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Warrior dividend

Trump announces \$1,776 bonus for troops for Christmas

BY JACOB BOGAGE
The Washington Post

The Trump administration will repurpose \$2.6 billion in military housing assistance to pay \$1,776 “warrior dividend” bonuses to service members, according to a senior administration official.

In a prime-time address Wednesday night, President Donald Trump announced the Christmastime bonuses “in honor of our nation’s founding in 1776.”

“Nobody deserves it more than our military. And I say congratulations to everybody,” Trump said.

The president said the money for the bonuses came from revenue from import taxes he’s imposed on trading partners worldwide. That was incorrect, however, and Trump does not have the authority to spend the money from tariffs without authorization from Congress.

But lawmakers this summer did approve \$2.9 billion to supplement the military’s basic allowance for housing as part of Trump and the GOP’s mammoth tax and immi-



DOUG MILLS, THE NEW YORK TIMES, POOL/AP

SEE DIVIDEND ON PAGE 9

President Donald Trump speaks during an address to the nation from the Diplomatic Reception Room at the White House, on Wednesday.

DOD families in Japan, S. Korea to get mental health clinics

BY BRIAN MCELHINEY
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — Military families, veterans and Defense Department civilians in Japan and South Korea will soon have a new option for mental health care with the opening of nonprofit clinics on U.S. bases, ac-

cording to the Army and Air Force Exchange Service.

AAFES plans to open Cohen Veterans Network mental health clinics in the fall at Camp Foster on Okinawa and Camp Humphreys in South Korea, according to a Monday news release. Additional clinics are planned for Kadena Air

Base on Okinawa, Yokota Air Base in western Tokyo and Osan Air Base in South Korea at later, unspecified dates.

“Taking care of military families is at the heart of the Exchange’s mission,” AAFES director Tom Shull said in the release. “The opening of these clin-

ics in the Pacific Region brings convenient access to critical mental health care and expertise to military families stationed overseas.”

The clinics will operate separately from medical services for active-duty troops and will primarily serve military families, reti-

rees, veterans and DOD civilians and retirees, AAFES spokesman Christopher Ward said Wednesday. Planning for future locations and opening dates is ongoing, he said.

The Cohen Veterans Network is

SEE CLINICS ON PAGE 8

BUSINESS/WEATHER

EUROPE GAS PRICES									
Country	Super E10	Super unleaded	Super plus	Diesel					
Germany	\$3.298	\$3.872	\$4.244	\$4.010	Azores	..	..	\$4.144	..
Change in price	-4.5 cents	-5.6 cents	-4.9 cents	-5.8 cents	Change in price	..	..	-4.9 cents	..
Netherlands	..	\$4.891	\$5.472	\$5.257	Turkey	..	..	\$3.994	\$3.760*
Change in price	..	+7.1 cents	-7.5 cents	-8.0 cents	Change in price	..	..	-4.9 cents	-5.8 cents
U.K.	..	\$5.463	\$5.827	\$5.698	Fuel prices are updated daily. These prices are effective Dec. 19. The change in price is from Dec. 12.				
Change in price	..	No change	No change	No change					

PACIFIC GAS PRICES									
Country	Super E10	Super unleaded	Super plus	Diesel					
Japan	..	\$3.899	..	\$3.669	South Korea	\$2.979	..	\$3.929	\$3.699
Change in price	..	-5.0 cents	..	-5.0 cents	Change in price	-5.0 cents	..	-5.0 cents	-5.0 cents
Okinawa	\$3.299	..	..	\$3.669	Guam	\$3.009**	\$3.589	\$3.959	..
Change in price	+1.0 cents	..	..	-5.0 cents	Change in price	-5.0 cents	-5.0 cents	-5.0 cents	..
*DieselEFD **Midgrade									
Pacific prices for the week of Dec. 19-25									

EXCHANGE RATES

Military rates			
Euro costs (Dec. 19)	0.83	Switzerland (Franc)	0.7944
British pound (Dec. 19)	\$1.31	Thailand (Baht)	31.44
Japanese yen (Dec. 19)	151.00	Turkey (NewLira)	42.7317
South Korean won (Dec. 19)	1,436.00		
Commercial rates		(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.)	
Bahrain (Dinar)	0.3744		
Britain (Pound)	1.3415		
Canada (Dollar)	1.3775		
China (Yuan)	7.0430		
Denmark (Krone)	6.3661		
Egypt (Pound)	47.5598		
Euro	0.8521		
Hong Kong (Dollar)	7.7805		
Hungary (Forint)	331.12		
Israel (Shekel)	3.2133		
Japan (Yen)	155.43		
Kuwait (Dinar)	0.3064		
Norway (Krone)	10.1693		
Philippines (Peso)	58.57		
Poland (Zloty)	3.58		
Saudi Arabia (Riyal)	3.7464		
Singapore (Dollar)	1.2897		
South Korea (Won)	1,472.62		

INTEREST RATES

Prime rate	6.75
Interest Rates Discount rate	3.75
Federal funds market rate	3.62
3-month bill	3.63
30-year bond	4.83

WEATHER OUTLOOK



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MILITARY

Senate approves bill inspired by DC collision

By JOSH FUNK
Associated Press

The Senate moved quickly Wednesday afternoon to close a loophole that could allow military aircraft to fly without broadcasting their locations just like an Army helicopter was doing last January before it collided with an airliner over Washington, D.C., killing 67 people.

Just hours after passing a massive defense bill that included the worrisome provisions about military flights, the Senate approved a bipartisan bill that will require all aircraft use ADS-B technology—or Automatic Dependent Surveillance—Broadcast technology—to broadcast their locations.

Republican Sen. Ted Cruz said that “tragedy could have been avoided” if the Army Black Hawk had been using its ADS-B system to broadcast its location before the crash, and this bill should save lives.

It is not clear exactly when the ROTOR act that Cruz and Democratic Sen. Maria Cantwell and the rest of the Commerce Committee supports will be taken up by the House and whether changes will be made. The Trump administration supports the bill and is committed to helping get it passed, said a White House official who spoke on condition of anonymity ahead of the formal public statement on the bill. Cruz said he is optimistic the bill could head to the president’s desk

as soon as next month.

Republican leaders decided not to delay the defense bill by amending it to address the flight safety concerns because doing that would have sent the bill back to the House for another vote.

The final report on the crash won’t be completed until sometime next year. But Cruz said it makes sense to take this step now to force the military to operate under the same rules as airliners do around Washington, D.C., after the National Transportation Safety Board



Cruz

found 85 near misses in the three years before the crash.

The Black Hawk helicopter involved in the deadly collision with a plane trying to land at Reagan National Airport also had a system that could have broadcast its location to the tower, but it was flying with it turned off because the military was concerned about observers being able to pinpoint its location during a training mission.

The NTSB has been recommending for decades to require all aircraft have locator systems that can both send out a signal with their location but also receive location data from other planes and helicopters. Part of the holdup has been concerns about the potential cost bur-

den on the average Cessna owner and privacy concerns because the system would allow their planes to be tracked.

Airline jets and newer general aviation planes are already equipped with what is known as ADS-B Out that can broadcast their locations, but the advanced ADS-B In systems that can receive data about the locations of other aircraft are not common.

The bill also requires a review of safety at airports across the country to ensure they don’t face the same hazards that contributed to the crash at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport. And the military and FAA will have to share safety data more freely.



MATTHEW THIEME/U.S. Coast Guard

Adm. Kevin Lunday, acting Commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard, speaks during the 144th Commencement Exercises at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy in May.

Coast Guard admiral’s promotion frozen over swastika, noose policy

The Washington Post

At least two U.S. senators have placed holds on the nomination of Adm. Kevin Lunday to serve as the Coast Guard’s commandant after the service enacted a new workplace harassment policy that downgrades the definition of swastikas and nooses from hate symbols to “potentially divisive.”

The action by Sens. Tammy Duckworth, D-Ill., and Jacky Rosen, D-Nev., follows a Washington Post report on Tuesday revealing that, despite Lunday’s forceful denunciation of such symbols and a separate directive he issued prohibiting them, the service allowed the policy to take effect with the “potentially divisive” language included.

A spokesperson for Lunday, who has been the service’s acting commandant for several months, did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Neither did a spokesperson for the Department of

Homeland Security, which oversees the Coast Guard.

The “potentially divisive” language was adopted as part of a policy manual overhaul initiated soon after the Trump administration took office and ousted Lunday’s predecessor, Adm. Linda Fagan. Officials cited Fagan’s “excessive focus” on diversity and inclusion initiatives.

The new workplace harassment manual changed how items such as swastikas and nooses were described, softening their definition from symbols of hate to “potentially divisive.” The new manual also would allow for a supervisor to review how the symbols were used or displayed in the workplace instead of immediately prohibiting them.

After The Post in November revealed the Coast Guard’s plan to adopt the new language, Lunday reacted swiftly—stating in a memo to all Coast Guard personnel that nei-

ther symbol was allowed in the workplace and condemning both. Lunday said at the time that his directive would supersede any other policy language.

For reasons that remain unclear, the policy manual was never updated to reflect the admiral’s directive, and it quietly went into effect earlier this week.

“It seems that Admiral Lunday may have backtracked in his commitment to me to combat antisemitism and hate crimes and protect all members of the Coast Guard,” Rosen said in a statement posted on social media Wednesday. “I will be placing a hold on his nomination until the Coast Guard provides answers.”

Duckworth’s office also confirmed that she too has also placed a hold on Lunday’s nomination because the Coast Guard kept the noose and swastika language in its new policy manual.

US announces sale of arms to Taiwan valued at more than \$10 billion

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Trump administration has announced a massive package of arms sales to Taiwan valued at more than \$10 billion that includes medium-range missiles, howitzers and drones, drawing an angry response from China.

The State Department announced the sales late Wednesday during a nationally televised address by President Donald Trump, who made scant mention of foreign policy issues and did not speak about China or Taiwan at all. U.S.-Chinese tensions have ebbed and flowed during Trump’s second term, largely over trade and tariffs but also over China’s increasing aggressiveness toward Taiwan, which Beijing has said must reunify with the mainland.

If approved by Congress, it would be the largest-ever U.S. weapons package to Taiwan, exceeding the total amount of \$8.4 billion in U.S. arms sales to Taiwan during the Biden administration.

The eight arms sales agreements announced Wednesday cover 82 high-mobility artillery rocket systems, or HIMARS, and 420 Army Tactical Missile Systems, or ATACMS—similar to what the U.S. had been providing Ukraine during the Biden administration to defend itself from Russia—worth more than \$4 billion. They also include 60 self-propelled howitzer systems and related equipment worth more than \$4 billion and drones valued at more than \$1 billion.

Other sales in the package include military software valued at more than \$1 billion, Javelin and TOW missiles worth more than \$700 million, helicopter spare parts worth \$96 million and refurbishment kits for Harpoon mis-

siles worth \$91 million.

The eight sales agreements amount to \$11.15 billion, according to Taiwan’s Defense Ministry.

The State Department said the sales serve “U.S. national, economic, and security interests by supporting the recipient’s continuing efforts to modernize its armed forces and to maintain a credible defensive capability.”

“The proposed sale(s) will help improve the security of the recipient and assist in maintaining political stability, military balance, and economic progress in the region,” the statements said.

China’s Foreign Ministry attacked the move, saying it would violate diplomatic agreements between China and the U.S.; gravely harm China’s sovereignty, security and territorial integrity; and undermine regional stability.

“The ‘Taiwan independence’ forces on the island seek independence through force and resist reunification through force, squandering the hard-earned money of the people to purchase weapons at the cost of turning Taiwan into a powder keg,” said Foreign Ministry spokesperson Guo Jiakun.

“This cannot save the doomed fate of ‘Taiwan independence’ but will only accelerate the push of the Taiwan Strait toward a dangerous situation of military confrontation and war. The U.S. support for ‘Taiwan Independence’ through arms will only end up backfiring. Using Taiwan to contain China will not succeed,” he added.

Under federal law, the U.S. is obligated to assist Taiwan with its self-defense, a point that has become increasingly contentious with China, which has vowed to take Taiwan by force, if necessary.

MILITARY

House rejects limits on action against Venezuela

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The House on Wednesday rejected two measures aimed at stopping President Donald Trump from carrying out additional strikes on suspected drug boats or attacking Venezuela without congressional approval as lawmakers remained divided over the administration’s military actions in South America.

The votes — 210-216 for the drug boat measure and 211-213 for the Venezuela resolution — marked the latest attempt by mostly Democrats and a handful of Republicans to assert Congress’ constitutional authority to declare war after two recent failed efforts in the Senate.

The flurry of congressional activity comes as the Trump administration escalates its pressure campaign against Venezuela, seizing an oil tanker carrying Venezuelan oil, ordering a blockade of sanctioned oil tankers into and out of the country and continuing to attack boats suspected of smuggling drugs.

Trump warned on social media Tuesday that the massive buildup of military assets near Venezuela — the largest in decades — “will



JULIA DEMAREE NIKHINSON/AP

House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., departs a military briefing Tuesday in Washington.

only get bigger, and the shock to them will be like nothing they have ever seen before.”

Alarmed lawmakers on Wednesday said it was imperative for Congress to weigh in as Trump threatens land strikes inside Venezuela and uses the military to bomb alleged drug-trafficking boats in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific, many near Venezuela.

The Constitution gives Congress, not the president, the authority to declare war, and the 1973 War Powers Resolution requires the president to seek approval from Congress before introducing armed forces “into hostilities or into situations where im-

minent involvement in hostilities is clearly indicated by the circumstances.”

Rep. Jim McGovern, D-Mass., who introduced the measure prohibiting military action against Venezuela without congressional authorization, said service members were already being put at risk.

“American troops take an oath to protect and defend this country — it is our duty in Congress to debate and vote before they are put into harm’s way,” said McGovern. “Right now, by placing U.S. military assets off the coast of Venezuela, this administration has them in harm’s way.”

White House chief of staff Susie Wiles conceded in an interview published Tuesday that “activity on land” in Venezuela would need congressional authorization. But the Trump administration has suggested it does not need lawmaker approval for the boat strikes because the vessels are mostly being hit by drones far from U.S. naval forces.

Lawmakers this week received several classified briefings on the boat bombing campaign, which has killed at least 99 people in 26 attacks. Democrats are contin-

uing to push for the public release of unedited videos showing the initial Sept. 2 strike and a controversial follow-up strike that killed two survivors.

Rep. Mike Rogers of Alabama, the Republican chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, expressed support Wednesday for the operation targeting drug boats and said Trump was acting “decisively and lawfully” within his authority as commander-in-chief to combat cartels.

“These strikes are lawful under U.S. law and international laws and all actions are in compliance with the law of armed conflict,” he said. “But most importantly, these strikes have dramatically reduced drug smuggling operations.”

Rep. Gregory Meeks of New York, the top Democrat on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, left Tuesday’s briefing questioning Trump’s motivations regarding Venezuela.

“It doesn’t seem to be just about narcotics trafficking,” Meeks said. “So if this is about regime change, it seems to me that the administration should say that’s what it is and should come to Congress to ask for that authorization, which has not taken place.”

Meeks led the resolution to remove U.S. troops “from hostilities with any presidentially designated terrorist organization in the Western Hemisphere” without congressional authorization.

Republican Brian Mast of Florida, the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and an Army combat veteran, argued against both resolutions Wednesday, saying they would tie the president’s hands. He echoed the Trump administration’s contention that Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro is a narco-terrorist who is poisoning Americans.

But Republican Thomas Massie of Kentucky, a co-sponsor of the resolution requiring congressional approval for military action in Venezuela, cast doubt on the administration’s stated focus on drugs — “this is about oil and regime change,” he said.

He urged fellow lawmakers to demand a say over how the president deploys the military.

“All we’re voting on is a war powers resolution that strengthens the fabric of our republic by reasserting the plain and simple language in the Constitution that Congress must decide questions of war,” he said.

Trump pays respects to guardsmen, interpreter killed in Syria

By MICHELLE L. PRICE
AND DARLENE SUPERVILLE
Associated Press

DOVER AIR FORCE BASE, Del. — President Donald Trump paid his respects Wednesday to two Iowa National Guard members and a U.S. civilian interpreter who were killed in an attack in the Syrian desert, joining their grieving families as their remains were brought back to the country they served.

Trump met privately with the families at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware before he joined top military officials and other dignitaries on the tarmac for the dignified transfer, a solemn and largely silent ritual honoring U.S. service members killed in action.

The guardsmen killed in Syria on Saturday were Sgt. Edgar Brian Torres-Tovar, 25, of Des Moines, and Sgt. William Nathaniel Howard, 29, of Marshalltown, according to the U.S. Army. Both were members of the 1st Squadron, 113th Cavalry Regiment, and have been hailed as heroes by the Iowa National Guard. Their remains will be taken to Iowa.

Torres-Tovar’s and Howard’s families were at Dover for the return of their remains, alongside Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds, members of Iowa’s congressional delegation and leaders of the Iowa National Guard.

