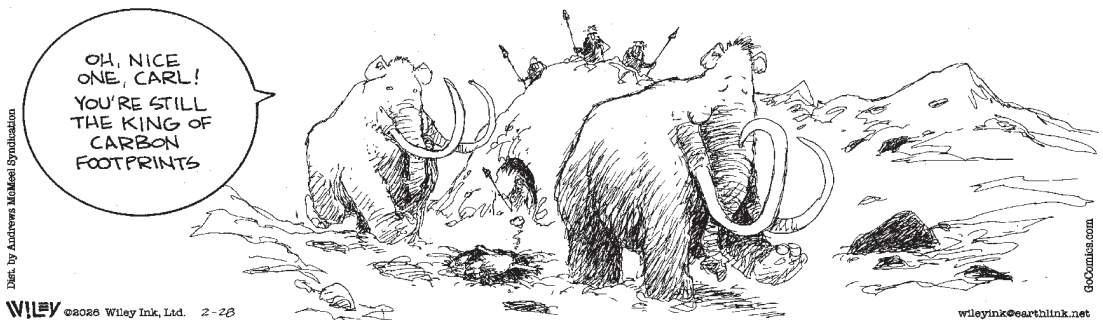
Frazz



Pearls Before Swine



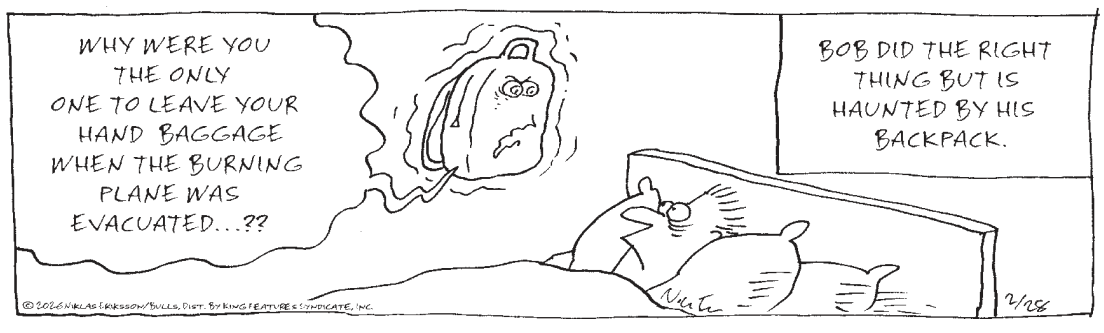
Non Sequitur



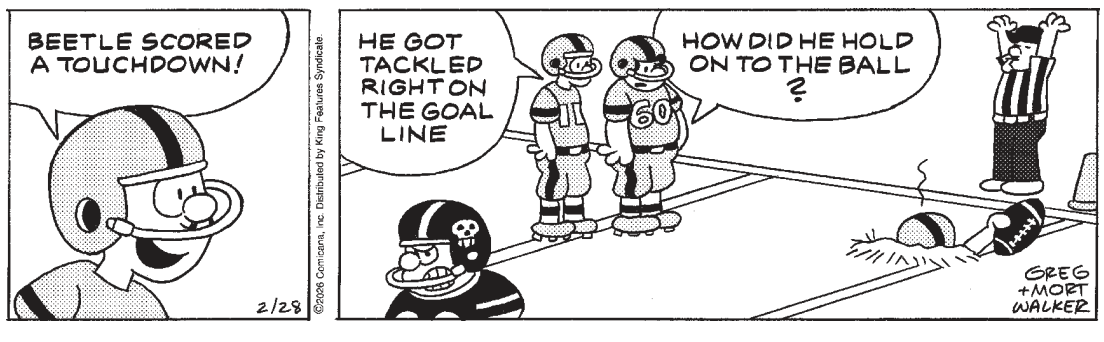
Wumo



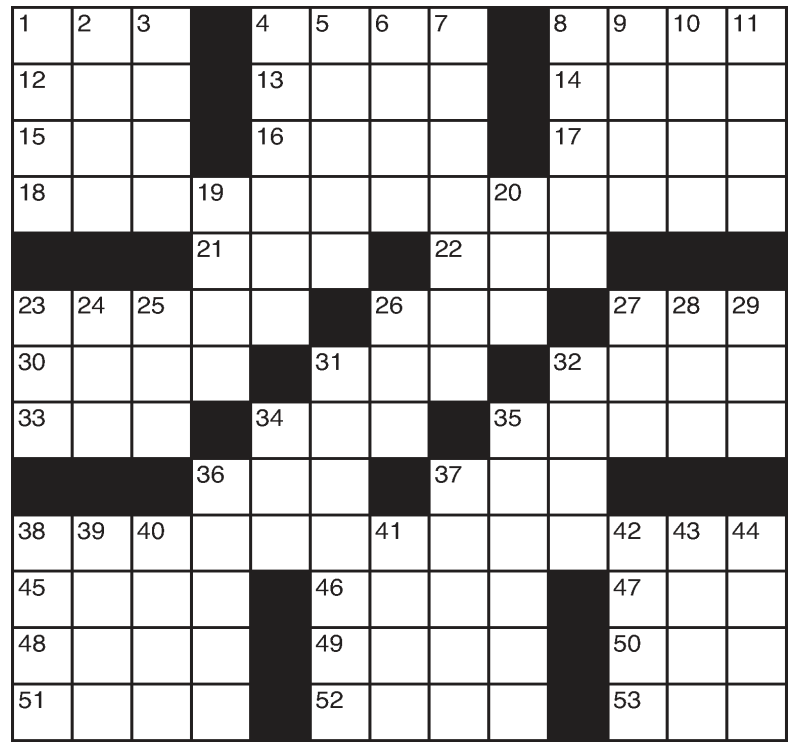
Carpe Diem



Beetle Bailey



Eugene Sheffer Crossword



ACROSS

1 Rationale
4 Deeds
8 Optimum
12 "Yoo- —!"
13 Quick look
14 Capital on a fjord
15 Caribou's kin
16 Morales of "Jericho"
17 Lacking slack
18 Very early morning, per a Sinatra song
21 Pitch
22 Bagel topper
23 Imam's holy book
26 Nov. honoree
27 Table support
30 Friend
31 Body art, for short
32 Greek salad cheese
33 "Indeed!"
34 Piercing tool
35 "Paradise Lost" archangel
36 Sushi fish
37 Compass dir.
38 Origin-of-the-universe premise
45 La Scala solo
46 Swiss-born painter Paul
47 Goat's cry
48 Fine spray
49 Mad king of theater
50 Trio after H
51 Tennis champ Arthur
52 Termini
53 Prof's helpers

DOWN

1 "That was close!"
2 Pit
3 Oxen's burden
4 Tarzan type
5 Activist Chavez
6 Pond duck
7 Omelet pan
8 Wrinkle treatment
9 Jacob's twin
10 Curved line, in music
11 Youngsters
19 Remain
20 Stolen
23 Singer Starr
24 Flamenco cheer
25 "Kidnapped" monogram
26 Kilmer of "Top Gun"
27 Floral necklace
28 Montreal summer
29 Lass
31 Glimmer
32 Gratis
34 "Caught ya!"
35 Aisle escorts
36 Diminish
37 Lieu
38 Crimson Tide, briefly
39 Eye part
40 Screen legend Lillian
41 Hidden valley
42 Skip
43 Prince of India
44 Talks nonstop

Answer to Previous Puzzle

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

2-28 CRYPTOQUIP

GR M TMYTIY DMWUIZ UP RGWGNJ JGN DPYQ XPWNGZIYMTSC RMNUIY UJMW KNKMS, DPKSZ JI UMQI NJPYUXKUN?

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: WELL-KNOWN FLICK FEATURING TEENAGE GIRLS WHO CAN NEVER FIND ADHESIVE STUFF: "GLUELESS."

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: K equals U

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Max D. Lederer Jr., Publisher
Laura Law, Chief Operating Officer
Lt. Col. Daniel "DQ" Quinlan, Europe commander
John Rodriguez, Europe chief of staff
Lt. Col. Lucas Crouch, Pacific commander
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
Shane W. Schiermeier, Circulation Manager
schiermeier.shane@stripes.com
xsscirculation@stripes.com
+49(0)152.5672.5036; DSN (314)583-9111

Europe
Shane W. Schiermeier, Circulation Manager
schiermeier.shane@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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OPINION

NATO must focus on its purpose, capabilities

By Paula J. Dobriansky and Paul J. Saunders
Special to The Washington Post

At January's World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney announced the collapse of the rules-based order. German Chancellor Friedrich Merz likewise declared at February's Munich Security Conference that the rules-based "order, imperfect as it was even at the best of times, no longer exists." Meanwhile, Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who led the American delegation in Munich, was more forward-looking, announcing a "new era in geopolitics" ahead of the trip and outlining a vision for a NATO that retains what works while adapting to new realities.

The United States is already moving to redefine the alliance on more sustainable terms, particularly on burden sharing and strengthening the defense industrial base. The outlines for a path forward are there, and many European leaders privately acknowledge as much. But convergence will come only if European allies focus less on the old order and engage seriously with the new one.

It's worth understanding how NATO got here, because today's tensions long predate the current administration. Two long-term drivers have brought the alliance to this point.

The first is China's rise. China's booming economy, soaring military spending, expanding nuclear arsenal, and rising self-confidence and assertiveness have been obvious since shortly after many in the West supported China joining the World Trade Organization in 2001 and opened their markets to Chinese exports. China used that market access to build an export-driven industrial machine that undercut Western manufacturers, gobbling up critical supply chains and converting the profits into military power. Regrettably, U.S. and Western policy largely failed to respond, leaving the United States and its allies economically dependent, disadvantaged and vulnerable.

The second driver is America's frustration with the evident costs and less evident benefits of international leadership.

The United States and its allies created NATO to advance their shared security interests in facing the Soviet Union. However, America now sees China as its principal threat — and as not only a security threat, but also an economic threat. Yet U.S., European and Canadian economic interests do not overlap in the same ways, or to the same extent as their security interests have, now or in the past. Responses to China's economic threat — such as efforts to rebuild domestic manufacturing — can quickly provoke disputes among security allies that are simultaneously economic competitors.

In Munich, Under Secretary of Defense Elbridge Colby aptly described NATO's challenges and suggested a new basis for a revitalized alliance, which he called NATO 3.0. "Europe must assume primary responsibility for its own conventional defense," he said.

It's not just rhetoric. President Donald Trump's Feb. 6 executive order "Establishing an America First Arms Transfer Strategy" fleshes out this approach. The order aims to ensure that U.S. arms sales support both America's strategic interests and efforts to rebuild domestic arms manufacturing. It pursues these goals in part by giving priority to arms deliveries to countries that are investing in their own self-defense, are geographically critical or contribute to U.S. economic security. Countries like Poland, the Baltic states, Norway and Denmark — all spending above 3% of gross domestic product on defense as of June 2025 — stand to benefit, as do Finland, Sweden and Britain, which are spending significantly on new capabilities. The policy could also help Ukraine indirectly by accelerating deliveries to NATO countries that plan to transfer American weapons onward.

While its intent is to encourage allied investment in U.S. domestic defense manufacturing — an important goal — the Trump administration could also consider how allies could enhance U.S. economic security through co-production in their countries. Expanding U.S. defense firms' operations in allied countries can serve American interests by generating additional revenue for U.S. manufacturers, driving down unit costs through greater scale and binding allies' economic interests more tightly to America's. An existing Abrams tank maintenance facility in Poznan, Poland, offers a ready-made opportunity to expand collaboration.

For far too long, NATO focused more on its size than on its purpose and capabilities. Trump has launched a series of necessary disruptions that, if successful, could sustain the alliance well beyond its 100th anniversary in 2049. It looks messy, but the outcomes could be profound.

Getting there will take disciplined U.S. effort toward this new strategic vision — and European allies willing to match American ambition with their own.

Paula J. Dobriansky is vice chair of the Atlantic Council's Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security and a former under secretary of state. Paul J. Saunders is president of the Center for the National Interest and publisher of the National Interest.

The danger of being inured to a flawed status quo

By Llewellyn King
Tribune News Service

We have all had the experience of staying a few days in a hotel — say on vacation — which becomes home. Quickly, it becomes familiar. Individuals adjust to change. People who come into money get used to being well-off, and people who lose everything get used to that.

So, too, with nations. They adjust with this attitude: That is just the way it is.

The danger to America is that we will adjust, take the aberrations of today as the norm, and that after this period of presidential excess, we will be inured to presidential excess.

We will expect future presidents to skirt the Constitution or ignore it, and to consolidate the dangerous concept of a unitary executive — where the president is all-powerful and Congress is a functionary, often subservient.

The danger is acceptance. When something is accepted, it becomes the new normal, ensconced and hard to remove. The status quo ante isn't a guaranteed consequence of the next election.

Over 25 years, I went to Ireland once a year to attend an Irish summer school, akin to a Renaissance Weekend here or a mini-Davos. When I started traveling to Ireland, it was one of the poorest nations in Europe.

What was most disturbing wasn't that Ireland, the mother-nation to so many Americans, was poor, but rather the terrible acceptance that poverty was inevitable, and that to be a poor nation was the destiny of Ireland.

Then came the Celtic Tiger period, 1995 to 2007. The computer industry set Ireland on the road to global success, and the Emerald Isle became the Golden Isle, basking in prosperity. Ireland gained swagger and became a self-confident place that could show the world. This adjustment came quickly.

At the end of World War II, Argentina had the fifth-largest economy in the world. It had a high per-capita income, and its currency was as stable as the U.S. dollar. Now, it ranks 24th in the world by nominal GDP, and 70th by per-capita income, although it is the second-largest economy in South America, after Brazil.

Worse, I have found on visits to Argentina that it has come to accept its status as a permanent economic basket case with inept political leadership.

Since the end of World War II, the United States has been on an upward economic path. It also assumed a world leadership role that made it the envy of the world, the place to emulate.

And for an individual, it was the place to migrate to. Talent and skill poured in, and the United States led the world in medicine, other sciences and technology. Also, in movies and popular music.

A second upward path began in the early 1960s with the civil rights movement, which opened a segregated society to all and became a beacon for the world.

Recently, on the PBS television program "White House Chronicle," Freeman Hrabowski spoke with me and my co-host, Adam Clayton Powell, about his astonishing ascent from a child who was imprisoned in Birmingham, Ala., in May 1963 for marching for access to a better school to his being sworn in as president of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

"In 30 years, I went from being denied access to a white university, the University of Alabama, to becoming president of a mostly white university," he said.

Civil rights and human rights were a second trajectory that took the United States to a special place in global esteem. A place of decency, values and hope. We exported those values and promoted them universally, until last year when they were abandoned.

We had accepted that we were a generous nation, concerned with the condition of the world outside our borders and anxious to share our bounty and to help.

The very concept of who we were was tied up with the sense of America's mission: a force for good at home and abroad; first to seek peace, to further self-determination and healing. America was beautiful in that mission.

Now, we are America the transactional. However, transactions by their nature aren't generous; they aren't uplifting. They don't boost the spirit or inspire the future; they don't soar. Instead, they say over and over again: "What is in it for me?"

That isn't America, which is a great country, and a greater state of mind.

Llewellyn King is the executive producer and host of "White House Chronicle" on PBS. He wrote this for InsideSources.com.

SCOREBOARD

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Wednesday's men's scores

EAST

Boston College 68, Wake Forest 67
Boston University 78, Holy Cross 63
Bucknell 75, Army 73
Davidson 67, Duquesne 56
Lafayette 70, Colgate 69
Lehigh 78, American 73
Navy 78, Loyola (Md) 51
Providence 94, Xavier 84
Robert Morris 73, Detroit Mercy 62
Saint Joseph's 81, George Mason 63
UConn 72, St. John's 40
Villanova 82, Butler 73

SOUTH

Alabama 100, Mississippi State 75
Belmont 98, Evansville 64
Central Arkansas 93, Austin Peay 88
Charlotte 80, North Texas 79
Furman 72, The Citadel 51
James Madison 82, Georgia Southern 66
LSU 106, Ole Miss 99, 2OT
Morgan State 90, South Carolina State 83
North Alabama 73, Bellarmine 68
Queens 96, Eastern Kentucky 79
South Alabama 89, Louisiana-Monroe 54
Tulsa 90, Tulane 56
Vanderbilt 88, Georgia 80
West Georgia 84, Lipscomb 77
Western Carolina 78, Mercer 74
Wofford 72, East Tennessee State 69

MIDWEST

DePaul 72, Creighton 71
Illinois State 71, Northern Iowa 69
Iowa 74, Ohio State 57
Milwaukee 78, Youngstown State 65
Nebraska 74, Maryland 61
Northern Kentucky 81, Cleveland State 70
Oakland 86, IU Indianapolis 74
South Dakota 89, Omaha 72
Southern Illinois 66, Indiana State 55
Valparaiso 74, Drake 71
Wright State 74, Purdue Fort Wayne 70

SOUTHWEST

Arkansas 99, Texas A&M 84
East Carolina 82, UTSA 81
Florida 84, Texas 71
South Florida 75, Rice 56

FAR WEST

California 73, SMU 69
Colorado 79, Kansas State 70
Gonzaga 89, Portland 48
Grand Canyon 80, UNLV 67
Loyola Marymount 67, Washington State 66
Oregon 85, Wisconsin 71
Oregon State 92, San Diego 82, OT
Saint Mary's 86, Santa Clara 67
San Diego State 89, Utah State 72
Seattle 87, Pepperdine 80
Stanford 75, Pittsburgh 67

Men's Top 25 schedule

Friday's games

No. 3 Michigan (25-2) at No. 10 Illinois (22-6)
No. 21 Miami (OH) (27-0) at Western Michigan (9-18)

Saturday's games

No. 1 Duke (25-2) vs. No. 11 Virginia (24-3)
No. 2 Arizona (25-2) vs. No. 14 Kansas (20-7)
No. 4 Iowa State (23-4) vs. No. 16 Texas Tech (20-7)
No. 5 Houston (23-4) vs. Colorado (15-12)
No. 6 UConn (25-3) vs. Seton Hall (19-9)
No. 7 Florida (21-6) vs. No. 20 Arkansas (20-7)
No. 9 Gonzaga (27-2) at Saint Mary's (25-4)
No. 12 Nebraska (23-4) at USC (18-9)
No. 15 St. John's (22-5) vs. Villanova (21-6)
No. 17 Alabama (20-7) at No. 22 Tennessee (20-7)
No. 18 North Carolina (21-6) vs. Virginia Tech (18-10)
No. 19 BYU (20-7) at West Virginia (16-11)
No. 23 Saint Louis (25-2) vs. Duquesne (16-11)
No. 24 Louisville (20-7) at Clemson (20-8)
No. 25 Vanderbilt (21-6) at Kentucky (17-10)

Sunday's games

No. 8 Purdue (22-5) at Ohio State (17-10)
No. 13 Michigan State (22-5) at Indiana (17-10)

Wednesday's women's scores

EAST

Davidson 58, Fordham 49
George Washington 61, St. Bonaventure 47
Indiana 79, Rutgers 69
Maryland 79, Northwestern 57
Penn State 85, USC 82
Rice 77, Temple 66
UMass 66, Kent State 56
Western Michigan 58, Buffalo 43

SOUTH

Central Arkansas 62, North Alabama 55
Eastern Kentucky 67, Austin Peay 54
Florida Gulf Coast 58, North Florida 55
Gardner-Webb 52, USC Upstate 51
George Mason 85, Saint Joseph's 59
Georgia Southern 62, Appalachian State 48
James Madison 77, Old Dominion 55
La Salle 71, VCU 54
Lipscomb 87, Bellarmine 42
Longwood 96, Charleston Southern 69
Louisiana-Monroe 83, Texas State 74
Memphis 88, East Carolina 80, 2OT
Radford 95, Presbyterian 54
Richmond 72, Rhode Island 46
South Alabama 57, Southern Miss 43
Stetson 85, Jacksonville 81
UNC Asheville 64, Winthrop 59
West Virginia 74, UCF 62
Wichita State 60, UAB 54