Ayad Mansoor Sakat, of Ma-



JULIA DEMAREE NIKHINSON/AP

President Donald Trump salutes as carry teams move the transfer cases with the remains of civilian interpreter Ayad Mansoor Sakat, who was killed in an attack in Syria, during a casualty return, Wednesday at Dover Air Force Base, Del.

comb, Mich., a U.S. civilian working as an interpreter, was also killed. Three other Iowa National Guard members were injured in the attack. The Pentagon has not identified them.

They were among hundreds of U.S. troops deployed in eastern

Syria as part of a coalition fighting the Islamic State group.

Returning to Joint Base Andrews after the transfer, Trump said it was a “beautiful event for three great people. And they’re now looking down and their parents and wives and all of the peo-

ple that were there were, I mean, were devastated but great people, great people.”

Trump observed several dignified transfers in his first term and has said it was “the toughest thing I have to do” as president.

There is no formal role for a

president at a dignified transfer other than to watch in silence, keeping all thoughts to himself for the moment. There is no speaking by any of the politicians and other dignitaries who attend, with the only words coming from the military officials who direct the highly choreographed transfers.

Trump, wearing an overcoat against the chill and brisk wind, joined the other attendees in a salute that was held as each of the American flag-draped transfer cases was carried from the belly of a hulking C-17 military cargo plane and loaded into a dark, unmarked van nearby.

He gazed straight ahead as each case passed in front of him, though he turned to look after the first one was placed inside the vehicle. The remains were taken to the on-base mortuary for processing before they are released to the families.

At the start of the transfer, Trump and Gen. Dan Caine, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, joined several others from the military at the open rear of the cargo plane, where all but Trump bowed their heads. The president looked inside the plane. Trump then stood alongside Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth when the group joined the official party.

Before Trump joined the others, White House chief of staff Susie Wiles, who flew up with Trump, dabbed her eyes with a tissue.

MILITARY

Pentagon hosts first Christmas worship service

By MATTHEW ADAMS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Continuing with the concept of firsts for the Defense Department, the Pentagon held a Christmas worship service on Wednesday led by the Rev. Franklin Graham.

“It’s a privilege to be here at the Pentagon. This is a great, great facility. Men and women from all across this country, representing the people of this great nation,” Graham said as part of his Christmas message.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth since May has hosted monthly evangelical prayer services for about 30 minutes in the Pentagon’s auditorium and broadcast on its internal cable network.

Hegseth has said previously that attendance at the prayer service was voluntary but encouraged the uniformed military personnel and civilian employees there to tell their co-workers about it.

The Wednesday service was moved outside to the Pentagon courtyard and extended to one hour. Christian singers Matthew West and Anne Wilson performed Christmas songs, as well as original music from their albums, for hundreds of people.

Graham, who leads the Christian humanitarian relief organization Samaritan’s Purse, is the son of the Rev. Billy Graham and one of the leading figures in evangelical Christianity.

Franklin Graham’s son, Edward, was invited by Hegseth to speak at the July prayer service.

Edward, the chief operating officer at Samaritan’s Purse, graduated from the United States Military Academy and served 16 years in the Army, according to his biography.

Military personnel and civilians before the event approached Franklin and Edward to speak with them and take a photo.

“I think they’re basically the special forces of Jesus,” said Jennifer Hegseth, the wife of the defense secretary, in her opening remarks. “They go into places nobody else wants to go. They do the



Christian singer Anne Wilson performs at the Pentagon’s first Christmas worship service on Wednesday.



The Rev. Franklin Graham turns to Scripture for his message during the Pentagon Christmas worship service on Wednesday.

hard things, and they even show up here on Wednesday in December to help pray with us.”

Hegseth was not able to attend the majority of the ceremony, as he was at Dover Air Force Base,

Del., with President Donald Trump to pay their respects to two Iowa National Guard members and a U.S. civilian interpreter who were killed in a Dec. 13 attack in the Syrian desert, joining their

grieving families as their remains were brought back to the country they served.

Hegseth’s wife stepped in to give the opening remarks to the crowd in the courtyard. She acknowledged the loss of Sgt. Edgar Brian Torres-Tovar, 25, of Des Moines, and Sgt. William Nathaniel Howard, 29, of Marshalltown.

She also gave a shout-out to Labor Secretary Lori Chavez-DeRemer in attendance, who this month started a prayer service at the Department of Labor after attending one of the Pentagon’s monthly services. Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins, who also attended the worship service, has been hosting a weekly Bible study at her agency, Hegseth said.

Most of the service was music being performed in what turned out to be good weather for a winter day in the nation’s capital. Hegseth prior to the event had requested Wilson sing his favorite

song, “O Holy Night.”

The song was performed around the 45-minute mark of the event. The secretary made it back just in time to catch a portion of the song.

Hegseth provided a few remarks afterward and acknowledged he “barely” made it. He said he had just gotten back from the dignified transfer. He said there is no way to manage what to say to the families who lost loved ones. In the midst of that, “almost to a man and to a woman, you see them start to find hope in that there is something bigger,” Hegseth said.

“Yes, they served our nation. They put on the cloth of our uniform. Served all of us, on behalf of all of us,” he added. “They serve a bigger and greater God, and we know where they are. We pray with them. We pray for them.”

Amid questions about the U.S. striking alleged drug boats, Hegseth on Tuesday night posted a video on X ordering sweeping changes to the U.S. military’s chaplain corps, with a plan to simplify a system that he said has become too focused on “new age” concepts.

He took special aim at the Army, saying its current spiritual fitness guide is pushing secular humanism, and he ordered the service to cease using the program immediately.

Hegseth said the Pentagon is working on a new program, which could curtail what qualifies as a faith or belief recognized in the military.

“I’m grateful that the secretary is supporting our chaplains and backing our chaplains,” Franklin Graham said. “I’m so grateful for that because this is the bedrock of our country. There is not a community that you don’t go into where there isn’t a church, house of worship, nowhere.”

In 2017, the Defense Department updated what qualifies as a recognized religious denomination or belief system, with a list of 221 groups that ranged from the mainstream to obscure Christian sects, Wiccans and atheists.

Latest strikes bring AFRICOM’s annual total in Somalia to 117

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — U.S. Africa Command unleashed a series of strikes against various targets this week in Somalia, where the command’s attacks on militants are at an all-time high.

Islamic State fighters in the country were hit Monday and Tuesday in the vicinity of the group’s enclave near the Golis Mountains in northern Somalia, AFRICOM said in a statement

Wednesday.

Separate strikes also were conducted against the al-Shabab group on Monday near the southern coastal city of Kismayo, AFRICOM said.

The latest round of strikes brings AFRICOM’s annual total in Somalia to 117, nearly double the command’s previous high of 63 in 2019.

ISIS in Somalia has become a growing concern for AFRICOM, which has stepped up its attacks

against the group over the past year. Formed in 2015 by al-Shabab defectors, the ISIS branch in Somalia also has drawn foreign fighters to its ranks.

As of May, about 60% of its force of 1,500 came from outside Somalia, AFRICOM said at the time.

ISIS as a whole remains a threat to U.S. forces abroad, as demonstrated by last week’s deadly ambush in Syria by an attacker who claimed to be a mem-

ber of the group.

Two U.S. soldiers and a civilian interpreter were killed in the attack, prompting President Donald Trump to vow “serious retaliation.”

American forces in Syria are involved in an effort to prevent a resurgence of ISIS there. After seizing control of a large swath of territory in Syria and Iraq, the group declared a caliphate in 2014 before eventually losing its hold on the land.

In Somalia, U.S. forces have faced similar threats over the years but usually at the hands of al-Shabab, which has waged a decadeslong insurgency against the country’s weak central government.

U.S. military personnel in Somalia provide various forms of support to Mogadishu in its long-running campaign against al-Shabab. Besides airstrikes, U.S. troops train and advise local ground forces.

PACIFIC

US-Japan drill simulates radiation exposure

By ALEX WILSON
AND HANA KUSUMOTO
Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — More than 200 U.S. and Japanese personnel took part Thursday in a joint emergency drill to practice responding to a hypothetical radiation exposure involving a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier.

The annual exercise, now in its 18th year, brought together 134 U.S. service members and civilians and 95 Japanese officials and first responders to rehearse coordination and communication in the event of a radiation incident, according to the Navy.

In the scenario, a U.S. sailor working on a propulsion support system aboard the USS George Washington was exposed to low-level radioactive water leaking onto his hands.

Emergency protocols were activated and the sailor was taken to U.S. Naval Hospital Yokosuka for treatment.

The simulated radiation exposure was roughly equivalent to that found in two bananas and lower than naturally occurring radiation in a pot of coffee, according to a Navy media handout.



Defense Department civilians check a sailor for radiation during a drill simulating a low-level radiation leak aboard the aircraft carrier USS George Washington at Yokosuka Naval Base, Japan, Thursday.

Participants included Yokosuka base commander Capt. Johnathan Hopkins and Yokosuka Mayor Katsuaki Kamiji.

“All involved parties worked diligently in all aspects of the drill, and we were able to confirm that communication and cooperation

between Japan and the United States was well-established and that the system will function properly in the event of an emergency,” Kamiji told reporters afterward.

The exercise is intended to address public concerns surround-

ing the presence of nuclear-powered U.S. warships. The Navy and Yokosuka city have conducted the drill annually since 2007, with the scenario largely unchanged.

Public concerns about radiation risks in Japan go back decades, in-

cluding a 1999 accident at a nuclear fuel-processing facility in Tokaimura in Ibaraki prefecture that exposed hundreds of people to radiation and killed two workers. Japan’s history as the only country subjected to atomic bombings has also shaped public sentiment.

An activist group — Citizens’ Coalition Concerned About the Homeporting Project of the Nuclear-Powered Carrier at Yokosuka — feels the training is inadequate.

“It’s not realistic,” group leader Masahiko Goto said by phone after the drill. “They need to conduct a drill assuming the worst-case scenario.”

The group, in a Thursday statement to media, called for a training scenario similar to those conducted by nuclear power plants to prepare for meltdowns and other incidents.

The Navy has repeatedly said its nuclear-powered ships have never experienced a reactor accident or released harmful radiation and that extensive safeguards and procedures are in place to prevent such incidents.

Stars and Stripes photojournalist Akifumi Ishikawa contributed to this report.

Taiwan tracks Chinese aircraft carrier on its first strait transit

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

China’s newest aircraft carrier, the Fujian, steamed through the Taiwan Strait this week for the first time since being commissioned, a move closely monitored by Taiwan amid ongoing tensions with Beijing.

Taiwan’s Ministry of National Defense disclosed the transit Wednesday in a post on X, alongside an aerial photograph of the carrier. The island’s military “monitored the situation and responded,” the ministry wrote, without elaborating.

The Fujian crossed the strait Tuesday, marking its first such passage since its Nov. 5 commissioning, according to the ministry and Taiwanese Defense Minister Wellington Koo, cited by the Taipei Times on Wednesday.

The ship had previously sailed through the strait at least once during sea trials on Sept. 12.

China’s Defense Ministry had not publicly commented on the transit as of Thursday afternoon.

During the September passage, the ministry said the carrier was en route to the South China Sea for “scientific research tests and training missions,” calling the transit a “regular arrangement in the aircraft carrier’s construction



Taiwan Ministry of National Defense

Chinese carrier Fujian passes through the Taiwan Strait on Tuesday.

process” and saying it was “not aimed at any specific target.”

The Fujian appeared to be operating without aircraft on board during Tuesday’s transit, Taiwan’s Defense Ministry said.

Following the carrier’s passage, Taiwan reported heightened Chinese military activity around the island.

The ministry said Thursday that China conducted 40 aircraft sorties — more than half of which crossed the strait’s unofficial median line — and deployed eight naval vessels in nearby waters over a 24-hour period beginning Wednesday morning.

The Fujian is China’s second domestically built aircraft carrier and the first of its class.

Unlike the United States’ nuclear-powered carrier fleet, the Fujian and China’s two earlier carriers are powered by steam turbines.

The ship, however, represents a significant technological leap for Beijing’s navy.

It features an electromagnetic catapult system similar to that used on the Navy’s newest carrier, the USS Gerald R. Ford, enabling the launch of heavier aircraft and potentially expanding China’s naval aviation capabilities.

US-made WWII bomb uncovered during safety survey on Okinawa island

By BRIAN MCELHINEY
AND KEISHI KOJA
Stars and Stripes

Okinawa authorities discovered a U.S.-made bomb believed to date to World War II during an airport safety survey on a southern Japanese island, the first ordnance found in a series of inspections launched after an explosion last year.

The 110-pound bomb was found late Tuesday by contractors conducting a magnetic survey at Miyako Airport on Miyakojima, about 185 miles southwest of Okinawa’s main island, a spokesman for the prefecture’s Airport Division said Thursday.

The device was buried about 3 feet below a grassy area nearly 90 feet from the runway, he said. It is about 2 1/2 feet long.

The bomb is not considered at risk of detonating and has been secured with sandbags while officials determine a disposal timeline, the spokesman said.

The discovery marks the first ordnance found during the Miyakojima survey, which began in August and is slated to conclude in February.

Japan has expanded airport surveys nationwide following an

October 2024 explosion at Miyazaki Airport on the southern island of Kyushu, where an old shell detonated.

A government survey there concluded on March 28 and found no additional unexploded ordnance, according to the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism.

Magnetic surveys at Naha, Matsuyama and Fukuoka airports have been extended through March, while inspections at Sendai Airport are expected to finish in February, the ministry said. No ordnance has been found at these airports so far.

Unexploded ordnance from the 1945 Battle of Okinawa continues to surface across the island prefecture. On Dec. 8, four suspected U.S.-made white phosphorous grenades emitting smoke were discovered at a construction site in Naha, Okinawa’s capital.

No injuries were reported, and the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force removed the grenades the following morning, police said.

Between April 1, 2024, and March 31, crews disposed of nearly 13 tons of unexploded ordnance left behind from WWII on Okinawa, according to prefectural data.

MILITARY

Joy amid the rain as Nimitz crew comes home

BY GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

BREMERTON, Wash. — It was getting darker, colder and wetter by the minute Tuesday afternoon when the USS Nimitz slowly edged its bow into Sinclair Inlet, made a tug-assisted pivot into a berth, and came to a stop at Naval Base Kitsap.

Yvonne Ramirez had driven 125 miles south from Mount Vernon to see her sailor boyfriend, skirting the floods in Snohomish and King counties that had been declared a disaster area by Gov. Bob Ferguson.

Standing under a shelter in front of the berth, she squinted through gray skies at the 1,000-foot-long carrier in hopes of seeing her boyfriend among the sailors manning the rails around the rim of the Nimitz flight deck.

“I’d wait for you forever, but 270 Days was long enough. Welcome home, Kevin Scruggs,” her sign said.

The nine-month trip across the Pacific and back was a final voyage for the 50-year-old Nimitz, the oldest aircraft carrier in the fleet, a veteran of the end of the Vietnam War; the Iranian Revolution; the Gulf of Sidra incident; two decades of the Cold War; Operation Desert Storm; 9/11; wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria; as well as lesser-known events around the globe.

On its final deployment, the carrier’s 82,000-mile mission included launching its F/A-18 Hornet jets to hit ISIS targets in Somalia, as well as more sedate moments when the crew hosted VIPs in Malaysia and Bahrain.

Tuesday’s arrival in Bremerton was likely the last of the 30 homecomings from deployments that the Nimitz has made since joining the fleet in 1975. The carrier is scheduled to move its homeport from Naval Base Kitsap to Naval Station Norfolk, in Virginia, early next



HANNAH KANTNER/U.S. Navy

Crew of the aircraft carrier USS Nimitz “man the rails” for arrival at Bremerton, Wash., on Naval Base Kitsap, on Tuesday. It was likely the last of the 30 homecomings from deployments that the Nimitz has made since joining the fleet in 1975.

year, the beginning of a long process of decommissioning and deactivation.

Before arriving in Bremerton, several hundred carrier personnel had disembarked in earlier stops at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii; and San Diego. The carrier’s squadrons had flown off to Naval Station Lemoore, Calif., Naval Air Station Whidby Island, Wash., and other wintertime warbird nests.

It took most of two hours to get the remaining 3,000 sailors off the ship in Bremerton — a steady stream of men and women in dress blue uniforms with white caps.

Once past the security gate, new Nimitz crew fathers met their sons and daughters born while deployed, couples clutched for first kisses after nine months apart and parents welcomed home sons and daughters.

Trae Zipperer, of Fort Myers, Fla., had served on the Nimitz from 1987 to 1991. He was in Bremerton to watch his old ship arrive with his relatively new son-in-law, Manny Munchnikoff. Zipperer’s daughter, Maddy Muchnikoff, waited with him under a shelter that kept the pouring rain off their heads.

“She married into the Nimitz,” Zipperer

said. “I served aboard from 1987 to 1991, then she married a Nimitz sailor. It was a fantastic ship, and he’s a fantastic guy.”

Ashley Cortes was dressed as Winnie the Pooh to greet her husband, Chief Petty Officer Randy Cortes. She’d brought the couple’s three children — Noah, Rome and Zion — with the younger two decked out in “Tigger” the tiger costumes.

“I’m just happy he’s back for Christmas with the family,” Ashley said. “It’s been a long stretch.”