MIDWEST

Ball State 88, Akron 55
Bowling Green 60, Ohio 56, OT
Butler 71, DePaul 64
Central Michigan 68, Toledo 64
Cleveland State 81, Wright State 55
Dayton 67, Loyola Chicago 58
Duquesne 82, Saint Louis 64
Green Bay 72, IUPUI 61
Kansas 68, Texas Tech 59
Marquette 77, Xavier 65
Miami (OH) 78, Eastern Michigan 60
Michigan 88, Ohio State 86, OT
Northern Kentucky 84, Oakland 59
Oklahoma State 88, Iowa State 77
Omaha 84, Oral Roberts 75
Oregon 71, Purdue 65
Purdue Fort Wayne 71, Milwaukee 52
South Dakota 80, North Dakota 66
South Dakota State 59, North Dakota State 44
St. Thomas 73, Kansas City 71
TCU 83, Cincinnati 70
Youngstown State 72, Detroit Mercy 60

FAR WEST

Air Force 69, Wyoming 61, OT
BYU 66, Arizona State 61
Colorado State 77, UNLV 61
Grand Canyon 57, Fresno State 42
Nevada 49, San Jose State 41
New Mexico 69, Utah State 54
San Diego State 66, Boise State 64

Women's Top 25 schedule

Friday's game

No. 25 Princeton (21-3) at Dartmouth (10-14)

Saturday's games

No. 8 Michigan (22-5) vs. No. 14 Maryland (22-6)
No. 25 Princeton (21-3) at Harvard (15-9)

Sunday's games

No. 1 UConn (29-0) at St. John's (21-9)
No. 2 UCLA (27-1) at USC (17-10)
No. 3 South Carolina (27-2) at No. 16 Kentucky (20-8)
No. 4 Texas (26-3) at No. 24 Alabama (21-7)
No. 5 Vanderbilt (25-3) at Tennessee (16-10)
No. 6 LSU (24-4) at Mississippi State (18-10)
No. 7 Oklahoma (21-6) at Missouri (16-13)
No. 9 Iowa (22-5) at Wisconsin (13-15)
No. 10 Louisville (24-5) vs. Notre Dame (18-9)
No. 11 TCU (25-4) vs. No. 18 Baylor (23-6)
No. 12 Duke (20-7) at No. 21 North Carolina (23-6)
No. 13 Ohio State (23-5) at No. 15 Michigan State (22-6)
No. 17 West Virginia (22-6) vs. Cincinnati (11-17)
No. 19 Ole Miss (21-8) vs. Texas A&M (12-11)
No. 20 Texas Tech (24-5) vs. Arizona State (22-7)
No. 22 Minnesota (21-7) at Illinois (19-8)
No. 23 Georgia (20-7) vs. Florida (16-13)

DEALS

Wednesday's Transactions

BASEBALL
Major League Baseball
American League

SEATTLE MARINERS — Agreed to terms with C Mitch Garver on a contract.

BASKETBALL
National Basketball Association

MINNESOTA TIMBERWOLVES — Signed G Jules Bernard to a two-way contract.

FOOTBALL
National Football League

TENNESSEE TITANS — Released S Xavier Woods.

HOCKEY
National Hockey League

ANAHEIM DUCKS — Reinstated F Leo Carlsson from injured reserve.
BUFFALO SABRES — Placed F Jordan Greenway on injured reserve. Reinstated F Joshua Dunne from injured reserve.
DALLAS STARS — Recalled F Arttu Hyry from Texas (AHL). Sent G Remi Poirier to Texas.
EDMONTON OILERS — Reinstated F Adam Henrique from long-term injured reserve. Recalled F Matthew Savoie from Bakersfield (AHL).
LOS ANGELES KINGS — Reinstated Fs Alex Turcotte and Mikey Anderson from injured reserve.
MINNESOTA WILD — Sent D David Spacek to Iowa (AHL).
MONTREAL CANADIENS — Reinstated F Alex Newhook from injured reserve.
NASHVILLE PREDATORS — Sent G Matthew Murray to Milwaukee (AHL).
OTTAWA SENATORS — Sent D Carter Yakemchuk to Belleville (AHL).
PHILADELPHIA FLYERS — Sent D Adam Ginning to Lehigh Valley (AHL).
PITTSBURGH PENGUINS — Placed C Sidney Crosby on injured reserve. Reinstated D Kris Letang from injured reserve.
SEATTLE KRAKEN — Reinstated Fs Ben Meyers and Berkly Catton from injured reserve.
TAMPA BAY LIGHTNING — Placed F Nick Paul on injured reserve.
TORONTO MAPLE LEAFS — Reinstated F Dakota Joshua from long-term injured reserve.
UTAH MAMMOTH — Sent Ds Maveric Lamoureux and Dmitry Simashev to Tucson (AHL). Reinstated Fs Logan Cooley and Alexander Kerfoot from injured reserve.
VANCOUVER CANUCKS — Reinstated Ds Zeev Buium and Marco Rossi from injured reserve. Reassigned G Jiri Patera to Abbotsford (AHL). Placed F Filip Chytil on injured reserve.
VEGAS GOLDEN KNIGHTS — Reinstated F Colton Sissons from injured reserve.
WASHINGTON CAPITALS — Designated F Sonny Milano for waivers. Reinstated F Connor McMichael from injured reserve.

SOCCER
Major League Soccer

D.C. UNITED — Signed G Grant Leveille to a contract.
FC CINCINNATI — Signed Ds Andrei Chirila and Ayoub Lajhar and G Bryan Dowd to short-term agreements.
LOS ANGELES FC — Signed F Denis Bouanga to a three-year contract extension.

TENNIS

Dubai Duty Free Championships

At Dubai Tennis Stadium
Dubai, United Arab Emirates
Purse: $3,311,005
Surface: Hardcourt outdoor
Seedings in parentheses
Thursday
Men's Singles
Quarterfinals

Daniil Medvedev (3), Russia, def. Jenson Brooksby, United States, 6-2, 6-1.
Felix Auger-Aliassime (1), Canada, def. Jiri Lehecka (8), Czechia, 6-3, 7-6 (2).
Men's DoublesQuarterfinalsSimone Bolelli and Andrea Vavassori (4), Italy, def. Patrik Rikl and Petr Nouza, Czechia, 6-7 (4), 6-2, 10-8.
Lloyd Glasspool and Julian Cash (1), Britain, def. Albano Olivetti and Theo Arribage, France, 6-7 (6), 6-3, 10-4.

Men's Doubles
Quarterfinals

Harri Heliovaara, Finland, and Henry Patten (3), Britain, def. Alexander Bublik, Kazakhstan, and Juncheng Shang, China, walkover.
Mate Pavic, Croatia, and Marcelo Arevalo (2), El Salvador, def. Lucas Miedler, Austria, and Francisco Cabral, Portugal, 6-4, 3-6, 11-9.

Merida Open

Wednesday
At Yucatan Country Club
Merida, Mexico
Purse: $1,206,446
Surface: Hardcourt outdoor
Seedings in parentheses
Women's Singles
Round of 16

Victoria Jimenez Kasintseva, Andorra, def. Magda Linette (8), Poland, 5-7, 7-6 (5), 7-5.
Marie Bouzkova (4), Czechia, def. Emiliana Arango, Colombia, 2-6, 6-1, 2-0, ret.
Katie Boulter, Britain, def. Camila Osorio, Colombia, 6-3, ret.
Cristina Bucsa, Spain, def. Marina Stakusic, Canada, 7-6 (1), 6-3.

Women's Doubles
Round of 16

Quinn Gleason, United States, and Magali Kempen, Belgium, def. Kristina Mladenovic, France, and Hanyu Guo (3), China, 6-4, 6-1.
Maia Lumsden, Britain, and Isabelle Haverlag, Netherlands, def. Renata Zarazua and Marian Gomez Pezuela Cano, Mexico, 6-3, 6-2.
Xu Yifan and Qianhui Tang, China, def. Emiliana Arango, Colombia, and Zeynep Sonmez, Turkiye, walkover.

Abierto Mexicano Telcel

Wednesday
At The Princess Mundo Imperial
Acapulco, Mexico
Purse: $2,469,450
Surface: Hardcourt outdoor
Seedings in parentheses
Men's Singles
Round of 16

Terence Atmane, France, def. Rafael Jodar, Spain, 6-2, 4-6, 6-1.
Flavio Cobolli (5), Italy, def. Dalibor Svrcina, Czechia, 6-4, 6-4.
Miomir Kecmanovic, Serbia, def. Alexander Zverev (1), Germany, 6-3, 6-7 (3), 7-6 (4).
Brandon Nakashima, United States, def. Patrick Kypson, United States, 6-4, 6-4.
Yibing Wu, China, def. Sho Shimabukuro, Japan, 6-3, 7-6 (4).
Mattia Bellucci, Italy, def. Alejandro Davidovich Fokina (4), Spain, 6-3, 6-3.
Frances Tiafoe (8), United States, def. Aleksandar Kovacevic, United States, 6-4, 3-6, 7-6 (7).
Valentin Vacherot (6), Monaco, def. Gael Monfils, France, 6-3, 6-3.

PRO SOCCER

MLS

Eastern Conference

	W	L	T	Pts	GF	GA
Nashville	1	0	0	3	4	1
Cincinnati	1	0	0	3	2	0
New York	1	0	0	3	2	1
D.C. United	1	0	0	3	1	0
Charlotte FC	0	0	1	1	1	1
NYC FC	0	0	1	1	1	1
Columbus	0	1	0	0	2	3
Toronto FC	0	1	0	0	2	3
Chicago	0	1	0	0	1	2
Orlando City	0	1	0	0	1	2
Philadelphia	0	1	0	0	0	1
Atlanta	0	1	0	0	0	2
New England	0	1	0	0	1	4
Inter Miami CF	0	1	0	0	0	3
CF Montréal	0	1	0	0	0	5

Western Conference

	W	L	T	Pts	GF	GA
San Diego FC	1	0	0	3	5	0
LA FC	1	0	0	3	3	0
San Jose	1	0	0	3	3	0
Seattle	1	0	0	3	2	0
FC Dallas	1	0	0	3	3	2
Portland	1	0	0	3	3	2
Houston	1	0	0	3	2	1
Vancouver	1	0	0	3	1	0
Austin FC	0	0	1	1	2	2
Minn. United	0	0	1	1	2	2
LA Galaxy	0	0	1	1	1	1
St Louis City	0	0	1	1	1	1
Real Salt Lake	0	1	0	0	0	1
Colorado	0	1	0	0	0	2
Sporting KC	0	1	0	0	0	3

Note: Three points for victory, one point for tie.

Saturday, February 28

New England at New York
CF Montréal at Chicago
Portland at Colorado
Cincinnati at Minnesota
Seattle at Real Salt Lake
Atlanta at San Jose
Nashville at FC Dallas
Los Angeles FC at Houston
Columbus at Sporting Kansas City
Toronto FC at Vancouver
Charlotte FC at LA Galaxy

Sunday, March 1

D.C. United at Austin FC
New York City FC at Philadelphia
Miami at Orlando City
St Louis City at San Diego FC

Saturday, March 7

Houston at New England
Orlando City at New York City FC
Miami at D.C. United
Real Salt Lake at Atlanta
Austin FC at Charlotte FC
Chicago at Columbus
San Jose at Philadelphia
San Diego FC at Sporting Kansas City
Minnesota at Nashville
Seattle at St Louis City
LA Galaxy at Colorado
FC Dallas at Los Angeles FC
Vancouver at Portland

Sunday, March 8

CF Montréal at New York
Toronto FC at Cincinnati

AP SPORTLIGHT

Feb. 27

1918 — The first neutral site game in NHL history is held in Quebec City. Frank Nighbor scores twice in the first period to lead the Ottawa Senators to a 3-1 win over the Montreal Canadiens.
1955 — Boston beats Milwaukee 62-57 at Providence, R.I. in a game which set records for fewest points scored by one team, and by both teams, since the introduction of the 24-second clock.
1959 — The Boston Celtics beat the Minneapolis Lakers 173-139 as seven NBA records fall. The Celtics set records for most points (179), most points in a half (90), most points in a quarter (52) and most field goals (72). Boston's Tom Heinsohn leads all scorers with 43 points and Bob Cousy adds 31 while setting an NBA record with 28 assists.
1966 — Richard Petty wins the rain-shortened Daytona 500 by more than a lap at a speed of 160.927 mph. Petty holds the lead for the last 212 miles of the scheduled 500-mile event, which is called five miles from the finish. Cale Yarborough finishes second.
1977 — Stan Mikita of the Chicago Black Hawks scores his 500th goal in a 4-3 loss to the Vancouver Canucks.
1982 — Florida apprentice Mary Russ becomes the first female jockey to win a Grade I stakes in North America when she captures the Widener Handicap aboard Lord Darnley at Hialeah (Fla.) Park.
2006 — Effa Manley is the first woman elected to the baseball Hall of Fame. The former Newark Eagles co-owner is among 17 people from the Negro Leagues and pre-Negro Leagues chosen by a special committee.

PRO BASKETBALL

NBA

Eastern Conference
Atlantic Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Boston	38	20	.655	—
New York	37	22	.627	1½
Toronto	34	25	.576	4½
Philadelphia	32	26	.552	6
Brooklyn	15	42	.263	22½

Southeast Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Orlando	31	26	.544	—
Miami	31	28	.525	1
Atlanta	29	31	.483	3½
Charlotte	28	31	.475	4
Washington	16	41	.281	15

Central Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Detroit	43	14	.754	—
Cleveland	37	23	.617	7½
Milwaukee	26	31	.456	17
Chicago	24	35	.407	20
Indiana	15	44	.254	29

Western Conference
Southwest Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
San Antonio	42	16	.724	—
Houston	36	21	.632	5½
Memphis	21	36	.368	20½
Dallas	21	36	.368	20½
New Orleans	17	42	.288	25½

Northwest Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Oklahoma City	45	15	.750	—
Denver	37	22	.627	7½
Minnesota	36	23	.610	8½
Portland	28	31	.475	16½
Utah	18	40	.310	26

Pacific Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
L.A. Lakers	34	23	.596	—
Phoenix	33	26	.559	2
Golden State	31	28	.525	4
L.A. Clippers	27	30	.474	7
Sacramento	13	47	.217	22½

Wednesday's games

Golden State 133, Memphis 112
Detroit 124, Oklahoma City 116
San Antonio 110, Toronto 107
Houston 128, Sacramento 97
Milwaukee 118, Cleveland 116
Denver 103, Boston 84

Thursday's games

Charlotte at Indiana
Miami at Philadelphia
Houston at Orlando
San Antonio at Brooklyn
Washington at Atlanta
Portland at Chicago
Sacramento at Dallas
L.A. Lakers at Phoenix
New Orleans at Utah
Minnesota at L.A. Clippers

Friday's games

Cleveland at Detroit
Brooklyn at Boston
New York at Milwaukee
Memphis at Dallas
Denver at Oklahoma City

Saturday's games

Portland at Charlotte
Houston at Miami
Toronto at Washington
L.A. Lakers at Golden State
New Orleans at Utah

Sunday's games

San Antonio at New York
Cleveland at Brooklyn
Milwaukee at Chicago
Minnesota at Denver
Memphis at Indiana
Detroit at Orlando
Portland at Atlanta
Oklahoma City at Dallas
Philadelphia at Boston
New Orleans at L.A. Clippers
Sacramento at L.A. Lakers

Scoring leaders

Through Wednesday

	G	FG	FT	PTS	AVG
Doncic, LAL	45	465	371	1464	32.5
Gil.-Alex., OKC	49	534	403	1558	31.8
Edwards, MIN	49	501	280	1450	29.6
Maxey, PHI	56	567	309	1629	29.1
Brown, BOS	52	561	285	1513	29.1
Jokic, DEN	43	434	284	1238	28.8
Mitchell, CLE	55	546	287	1570	28.5
Leonard, LAC	44	430	257	1234	28.0
Brunson, NY	54	512	266	1443	26.7
Markkanen, UTA	42	384	240	1123	26.7

AUTO RACING

Palou chasing 4th straight IndyCar title

By Jenna Fryer
Associated Press

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. — IndyCar opens its season with a roaring four races in March, a return to Phoenix Raceway, three new venues and the son of a motorsports icon making his debut in a North American-based series.

Oh, and Alex Palou will be racing for his fifth championship in six years.

The season begins Sunday on the downtown streets of St. Petersburg with a field of 25 drivers led by defending race winner Palou. The Spaniard kicked off his title campaign on the street course a year ago with the win, the first of eight victories that included the Indianapolis 500 and a third consecutive IndyCar title.

He's back with his Chip Ganassi Racing team intact, the breach of contract lawsuit with McLaren decided and his eyes on another title. If he wins a fourth straight championship, Palou would join Sebastien Bourdais as the only driver in series history to accomplish the feat.

"I think 2025 was so strange, so good, so magical ... it's very hard to get there. That doesn't mean that nobody can or that I cannot do it again, but you need so many things to go right to get eight wins, to win the 500, to win the championship," Palou said. "Although I would love to have another season like 2025, I am pretty certain that it's probably not going to happen again for me. But I'll try. I'll try."

His competition will come from within — teammate Scott Dixon, a six-time IndyCar champion, is looking to rebound from last year's one-win season — as well as traditional heavyweight Team Penske. McLaren hopes to be a contender after Pato O'Ward finished second in the standings last year, and Andretti Global has been bolstered by the addition of former Penske stalwart Will Power and other key hires.

Many eyes will be on Power, who turns 45 on Sunday, the same day as his first IndyCar race driving for someone other than Roger Penske since 2009. He was replaced in the Penske lineup by David Malukas, who at 24 has a longer runway than Power.



George Walker IV/AP

Alex Palou celebrates after winning the IndyCar championship Aug. 31 at Nashville Superspeedway in Lebanon, Tenn. Palou is seeking his fourth-straight series title.

But Power was quickly snapped up by aggressive new Andretti owner Dan Towriss, who also hired Ron Ruzewski, one of three Team Penske executives fired after an Indianapolis 500 inspection infraction, as team principal of its IndyCar team. Ruzewski and Power know Team Penske inside and out and bring priceless knowledge to an Andretti organization that last won the IndyCar title in 2012.

"It's really difficult to understand, like, are we missing anything? Are we good or bad? We won't know that until we actually have our first race," Power said. "But the end of the first race weekend you'll start to see, as you always do, 'OK, we need to work on this, this, this and this.'"

Power won Penske its last IndyCar championship in 2022 and the organization is trying to rebound from a rough season last year. Two-time Indy 500 winner Josef Newgarden didn't win until the season finale and finished 12th in the standings. Scott McLaughlin went winless but was ninth.

Busy month of March

IndyCar has a healthy 18-race schedule this year, the most events since the 2014 season, and for the first time in years, the series won't go weeks between the opener and the next race.

Penske, who owns IndyCar and Indianapolis Motor Speedway, was able to get a record four races in March by joining NASCAR next weekend for a return to Phoenix. IndyCar last raced at Phoenix in 2018, a race won by Newgarden.

From Phoenix, the series goes to the inaugural event on the Streets of Arlington in a collaboration with Jerry Jones and the Dallas Cowboys. IndyCar closes out the month at Barber Motorsports Park in Alabama.

Arlington is one of three new venues on the schedule as IndyCar will move away from downtown Toronto to race on the streets of Markham, Ontario, and a President Donald Trump-backed event in Washington, D.C., to mark the 250th birthday of the United States.

Schumacher's debut

IndyCar typically features a few new faces every year, but none come with the name recognition that Mick Schumacher brings.

Schumacher is the son of seven-time Formula 1 champion Michael Schumacher and has made the move away from F1 after three seasons without a ride. He drove for Haas in F1 and became a Mercedes reserve driver after losing that seat at the end of 2022.