Among those greeted with hugs and kisses was Capt. Joseph J. Furco, the Nimitz’s commanding officer.

“The big picture is we were in the Pacific Ocean, South China Sea, and then participated in operations off the Middle East, including the twelve-day war with Iran, and in conjunction with Air Wing 17 operations in Africa, conducting strikes against ISIS,” he said.

The ship also took part in joint operations with the navies of France and India.

Furco ticked off the carrier’s port stops along the way: Guam, Malaysia, Bahrain, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Honolulu, San Diego and then back to Bremerton.

“I am deeply proud of this crew for proving, over nine months of sustained operations at sea, that they are well-trained, fit to fight and ready to win,” Furco said.

Over by the awning where family members were waiting for the crew to disembark, Ramirez spotted her boyfriend, Scruggs, away for 270 days.

The sailor strode to her side, got down on one knee, unlatched a small red box with a ring and asked Ramirez to marry him.

She’d been a girlfriend on the tough drive over from Mount Vernon, but would return a fiancée.

Student’s letter to AAFES spurs discussion on improving lunches

BY MARC CASTANEDA
Stars and Stripes

YOKOTA AIR BASE, Japan — When fifth-grader Nii Borketey noticed classmates dumping much of their cafeteria lunches into the trash, he spent his summer investigating why — an effort that ultimately prompted a conversation with the people who oversee those meals.

What began as a casual observation at Yokota West Elementary School turned into three months of research and revision that produced a detailed three-page letter delivered to the commander of the Army and Air Force Exchange Service’s Pacific Region. AAFES provides school meals for K-12 students on installations in seven countries overseas, according to its website.

“I wrote the letter to kind of raise awareness and advocate for my classmates,” Borketey told Stars and Stripes during a recent interview. “My mom urged me to be a part of the solution and said that I should do something to help the school community.”

He examined menus, compared nutritional guidance and gathered opinions from peers before writing a pointed critique that included suggestions for improvement.

One example he cited was a grilled cheese sandwich that “appeared to be cooked under a 60-watt lightbulb,” with bread that was “rock-solid stale.” Some vegetables, he wrote, were “beyond recognizable and not fresh.”

Borketey urged AAFES to provide more

fresh produce and cited information from the Food Research & Action Center linking nutritious school meals to improved classroom performance.

“Students who participate in school lunch programs have improved attendance, behavior, academic performance and academic achievements as well as decreased tardiness,” he wrote.

His letter eventually reached Air Force Col. Jason Beck, the commander of AAFES Pacific Region, who visited Yokota West Elementary on Sept. 19 to eat lunch with Borketey and several classmates.

Beck gave Borketey a challenge coin and praised his initiative, telling The Exchange Post newsletter last month that the 10-year-old’s “acumen was light-years ahead of where I was as a fifth grader.”

Yokota Exchange General Manager Andrew Defelice, who joined the lunch, told the newsletter that hearing students’ feedback firsthand provided “real insight.”

“Borketey doing his research and articulating his concerns illustrates that no matter what age, you do have a voice to champion new ideas and provide feedback,” he said.

AAFES Pacific coincidentally replaced the hamburger patties used in school lunches around the same period, a change that received noticeably better feedback from students.

“The change in burger patties was a result of feedback received from a recent survey,”



AAFES

Fifth-grader Nii Borketey, in tie, dines with Air Force Col. Jason Beck, commander of the Army and Air Force Exchange Service’s Pacific Region, and Yokota Exchange General Manager Andrew Defelice at Yokota West Elementary School in Japan on Sept. 19.

AAFES spokeswoman Karrington Bradley wrote in a Dec. 9 email. “This update was noted as an example of program improvements that regularly occur as a result of feedback from parents and students.”

Bradley added that AAFES continually reviews and adjusts its meal offerings based on U.S. Department of Agriculture requirements and annual clientele surveys.

Borketey’s mother, Francisca Koduah, a project management team chief with Yokota’s 374th Civil Engineer Squadron, encouraged

her son’s curiosity throughout the process.

“He’s a very smart student, part of the Johns Hopkins gifted and talented program,” she said during the interview with her son. “He likes asking questions, digging into things and figuring out how systems can work better so we just try to nurture that.”

Although his letter did not result in immediate policy changes, Borketey said the experience was still meaningful.

“It felt good knowing people listened,” he said.

MILITARY

EU lawmakers seek to expedite military mobility

By PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

European Union lawmakers want to remove internal barriers to the cross-border movement of troops and military equipment, allowing the forces of partners and allies such as the U.S. to move across the Continent faster in a crisis.

A resolution adopted Wednesday in the European Parliament seeks creation of a “military Schengen area,” a reference to the zone encompassed by European countries that have abolished internal passport and customs controls in their combined territory.

“There are still considerable administrative and financial barriers, as well as infrastructure obstacles, which means that it can sometimes take over a month to move military equipment across the EU,” the European Parliament said in a statement Wednesday.

In the resolution, lawmakers said Russia’s war in Ukraine has underscored the “urgent

need” for improvements, particularly along NATO’s eastern flank in countries such as Poland and the Baltic states.

Reducing existing obstacles to military mobility is “essential for European security and defense,” they said.

European countries also must invest more in transportation infrastructure, especially along four military transport corridors previously identified by the EU, according to the resolution. All four corridors include central and Eastern European countries.

The move comes amid ongoing pressure on European NATO members from U.S. President Donald Trump to spend more on defense.

In June, NATO leaders meeting in The Hague, Netherlands, pledged to aim toward spending 5% of their gross domestic product annually by 2035 on defense and broader security-related expenditures, including infrastructure and resilience efforts.

The resolution passed by a vote of 493-127, with 38 abstentions. Members of the Euro-

pean Parliament’s transport and defense committees are expected to begin legislative work on the European Commission’s military mobility package in the coming weeks.

The resolution text points to constraints, noting that tanks have been barred from entering some member states because they exceed national weight limits and that convoys have been halted at bridges not designed to support heavy military loads.

Lawmakers endorsed the European Commission’s proposal to raise funding for military mobility to roughly \$20 billion in the EU’s next long-term budget, warning member states against cutting the proposal as they did in the 2021-27 budget cycle, when planned funding was reduced by 75%.

Upgrading roughly 500 infrastructure “hot spots,” including bridges, tunnels and rail lines not suited for heavy military vehicles, would require upward of \$117 billion, according to the resolution text.

Lawmakers further urged the EU to follow NATO’s example and ensure that rapid-

reaction troops could cross internal EU borders within three days in peacetime and within 24 hours during a crisis.

NATO has long planned for rapid cross-border troop movements, but EU lawmakers say civilian rules and infrastructure still prevent those timelines from being met.

Lawmakers also called for a military mobility task force, a European coordinator and a commission-led roadmap to streamline implementation, as well as digital solutions and a one-stop shop to accelerate cross-border movement authorizations.

European Parliament co-rapporteur Roberts Zile said many of the obstacles could be addressed quickly.

Zile represents Latvia, a Baltic NATO member bordering Russia that has been among the most vocal advocates for stronger European responses to the Kremlin.

“Military mobility has become even more urgent in light of Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine,” Zile said. “There is no time to waste.”

Navy lauds launch of one-way attack drone from ship

By SHANNON RENFROE
Stars and Stripes

A Navy warship’s successful launch of a one-way attack drone this week was a watershed in the Defense Department push to get hundreds of thousands of the transformational aircraft into the field, according to the service.

The LUCAS drone was deployed Tuesday from the littoral combat ship USS Santa Barbara in the Persian Gulf in what was the first launch of the unmanned system from a ship at sea, U.S. Naval Forces Central Command said in a statement Wednesday.

U.S. Central Command assigned the drone to Task Force Scorpion Strike, a unit created to develop and deploy one-way attack drones at scale. The task force, based in the Middle East, works to deliver autonomous strike capabilities to deployed forces.

“This achievement demonstrates the power of innovation and joint collaboration in this critical region,” Vice Adm. Curt Renshaw, commander of U.S. Naval Forces Central Command/U.S. 5th Fleet, said in the statement.

The launch was a “significant milestone,” Renshaw added.

Earlier this month, CENTCOM announced the deployment of the military’s first operational squadron built around one-way attack drones.

LUCAS is an abbreviation for low-cost unmanned combat attack system. The drones have an extensive range and are



KAYLA MCGUIRE/U.S. Navy

A LUCAS one-way attack drone is launched from the flight deck of the USS Santa Barbara in the Persian Gulf on Tuesday. U.S. Navy officials called the event a “significant milestone,” saying it was the first time a LUCAS drone was launched from a ship at sea.

designed to operate autonomously, CENTCOM said.

They can be launched in various ways, including ship-based means, catapults and platforms mounted on the ground or a vehicle.

The one-way attack drones recently de-

ployed by U.S. forces are meant to act as a foil to an Iranian model known as the Shahed, which has wreaked havoc on the battlefield in Ukraine and has been employed by Iran-backed militias throughout the region.

Earlier this year, the Air Force asked

manufacturers to make a handful of exact replicas of the Shahed to assist in testing and training.

LUCAS was developed by Arizona-based defense contractor SpektreWorks and is designed for long-range, autonomous missions.

The aircraft is being introduced amid a broader U.S. military initiative to scale up use of low-cost unmanned strike systems. The intent is to increase operational flexibility and reduce production timelines and unit costs, defense officials say.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth last month announced a \$1 billion, multiyear drone buy that will require manufacturers to compete against one another in “gauntlet” challenges to procure drone contracts.

On Wednesday, DOD published its initial request for solutions outlining the parameters of the first challenge, scheduled for February.

Military operations are to run a number of tests on the vendors’ UAVs and grade them on their ability to locate targets.

The launch from Santa Barbara was handled by Task Force 59, a Navy unit focused on integrating drones into fleet operations. The task force has overseen a series of tests and demonstrations involving unmanned platforms in the Middle East.

NAVCENT did not say whether the drone carried a live payload during the launch.

Stars and Stripes reporter Lara Korte contributed to this story.

Clinics: Treatment will include individual, couples, family and group therapy

FROM PAGE 1
a national nonprofit organization founded in 2016 by philanthropist Steven Cohen to reduce barriers to mental health care for post-9/11 veterans, active-duty service members and their families.

It operates clinics across the United States and now plans to expand its footprint in the Indo-Pacific.

The AAFES release said U.S.-licensed clinicians will provide treatment for depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, grief and loss, anger, family and relationship issues, military transition challenges and children’s behavioral problems. Services will include individual, couples, family and group therapy, offered both in person and via telehealth.

The expansion comes as overseas military communities have raised concerns about access to mental health care, particularly for civilians. In December 2022, the Defense Health Agency limited DOD civilians in Japan to space-available appointments at military medical facilities and encouraged them to seek care from off-base providers, many of whom do not accept foreign health insur-

ance.
A Government Accountability Office report released in April found that DOD civilians and families in Japan often struggle to find mental health providers who speak English or fully understand American culture. Japan also has fewer mental health workers per capita than the U.S., the report said, citing World Health Organization data.

NATION

Trump: Economy stronger than many voters believe

By JOSH BOAK
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump delivered a politically charged speech Wednesday carried live in prime time on network television, seeking to pin the blame for economic challenges on Democrats while announcing he is sending a \$1,776 bonus check to U.S. troops for Christmas.

The remarks came as the nation is preparing to settle down to celebrate the holidays, yet Trump was focused more on divisions within the country than a sense of unity. His speech was a rehash of his recent messaging that has so far been unable to calm public anxiety about the cost of groceries, housing, utilities and other basic goods.

Trump has promised an economic boom, yet inflation has stayed elevated and the job market has weakened sharply in the wake of his import taxes. Trump suggested that his tariffs — which are partly responsible for boosting consumer prices — would fund a new “warrior dividend” for 1.45 million military members, a payment that could ease some of the financial strains for many households. The amount of \$1,776 was a reference to next year’s 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

Presidential addresses to the nation carried on network television are traditionally less partisan than rally speeches, but Trump gave a condensed version of his usual political remarks.

Flanked by two Christmas trees with a portrait of George Washington behind him in the White House’s Diplomatic Reception



DOUG MILLS/AP

President Donald Trump speaks during an address to the nation Wednesday.

Room, Trump sought to pin any worries about the economy on his predecessor, Joe Biden.

His holiday wishes came at a crucial time as he tries to rebuild his steadily eroding popularity. Public polling shows most U.S. adults are frustrated with his handling of the economy as inflation picked up after his tariffs raised prices and hiring slowed.

Trump brought charts with him to make the case that the economy is on an upward trajectory. He made claims about incomes growing, inflation easing and investment dollars pouring into the country as foreign leaders, he claimed, have assured him that “we’re the hottest country anywhere in the world,” a statement he has frequently repeated at public events.

The hard math internalized by the public paints a more complicated picture of an economy that

has some stability but few reasons to inspire much public confidence.

The stock market is up, gasoline prices are down and tech companies are placing large bets on the development of artificial intelligence.

But inflation that had been descending after spiking to a four-decade high in 2022 under Biden has reaccelerated after Trump announced his tariffs in April.

The consumer price index is increasing at an annual rate of 3%, up from 2.3% in April.

The affordability squeeze is also coming from a softening job market. Monthly job gains have averaged a paltry 17,000 since April’s “Liberation Day,” when Trump announced import taxes that he later suspended and then readjusted several months later.

Trump’s mass deportations of immigrants have proved unpopular even as he is viewed favorably for halting crossings along the U.S. border with Mexico. The public has generally been unmoved by his globe-trotting efforts to end conflicts and his attacks on suspected drug boats near Venezuela.

Trump sought to blame Democrats for the likely increase in health insurance premiums as the subsidies tied to the 2010 Affordable Care Act are expiring. Democratic lawmakers and some Republicans have sought to address that issue, but Trump has pushed back and suggested instead that payments should go directly to the buyers of health insurance instead of the companies. The president has yet to commit to a specific legislative fix.



MARKUS SCHREIBER/AP

Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, left, and Steve Witkoff, special envoy of the United States, meet at the chancellery in Berlin, on Monday.

Kremlin envoy slated to visit Miami for talks

By MATTHEW LEE
AND ILLIA NOVIKOV
Associated Press

A Kremlin envoy will travel to Florida to discuss a U.S.-proposed plan to end the war in Ukraine, a U.S. official said Thursday as European Union leaders weighed a major loan to help the Ukrainian government.

Kirill Dmitriev, who heads Russia’s sovereign wealth fund, is set to meet with President Donald Trump’s envoy, Steve Witkoff, and Trump’s son-in-law, Jared Kushner, in Miami on Saturday, according to an American official who spoke on condition of anonymity to preview a meeting that hasn’t yet been publicly announced.

The official said that Witkoff and Kushner will sit down with Dmitriev, after meetings with Ukrainian and European officials in Berlin earlier this week, in which they discussed U.S. security guarantees for Kyiv, territorial concessions and other aspects of the American-authored plan aimed at ending the war.

Asked about the meeting in Miami, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Thursday that Moscow was preparing for contacts with the U.S. to learn about the results of the meetings in Berlin, but didn’t give further details.

Trump has unleashed an extensive diplomatic push to end nearly four years of fighting following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine that began on Feb. 24, 2022, but Washington’s efforts have run into sharply conflicting demands by Moscow and Kyiv.

Russian President Vladimir Putin warned Wednesday that Moscow would seek to extend its gains in Ukraine if Kyiv and its Western allies reject the Kremlin’s demands in peace talks.

Putin wants all the areas in four key regions captured by his forces, as well as the Crimean Peninsula, which was illegally annexed in 2014, to be recognized as

Russian territory. He also has demanded that Ukraine withdraw from some areas in eastern Ukraine that Moscow’s forces haven’t captured yet.

The Kremlin also insists that Ukraine abandon its bid to join NATO and warns that Moscow won’t accept the deployment of any troops from NATO members and will view them as a “legitimate target.”

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has expressed readiness to drop Ukraine’s bid to join the alliance if the U.S. and other Western nations give Kyiv security guarantees similar to those offered to NATO members. But Ukraine’s preference remains NATO membership as the best security guarantee to prevent further Russian aggression.

At the same time, Zelenskyy has rejected Moscow’s demands that it pull back its troops from other areas that Russia hasn’t been able to take by force.

Zelenskyy said that Ukrainian officials were expected to hold negotiations in the U.S. on Friday or Saturday.

“We have progress in our dialogue with the American side regarding some of our points, they also speak with Russian side,” Zelenskyy said during a visit to Brussels where EU leaders were set to decide whether to use tens of billions of euros in frozen Russian assets to underwrite a loan to meet Ukraine’s military and financial needs over the next two years.

As European allies gathered for the high-stakes summit, Russia and Ukraine exchanged more aerial attacks. Ukraine’s air force said that Russia fired 82 drones of various types at Ukraine overnight, 63 of which were intercepted or jammed. In Russia’s Rostov region, three people were killed by Ukrainian drones overnight, including two crew members of a cargo ship that was hit in Rostov-on-Don and another man who died in Bataysk.

Dividend: Bonuses set to be tax-free

FROM PAGE 1

gration law, the “One Big Beautiful Bill.”