Now the 26-year-old German will give North American open wheel racing a try with a seat at Rahal Letterman Lanigan.

He'll need to quickly adapt to oval racing, which will be new to Schumacher, who said he's leaning on teammate Graham Rahal for advice.

"I'm very curious and interested in learning about that," Schumacher said. "The good thing is we have Graham on board, who has done a couple of these races in his lifetime, and therefore I can learn very much from him."

F1's new regulations could have major impact on series

By James Ellingworth
Associated Press

Chaotic starts, tricky overtaking, lifting off the gas on straights. Formula 1's new era of regulations could upend the series in unexpected ways when the season begins with the Australian Grand Prix next week.

Max Verstappen and Lewis Hamilton, the two most successful drivers on the grid, were critical in testing of cars whose electrical hybrid systems promote unusual driving styles and make racing more strategic.

Four-time champion Verstappen branded the cars "no fun" and suggested they might be a factor in considering retirement, while seven-time champ Hamilton suggested the rules are too complex for fans to grasp.

It's a crucial season for F1, which expanded rapidly over the last decade by putting drivers' personalities center stage and not focusing on technological detail.

"We need to stay calm because, as always when there is something happening as a new regulation, there's always the doubt that everything is wrong," F1 chief executive Stefano Domenicali said last week at testing.

Despite big changes, the top four teams are the same after Mercedes, Ferrari, McLaren and Red Bull all showed promise in testing.

'Big four' in 2026

The "big four," as McLaren boss Zak Brown calls them, seem broadly similar on pace, with Mercedes and Ferrari perhaps having a slight edge in race simulations in testing.

At the final test, Ferrari revealed a rear wing that turns upside down for straight-line speed and an innovative mini-wing behind the exhaust. It also stood out as the fastest in practice starts after other teams, especially Mercedes, were sluggish off the line.

Rivals have praised Red Bull for mastering the electrical power technology, while champion Lando Norris and Oscar Piastri seem consistently strong again for McLaren, which uses a Mercedes engine.



Altaf Qadri/AP

Red Bull driver Max Verstappen watches mechanics prepare his car for preseason testing.

Mercedes' mix of power and reliability could make George Russell a true championship contender. There's extra attention on Mercedes' engine, which was fast in testing following weeks of speculation from rivals about its legality. Mercedes has said the design is perfectly legal.

Some teams sacrificed the 2025 season to seek big gains in 2026. It hasn't worked.

Even with star designer Adrian Newey in charge, Aston Martin was late to testing, unreliable and often slower than new team Cadillac. Williams and Alpine have also struggled, but Haas may be able to challenge the top teams.

Compromise to optimize

The push by the FIA for a 50-50 split between power from the engine and from electrical hybrid technology means driving in 2026 is all about compromise.

Drivers in preseason testing were revving the engines hard on the grid for a fast getaway, lifting off the gas on straights to charge the on-board battery and shifting down aggressively to first gear in corners. The FIA could intervene to tweak the regulations if the first few races throw up bizarre scenarios.

Standing starts off the grid required a tricky procedure in testing because the hybrid system doesn't kick in until 31 mph. After some sluggish practice starts, tweaks have been made to the procedure, but that might not stop Ferrari, which identified the issue early and designed its engine to be quick off the line. Hamilton delivered one of the most eye-catching moments of preseason by blasting past four cars in a practice start in Bahrain last week.

Fast starts might be extra important if overtaking is as hard as some drivers suspect. Get ready to hear about 2026 cars being "energy-starved" on certain tracks, including Australia, which doesn't have as many heavy braking zones where the battery can charge.

If cars can't make full use of the hybrid system, the new "overtake mode" with extra power might be a waste of limited energy if it needs several laps to hit full charge and still leaves the overtaking car a sitting duck afterward.

NASCAR/SOCCER



JENNA FRYER/AP

Banners showing 23XI co-owners Michael Jordan and Denny Hamlin as well as several of the team's drivers hang in the lobby at Airspeed, the team's headquarters, in Huntersville, N.C..

Jordan, Hamlin aiming for dominance with 23XI Racing

BY JENNA FRYER
Associated Press

HUNTERSVILLE, N.C. — There's a sign that hangs on a wall in Airspeed, the headquarters of 23XI Racing, that clearly states the vision of the NASCAR team owned by Michael Jordan and Denny Hamlin.

"To be the world's most recognizable motorsports team, winning on and off the track, moving forward together, and setting the standard for excellence," it reads.

Any questions about how 23XI would emerge from December's federal antitrust lawsuit against NASCAR have been immediately silenced at the start of the new year.

Tyler Reddick won the season-opening Daytona 500 and last weekend's race at Atlanta to open 2 for 2, while teammate Bubba Wallace led a combined 86 laps in the two events and easily could have been the winner instead of Reddick.

Reddick and Wallace head to Circuit of the Americas road course in Texas for this Sunday's race ranked 1-2 in the Cup Series points standings.

"All we've been doing since the season started is eating, drinking and celebrating," 23XI President Steve Lauletta told the 100-plus employees this week during a luncheon to celebrate Reddick's Daytona 500 win.

The culture

Jordan, the Pro Basketball Hall of Famer, and Hamlin, a three-time Daytona 500 winner, have created a culture inside 23XI designed to build a championship-winning organization that will be the go-to destination for aspiring drivers, engineers, mechanics and anyone who wants to work in NASCAR.

A victory flag flapped in the wind outside Airspeed, where wins are celebrated with a pizza party when the team plane returns. Then comes company-wide celebratory luncheons, and an end-of-day shot of Jordan-owned Cincoro Tequila.

Employees get preloaded cards each month to use in the vending machines, have access to a state-of-the-art gym equipped with a sauna, hot and cold tubs and a physical therapist, and work in a building many legacy NASCAR teams only dream of owning.

All this for a team that was only conceived in 2020, launched in 2021, and now ranks among the top in NASCAR with the likes of Hendrick Motorsports, Joe Gibbs Racing and Team Penske.

"There's no question that we're building fast cars and cars that are capable of winning week in, week out. We don't always hit the setup or things like that, but we're working hard," said Hamlin.

No quit despite legal fight

23XI has reached the top despite a two-plus year Jordan-led fight against NASCAR over revenue sharing. The legal battle put a strain on 23XI, which raced unchartered all of last season and won just once — Wallace's win at the Brickyard 400 at Indianapolis Motor Speedway — as employees worried a courtroom defeat would put the team out of business.

NASCAR settled the suit on the ninth day of the trial — a win for all the teams, but especially plaintiffs 23XI and Front Row Motorsports — and 23XI never missed a beat. Lauletta said part of the early 2026 success is because Jordan and Hamlin promised to pay employees through 2026 regardless of the lawsuit outcome. That vow put the company at ease as everyone focused on their jobs.

"The guys worked hard all summer. I know we had our little ordeal, but they never gave up," Jordan said after Reddick's win at Atlanta. "They kept working hard, and this is the fruit of their labor. You know, they put forth the effort, and for us to come out and win the first two races says a lot about our whole team."

Reaching new heights

As 23XI attempts to become an industry leader, the organization has been thinking outside the box in marketing and partnership opportunities. San Diego State University wears Jordan brand and 23XI partnered with the basketball team the night before the Daytona 500 for a game against the University of Nevada.

Recorded messages from 23XI's drivers played on the big screen, a race car was displayed outside the arena and branded rally towels were distributed. On race day, 23XI and Toyota hosted a watch party at a sports bar on Coronado Island, where NASCAR will race for the first time later this year.

"We want people to go 'That's my team!'" Lauletta said. "We had our partners there giving away prizes and then we won the race. That's the stuff that helps differentiate us and helps these casual sports fan who know who Michael is now know who our team is. We won the race and the place went wild."

FIFA certain Mexico will host World Cup amid cartel violence

BY CARLOS RODRIGUEZ
Associated Press

MEXICO CITY — The violence that erupted in Mexico after the death of a powerful drug lord has left many questioning whether the country will be able to co-host the World Cup in just over three months.

FIFA President Gianni Infantino thinks it can.

"Of course, we are monitoring the situation in Mexico these days, but I want to say from the outset that we have complete confidence in Mexico, in its president, Claudia Sheinbaum, and in the authorities, and we are convinced that everything will go as smoothly as possible," Infantino said late Tuesday in a press conference in Colombia.

"Mexico is a great country, like in every country in the world, things happen; we don't live on the moon or another planet," Infantino added. "That's why we have governments, police and authorities who will ensure order and security."

The Mexican army killed Nemesio Rubén Oseguera Cervantes, "El Mencho," who led the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, on Sunday, sparking several days of violence. Cartel members burned cars and blocked roads in nearly a dozen Mexican states and authorities report that at least 70 people have died.

Four high-level soccer matches from the local leagues were postponed last Sunday, including one in the central city of Queretaro, where Mexico defeated Iceland 4-0 late Wednesday in a friendly match.

Before the match, a minute of silence was held in the Corregidora stadium in honor of the soldiers who died during the operation to capture Oseguera.

Thirteen World Cup matches are scheduled to be held in Mexico, including the opening game in Mexico City on June 11 between the co-host and South Africa. Guadalajara, the central hub for the Jalisco cartel, is scheduled to host four.

Colombia is set to play one game in Mexico City and one in Guadalajara.

"Our first two matches are in Mexico, but we know they will overcome this and move forward," said Ramón Jesurún, the president of the Colombian Soccer Federation. "I have absolute and total confidence in my geopolitical thinking that this is an issue Mexico will overcome, and overcome very quickly."

Other nations have expressed more concern. The Portuguese soccer federation said Tuesday that it was closely monitoring developments ahead of a planned friendly against Mexico in March. Jamaica is set to play New Caledonia in Guadalajara on March 26 in an intercontinental playoff semifinal, with the winner advancing to face Congo for a World Cup spot.

"The games are at the end of March, so we still have another month to see what happens; but it is making me very nervous, to be honest," said Michael Ricketts, the president of the Jamaican Soccer Federation. "We will be listening out for CONCACAF and FIFA to give us instructions (on) whether they are playing the games or whether they are immediately looking for other options."

Another Mexican city, Monterrey, will host a playoff where Bolivia plays Suriname and the winner faces Iraq for a spot in the tournament.

On Monday, Sheinbaum said there is "every guarantee" that the World Cup matches in Guadalajara will be played as planned and added that there was "no risk."

"We are in regular contact with the presidency and the authorities in Mexico and we are monitoring the situation," Infantino said. "The World Cup is going to be an incredible celebration."



MARCO UGARTE/AP

Recent cartel violence has cast doubt over whether Mexico will be able to host World Cup games in just over three months at venues like Akron Stadium, seen here, in Guadalajara.

COLLEGE BASKETBALL/MLB



JESSICA HILL/AP

UConn guard Solo Ball defends St. John's forward Bryce Hopkins in the first half Wednesday in Hartford, Conn. The Huskies held the Red Storm to 20% shooting in a 72-40 rout.

Defense shines for No. 6 UConn over No. 15 St. John's

BY JIM FULLER
Associated Press

HARTFORD, Conn.— The last time UConn played in front of its home fans, coach Dan Hurley was pulling starters in the opening minutes as a result of defensive breakdowns in a surprising loss to Creighton.

There were no such issues during Wednesday night's clash of Big East heavyweights. The sixth-ranked Huskies forced No. 15 St. John's to miss its final 24 shots and held the Red Storm to 20% shooting in a 72-40 rout.

"It was just our night," Hurley said. "It just started snowballing on you when you have a night like this. Obviously, we played good defense on them. I thought we demoralized them a little bit. It was one of those nights when everything went great for us and everything went wrong for them. We did a lot to make that happen."

Tarris Reed Jr. had 20 points, 11 rebounds and six blocks in the blowout that snapped the Red Storm's 13-game winning streak.

Alex Karaban added 14 points and five rebounds for UConn (26-3, 16-2), which moved back into first place in the Big East by avenging an 81-72 loss to St. John's at Madison Square Garden on Feb. 6.

The Red Storm had just two field goals in the second half and didn't make a basket in the final 17:27.

"I thought we demoralized them a little bit."

Dan Hurley
UConn coach

"That has probably only happened to me two times in my career," Hall of Fame coach Rick Pitino said. "Once in my first year at Kentucky, when we went into Phog Allen (Fieldhouse) at Kansas, when I was playing with a very much inferior team and some walk-ons, not with this type of team. So it is all on me. I am very disappointed in our performance offensively, especially of sharing the ball, of moving the ball."

Zuby Ejiofor, Dillon Mitchell and Bryce Hopkins combined for 50 points while shooting 65% from the field in St. John's win Feb. 6. On Wednesday night, they had 14 points on 5-for-23 shooting.

Joson Sanon scored all 10 of his points in the first half for the Red Storm (22-6, 15-2). Ejiofor had two quick baskets for St. John's early in the second half, but UConn scored the next 16 points. A driving layup by Karaban put the Huskies up by 23 with 13:42 left.

"It is taking pride on the defensive end, really guarding our yard and having trust in each other," Karaban said after leading UConn to its 27th straight win in Hartford.

Top 25 on AFN

No. 3 Michigan (26-2)
at No. 10 Illinois (22-6)
AFN-Pacific
Saturday 2 a.m. CET
Saturday 10 a.m. JKT

No. 11 Virginia (25-3)
at No. 1 Duke (26-2)
AFN-Sports
Saturday 6 p.m. CET
Sunday 2 a.m. JKT

No. 14 Kansas (21-7)
at No. 2 Arizona (26-2)
AFN-Atlantic
Saturday 10 p.m. CET
Sunday 6 a.m. JKT

No. 17 Alabama (21-7)
at No. 22 Tennessee (22-8)
AFN-Sports
Saturday 12 a.m. CET
Sunday 8 a.m. JKT

In debut, Skenes loses four strikes to ABS challenges

Associated Press

NORTH PORT, Fla. — National League Cy Young Award winner Paul Skenes lost four strikes to challenges in his first spring training start.

Skenes struck out four and walked four over 2⅓ innings for Pittsburgh on Wednesday against the Atlanta Braves, who were 4-for-4 against the right-hander on challenges to get called strikes overturned to balls — one of them by the slimmest of margins.

The 53-pitch outing is expected to be the only one Skenes has for the Pirates before he joins the United States for the World Baseball Classic. He allowed one hit and one run while facing 12 batters. He is going into his third season with Pittsburgh.

"Winning gold is the biggest thing," said Skenes, who was then asked if U.S. success in the just-completed Winter Olympics provides more motivation. "Yeah, men's hockey, women's hockey, all the other golds that we won in the Olympics. We're America, we've got to assert our dominance over everybody else. That's what we do. ... It's going to be fun."

Skenes threw 27 pitches for strikes against Atlanta, along with four other pitches initially called strikes by home plate umpire Chris Segal that Braves hitters challenged through the automated ball-strike system — the so-called robot umpires.

"Today, that's how it is. I've just got to adjust," Skenes said. "I think it will even out over the course of the season, but ask me in June."

Three of those challenges came on consecutive batters in the first inning.

Matt Olson challenged an 82.3 mph curveball that was called a strike, and had a smile on his face as replay showed indeed that the 1-1 pitch was only about one-tenth of an inch off the plate. He went on to draw a walk.

"When the season gets rolling, that's probably not the pitch that you're going to be challenging, but you've got to feel it out a bit," Olson said. "I figured, whatever. It was a backdoor sweeper that I felt kind of held up a little bit."

Jurickson Profar then challenged a 98.3 mph fastball for a strike on the first pitch he faced, and it was overturned to a 1-0 count before he also walked. Austin Riley sought a replay when a 99 mph pitch on an 0-2 count was called a strike, but was above the zone, though on the next pitch he struck out swinging on a 98.5 mph fastball just below that.

In the Atlanta second, Ronald Acuña asked for a review and got a ball on a 97.6 mph fastball off the plate that had been called a strike.

While the overturned strike thrown to Riley was the fastest of the day by Skenes, his fastball was consistently in the upper-90s throughout his outing.



MATT SLOCUM/AP

Paul Skenes made what might be his only spring start for the Pirates on Wednesday before he heads to the World Baseball Classic.

NFL



MATT DURISKO/AP

Miami Dolphins quarterback Tua Tagovailoa faces an uncertain future but likely will land with a team because of a thin draft class this year.

Extra thin draft class will impact QB market

BY DAVE CAMPBELL
Associated Press

Kirk Cousins will be available to sign with any team in two weeks once he's released by the Atlanta Falcons. Tua Tagovailoa could be on the move from the Miami Dolphins. Kyler Murray might not be in the Arizona Cardinals' plans.

Reliable quarterbacks have been of utmost importance for decades in the NFL, but long-term satisfaction with the position across the league is becoming increasingly elusive. Just because a team has paid top dollar for a franchise quarterback doesn't mean that decision won't be reconsidered the following year for cost, injuries, performance or all of the above.

For the handful of clubs either at a crossroad or committed to starting over this offseason, the timing is hardly ideal.

Cousins will again be the most certain option on the market next month, when the Falcons plan to cut him and fully pivot toward 2024 first-round draft pick Michael Penix Jr., whose knee injury last year gave Cousins the job back. His familiarity with O'Connell and fondness for the Vikings could lead to a reunion. Cousins, who turns 38 before the season, would be a realistic bridge starter to give McCarthy more time to develop.

After Indiana national champion and Heisman Trophy winner Fernando Mendoza, who's widely expected to be the first-overall pick in the draft by the Las Vegas Raiders, the rookie class thins quickly.

Finding a new starter on the open market is always tricky, and the bargain options are as scant as ever. Green Bay Packers backup Malik Willis will be sought after in free agency, but he has only six career starts. Still, depending on how much a team is willing to pay, either against the salary cap or in trade currency with players and draft picks, there should be at least some viable upgrades available.

The Minnesota Vikings have found themselves in these predicaments as frequently as any franchise this century, entering this year with more uncertainty following an erratic and injury-filled debut by J.J. McCarthy.

While Vikings coach Kevin O'Connell has said repeatedly he remains confident in McCarthy's makeup and skill, all the team has committed to for 2026 is bringing in a veteran not only for insurance but stronger competition for the job.

Tua Tagovailoa: With a salary cap charge of about $56 million and new leadership in the front office and on the coaching staff, Tagovailoa's future with the Dolphins is unclear despite the extension he signed less than two years ago. After six seasons of injuries and inconsistency, including a career-most 15 interceptions in 2025, the fifth-overall pick in the 2020 draft is young enough at age 27 to attract attention from other teams.

"Everything's on the table, including the potential of a trade," general manager Jon-Eric Sullivan said.

Kyler Murray: Limited to five games by a foot injury last season as the Cardinals slumped to 3-14, Murray is carrying a salary cap hit of about $52 million for a team that also has a new coaching staff. General manager Monti Ossenfort uttered the familiar refrain at the NFL combine this week: "All options are on the table."

"When you had the kind of year that we had, there's a lot of room for improvement," Ossenfort said. "We've got to find a way to do that."

Daniel Jones: After signing a prove-it contract last season with the Indianapolis Colts, Jones was on his way to mirroring the success Sam Darnold — the biggest prize on the market last year — had with the Seattle Seahawks until Jones tore his Achilles tendon in December. Jones is still rehabilitating from the injury, lessening the league-wide interest, and general manager Chris Ballard said he's trying to re-sign the sixth-overall pick in the 2019 draft.

For Texas Tech D-linemen, combine is icing on cake

BY MICHAEL MAROT
Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Texas Tech had the best college defensive line money could buy last season.

Ends David Bailey and Romello Height each had double-digit sacks totals and were ranked among the top 15 in the Football Bowl Subdivision. Tackles Lee Hunter and Skyler Gill-Howard each relished their opportunities to take on blockers and let teammates fill in the gaps.

The immediate payoff came with the Red Raiders celebrating their first outright league title since 1955, their first Big 12 crown and their first College Football Playoff appearance.

Four of the five transfers who helped transform Texas Tech into a national power received a different reward — appearing at the NFL's annual scouting combine in Indianapolis.