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth ordered the Pentagon to spend most of that money as a one-time payout on the bonuses, said the senior administration official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly on the matter.

Roughly 1.45 million service members, including 174,000 reservists, will receive the bonuses, which Hegseth said in a video Thursday would be tax-free.

“This warrior dividend serves as yet another example of how the War Department is working to improve the quality of life for our military personnel and their families,” Hegseth said.

Trump renamed the Department of Defense as the Department of War in September, designating that as the department’s “secondary title” and authorizing its use. It’s unclear whether Trump has the authority to permanently rename Cabinet departments without congressional approval.

“I can think of no better Americans to receive this check right before Christmas, whether it’s for pay, housing, faith, support, all elements of what we’re doing are to rebuild our military,” Hegseth said.

The defense secretary called the payment “a direct investment in the brave men and women who carry on the legacy of our armed forces every single day,” and said military members in pay grades E-1 to O-6 would be eligible. The

top pay grade eligible includes the ranks of colonel in the Air Force, Army, Marines and Space Force, and captain in the Navy and Coast Guard.

The Trump administration has a track record of aggressively shifting resources around the Pentagon to goose service members’ compensation.

During the government shutdown, the administration twice moved money around from other parts of the Pentagon budget to keep paying troops. Doing so without the approval of lawmakers — who normally have a say over large changes in federal spending — was controversial in Congress, where aides from both parties acknowledged that the move was likely illegal.

NATION



GENE J. PUSKAR/AP

Holiday shoppers check out iPhones at an Apple Store in Pittsburgh earlier this month.

US says inflation slowed in last month but data may be distorted

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — U.S. inflation slowed unexpectedly last month according to data that was delayed, and likely distorted, by the government shutdown.

The Labor Department reported Thursday that its consumer price index rose 2.7% in November from a year earlier. Yet, year-over-year inflation remains well above the Federal Reserve's 2% target, and Americans are dismayed by the high cost of living.

The report was delayed eight days by the federal government's 43-day shutdown, which also prevented the Labor Department from compiling overall numbers for consumer prices and core inflation in October. Thursday's report gave investors, businesses and policymakers their first look at CPI since the September numbers were released on Oct. 24.

Consumer prices had risen 3% in September from a year earlier, and forecasters had expected the November CPI to match that year-over-year increase.

"It's likely a bit distorted," said Diane Swonk, chief economist at the tax and consulting firm KPMG. "The good news is that it's cooling.

We'll take a win when we can get it."

Still, Swonk added: "The data is truncated, and we just don't know how much of it to trust." By disrupting the economy — especially government contracting — the shutdown may have contributed to a cooling in prices, she said.

Energy prices, driven up by sharply higher fuel oil prices, rose 4.2% in November. Excluding volatile food and energy prices, so-called core inflation rose 2.6%, compared with a 3% year-over-year gain in September and the lowest since March 2021.

U.S. inflation remains stubbornly high, partly because of President Donald Trump's decision to impose double-digit taxes on imports from almost every country on Earth along with targeted tariffs on specific products like steel, aluminum and autos.

The president's tariffs have so far proved less inflationary than economists feared. But they do put upward pressure on prices and complicate matters at the Fed, which is trying to decide whether to keep cutting its benchmark interest rate to support a sputtering job market or whether to hold off until inflationary pressures ease. The

central bank last week decided to reduce the rate for the third time this year, but Fed officials signaled that they expect just one cut in 2026.

Kay Haigh, global co-head of fixed income and liquidity solutions at Goldman Sachs Asset Management, warned that the November numbers were "noisy ... The canceling of the October report makes month-on-month comparisons impossible, for example, while the truncated information-gathering process given the shutdown could have caused systematic biases in the data.

"The Fed will instead focus on the December CPI released in mid-January, just two weeks before its next meeting, as a more accurate bellwether for inflation."

As the holiday season approaches, Americans are dipping into savings, scouring for bargains and feeling like the overall economy is sputtering, a new AP-NORC poll finds.

The vast majority of U.S. adults say they've noticed higher than usual prices for groceries, electricity and holiday gifts in recent months, according to the survey from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

Four Republicans force House vote on ACA subsidies

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Four centrist Republicans broke with Speaker Mike Johnson on Wednesday and signed onto a Democratic-led petition that will force a House vote on extending for three years an enhanced pandemic-era subsidy that lowers health insurance costs for millions of Americans.

The stunning move came the same day that House Republican leaders pushed to passage a health care bill that does not address the soaring monthly premiums that millions of people will soon endure. Those premium hikes will occur because the tax credits for those who buy insurance through the Affordable Care Act expire at year's end.

The developments set the stage for a renewed intraparty clash over health care in January, something Republican leaders had been working hard to avoid.

The moderate Republicans were able to force the issue by signing a petition, led by Democratic leader Hakeem Jeffries of New York, to vote on a bill that would extend the ACA subsidies for three years.

Republican Reps. Brian Fitzpatrick, Robert Bresnahan and Ryan Mackenzie, all from Pennsylvania, and Mike Lawler of New York signed on Wednesday morning, pushing it to the magic number of 218. A vote on the subsidy bill could come as soon as January under House rules.

"Unfortunately, it is House leadership themselves that have forced this outcome," Fitzpatrick said in a statement.

Johnson told reporters Wednesday that "I have not lost control of the House" and he noted that Republicans have a razor-thin majority that allows a small number of members to employ procedures that would not usually be successful

in getting around leadership.

"These are not normal times," said Johnson, R-La.

The revolt against GOP leadership came after days of talks centered on the health care subsidies.

Johnson had discussed allowing more politically vulnerable GOP lawmakers a chance to vote on bills that would temporarily extend the subsidies while also adding changes such as income caps for beneficiaries. But after days of discussions, the leadership sided with the more conservative wing of the party's conference, which has assailed the subsidies as propping up a failed ACA program, which is widely known as "Obamacare."

House Republicans pushed ahead Wednesday on a 100-plus-page health care package without the subsidies. Instead, the measure focused on long-sought GOP proposals designed to expand insurance coverage options for small businesses and the self-employed. The bill passed on a mostly party-line vote of 216-211. Rep. Thomas Massie, R-Ky., joined with Democrats in voting against the measure.

Fitzpatrick and Lawler tried to add a temporary extension of the subsidies to the bill, but were denied.

"Our only request was a floor vote on this compromise, so that the American People's voice could be heard on this issue. That request was rejected. Then, at the request of House leadership I, along with my colleagues, filed multiple amendments, and testified at length to those amendments," Fitzpatrick said. "House leadership then decided to reject every single one of these amendments."

"As I've stated many times before, the only policy that is worse than a clean three-year extension without any reforms, is a policy of complete expiration without any bridge," Fitzpatrick said.

Health officials target US hospitals over kids' transgender care

Bloomberg News

Hospitals that offer gender-affirming care to minors will be forced to forgo federal insurance funding under a rule proposed by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, part of an effort by the Trump administration to curtail the practice.

The agency said Thursday it will roll out a two-part plan to curb access. Medicaid reimbursements for treatment

through the Children's Health Insurance Program, or CHIP, will no longer be offered for those under the age of 19. Hospitals that receive funding through Medicaid and Medicare, the government's programs for the poor and elderly, also must stop offering the care.

The proposed rules were posted on a federal website and now face a public comment period.

CMS's move is the latest turn in

the Trump administration's myriad efforts to curb support and care for transgender people in the U.S. The strategy — largely led by the Department of Justice and the White House — has been immediately met by lawsuits.

In January, Trump signed an executive order to halt funds for hospitals and medical schools that provide transgender care to people under the age of 19. Washington, Oregon and Minnesota

sued in February over the order. A judge then issued an injunction, effectively blocking it from being implemented.

The order also directed HHS to release a report on gender dysphoria and gender-affirming care in kids. That report was released in May and met with intense criticism over its contradictory data. The administration has canceled hundreds of thousands of dollars in LGBTQ+ research

and a federal suicide prevention hotline for transgender youth.

Cutting off funding for gender-affirming care was a top campaign pledge from Trump. It is already banned or restricted in 27 states, according to research from KFF, a nonpartisan health research institute. The new CMS proposal would impact hospitals in the remaining states, including California and New York, and the District of Columbia.

EUROPE

Russia trying to overwhelm Europe with sabotage

By EMMA BURROWS
Associated Press

In November, a train carrying almost 500 people came to a sudden halt in eastern Poland. A broken overhead line had smashed several windows, and the track ahead was damaged. Elsewhere on the line, explosives detonated under a passing freight train.

No one was hurt in either case and the damage was limited, but Poland, which blamed the attack on Russia's intelligence services, responded forcefully: It deployed 10,000 troops to protect critical infrastructure.

The sabotage in Poland is one of 145 incidents in an Associated Press database that Western officials say are part of a campaign of disruption across Europe masterminded by Russia. Officials say the campaign — waged since President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 — aims to deprive Kyiv of support, create divisions among Europeans and identify the Continent's security weak spots.

So far in this hybrid war, most known acts of sabotage have resulted in minimal damage — nothing compared to the tens of thousands of lives lost and cities decimated across Ukraine.

But officials say each act — from vandalism of monuments to cyberattacks to warehouse fires — sucks up valuable security resources. The head of one large European intelligence service said investigations into Russian interference now swallow up as much of the agency's time as terrorism.

While the campaign places a heavy burden on European security services, it costs Russia next to nothing, officials say. That's because Moscow is carrying out cross-border operations that require European countries to cooperate extensively on investigations — while often using foreigners with criminal backgrounds as cheap proxies for Russian intelligence operatives. That means Moscow notches up a win just by tying up resources — even when plots aren't successful.

"It's a 24/7 operation between all the services to stop it," said a senior European intelligence official.

Over the course of the year, AP spoke to more than 40 European and NATO officials from 13 countries to document the scope of this hybrid war, including incidents on its map only when linked by Western officials to Russia, its proxies or its ally Belarus.

Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov told AP that Russia doesn't have "any connection" with the campaign.

AP's database shows a spike in arson and explosives plots from one in 2023 to 26 in 2024. Six have been documented so far in 2025.



KPRM/AP

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, second right, visits the sabotaged rail line near Mika, Poland, Nov. 17.

Three vandalism cases were recorded last year, meanwhile, and one this year.

The data is incomplete since not all incidents are made public, and it can take officials months to establish a link to Moscow. But the spike matches what officials have warned: The campaign is growing more dangerous.

The countries most frequently targeted, according to the map, border Russia: Poland and Estonia. Several incidents have also occurred in Latvia, the U.K., Germany and France. All are major supporters of Ukraine.

The European official, a senior Baltic intelligence official and another intelligence official said the campaign noticeably calmed in late 2024 and early this year. Their analysis showed Moscow likely paused the campaign to curry favor with President Donald Trump's new administration. It has since resumed at full pace.

"They are back to business," the European official said.

The man officials say was behind the attack on the Polish railway that carries supplies to Ukraine is Yevgeny Ivanov — a Ukrainian convicted of working with Russian military intelligence to plot arson attacks at home improvement stores, a cafe and a drone factory in Ukraine, according to court documents.

Ivanov, who left Poland after the attack there, worked for Yuri Sizov, an officer from Russia's GRU military intelligence service, according to Ukraine's security service.

Ivanov was convicted in absentia in Ukraine but managed to enter Poland because Ukraine did not inform Polish officials of his conviction, Polish Interior Minister Marcin Kierwinski said. Ukraine's security service said it closely cooperates with allies.

Staging plots that involve perpetrators from several countries or who have crossed borders drains investigatory resources from multiple authorities across Europe — one of Moscow's key goals, according to Estonian State

Prosecutor Triinu Olev-Aas.

Over the last year, she said the profile of attackers in Estonia has changed from locals largely known to law enforcement to unknown foreigners. That requires increased cooperation among countries to disrupt plots or detain perpetrators.

For two attacks in January — fires set at a supermarket and a Ukrainian restaurant — the people hired had never been to Estonia before, Olev-Aas said.

At the restaurant, a Moldovan man smashed a window, threw in a can of gasoline and set it alight. Video showed his arm on fire as he ran away.

The man and his accomplice fled through Latvia, Lithuania and Poland before being caught in Italy.

While Russian intelligence officers might be the masterminds of such operations, they frequently rely on recruiters — often with convictions or criminal connections — who assign tasks to saboteurs on the ground, the Baltic official said.

Outsourcing to people with criminal backgrounds, like Ivanov, means Russia doesn't have to risk highly trained intelligence operatives — agents Moscow often isn't able to use anyway since European countries kicked out scores of spies as relations nosedived in recent years.

Russian criminal networks offer a ready-made alternative, the Baltic official said.

The European official said the man accused of coordinating a plot to put explosives in packages on cargo planes, for example, was recruited by Russian intelligence after involvement with smuggling guns and explosives. The man is linked to at least four other plots.

Other people are recruited from European prisons or soon after they're released, the Baltic official said.

In one case, the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia, dedicated to the Soviet Union's occupation of the country, was set on fire by someone released from prison the previous month.

Even plots that are foiled are a win for Moscow because they test defenses and waste resources.

In 2024, a Ukrainian man, working on the orders of Russian military intelligence, dug up a cache of items buried in a cemetery in Lithuania, including drone parts and cans of corn filled with explosives.

Officials believe the plan was to rig the drones with the explosives. The plot was eventually foiled — but not before considerable resources were used to track down everyone involved, said Jacek Dobrzynski, the spokesperson for Poland's security minister.

The sheer number of plots is

overstretching some law enforcement agencies, but Moscow's campaign has also fostered greater cooperation, the European official said.

Prosecutors in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia have created joint investigation teams for attacks organized by foreign intelligence services, said Martins Jansons, a special prosecutor in Latvia.

In the U.K., front-line police officers are being trained to spot suspicious incidents that may be state-backed, said Cmdr. Dominic Murphy, head of the counterterrorism squad at the Metropolitan Police.

He noted a trainee detective flagged an arson attack at a warehouse in London after realizing the business was owned by Ukrainians and contained communications devices used by the military. Police determined the attack was organized by Russian intelligence.

But officials warn Russia is continually testing new methods.

Smugglers in Russia's ally Belarus have sent hundreds of weather balloons carrying cigarettes into Lithuania and Poland, repeatedly forcing the Lithuanian capital's airport to shut in what authorities called a hybrid attack.

"Nowadays they only carry cigarettes," Dobrzynski warned, "but in future they could carry other things."

WORLD

Turkey warns Russia, Ukraine over Black Sea security

Associated Press

ANKARA, Turkey — Turkey has warned Russia and Ukraine to exercise greater caution regarding Black Sea security after its air force shot down a drone that entered Turkish airspace, the defense ministry said Thursday.

F-16 fighter jets were dispatched on Monday after an “out of control” drone approached Turkish airspace from the Black Sea.

The drone was shot down in a safe area to protect civilians and air traffic, officials said. The incident followed recent Ukrainian strikes on Russian “shadow fleet” tankers off the Turkish coast, as well as warnings from Turkish officials about the risk of the war in Ukraine spilling over into the region.

“Because of the ongoing war between Ukraine and Russia, our counterparts have been warned

that both sides need to be more careful regarding incidents that could negatively affect the security of the Black Sea,” the ministry said.

Turkish authorities have not disclosed the drone’s origin.

The ministry said that the object likely broke into small fragments that scattered over a wide area, making its identification more difficult. Search and technical analysis efforts were still underway, it added.

Ukraine said its naval drones struck two tankers on Nov. 28. A third vessel was struck Dec. 2 as it headed toward the Turkish port of Sinop.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan condemned the earlier attacks as a threat to “navigational safety, life and the environment, especially in our own exclusive zone.”

Israel launches intense airstrikes in Lebanon

Associated Press

BEIRUT — Israel carried out a series of airstrikes on southern and northeastern Lebanon on Thursday as a deadline looms to disarm the militant Hezbollah group along the countries’ tense frontier.

The strikes came a day before a meeting of the committee monitoring the enforcement of a U.S.-brokered ceasefire that halted the latest war between Israel and Hezbollah a year ago. The gathering on Friday was to be the second meeting of the mechanism after Israel and Lebanon appointed civilian members to a previously military-only committee. The group also includes the United States, France and the U.N. peacekeeping force deployed along the border.

In Paris, Lebanon’s army commander, Gen. Rodolph Haikal, was scheduled to hold meetings with American, French and Saudi officials to discuss ways of assisting the army in its mission to boost its presence in the border area. Haikal started his meetings first by holding talks with French military officials.

Gen. Fabien Mandon, the French armed forces’ chief of staff, posted on X Thursday that he discussed with Haikal the strategic environment and security challenges in Lebanon and the region.

Mandon said that France’s help to the Lebanese army is guided by a common objective, which is “to contribute to maintaining stability and lasting peace, in respect with Lebanon’s sovereignty.”

The Lebanese government has said that the army should have cleared the whole border area south of the Litani River from Hezbollah’s armed presence by the end of the year.

The Israeli military said that the strikes hit Hezbollah infrastructure and launching sites in a military compound used by the group to conduct training and courses for its fighters. The Israeli military also said that it struck several Hezbollah military structures in which weapons were

“This is an Israeli message to the Paris meeting aiming to support the Lebanese army.”