"All five of those guys we had come in, they're really good football players, tremendous football players, and pretty much they're all here getting ready for the combine," former teammate Jacob Rodriguez said Wednesday.

Playing behind the speedy pass rushers and big, beefy interior linemen, the linebacker had the best season of his college career — 128 tackles, seven forced fumbles, four interceptions and two fumble recoveries. His draft prospects soared and Rodriguez finished fifth in Heisman Trophy balloting.

Still, it was a costly proposition for Texas Tech, which paid an estimated $7 million to get the five game-changing linemen. Nearly half of that total reportedly went to Bailey, who some dubbed the highest-paid defensive player in college football's NIL era.

Bailey, of course, insists he was worth every penny and few at Texas Tech would quibble with him given the results.

"They should have paid the inside linebackers a little bit more," he said. "They were the leaders of the defense, everything ran through them."

For combine observers, this is life in a new world — one where more than 300 invitees no longer arrive dreaming of big paydays and joking about how some players might pocket less cash after turning pro.

"I never had to deal with that," 53-year-old New York Jets coach Aaron Glenn said, discussing the absence of NIL deals during his college days in the early 1990s. "I do know it's a real thing and a lot of these players are taking pay cuts (to play in the NFL). But I will say this is what they deserve, probably, because of the amount of money they bring to the college."

Wednesday's interview room could have doubled as an entrepreneurs roundtable.

At one point, defensive tackle Cam Ball explained why he spent all five seasons at Arkansas and how he's attempting to honor his late father's passion for barbecuing. Ball grew up moving grills for his father's Atlanta-based catering company and once his NIL deals kicked in, he continued to help his father though no longer needed need the paycheck.

Today, eight months after his father, Charles, died, Ball and his girlfriend are still cooking. Ball continues to perfect his secret, vinegar-based sauce with seasonings and trimmings his father taught him, while his girlfriend takes care of things such as baked beans and macaroni and cheese.

And Hunter explained how he'd used his NIL money to buy his mother a house and a car, to care for his 5-year-old daughter, Kaylee, and to help his brother start a trucking business by purchasing two 18-wheelers.

"It feels amazing," Hunter said. "There's still more, now I'm working to get (my brother) a bigger truck. That's my goal, to provide for my family and the people I love."

Texas Tech gave Hunter that opportunity last season and he and the school both cashed in. Now the question is will that continue in the NFL?



MICHAEL WYKE/AP

Texas Tech linebacker David Bailey, left, celebrates with Romello Height during a game last season. Both registered double-digit sacks and earned an invitation to the NFL scouting combine.

NHL

Panthers look to save playoff hopes

By Tim Reynolds
Associated Press

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. — By Friday night, the Florida Panthers will have some answers.

The back-to-back Stanley Cup champions — in desperate need of wins to keep realistic playoff hopes alive — open their post-Olympic schedule on Thursday against Toronto, then play host to Buffalo the next night.

They won't be in a playoff position when those two games are over. They won't be mathematically eliminated, either, no matter what happens. But two wins would bring some hope and momentum, while two losses would make already-slim odds probably seem a whole lot longer.

"I think it's very obvious: It's a very important week," Panthers general manager and hockey operations president Bill Zito said. "And it could give us ... we may have easy answers or easy questions to answer at the end of it. We may have real difficult ones. I don't know, but yes, I'll be watching."

The odds aren't good: The Panthers are eight points out of a spot with 25 games remaining. They're last in the Atlantic Division and need to pass six teams to climb into one of the two wild-card spots in the Eastern Conference.

"We are in trouble," Panthers forward Matthew Tkachuk said before the Olympic break.

There are reasons for hope.

Some Panthers did a whole lot of winning over the Olympic break. Tkachuk won a gold medal with USA Hockey at the Milan Cortina Games. Brad Marchand, Sam Reinhart and Sam Bennett won silver medals for Canada. Anton Lundell, Niko Mikkola and Eetu Luostarinen won bronze medals with Finland.

There are hopes that injured players — Seth Jones, Tomas Nosek, Dmitry Kulikov among them — could be back very soon, which would obviously help. And the biggest news came Tuesday, when captain Aleksander Barkov said his recovery from ACL and MCL injuries is going according to plan and that he expects to make his season debut "soon."



Petr David Josek/AP

Matthew Tkachuk celebrates after the US defeated Canada for the gold medal in Milan on Sunday. Tkachuk is back with the Panthers trying to help Florida make the NHL playoffs.

Soon might not be soon enough, but if the Panthers finally get healthy who knows what could happen.

"It's a veteran team that clearly understands what's ahead of us," Panthers coach Paul Maurice said.

"We don't have 25 games left. We've got 25 one-games left. Just really narrow your focus and not get ahead of yourself. It's like a playoff series. You just can't carry your losses into the next night and there's no room to take a deep breath after a win. You just cut it off and really focus on the next day."

The schedule coming down the stretch is daunting, to say the least.

Of the 25 remaining games, in a 49-day span, 15 are on the road. There are two four-game road trips left and a five-game one as well, with no homestand longer than two games the rest of the way. There are five back-to-backs left on the schedule, and there's not a lot of practice time either.

It will not be easy. And the next two games will absolutely set the tone.

"We need to be comfortable being uncomfortable, and that's sort of, kind of, a weak parallel on the management side," Zito said. "Trying to figure out what are we, where are we and why, and then applying that and then making prudent decisions."

Pens' Crosby on IR, expected to miss 4 weeks

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — The Pittsburgh Penguins will have to start their playoff push without Sidney Crosby.

The club placed its longtime captain on injured reserve on Wednesday. The move comes after Crosby sustained a lower-body injury during the Olympic hockey tournament at the Milan Cortina Games.

The 38-year-old three-time Stanley Cup winner went down in the second period of Canada's quarterfinal win over Czechia. The Canadians held out hope Crosby would be able to return, but he sat out a semifinal win over Finland and a loss to the United States in the gold medal game.

Crosby, who is expected to miss at least four weeks, does not regret his decision to play in Milan.

"It's the Olympics and it's an amazing experience just as an athlete, not just as a hockey player," he said, later adding, "obviously injuries are part of the game."

Crosby did not have an issue with the hit he absorbed from Czechia defenseman Radko Gudas.



Darryl Dyck/The Canadian Press

Sidney Crosby, right, gets checked by Ondrej Palat during an Olympics hockey game in Milan. Crosby is expected to miss four weeks while the Penguins battle for a playoff spot.

"He was trying to be physical and play hard as any defenseman would and it just went the wrong way as far as on my end of it," he said.

Crosby credited the medical staff in Italy with helping him have a shot at playing in the gold medal game. He believes he came "a lot closer" than he thought he would to suiting up for Team Canada in the final.

Asked if he considered playing in a limited capacity, such as being relegated to strictly the power play, Crosby shook his head.

"If you can't go out there and do a job and be relied upon ... then you can't force it and that's really what it came down to," he said.

The injury comes with the surprising Penguins in second place in the Metropolitan Division. Pittsburgh is looking to return to the postseason for the first time since 2022.

Crosby has been his usually productive self this season. He leads the Penguins in goals (27), assists (32) and points (59) and is on pace to extend his NHL record of averaging at least a point a game to 21 years and counting.

"Obviously, I want to be back out there as soon as possible," he said. "Just have to figure out what that looks like and how that's going to be and be at my best when I come back."

Pittsburgh opens the post-Olympic break at home against New Jersey on Thursday. The matchup with the Devils is the first of 13 games in a 24-day stretch for the Penguins.

"All year we've had injuries (and) guys have stepped up," he said. "To get to where we're at at this point, it's because of our team play."

Scoreboard

Eastern Conference

Atlantic Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Tampa Bay	56	38	14	4	80	203	142
Montreal	57	32	17	8	72	199	187
Buffalo	58	33	19	6	72	197	177
Detroit	58	33	19	6	72	174	175
Boston	57	32	20	5	69	195	182
Ottawa	57	28	22	7	63	191	184
Toronto	58	27	22	9	63	190	198
Florida	57	29	25	3	61	174	191

Metropolitan Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Carolina	57	36	15	6	78	197	163
Pittsburgh	56	29	15	12	70	192	169
N.Y. Islanders	58	32	21	5	69	169	162
Washington	60	30	23	7	67	192	178
Columbus	56	29	20	7	65	179	177
Philadelphia	57	25	21	11	61	168	183
New Jersey	58	28	28	2	58	147	177
N.Y. Rangers	57	22	29	6	50	151	180

Western Conference

Central Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Colorado	56	38	9	9	85	216	140
Dallas	58	35	14	9	79	197	161
Minnesota	58	34	14	10	78	196	169
Utah	58	30	24	4	64	185	161
Nashville	57	26	24	7	59	169	198
Winnipeg	57	23	26	8	54	163	177
Chicago	57	22	26	9	53	154	185
St. Louis	57	20	28	9	49	147	203

Pacific Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Vegas	58	28	16	14	70	197	183
Edmonton	58	28	22	8	64	198	194
Anaheim	56	30	23	3	63	185	195
Seattle	57	27	21	9	63	163	169
Los Angeles	57	23	20	14	60	150	167
San Jose	55	27	24	4	58	171	193
Calgary	56	23	27	6	52	142	169
Vancouver	58	18	33	7	43	151	213

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.