Nabih Berri

Lebanese parliamentary speaker

stored, and from which Hezbollah members operated recently.

The intense airstrikes stretched from areas in Mount Rihan in the south to the northeastern Hermel region that borders Syria, according to Lebanon’s state-run National News Agency, or NNA.

Shortly afterward, a drone strike on a car near the southern town of Taybeh wounded four people, NNA reported.

“This is an Israeli message to the Paris meeting aiming to support the Lebanese army,” parliamentary Speaker Nabih Berri said about the strikes.

“The fire belt of Israeli airstrikes is to honor the mechanism’s meeting tomorrow (Friday),” Berri said during a parliamentary meeting in Beirut.

The latest Israel-Hezbollah war began on Oct. 8, 2023, a day after Hamas-led militants attacked southern Israel, after Hezbollah fired rockets into Israel in solidarity with Hamas. Israel launched a widespread bombardment of Lebanon in September 2024 that severely weakened Hezbollah, followed by a ground invasion.

Israel has carried out almost daily airstrikes since then, mainly targeting Hezbollah members, but also killing 127 civilians, according to the office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Over the past several weeks, the U.S. has increased pressure on Lebanon to work harder on disarming Hezbollah.



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WEEKEND



Podcast ideas to make holiday travel brighter
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Pandora heats up

James Cameron’s world of blue-skinned warriors expands yet again with ‘Avatar: Fire and Ash’

Movie review, Page 17

20TH CENTURY STUDIOS/AP

WEEKEND: GADGETS & TECHNOLOGY

Bask in the glow of the tree, not a screen

Tips for scrolling, swiping less during the holidays

By Kelvin Chan
Associated Press

The Christmas holiday season is a time to step back from the busy pace of modern life and connect with our nearest and dearest instead of screens, apps and chatbots. Here are some suggestions on how to unplug from the online world for the next few weeks as you sit down for a festive meal, exchange gifts or take time out for some self-reflection:

Do not disturb me

Your phone already has built-in features that can help you stop getting distracted. To temporarily silence all those attention-seeking notifications, use the Focus setting on your iPhone or Android device. This mode is designed to stop interruptions when you want to concentrate. You can customize it by blocking specific apps or muting only when you're doing certain things, like sleeping or reading. Android and iOS also have related screen time controls to manage overall device usage. Too much Instagram scrolling? Limit yourself to a daily total of 20 minutes.

There are other tricks you could try, like turning the screen gray to make it less appealing. On iPhones or Android devices, tweak the color filter or adjust settings. On Android, activating Bedtime Mode also turns the screen gray.

Delete apps

If you need to be more strict with yourself, then delete any or all apps you're addicted to. An effective way to stop looking at your phone is by removing those apps that you spend the most time scrolling through, even if temporarily. You can always reinstall them again if the withdrawal symptoms become too much.

Get outside ...

When the temperature drops, it's tempting to hunker down inside and stay cozy. But don't sit on the couch all day. Head outdoors, away from Wi-Fi signals. If it's



been snowing where you are, have a snowball fight or go sledding. To keep your hands warm, don't forget to put on bulky mittens — which your phone's touch screen won't respond to. Even if there's no snow, take a walk in the woods, a park or along some tree-lined streets. Time spent outdoors, and away from screens, can benefit your mental health and physical well-being. There's even a term for it: forest bathing.

... and touch grass

There's an app you can use to force yourself to — literally — get back in touch with nature. Touch Grass takes its name from a viral catchphrase for when someone has lost their connection to the real world because they're consumed by what's on their screens. It's similar to other apps designed to restrict screen time by forcing users to take a timeout from scrolling. The difference is that Touch Grass requires users to go outside and take a picture of themselves physically touching some grass. Touch Grass has a free service level that allows you to block two apps. I found it was quite effective at stopping me from opening two of my favorite time-wasters, Reddit and Instagram, though I ended up

spending more time on other apps like Facebook. To block all apps, you'll have to shell out for a subscription — \$6 a month or \$50 annually. If you can't find grass because it's winter, there's also the option to touch snow or sand. It's only available for iPhones so far, but there are copycat versions for both iOS and Android, though we haven't tested them.

Put pen to paper

When was the last time you sent a Christmas card? Most digital natives find it easier to type out holiday greetings or send digital cards over chat apps, than to put pen to paper. The consequence of all the time that we spend tapping, typing or swiping on our devices is that handwriting is becoming something of a dying art. But there are neurological and cognitive benefits to handwriting, research suggests. For example, taking notes by hand is a better way for students to learn and to remember information. So use this time of year to write a thoughtful message to someone special, a letter to a long-lost friend or thank-you notes for presents received.

Pick up a book

If you still don't know what you want for Christmas, why not ask for a book? It's easy to find inspiration and ideas at this time of year, when many people like to share the books they've read over the past 12 months, and outlets including The Associated Press compile their lists of the year's best books. Reading long-form literature or non-fiction has many benefits that can't be gained from glancing at short-form bursts of text on your device, including a deeper understanding of a topic, developing empathy, increasing your focus and concentration and more.

Lock your device up

If you're looking for a last-minute gift, how about a time-lock vault to put your devices out of reach for, say, 15 minutes, a few hours or even weeks? There are plenty of versions for sale online. For about \$30, I bought a battery-powered gray plastic model that can hold several smartphones. The instruction leaflet says it's intended to "enhance self-discipline."

Punch in the amount of time — up to 30 days — and a digital display will count down until it unlocks. The lid has port-holes so you can thread in cables for charging while you wait. One evening, I locked my phone up for an hour and then grabbed my laptop to do some online Christmas shopping. But my plans were foiled because I forgot that authentication requests for my credit card and Amazon went to my phone.

Not-as-smart phones

For another gift idea, consider putting a brick phone under the tree. Also known as a feature phone, these devices cater to those who want a back-to-basics phone without all the digital stimulation that comes with a smartphone. Retro devices from Nokia evoke the early days of the cellphone era — no touch screens, numeric keypads and throwback video games like Snake. Most can only make voice calls and send text messages. If that sounds too primitive, there are so-called digital minimalist phones that serve a similar market niche. Devices from Light, Punkt and Balance offer sleek, modern designs but with a stripped-down experience.

Here's an idea for a last-minute gift they'll use all year

By Gregg Elluman
Tribune News Service

Just like that, we're in the homestretch for holiday shopping, which can lead to stress and impulse buys. To help out — and hopefully cut down your time in return lines — here's an item that will appeal to lots of people on your list. Divoom's Times Frame interactive digital frame (\$199.99, on sale for \$169.99) is fully customizable to fit your personality, environment, style, occasion or room. Divoom said it well on its website: "One device, every mood." Someone's device can be customized for a birthday or a holiday dinner party. Whatever you choose, there's no right or wrong; it's easy

to control and change with the companion app. With the app, you can write a note, welcome guests to your home, or show reminders, which are displayed on the 10.1-inch high-definition transparent IPS screen with a scratch-proof triple-layer tempered glass design, which gives it a 3D-like feel. Up to 700,000 photos or 6,000 minutes of video can be stored on the internal 64GB of storage. Transfers and connections are made via Wi-Fi 6 with your smartphone, tablet or laptop. There's an internal speaker so you can play your playlists and let the Times Frame work as a standalone speaker. There are more than 400 clock faces to

choose from; you can see your stocks and weather, load widgets, check your calendar or download from an ever-expanding library of pixel art. You'll have access to the Pixel Art Community online gallery, which has more than 3 million members and more than 10 million pieces of art to choose from. The operating system is user-friendly and referred to as a smartwatch-style system. The frame is controlled by the dual rotary knobs or the app. The first review on the Divoom site said it well: "One of the coolest gifts I've ever given — and he's obsessed!" Online: divoom.com/products/times-frame



Divoom/TNS

The Divoom Times Frame is like a digital information board, displaying photos, videos, widgets, notes and reminders.

WEEKEND: VIDEO GAMES



Dotemu

Marvel Cosmic Invasion gives players the nostalgia of arcade beat-'em-ups but updates the gameplay by adding elements of action and fighting games.

Beefing up a traditional beat-'em-up

Marvel Cosmic Invasion revives arcade experience but updates the mechanics and allows players to swap characters

By GIESON CACHO
The Mercury News

Gamers of a certain age will remember when beat-'em-ups ruled arcades. The cabinets inhaled quarters as four players teamed up to brawl their way to save Maggie Simpson or battle Shredder across New York. Those memories are connected to pizza parties or late-night forays, with parents handing one more dollar to see if the kids could finish the game.



Although most arcades are gone, those experiences live on thanks to developers such as Tribute Games, which has made a name for itself by finding new life in the genre. The team crafted an excellent adventure mutant inspired by Konami's Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles adventures on the Super Nintendo Entertainment System and in arcades, and now, its follow-up echoes another classic.

Spiritual successors

Tribute's Marvel Cosmic Invasion takes the formula from Shredder's Revenge and applies it to the X-Men arcade game, a legendary beat-'em-up that supported up to six players on a two-screen cabinet. That tech was advanced for its time, but nowadays, the wide-screen format doesn't stand out as much.

Instead, Tribute pushed what's capable in the game-play. The 1990s version had simpler mechanics with three buttons for jumping, attacking and a super move that was powerful but consumed health. Marvel Cosmic Invasion moves beyond that by adding elements of action and fighting games.

When it comes to movement, characters can sprint

across the screen with a double-tap. Heroes capable of flying can stay above the fray when players hit the jump button twice. Tribute adds a defensive component with a button that can either dodge or block, depending on the character. With the right timing, fighters such as Phyla-Vell can even counter an enemy attack.

On the offensive side, players have an attack that can be mashed for combos, while their power attack can deliver a ranged blast, grapple move or heavy blow. What's more, players can hold onto the attack buttons for powered-up attacks. Super moves are still in Marvel Cosmic Invasion, but instead of shaving off health, they rely on a Focus meter that players build up through fighting.

Dynamic duos

Tribute adds another wrinkle to the gameplay with the swap button. Before entering a stage, players choose two characters, and they can hit the left trigger to switch to a second hero, similar to a Capcom fighting game. It's helpful when one hero is being held down by an adversary or if one character is low on health. A tag out can bring a hero with full health into the fore and allow the hurt partner to partially heal up. The swap button can even be used as a finisher for a combo.

Players have plenty of duo combinations to explore with 15 heroes from across the Marvel universe. It's not just mutants. Players can choose Avengers and heroes beyond Earth's boundaries, such as Nova and Beta Ray Bill. They all join together to fend off an attack from Annihilus and his minions.

Some of the heroes must be unlocked through the campaign, but that isn't hard to do. It's best to choose heroes of different talents so that players can deal with a variety of situations. If they encounter a stage with a lot of flying foes, it's best to grab someone like Storm or Iron Man,

who can hover and take them out.

In addition, each of the heroes will level up after completing a stage or being defeated. Hitting a new milestone offers stat perks, passive abilities or a new color option. Even if players fail to complete a stage, they can keep at it, and the next attempt should be easier with a more powerful hero. Players, however, can hit a level cap, and it isn't hard with 10 levels. Sadly, they also all level up the same way without a skill tree or way to make each hero more distinct.

Short but sweet

Marvel Cosmic Invasion contains 15 full stages that are drawn beautifully with pixel art. They're well-animated and have a crafted retro charm that will scratch that nostalgic itch. You'll feel as though you're playing a game from your childhood. Tribute mines that vein and takes players to locales that will be familiar to Marvel Cinematic Universe fans as well as comic aficionados.

Unfortunately, not all the stages are well-done. Some feel short while others are unimaginative. The best ones have a gimmick or noteworthy layout. They're all themed well, as the campaign encourages players to pick two canon heroes and complete three objectives for each stage. This gives players cosmic cubes so they can unlock more rewards. It's a way to increase the replay value.

Like its arcade brethren, Marvel Cosmic Invasion isn't long. Players can complete it over the weekend or Sunday afternoon, but even if they beat it once, there's still joy to unlock. Fans can master their favorite heroes or learn to use new ones. They can also just grab old friends and relive a piece of their childhood.

Platforms: PC, PlayStation 4/5, Nintendo Switch and Switch 2, Xbox Series X/S
Online: marvelcosmicinvasiongame.com

WEEKEND: MOVIE REVIEWS



LIONSGATE/AP photos

Down-on-her-luck Millie Calloway (Sydney Sweeney) secures a job as a live-in housekeeper by submitting a fraudulent résumé and fraudulent references in “The Housemaid.”

Behind expensive doors

‘Housemaid’ a twisty horror-thriller about the depravity of the wealthy

By MARK KENNEDY
Associated Press

Santa left us a present this holiday season, and it is exactly what we didn’t know we needed: a twisty, psychological horror-thriller with nudity that’s all wrapped up in an empowerment message. “The Housemaid” is Paul Feig’s delicious, satirical look at the secret depravity of the ultra-rich, but it’s so well-constructed that it’s not clear who’s naughty or nice. Halfway through, the movie zigs and everything you expected zags.

It’s almost impossible to thread the line between self-winking campy — “That’s a lot of bacon. Are you trying to kill us?” — and carving someone’s stomach with a broken piece of fine china, yet Feig and screenwriter Rebecca Sonnenshine do.

Sydney Sweeney stars as a down-on-her luck Millie Calloway, a gal with a troubled past living out of her car who answers an ad for a live-in housekeeper in a tony suburb of New York City. Her résumé is fraudulent, as are her references.

Somehow, the madam of the mansion, Nina Winchester — played with frosty excellence by Amanda Seyfried in pearls and creamy knits — takes a shine to this young soul.

“I have a really good feeling about this, Millie,” she says in that perky, slightly crazed, clipped way that Seyfried always slays with. “This is going to be fun, Millie.”



Brandon Sklenar and Amanda Seyfried play the married owners of the mansion where Millie gets a job in “The Housemaid.”

Maybe not for Millie, but definitely for us. The young housekeeper gets her own room in the attic — weird that it closes with a dead bolt from the outside, but no matter — and we’re off. Millie gets a smartphone with the family’s credit card preloaded and a key for that dead bolt.

“What kind of monsters are we?” Nina asks. Indeed.

The next day, the house is a mess when the housekeeper comes down and Seyfried is in a wide-eyed, crashing-plates, full-on psychotic rage. The sweet, supportive woman we met the day before is gone. But her hunky husband (Brandon Sklenar) is helpful and apologetic. And smoldering. Uh-oh. Did we mention he’s hunky?

If at first we understand that the housekeeper is being a little manipulative — lying to get the job, for instance, or wearing glasses to seem more serious — we soon realize that all kinds of

gaslighting games are being played behind these gates, and they’re much more impactful.

Based on Freida McFadden’s novel, “The Housemaid” rides waves of manipulation and then turns the tables on what we think we’ve just seen, looking at male-female power structures and how privilege can trap people without it.

The film is as good looking as the actors, with nifty touches like having the main house spare, well-lit and bright, while the husband’s private screening room in the basement is done in a hellish red. There are little jokes throughout, like the husband and the housemaid bonding over old episodes of “Family Feud,” with the name saying it all.

Feig and his team also have fun with horror movie conventions, like having a silent, foreboding groundskeeper, adding a creepy dollhouse and placing lightning and thunder during a pivotal scene. They surround the mansion with fussy, aristocratic PTA moms who have tea parties and say things like “You know what yoga means to me.”

Feig’s fascinating combination of gore, torture and hot sex ends happily, capped off with Taylor Swift’s perfectly conjured “I Did Something Bad” playing over the end credits. Not at all: This naughty movie is definitely on the nice list.

“The Housemaid” is rated R for strong bloody violence, gore, language, sexuality/nudity and drug use. Running time: 131 minutes. Now playing at select on-base theaters.

‘Search for SquarePants’ a madcap, swashbuckling ride

By LINDSEY BAHR
Associated Press

SpongeBob SquarePants just wants to be a big guy. For our bubble-blowing Bikini Bottom resident (voiced by Tom Kenny), that means reaching the coveted height of 36 clams tall so that he can finally ride the big roller coaster at Captain Booty Beard’s Fun Park.

In the new feature-length movie, “The SpongeBob Movie: Search for SquarePants,” he wakes up to discover, with the help of his loyal pet Gary the Snail, that he has finally made it. But, as many kids before him have learned the hard way, being tall enough to ride the big roller coaster is not always the same as being ready to ride the big roller coaster. Cue the “O Fortuna” needle drop.

This installment has more madness up its sleeves than a terrifying roller coaster. A little lie from SpongeBob, that he promised he’d wait to ride it with his boss Mr. Krabs (Clancy Brown), has unintended consequences. Soon Mr. Krabs is regaling SpongeBob with his own story from his seafaring days about earning a coveted swashbuckler certificate (which includes proving one’s “intestinal fortitude”) by defeating The Flying Dutchman. SpongeBob, determined to not be just a bubble-blowing baby, sets off on his own odyssey that takes him and his jolly starfish sidekick Patrick (Bill Fagerbakke) on a madcap adventure to the underworld with the ghost of The Flying Dutchman (Mark Hamill) and his lackey Barb (Regina Hall). SpongeBob, as earnest as ever, believes he’s there to prove his swashbuckling mettle. The Flying Dutchman has other plans.

This underworld is a wild, colorful place (the words surreal tiki bar have been thrown around) where sirens lure you in with smooth jazz (far too tempting for Squidward, voiced again by Rodger Bumpass), where two monstrous creatures start spontaneously kissing one another

instead of killing the intruders and where guardian skeletons can be brought down with laughter. Just wait until you see how SpongeBob and Patrick decide they’ve passed the “intestinal fortitude” test.

“Search for SquarePants” was directed by Derek Drymon and written by Pam Brady and Matt Lieberman. Drymon is an animation veteran, who worked with SpongeBob creator Stephen Hillenburg on the development of his signature series.

One significant change is that “Search for SquarePants” embraces 3D animation, which is a little jarring at first, especially coming after the short “Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles” film, with its hand-drawn style, that plays before “SpongeBob.” I’m not entirely sure what’s improved with the new look. Perhaps the more vulgar visual gags with butts and such look a little more innocent in 3D? Thankfully, the irreverent sense of play remains firmly intact. During one particularly manic montage, we’re even transported into the studio boss’ office who tells them the movie has gone off the rails. There’s also some live-action insanity in Santa Monica, Calif.

As far as lessons to be learned from this outing, “SpongeBob” stays admirably in the zone of concerns of its target audience, like being too scared to ride the roller coaster and not wanting to admit it. One conflict involves external forces trying to convince SpongeBob that he’s outgrown his friend. There’s always room for big, worldly themes in animation, but it’s nice when they take on the microissues that consume children’s worlds as well.

Hillenburg died in 2018, but his wholly unique, zany world lives on, now four features in. It might not be the best of the bunch, but the infectious childlike spirit (and intestinal fortitude) remains firmly intact.

“The SpongeBob Movie: Search for SquarePants” is rated PG for rude humor, action and some scary images. Running time: 96 minutes. Now playing at select on-base theaters.



PARAMOUNT ANIMATION AND NICKELODEON/AP

SpongeBob, voiced by Tom Kenny, and Flying Dutchman, voiced by Mark Hamill, in “The SpongeBob Movie: Search for SquarePants.”

WEEKEND: MOVIE REVIEW



20TH CENTURY STUDIOS/AP

New to “Avatar”: Varang, performed by Oona Chaplin, is leader of the Mangkwan, a tribe of ash-covered, fire-wielding Na’vi rebels enamored with the Sky People’s shiny guns.

Wonder and war in ‘Avatar: Fire and Ash’

Latest trip to Pandora has convoluted plot, but Cameron makes it worthwhile

By SONIA RAO
The Washington Post

The third and latest film in James Cameron’s epic “Avatar” series about the big blue aliens, “Fire and Ash,” picks up where its predecessor left off: Jake Sully (Sam Worthington) and his native Na’vi wife, Neytiri (Zoe Saldña), mourn their oldest child, Neteyam (Jamie Flatters), who died in the last major conflict with malevolent colonizing humans. Jake blames himself, as does the couple’s surviving son, Lo’ak (Britain Dalton). But they must quickly set their grief aside to handle a new threat from Jake’s returning enemy, Col. Miles Quaritch (Stephen Lang), a human who died in the first film and was resuscitated in Na’vi form — but still fights for the species known to the Na’vi as the “Sky People.” Quaritch finds an ally in Varang (Oona Chaplin), leader of the Mangkwan, a tribe of ash-covered, fire-wielding Na’vi rebels enamored with the Sky People’s shiny guns.

If this plot sounds ludicrous to you, congratulations: You just saved yourself over three hours because, all these years later, you are still not the target audience for Cameron’s fantastical treatise on the human destruction of natural beauty and wonder. But if you emerged from all that blather unscathed, you might as well stick around. “Avatar: Fire and Ash,” an unfocused narrative that operates as more of a Part 2 to 2022’s “The Way of Water” than it does its own film, is another visual spectacle that manages to deepen the audience’s connection to the planet our Na’vi heroes hold so dear.

While Jake and Quaritch’s long-standing feud represents a greater war between species, they technically spend much of “Fire and Ash” fighting over a human teenager named Miles “Spider” Socorro (Jack Champion). Spider, Quaritch’s biological son who admires the Na’vi so much that he also wears his hair in dreadlocks, has lived with the Sully family since the last film. Quaritch doesn’t care about Spider’s moral inclinations and tries to bring him back to the dark side. Jake resists this effort, in part because he cares for Spider but also because he worries the boy will teach humans how to thrive



Col. Miles Quaritch, who fights for the Sky People and is performed by Stephen Lang, finds an ally in Varang and gets seduced by her use of violence and feminine wiles.

on Pandora, a planet with air they cannot breathe, thus bolstering the takeover.

If I’m being honest, I don’t really care about Spider. He is far less intriguing a character than his best friend, Jake and Neytiri’s adopted daughter Kiri (Sigourney Weaver, voicing a child for reasons that are far too complicated to get into right now), who possesses an unusually strong connection to the Na’vi deity Eywa — essentially, Mother Earth. But Spider’s presence becomes a fascinating point of contention between Jake and Neytiri, putting a strain on their interspecies marriage. (Remember, Jake only appears to be Na’vi because his human consciousness was transferred to his avatar.)

“I hate their pink little hands. I hate the insanity in their minds,” Neytiri says of humans, lashing out in anger at her husband after realizing Quaritch’s human forces — of which Jake was once a member — will never stop coming after them. It is just as insane a line of dialogue, but Saldña sells it. That Neytiri’s explosive anger comes through in this scene, in addition to the pained facial expression Jake sports in response, is a credit to both actors and the franchise’s always-advancing motion capture technology.

“Fire and Ash” introduces a terrific new antagonist in Varang, a nihilist whose followers are genuinely quite frightening. The Na’vi reject firearms, warning that using the Sky People’s weapons will poison your heart, which makes Varang’s stark embrace of machine guns all the more off-putting. Franchise newcomer Chaplin (the granddaughter of Charlie!) relishes Varang’s villainy,

playing it up with exaggerated body movements and wide grins. The character uses violence and feminine wiles to seduce Quaritch, an odd romantic pairing that further establishes his deranged thirst for power.

Some of my previous grievances with the “Avatar” movies persist: There are too many plot points to recall from years ago, though I guess it makes more sense to skirt over explanation than bog down an already lengthy film with tedious expository dialogue. While the Na’vi language was developed by a professional linguist, it remains distracting that the Na’vi characters speak English with different accents — inspired by Indigenous communities from around OUR world — even when they’re from the same tribe.

Storylines get tangled, like vines that snap beneath the characters’ feet as they run through vividly rendered rainforests. A whole subplot involving Payakan, a whale-like creature who was cast out of his tulkun pod for violently avenging the death of his mother, seems to exist only to set up a dramatic fight scene later on.

But once that fateful battle finally begins — make sure you visit the bathroom before sitting in the theater — you will no longer care why or how they got there. Cameron directs the hell out of a climactic action sequence. Similar to the indelible “Titanic” shipwreck sequence, which probably won Cameron all three of his Oscars, this one is expertly paced. The frenetic energy of its arrow-shooting and boat-exploding amps up anxiety, while gorgeous visuals of dusky skies and sparkling water lapping up on the shore remind you of what the Na’vi fight to protect. Cameron is such an earnest purveyor of this story that you, too, cheer for the humans’ demise (even when they answer to a general played by Edie Falco).

Have I mainlined shimmering blue Kool-Aid? Attached the neural network of my braid (or a kuru, as the Na’vi call it) to some sort of hypnotizing Pandoran life source? Perhaps. I don’t mean to suggest that we *need* the fourth and fifth Avatar movies Cameron previously planned. The plot simply doesn’t have enough juice. But if he does end up making them, I expect to be back at the multiplex in approximately four to five years. This alien world is too gorgeous to resist.

“Avatar: Fire and Ash” is rated PG-13 for violence, bloody images, strong language and suggestive material. Running time: 195 minutes. Now playing at select on-base theaters.

WEEKEND: ENTERTAINMENT



The best movies and shows to watch on an airplane — or if you're trapped at the airport this holiday season

BY MARY McNAMARA
Los Angeles Times

Even with inflation, endless air travel complaints and the recent flight cancellations caused by the government shutdown, millions of Americans, including me, will begin their holiday celebrations on a plane. And while some are already making their packing lists, I am more concerned about what I should watch. In addition to getting you where you want to go, those hours spent in uncomfortable seats — first at the gate and then on board — are a guilt-free opportunity to catch up on or revisit great shows and films.

In-flight viewing is a specific, and sometimes unintentionally communal, viewing experience; not everything works. Choose tearjerkers and musicals with care. Ugly crying over “The Notebook” or singing along with “Wicked” might feel great, but it can cause your fellow passengers unnecessary consternation and/or annoyance.

If you are traveling with or seated near children, you should avoid hard-R-rated fare — as I discovered while briefly attempting to watch “Game of Thrones” while seated beside my then-young son, nudity and beheadings don’t need the sound on to be inappropriate.

Likewise, avoid anything that involves tragic or problematic air travel — catch up on the “Final Destination” franchise another time — and you also might want to skip full-attention-demanding subtitles. The perfect airplane watch allows you to immerse yourself while also remaining aware of what’s happening around you (including and especially requests from flight attendants). With all these considerations in mind, here are some suggestions:

Watch at the gate

Comedy series are best, for obvious mood-sweetening reasons (should delays occur), but also because the episodes are short and tend not to have dramatic moments that might keep you watching even after your group number has been called.

“**Schitt’s Creek**” (*Prime Video*): Each episode of this perfectly addictive series about a once-rich (and very dysfunctional) family that finds itself forced to start anew in a small town will make you laugh no matter how many times you’ve seen it.

“**Derry Girls**” (*Netflix*): Those unfamiliar with the Northern Ireland accent may find it necessary to use subtitles, which I just cautioned against. But this show is worth breaking the rules for. Living through the Troubles in 1990s Derry, five Catholic school friends and their families cope hilariously with everyday issues, including school life under the redoubtable eye of Sister Michael (Siobhán McSweeney).

“**New Girl**” (*Hulu*): The shenanigans of friends/roomies Jess (Zooey Deschanel), Nick (Jake Johnson), Schmidt (Max Greenfield), Winston (Lamorne Morris) and Cece (Hannah Simone) are always a delight.

“**Brooklyn Nine-Nine**” (*Netflix*): Any time’s a good time to watch the greatest police comedy series since “Barney Miller.” Andy Samberg’s Jake Peralta leads a misfit but inevitably successful team of New York detectives, headed by the drier, wisest chief in TV history — Captain Holt, played by the late, great Andre Braugher.

“**Abbott Elementary**” (*Hulu*): Celebrate the holidays with this quick-witted, revelatory and very sweet teacher-centric mockumentary-comedy created by and starring Quinta Brunson. Compared with classroom chaos, even the airport will seem like an oasis of tranquility.

“**What We Do in the Shadows**” (*Hulu*): If you somehow missed this hilariously unique comedy-horror mocku-

mentary about a group of vampires living in modern-day Staten Island, now is the time to rectify that.

Watch on domestic flights

All of the above comedy series work here as well — six episodes will take you from Los Angeles to Chicago, 10 or 11 from LA to New York — but movies are best, especially if you can time it so the film begins when altitude is achieved and ends as you’re returning your seat backs and tray tables to their fully upright positions.

FILMS:

“**The Da Vinci Code**” (*AMC+*): The perfect in-flight film, “The Da Vinci Code” offers something like cultural edification (the Louvre! The Knights Templar! Biblical history!) while not forcing you to think too much. A tour of Paris, great action sequences, the always endearing Tom Hanks and a literally beatific conclusion.

“**Spy**” (*Prime Video*): Melissa McCarthy is an everywoman intelligence agent who chooses to go into the field for the first time in this strangely unsung hero of modern comedy. Guaranteed to make you laugh even if you’re stuck in the middle seat. (Also set in Paris, it’s a perfect double feature with “The Da Vinci Code” for those five-hour flights.)

“**Crazy Rich Asians**” (*Netflix*): Jon M. Chu’s glorious romantic comedy will transport you into a world far beyond the dreary confines of contemporary air travel and make you feel, if only for a moment, that you too are flying in a first-class compartment that contains an actual double bed.

“**Iron Man**” (*Disney+*): Travel back in time to the moment when Robert Downey Jr. jump-started the Marvel Cinematic Universe and remind yourself why. It really is that good.

“**Sense and Sensibility**” (*Prime Video*): The exquisite

SEE AIRPORT ON PAGE 19

WEEKEND: ENTERTAINMENT

Airport: These options can help fill just about any length of flight or delay

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nature of the performances, writing, direction, cinematography and score has made one of the best Jane Austen adaptations a go-to comfort film for when you're feeling ill. Which is why it's perfect while flying.

"Paddington" and/or "Paddington 2" (*Netflix*): Come for the adorable bear (voiced by Ben Whishaw), stay for the adventure and sweet hijinks (and, in "Paddington 2," Hugh Grant!). You will reach your destination feeling more kind toward your fellow travelers, which can only improve any trip.

"Edge of Tomorrow" (*Netflix*): Tom Cruise teams up with Emily Blunt to battle an alien invasion, with some help from time travel. Classic dystopian thriller with several clever twists. If you're feeling hot and cramped, just think of Cruise and Blunt in those supersuits.

"The Martian" (*Netflix*): Feel bad that your flight got delayed and you might not make your connection? A little time spent with Matt Damon's astronaut, stranded for years on Mars, will put everything in perspective. At least you don't have to figure out how to grow potatoes in hostile soil.

"Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle" (*Prime Video*): The ultimate full-immersion movie sees four teenagers sucked into a survival adventure game in which their avatars are played by Dwayne Johnson, Jack Black, Kevin Hart and Karen Gillan.

"Skyfall" (*Prime Video*): Honestly, most Bond films are a good choice, but Daniel Craig is my favorite Bond, and "Skyfall" features a more-than-usual presence of M (Judi Dench). Also, the song.

"Knives Out" (*Prime Video*): A classic manor house mystery, which revived the genre when it became a hit in 2019, "Knives Out" is the ideal blend of mystery and wit, with a cast of characters to keep you company.

SHOWS:
"Hawkeye" (*Disney+*): If you're looking for a five-hour (or so) miniseries with plenty of Marvel action and a holiday theme, look no further. A year after the events of "Avengers: Endgame," Hawkeye superfan Kate Bishop (Hailee Steinfeld) teams up with her reluctant hero, Clint Barton (Jeremy Renner), to face down enemies new and old. Oh, and celebrate Christmas in New York.

"Black Mirror" (*Netflix*): This sci-fi anthology series is perfect plane viewing because a) It's so very good and b) Each episode is its own story, so you can construct however many hours you need (and, perhaps, catch up on a show so many people continue to talk about).

"Sherlock" (*PBS*): Same principle — each episode is essentially a short film and you get to wallow in the wonder of Benedict Cumberbatch (Sherlock), Martin Freeman (Watson), Mark Gatiss (Mycroft) and all the rest as they solve crimes in modern twists on the classic tales.

Watch on international flights

For flights six hours and longer, you can hunker down and make your way through a film franchise or an entire season or seasons of a television series.

FILMS:
"The Lord of the Rings" trilogy (*HBO Max*): Pick the director's cut of all three and your journey through Middle-earth will take you almost 12 hours, which is about as long as it takes to fly from LA to



Sony Pictures

Ben Whishaw voices the titular bear in "Paddington in Peru" and "Paddington 2."



BBC STUDIOS, NEAL STREET PRODUCTIONS/TNS

Renee Bailey, left, and Helen George in the 14th season of "Call the Midwife."



Apple TV

Gary Oldman as Jackson Lamb in Season 5 of "Slow Horses."



Paramount Pictures and Skydance

From left, Pom Klementieff, Greg Tarzan Davis, Tom Cruise, Simon Pegg and Hayley Atwell in "Mission: Impossible - The Final Reckoning."

New Zealand, where it was filmed.
"Hunger Games" (*HBO Max*): The four films in which Katniss Everdeen (Jennifer Lawrence) and friends attempt to wrest a shattered land from the tyranny of President Snow (Donald Sutherland) clock in at about nine hours total, which, with bathroom and meal breaks, should get you from LA to London or Paris.

"Mission: Impossible" films (*Prime Video and other platforms*): Although they often include mishaps in the air, the fantastic (in both senses of the word) nature of "Mission: Impossible" makes these films an ideal high-altitude binge. From first to last, they run more than 18 hours, which is, quite frankly, far too many hours of consecutive movie viewing. But with plenty of installments to choose from, you can accept whichever assignments (and Cruise stunts) appeal to you.

"Harry Potter" (*HBO Max*): However one feels about J.K. Rowling's politics, this is a delightful film franchise that's even longer than "Mission: Impossible" — about 20 hours. But you can start, and stop, the series wherever you want (though I would urge you not to skip the underrated "Order of the Phoenix").

SHOWS:
"Black Doves" (*Netflix*): Keira Knightley and Whishaw play highly unlikely but ruthlessly skilled mercenary spies who work for an ice-cold Sarah Lancashire. The six-hour-long series tells a complete tale (though Season 2 is in the works) and as the events take place in London as Christmas approaches, makes a fine holiday thriller.