Wednesday's games

Washington 3, Philadelphia 1
Buffalo 2, New Jersey 1
Tampa Bay 4, Toronto 2
Dallas 4, Seattle 1
Colorado 4, Utah 2
Winnipeg 3, Vancouver 2, OT
Vegas 6, Los Angeles 4
Anaheim 6, Edmonton 5

Thursday's games

Columbus at Boston
Detroit at Ottawa
N.Y. Islanders at Montreal
New Jersey at Pittsburgh
Tampa Bay at Carolina
Toronto at Florida
Chicago at Nashville
Philadelphia at N.Y. Rangers
Seattle at St. Louis
Minnesota at Colorado
Calgary at San Jose
Edmonton at Los Angeles

Friday's games

Buffalo at Florida
Vegas at Washington
Minnesota at Utah
Winnipeg at Anaheim

Saturday's games

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

Sunday's games

Vegas at Pittsburgh
Winnipeg at San Jose
Chicago at Utak
St. Louis at Minnesota
Florida at N.Y. Islanders
Calgary at Anaheim

Scoring leaders

Through Wednesday

	GP	G	A	PTS
Connor McDavid, EDM	59	34	64	98
Nikita Kucherov, TB	52	30	64	94
Nathan MacKinnon, COL	55	40	53	93
Macklin Celebrini, SJ	55	28	53	81
Leon Draisaitl, EDM	56	29	51	80
David Pastrnak, BOS	52	22	49	71
Mark Scheifele, WPG	57	27	43	70
Kirill Kaprizov, MIN	58	32	38	70
Mikko Rantanen, DAL	54	20	49	69
Jack Eichel, LV	50	21	47	68

NHL

Ducks coach Quenneville reaches 1K wins

By Greg Beacham
Associated Press

ANAHEIM, Calif. — Joel Quenneville's 1,000th career victory as an NHL head coach was so dramatic that he almost had to be reminded of the milestone when the clock finally hit zeros on the Anaheim Ducks' 6-5 comeback win.

When Quenneville stood at center ice with his wife, his daughter and his entire team for a postgame photo moments later Wednesday night, he allowed himself a moment out of the hockey grind to appreciate history.

"I wasn't prioritizing the number," Quenneville said after joining Scotty Bowman in the most exclusive hockey coaching club. "I just wanted to play well tonight and find a way to win. That was the motivation, and it turned out to be a very special one as well."

His Ducks rallied to beat two-time defending conference champion Edmonton in their return from the Olympic break, overcoming a pair of two-goal deficits and another one-goal deficit during their frenetic four-goal third period.

Cutter Gauthier scored the winner with 1:14 to play, and Anaheim hung on for its NHL-leading eighth multigoal comeback win during its first year under Quenneville, whose players all gathered at the bench to mob their coach after the whistle.

"It was an important game for us in a lot of ways," said Quenneville, who has the second-place Ducks in the Stanley Cup playoff race for the first time since 2018. "They had the puck a lot more than we did, but at the same time, I thought we found a way to win a game. It had other meanings, but to me it was the importance of where it put us in the standings, and coming out of the break, the momentum that we could get off a win like tonight."



Gregory Bull/AP

Ducks head coach Joel Quenneville, center, celebrates with goaltender Lukas Dostal (1) after getting his 1,000th career coaching victory with a 6-4 win over the Edmonton Oilers on Wednesday in Anaheim, Calif.

The second member of the 1,000-win club took a long time to join Bowman, who got his 1,000th with the Detroit Red Wings on Feb. 8, 1997 — just a month after Quenneville coached his very first game with the St. Louis Blues.

Quenneville, 67, reached the mark in his 1,825th game of a career highlighted by three Stanley Cup championships with the Chicago Blackhawks. Bowman finished his career in 2002 with 1,244 victories in 2,141 regular-season games, also winning nine Stanley Cup titles as a coach.

"He's from a different league when I look at his company," Quenneville said about Bowman, who was a senior advisor of hockey operations to his son, general manager Stan Bowman, during the Blackhawks' successful run under Quenneville.

"I think he's lonesome up there, the number he's at," Quenneville added. "I had Scotty and Stan in Chicago together. We had some great wins, and he's got a lot of Cups. He's been very successful in the game. ... I'm happy to be getting the opportunity back in the game and be around a team like we've got now."

Quenneville has made a successful return to the NHL this season in Anaheim after a four-year absence from the league following his resignation from the Florida Panthers in late 2021 over his inaction during the Blackhawks' sexual abuse scandal 11 years earlier.

Quenneville's NHL ban was lifted in July 2024, and the Ducks hired him one year later to take over a struggling franchise with no playoff appearances in seven consecutive seasons. Anaheim (31-23-3) has vaulted into the thick of the Western Conference playoff race in its first season under Quenneville, who has led his teams to the playoffs in 20 of the 22 NHL seasons he finished behind a bench.

When asked if there were times when he wondered whether he would have a chance to reach 1,000 wins, Quenneville replied: "It's something that I don't think about. I think my motivation, my goals were always once you win a Cup one time, you can't wait to do it again. It's always been the reason why we're doing what we're doing."

After playing 13 NHL seasons as a sturdy defenseman with the signature bristly mustache he has sported for his entire adult life, Quenneville has been an NHL head coach for parts of 26 seasons, and he has won at every stop.

He led the Blues to seven consecutive playoff appearances before his firing. Quenneville then lasted just three seasons with the Colorado Avalanche despite producing two playoff teams.

He replaced Denis Savard behind Chicago's bench in 2008 and led the Original Six franchise to eight straight playoff appearances and three championships — including the 2010 Stanley Cup, which ended the NHL's longest active drought at 59 seasons.

Quenneville joined the Panthers in April 2019, but his third season in Florida ended abruptly when the NHL banned him along with Stan Bowman and Al MacIsaac "as a result of their inadequate response upon being informed in 2010 of allegations that Blackhawks player Kyle Beach had been assaulted by the club's video coach," the league said.

NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman determined Quenneville had showed remorse for his inaction on the allegations that surfaced during Chicago's playoff run to a Stanley Cup title. Quenneville said he also worked with advocacy groups to study the proper ways to lead in such situations.

Quenneville remained intently focused on the NHL during his four years away from the bench, watching games every night on television from his home in Florida and staying in contact with his countless friends in the game. Those friends included Pat Verbeek, his former teammate with the Hartford Whalers and the Ducks' general manager.

Bowman and Quenneville could be joined in the 1,000-win club by two more veteran coaches within the next few seasons.

Paul Maurice, who won the past two Stanley Cup titles with the Panthers, has 945 career victories with five teams. Lindy Ruff earned his 933rd career victory Wednesday night with the Buffalo Sabres' 2-1 win over New Jersey.

Power: Avs, Stars, Wild hoping long break won't slow down momentum

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most of their NHL peers had.

Dallas is expecting to miss leading scorer Mikko Rantanen for multiple weeks after he suffered a lower-body injury with Finland in the Olympics.

"My experience with these streaks is that when you have a big break like this, it kind of interrupts the rhythm," Stars coach Glen Gulutzan said a day before playing the Kraken.

But that doesn't mean he's expecting a fade, considering his team's recent performance.

"There was a very clear visual of what our players felt they were doing better and we as coaches felt we were doing better in those five or six games than we had prior," Gulutzan said, "and I think that hasn't left us."

With defensemen Quinn Hughes and Brock Faber and forward Matt Boldy winning gold medals for the United States and then heading to the White House during their whirlwind celebratory return, Minnesota will have three key players who've been on the go the whole time. But they're young — and the experience ought to help them come playoff time, coach John Hynes said.

"When you get in those environments of high-stakes games, really it's like three Game 7s because you have a quarterfinal, and then you have a semifinal, and then you have a medal game, and they're all one and done," Hynes said, as he broke down the benefits: "The preparation, understanding of how to play in those situations with that type of pressure and fanfare and knowing that one mistake could cost the game."



Tyler Tate/AP

Utah Mammoth right wing Clayton Keller (9) shoots the puck toward the net protected by Colorado Avalanche goaltender Scott Wedgewood during the second period Wednesday in Salt Lake City.

SPORTS

Defensive clinic

UConn holds St. John's to 40 points in rout ›› College basketball, Page 28



MATT KROHN/AP

Minnesota Wild right wing Danila Yurov, right, shoots the puck as Dallas Stars defenseman Miro Heiskanen (4) defends during the second period Dec. 11 in St. Paul, Minn.

Centralized power crisis

Stars, Wild on collision course as they chase NHL-best Avalanche

BY DAVE CAMPBELL
Associated Press

ST. PAUL, Minn. — The Dallas Stars surged into the Olympic break on a six-game winning streak. The Minnesota Wild won their last five games to finish 8-1-1 before the NHL's three-week schedule pause.

Both teams have maintained top-five records in the league for much of the season — and they've constantly been trying to catch the rival Colorado Avalanche.

Such has been the predicament in the powerful Central Division, where the NHL's siloed playoff format would pit Dallas against Minnesota in the first round if the standings were to stay this way. Colorado would then be favored to face the winner in the divisional bracket, likely bouncing two of the top five teams in the league from the postseason by the second round.

"It's a fun division to be a part of," Wild goalie Filip Gustavsson said, "because every game really matters."

The Avalanche went 37-9-9 for an NHL-leading 83 points before the break, a sparkling record that has actually lost some luster from earlier this winter. They pushed that to 85 points with a 4-2 win at Utah on Wednesday night.

Colorado led the division by 12 points Jan. 11, but the Stars (35-14-9) with 79 points and Minnesota (34-14-10) with 78 points have narrowed their gaps. Dallas beat Seattle 4-1 on Wednesday night to extend its season-best winning streak to seven while the Wild had an extra day before playing at, conveniently, Colorado on Thursday.

"They become a little bit more human now and are losing a few games, so if we win tomorrow and get on a little run we might be able to catch up some ground to them," Gustavsson said after practice Wednesday.

The Avs and Stars play three more times. Dallas won the first matchup with Colorado in a shootout. The Stars and Minnesota meet twice more, having split their first two games. The Avalanche and the Wild play two more times after splitting their first two matchups, with Minnesota's win coming in a shootout.

"We pretty much have to sweep them, and we've got to greatly outplay them to take that spot," Dallas center Matt Duchene said. "So could it be done? Yes. Will it be done? Probably not, to be honest, but that's OK. It feels like in our division we've got go through the gauntlet every year, and we're ready for that."

Colorado had four players competing in the Olympic gold medal game in Italy on Sunday, alongside three from the Wild and two from the Stars. The three teams combined sent 23 players to the Winter Games, making the final stretch all the more intriguing. Not only will each club need to recreate the momentum it had prior to the break, but the Olympians — particularly the Americans and Canadians — must be reintegrated after not getting the time off

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IndyCar opens season; Palou seeks 4th straight title ›› Auto racing, Page 26