"House": Pick a season, any season (there are eight of them, with an average of 22 episodes each), and the wit, wisdom

and scathing insanity of Dr. Gregory House (Hugh Laurie) and his team will carry you through to any destination. And unlike other medical shows, most of the ailments are so bizarre that you won't have to worry if that cough or twinge is a sign that you're getting one of them.

"The Durrells in Corfu" (*PBS*): It's 1935 and young widow Louisa Durrell (Keeley Hawes) decides that the answer to her financial straits is to move herself and her four children to the island of Corfu. Sweet and scenic hilarity ensues, and includes the young Josh O'Connor ("The Crown") and Callum Woodhouse ("All Creatures Great and Small") as two of Louisa's sons. Four seasons, 26 episodes. You're welcome.

"Call the Midwife" (*Netflix*): Seasonal purists could just download the dozen or so Christmas episodes of this long-running and still-exceptional drama about a group of midwives working out of a convent in London's East End. (Between the nuns and the babies, the specials are always wonderful.) But if you haven't seen the series, best to start with Season 1 and keep going.

"Mare of Easttown" (*HBO Max*): If you somehow missed Kate Winslet's turn as a small-town Pennsylvania cop (with a great Delco accent) who is trying to solve a brutal murder, then this is your chance. If you didn't, well, it's time for an eight-hour rewatch in which you can use the time you spent wondering whodunit to admire all the terrific acting.

"Slow Horses" (*Apple TV*): The butt-numbing hours will fly by like minutes when you immerse yourself in the TV adaptation of the first five of Mick Herron's Slough House novels. Gary Oldman is having a blast as Jackson Lamb, the greasy, rumpled, sharp-tongued and strategically flatulent keeper of a den of MI5 misfits who somehow manage to save the day.

"The Crown" (*Netflix*): Think your flight is long? Consider the reign of the late Queen Elizabeth, played over the course of six seasons by Claire Foy, Olivia Colman and Imelda Staunton. For a full immersive experience, it's tough to beat the royal settings, period clothes and changing times. And with 60 hours at your fingertips, you can move through history without ever leaving your seat.

"30 Rock" (*Hulu*): Tina Fey's send-up of a fictional "Saturday Night Live"-type show, and satirical look at the television business in general, is just as biting and gimlet-eyed as it was when it premiered almost 20 years ago. It got better as it aged, so for purposes of downloading, look to Seasons 4 and 5.

"Parks and Recreation" (*Peacock/Prime Video*): Life is always better when you spend some time with Leslie Knope (Amy Poehler), Ron Swanson (Nick Offerman), April Ludgate (Aubrey Plaza) and the many fine public servants in Pawnee, Ind.'s city government. The mockumentary series found its feet in Season 2, so you might want to start there.

"The Wire" (*HBO Max*): David Simon's five-season Baltimore-based crime drama is definitely R-rated (thus breaking one of our earlier stated rules), but it is the show that is consistently listed as one of the best — if not the best — TV dramas ever. So if a long-haul flight demands that you binge, why not binge big?

WEEKEND: MOVIES

A few great films

‘This Is Spinal Tap,’ ‘The Princess Bride’ and more: Reiner’s memorable movies and where to watch them

By LINDSEY BAHR
Associated Press

Rob Reiner made the kind of movies that we all rewatch already. They’re the films that we quote without having to think about it, the ones we hold up as gold standards of comedy, romance, drama and suspense, the ones we wish they made today.

Before his death Sunday, it was not uncommon, or unwarranted, to marvel at his incredible streak of films from 1984, when he made his directorial debut with the mockumentary “This Is Spinal Tap,” through 1995 with “The American President.” Not to mention his comedic excellence in front of the camera, where he made a feast out of even the smallest roles, whether it was telling Tom Hanks about tiramisu in “Sleepless in Seattle” or yelling at Leonardo DiCaprio for his credit card bill in “The Wolf of Wall Street.”

When people bemoan that they don’t make movies like they used to, Reiner’s genre-spanning films from that decade are often the kinds they’re talking about. There might not be a best picture winner in the bunch, but it hardly matters. He made films that we remember.

Here are some of the best and where to watch them.

‘This Is Spinal Tap’ (1984)

“There’s a fine line between stupid and clever,” Michael McKean’s singer David St. Hubbins and Christopher Guest’s guitarist Nigel Tufnel observe in “This Is Spinal Tap” and Reiner’s almost entirely improvised film about a British heavy metal group’s disastrous tour is proof. In its unabashed commitment to silliness, it captured truths about rock ‘n’ roll, the music industry and ego. Reiner even based his documentary filmmaker character Marty DiBergi on Martin Scorsese in “The Last Waltz,” which he might have been a little upset about at first but has come to love over the years.

While Reiner and his friends never dared take credit for the mockumentary, he did say that perhaps they made they first “mock rock doc.”

Most memorable line: “These go to 11.”
Where to watch: Streaming on Roku, TCM, DIRECTV Stream and HBO Max. Also available to rent or buy.

‘Stand by Me’ (1986)

This coming-of-age classic, adapted from a Stephen King story, follows four 12-year-old boys on a search for a missing kid in 1950s Oregon. It helped make a star out of River Phoenix, along with Wil Wheaton, Corey Feldman and Jerry O’Connell, and it came to Reiner only because Adrian Lyne had dropped out.

In 2021, Reiner said that the film meant more to him than any other he’d made. “It was the first time I did a film that reflected my own personal sensibility; it had a mixture of melancholy, humor and nostalgia,” he said. “I was 12 in 1959, so the music was the music I listened to and the feelings I had in relation to my father, I injected into the film. When it came out and was accepted, it validated me.”

Most memorable line: “I never had any friends later on like the ones I had when I was 12. ... Does anyone?”
Where to watch: On Netflix, fuboTV and Philo. Also available to buy.

‘The Princess Bride’ (1987)

Carl Reiner famously gifted his son William Goldman’s novel, which became his favorite and set him on path to adapt it for the big screen, which many had already tried and failed to do.

Norman Lear came to the rescue once more (he funded “Spinal Tap”) and gave Reiner the money to make “The Princess Bride.”

They assembled one of the great ensembles with Robin Wright, Cary Elwes, Chris Sarandon, Wallace Shawn, Mandy Patinkin, Carol Kane, Billy Crystal, Peter Falk and André the Giant to bring to life this very singular, very clever tale of love, adventure and storytelling that would have many more lives as a home video staple.

Most memorable lines: “Inconceivable!” “As you wish.”
Where to watch: Streaming on Hulu, Disney+ and DIRECTV Stream. Also available to rent or buy.

‘When Harry Met Sally...’ (1989)

Reiner enlisted Nora Ephron to help take an honest look at dating and relationships in what would become one of the most beloved romantic comedies, following Meg Ryan’s Sally and Crystal’s Harry across 12 years. Reiner’s mother, Estelle, was the key to the most iconic scene in Katz’s Delicatessen, a location which took on a new fame as well.

Around the film’s 30th anniversary, Reiner reflected on its longevity.

“I think people see some basic truths about men and women when they watch that movie,” he told The Associated Press. “To me, the dance that happens between men and women is forever.”

Most memorable line: “I’ll have what she’s having.”
Where to watch: Streaming on Roku, STARZ and DIRECTV Stream. Also available to rent or buy.



Director Rob Reiner, second from left, poses with “A Few Good Men” actors (from left) Tom Cruise, Demi Moore and Kevin Bacon.

‘Misery’ (1990)

Reiner re-teamed with Goldman to adapt King’s “Misery,” about a famous novelist (James Caan) who after a car crash finds himself in the captive care of a crazed fan (Kathy Bates). Warren Beatty was initially attached to star and told Reiner that he didn’t see it as a horror movie or a thriller but a prison movie. It’s also kind of a comedy. When Reiner rewatched the film to talk about it earlier this year at the TCM Classic Film Festival, he said even he was surprised at how many laughs there were.

Most memorable line: “I’m your number one fan!”
Where to watch: Available to buy on Prime Video and Apple TV.

‘A Few Good Men’ (1992)

The death of a Marine at Guantanamo Bay provides the backdrop for the Aaron Sorkin-penned courtroom drama, which went to Broadway before the big screen. In Reiner’s hands, pitting Tom Cruise as a cocky, pleahappy junior lawyer against Jack Nicholson as an intimidating commanding officer, it became a hit that would score a best picture nomination. Nicholson would reunite with Reiner 15 years later for “The Bucket List.”

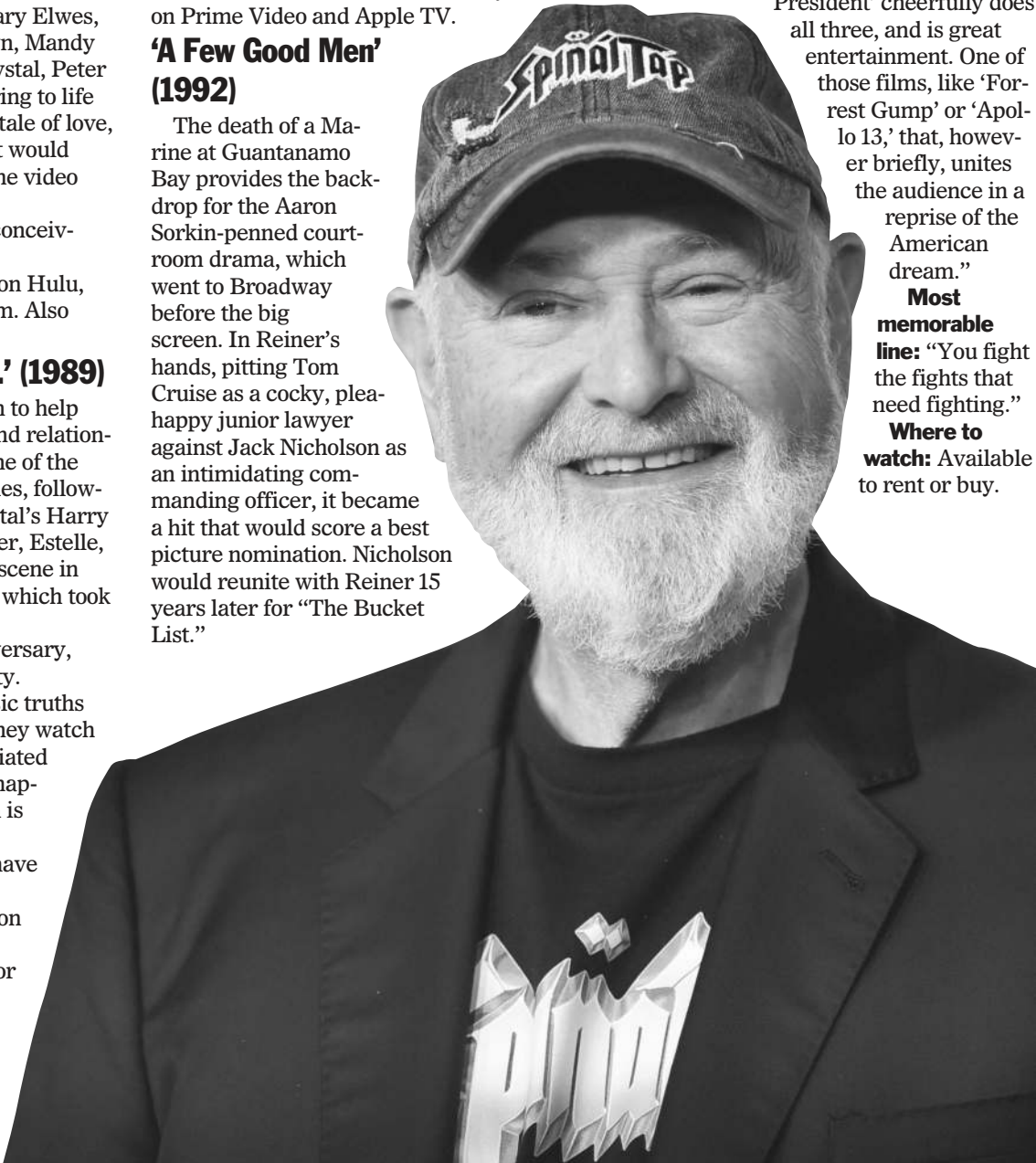
Most memorable line: “You can’t handle the truth!”
Where to watch: Streaming on BBC America, Philo and DIRECTV Stream. Also available to buy.

‘The American President’ (1995)

Working with another Sorkin script, Reiner returned to the romantic comedy to tell a story about a widower U.S. president (Michael Douglas) who begins dating an environmental lobbyist (Annette Bening). Roger Ebert wrote in his review, “It is hard to make a good love story, harder to make a good comedy and harder still to make an intelligent film about politics.

Rob Reiner’s ‘The American President’ cheerfully does all three, and is great entertainment. One of those films, like ‘Forrest Gump’ or ‘Apollo 13,’ that, however briefly, unites the audience in a reprise of the American dream.”

Most memorable line: “You fight the fights that need fighting.”
Where to watch: Available to rent or buy.



Rob Reiner attends the Sept. 9 premiere of “Spinal Tap II: The End Continues” at The Egyptian Theatre Hollywood in Los Angeles.

RICHARD SHOTWELL, INVISION/AP

WEEKEND: TRAVEL

Britain’s stone circles captivate visitors

Grand, centuries-old cathedrals distinguish Great Britain’s cities and towns, providing spiritual nourishment to those who visit. These places of worship seem ancient almost beyond imagination. But long before Gothic cathedrals — long before recorded history, even — Britain’s stone circles were this land’s sacred spots. Stonehenge is the most famous of these — and has a state-of-the-art visitors center to serve nearly one million annual sightseers (consider booking your timed-entry ticket ahead of your visit). As old as the pyramids, this site amazed medieval Europeans, who figured it was built by a race of giants. Archaeologists think some of these stones came from South Wales — 150 miles away — probably rafted, then rolled on logs by Bronze Age people. Most believe stone circles functioned as celestial calendars, and even after 5,000 years, Stonehenge still works as one. As the sun rises on the summer solstice (usually June 21, but in some years one day before/after), the “heel stone” — the one set apart from the rest — lines up with the sun and the altar at the circle’s center. With the summer solstice sun appearing in just the right slot, prehistoric locals could tell when to plant and when to party. While Stonehenge is viewable only from a distance, Britain is dotted with roughly 800 lesser-known stone circles. A favorite is Avebury. Just 19 miles north of Stonehenge, it’s 16 times as big. And Avebury is a megalithic playground, welcoming kids, sheep and anyone interested in a more hands-on experience. Visitors are free to

wander among its 100 stones, ditches, mounds and curious patterns from the past, as well as stroll in the village of Avebury, which grew up around and even within this fascinating 1,400-foot-wide Neolithic circle. In the 14th century, in a frenzy of religious paranoia, Avebury villagers buried many of these mysterious pagan stones. Their 18th-century descendants hosted social events in which they broke up the remaining stones. In modern times, the buried stones were dug up and re-erected. On a recent visit, enjoying the half-mile walk along the perimeter path, I noted the concrete markers showing where the missing broken-up stones once stood. In the moorlands of southwest England, smaller stone circles composed of weathered craggy rocks are even more evocative. (Good local maps mark them.) Wind-swept and desolate, Dartmoor National Park has more of these than any other chunk in the country. On one visit, I trekked from the hamlet of Gidleigh on a mission to find a 4,000-year-old circle of stone. Venturing in the pristine vastness of Dartmoor, I sank into the powerful, mystical moorland — a world of greenery, eerie wind, white rocks and birds singing but unseen. As I climbed over a hill, the stones appeared, frozen in a forever game of statue maker. I sat on a fallen stone, observing blackbirds and wild horses, as my imagination ran wild.



Rick Steves



Rick Steves

Visitors to the Avebury circle, which encloses nearly 30 acres, are allowed to roam freely.

The Castlerigg Stone Circle is a highlight in England’s Cumbrian Lake District. While just off the main road near the town of Keswick, it feels a world away. With each visit, I marvel at how the stones line up with the surrounding mountain peaks. Sitting alone (except for the sheep) in the middle of this circle of stones, drenched in lush and pristine Lake District beauty, I imagined dancing druids and dancing flames, and the fear that winter would snuff out spring forever. Scotland has its own breed of stone circles. At Clava Cairns, set in a peaceful grove of trees just a few minutes’ drive

from Inverness, are the remains of three thought-provoking stone igloos, each cleverly constructed with a passageway that the sun illuminates, as if by magic, with each winter solstice. Nobody knows for sure what these stone circles meant to the people who built them. But their misty, mossy settings provide curious travelers with an intimate and accessible glimpse of the mysterious people who lived in prehistoric Britain.

This article is used with the permission of Rick Steves’ Europe (www.ricksteves.com). Rick Steves writes European guidebooks, hosts travel shows on public TV and radio and organizes European tours.

Lights, trees, action! European cities deliver holiday cheer

Europe’s great cities deliver holiday cheer and festive decor in droves. While it seems nearly every sizable city has a Christmas market these days, strolls along major shopping thoroughfares also hold the promise of glittering lights and massive trees. What’s more, these light displays are sure to shine bright many days after December 25 has passed us by. Here are some streets and squares that positively glow this time of year: **London:** The city’s retail districts seem locked in a battle to out-dazzle one another, and all the contenders are strong. A canopy of more than 5,000 white LED stars hangs high above Oxford Street, while angels with their outstretched wings loom above the passersby on Regent Street. Covent Garden’s display is made up of huge golden bells, bulbs and mirrored balls. Savile Row, the traditional street of tailors, nods to its heritage with lights shaped in the form of scissors, and Bond Street, known for its luxurious, high-end shops, is lit up with light installations inspired by the crown jewels. Online: tinyurl.com/5f397eky **Lisbon:** A stroll along the elegant Avenida da Liberdade is sure to get one in the holiday spirit. The pedestrian-only Rua Augusta bathes walkers in a deep sea of twinkling lights. The Praça do Comércio is a handsome square overlooked by a sparkling Christmas tree that is among the tallest in Europe. Online: tinyurl.com/56psnwva **Madrid:** Giant garlands of light spanning some hundred miles and 13 giant Christmas trees bring a festive glow to Spain’s bustling capital. For sophisticated decor, the place to be is the Barrio de Salamanca, a street known for its upscale dining and designer boutiques. Along the Gran Via, the decor changes each year; in 2025, 31 arches towering 30 feet high will dazzle with patterns of snowflakes displaying their molecular structure. At the point



Karen Bradbury



iStock

Huge red baubles line Vienna’s Rotenturmstrasse at Christmastime. The city is a wonderful place to stroll.

where the Gran Via crosses Alcalá, a 70-foot-high fir tree covered in hundreds of blue baubles greets visitors. Online: tinyurl.com/2z24f3ue **Paris:** For a truly over-the-top display of Christmas lights, make way to one of the world’s most famous avenues, the Champs Élysées. Here, more than a million sparkling lights are draped over the trees lining both sides of the street between Place de la Concorde and the Arc de Triomphe. Swarovski crystals are also integrated into the decor. Other prettily decorated areas of the City of Lights include the Haussmann district, Place Vendôme and Montaigne. Online: tinyurl.com/2h72bh9s **Turin:** Each year at Christmas, the capital of the Piedmont region of northern Italy shines brightly thanks to an initiative known as Luci d’Artista, in which light installations designed by both Italian and international artists are set up in and above the city streets. Don’t miss the dis-

plays along the Via Roma, a street known for its swanky shops. This year’s edition of Luci d’Artista features more than 30 separate works, which can be viewed through Jan. 11. Online: tinyurl.com/4xe9tur **Vienna:** A wintry evening stroll along Vienna’s major shopping streets is akin to a trip through time and space. One could start the walk at the Annagasse, where the Christmas lights play out the first few notes of the famous carol “Silent Night,” followed by a turn onto Graben, where the lights resemble blingy chandeliers. From there, it’s on to Kohlmarkt and its high-end boutiques, where the lights shine in a glamorous gold in keeping with the street’s reputation for luxury. The 48 stars shining high above the Neuer Markt square are there to remind us of the famous diamond-studded headdress worn by Empress Elisabeth, familiarly known as Sisi. Wrap things up along Rotenturmstrasse, where huge red baubles line the way. Online: tinyurl.com/3tw8hstf **Warsaw:** For the third and final time, the décor on the streets of Warsaw takes its inspiration from fixtures of daily life under Communism in the 1950s and 1960s, from rotary phones to the scales once ubiquitous in shops. A Christmas lights staple is always the so-called Royal Route, which stretches some six miles between the Old Town and the Royal Castle. The route features interactive light installations, sound effects, and yet more retro-style decorations. Online: tinyurl.com/yck8euth **Zurich, Switzerland:** There’s even a name for the display of lights hanging over the Bahnhofstrasse, hailed as one of the world’s most expensive retail streets. The “Lucy” Christmas lights take their name from the Beatles song “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds” and feature 11,150 glass crystals and 23,000 shimmering LED lights along the stretch of road between the train station and Bürkliplatz. The display shines bright until Jan. 6. Online: tinyurl.com/3fc3kt45

WEEKEND: QUICK TRIPS

Serious Swifties setting

Wiesbaden scavenger hunt in museum capitalizes on hype around ‘Ophelia’ art

By BRADLEY LATHAM
Stars and Stripes

Wiesbaden has become many things in the nearly six years I’ve lived there between 2017 and now, but a landmark to Taylor Swift fans, commonly known as “Swifties,” wasn’t something I’d ever put on my bingo card.

That quickly changed in October with the release of Swift’s music video for “The Fate of Ophelia.” International headlines drew attention to striking similarities between the video’s opening shot and German painter Friedrich Heyser’s “Ophelia,” housed at Museum Wiesbaden.

Smartly capitalizing on the hype, the museum announced a “Swiftie Tour” scavenger hunt in November, and I was sold on a future daddy-daughter adventure.

Thanks to a combination of a kindergarten dance performance of “Shake It Off,” mainstream radio and a few weekend YouTube rabbit holes, my wife and I have inadvertently created our own almost 5-year-old megafan, and Tay Tay now permeates my car playlists for daily preschool commutes.

On a recent Tuesday, when I assumed the museum wouldn’t be as busy, I scooped up my little Swiftie and we headed downtown to see “the painting from the ‘Phelia’ video.”

I wasn’t sure how much the rest of the venue would appeal to her, but after about 20 minutes, that uncertainty vanished.

We picked up the Swiftie Tour pamphlet before leaving the main atrium, and on the advice of the ticket counter staff, we started on the left with the natural history exhibits.

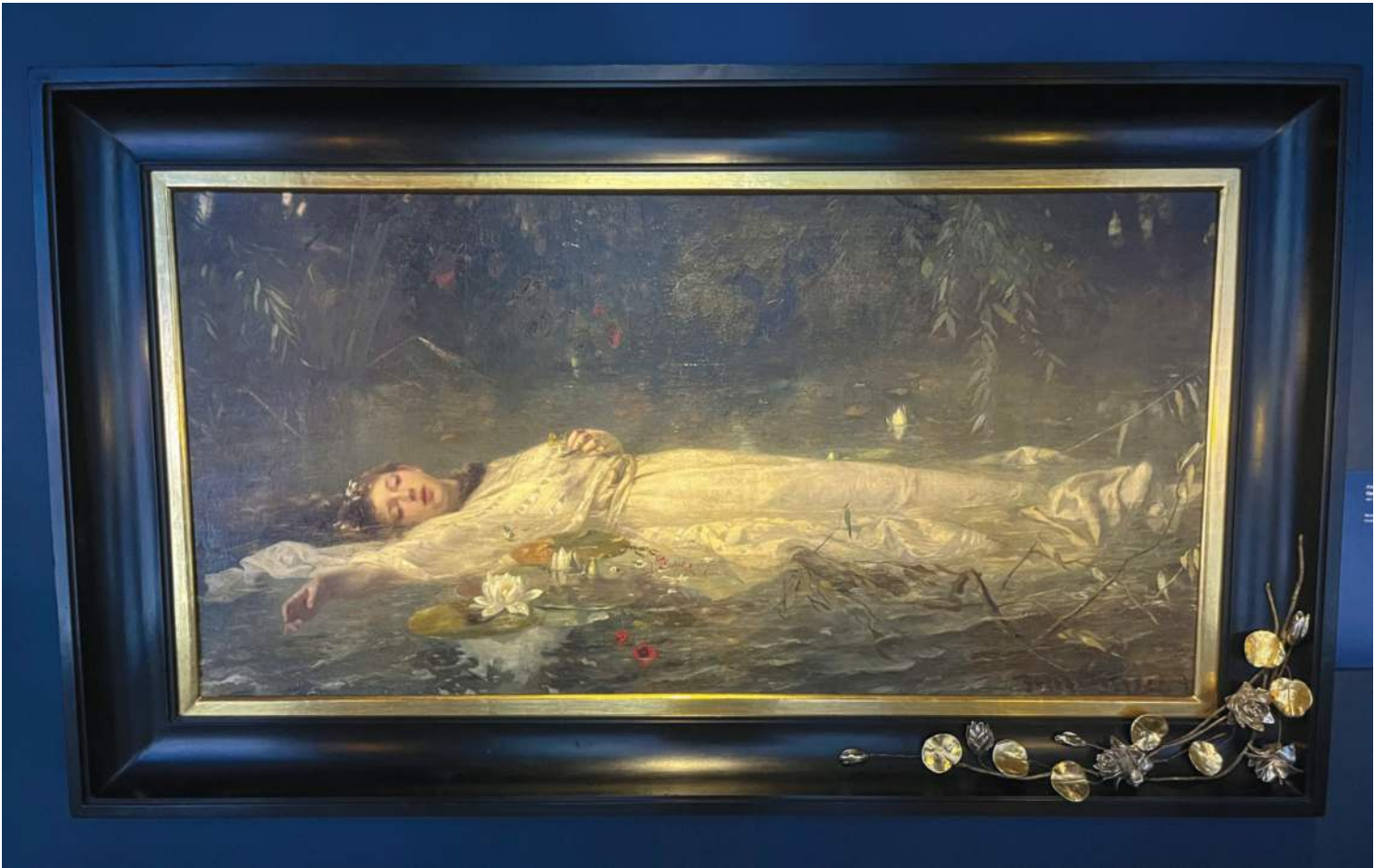
The museum is divided into two main wings across three floors, separating the art and natural history sections.

There were many interactive displays and activities interspersed among hundreds of taxidermy specimens and animal models.

It was more than enough to grab and hold my daughter’s attention despite her not being quite old enough to appreciate the full scope of the exhibits.

Nearly all the information boards were in both German and English, and a QR code could be scanned for an English translation of the few that were only in German.

We navigated each floor alternating



PHOTOS BY BRADLEY LATHAM/Stars and Stripes

Friedrich Heyser’s “Ophelia” is on permanent display at Museum Wiesbaden in Germany. The painting from around 1900 has recently become a sensation following the release of the music video for Taylor Swift’s hit song “The Fate of Ophelia.”



The “Swiftie Tour” scavenger hunt provides an opportunity to explore the museum and enter a monthly drawing for a prize from the gift shop.

between natural history and art exhibits, with regular reminders that we needed “to find the painting from the video.”

Naturally, my adventuring partner wasn’t nearly as interested in collections of turn-of-the-century Art Nouveau, contemporary and modern art or masterpieces from the 13th through 18th centuries, but an occasional painting or large installation elicited a response of “wow” or “pretty.”

I appreciated the creativity of the scavenger hunt, as it provided enough of an incentive to keep my Swiftie exploring every exhibit looking for “clues.”

Throughout the permanent exhibits in both wings, 13 Easter eggs are placed on the floor tying one of Swift’s songs or selected lyrics to a piece of art or nature display. Each of the floor markers has a letter on it that’s used to discover a two-word code.

We found “Ophelia” about halfway through our visit, and it was readily apparent there was more than one T-Swizzle fan present.

Four teens were dancing in front of the painting, while a fifth played the associat-



A “Swiftie Tour” Easter egg label sits on the floor near Katharina Grosse’s “Sieben Stunden, Acht Stimmen, Drei Bäume” (Seven Hours, Eight Voices, Three Trees). The “Out of the Woods” label is one of 13 clues that thematically tie Taylor Swift song titles and lyrics to featured artwork and nature displays in the museum.

Museum Wiesbaden

Address: Friedrich-Ebert-Allee 2, 65185 Wiesbaden
Hours: Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday-Sunday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; Thursday, 10 a.m.-9 p.m.; closed Monday
Prices: Adults, 12 euros; under 18, free
Information: Phone: +49 611 3352250; online: museum-wiesbaden.de

Bradley Latham

ed song and recorded them with her phone for what I assumed was TikTok content. It felt out of place, but it didn’t bother us or seem to disturb any of the other visitors.

My daughter immediately recognized the painting and posed for her own photo, and I was finally able to take a few moments to appreciate a piece of art before we continued our visit.

We ended our day with cake at the on-site café and a solution to the scavenger

hunt puzzle — no spoilers here, though! Visitors who solve the puzzle can drop off their completed sheets near the museum gift shop. There is a drawing on the 13th of each month for a Swiftie prize package.

It’s unclear how long the Swiftie Tour scavenger hunt will be offered, but “Ophelia” is a permanent fixture in the museum’s F.W. Neess collection.

Pop star references aside, though, Museum Wiesbaden is a must-visit for everyone stationed here. It is larger and more engaging than I expected, and it left me questioning why I had overlooked it the hundreds of times I’ve passed by over the years.

I won’t go so far as to call myself a reluctant Swiftie, but if Taylor’s artistry and aura can draw a new audience to a bit of fine art, introspection and discovery, I can certainly appreciate the magic in that.

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WEEKEND: FOOD & DINING

Die Brasserie gets brass ring in fancy food

Michelin restaurant in Pirmasens serves up a memorable meal

By DAVID EDWARDS
Stars and Stripes

This year, my annual late November holiday litany of things for which I am thankful validated the saying that there's a first time for everything.

Had it not been for the permanent closure of the restaurant I'd originally chosen to review, I wouldn't have stumbled across the nearby Michelin-starred restaurant and treated myself to the most exquisite Thanksgiving dinner of my life.

That indelible memory came courtesy of Die Brasserie in Pirmasens, an industrial Rheinland-Pfalz city I've been exploring since a recent move brought me to the opposite end of the Kaiserslautern Military Community.

Patronizing such an establishment is by definition a splurge, which in the culinary sphere is fairly rare for me. The only comparable experience I could draw on came last year during a whirlwind trip to Morocco, where I indulged in foodie nirvana at the lavish Royal Mansour Marrakech hotel and the legendary Rick's Café in Casablanca.

I decided there could be no better occasion than the quintessentially American food-and-football fest bestowed on us by Abraham Lincoln. My dining companion had to cancel at the last minute, though, so I prepared to go solo for my baptism into the Michelin restaurant scene.

All the tables at Die Brasserie were empty when I walked in and gazed around the plush but inviting interior. A small group of diners arrived later and was seated at a table well away from mine.

Appreciating the German lack of such a holiday, I smiled at the blissfully uncrowded scene for my Turkey Day feast. And the word "feast" more than does justice to the three hours I devoted to being a gratitude-fueled gourmand.

One of the things that struck me was how unwittingly Thanksgiving-adjacent much of the fare turned out to be. I kicked things off by ordering a glass of Jörg Geiger Apfelsinfonie sparkling apple cider, my favorite beverage for family meals during this yearly celebration.

I also was served an introductory plate of bread with a delightful fresh cream spread and a bowl of aromatic broth, which restaurant hostess Lena Pavic



Die Brasserie in Pirmasens, Germany, has earned a Michelin star in recognition of its high-quality cooking. The interior features a decorative wall painting, chandeliers and comfortably upholstered seating.

encouraged me to drink straight from the bowl so the fragrance had a direct path to my nostrils.

Die Brasserie offers a choice of four, five or six courses from either the seasonal menu or the vegetarian menu. I opted for the four-course meal, which costs 95 euros but was served a complimentary additional course.

That item, the pumpkin and cherries from the vegetarian menu, ended up being the ultimate standout in a food lineup that left me starstruck for the entirety of the meal.

Instead of the standard Thanksgiving pie form, this pumpkin came as a grilled and braised crescent-shaped slice resting in a stunningly presented mélange of pepper, pumpkin seeds, pumpkin puree and a sour cherry barbecue sauce.

The fruity tang of the barbecue sauce resurrected memories of a place I had visited eons ago in barbecue-crazy Kansas City, Mo., and I almost had to pinch myself to call to mind that the reminiscence was sparked in the unlikely locale of Pirmasens.

Before the pumpkin dish, I received the first course, which on the menu is called beetroot and goat's milk. It was a compact and colorful salad served atop a thin circle of goat-milk panna cotta. The other ingredients included purple cyclamen petals, green dabs of chive oil, horseradish and chopped Piedmontese hazelnuts.

My ad-libbed German Thanksgiving dinner also featured a bird, just not the typical one, as well as a succulent cranberry-containing concoction. Twin slices of grilled and glazed breast of Challans duck, a French deli-



Die Brasserie

Address: Landauer Strasse 105, Pirmasens, Germany
Hours: Wednesday, 6-11 p.m.; Thursday through Saturday, 12-3 p.m. and 6-11 p.m.
Cost: Four-course meal, 95 euros; five-course meal, 125 euros; six course meal, 139 euros; Apfelsinfonie sparkling apple cider, 8 euros per glass. Customers who don't have a German EC card must pay in cash, as the restaurant does not accept credit cards.
Information: Phone: +49 6331 7255544; online: diebrasserie-ps.de, tinyurl.com/5x9rbazh

David Edwards

cacy, sat atop an inner ring of chestnut mousseline and an outer ring of orange-cranberry jus.

The tender, juicy meat was brimming with flavor, and I was blown away by the sauce. With the silky smooth mousseline, it was almost as if Die Brasserie had taken the creamy peanut butter of my school lunch box days and raised it to the pinnacle of haute cuisine.

Three rounds of scintillating sweetness rounded out the banquet. First up was the Gouda and sherry, which consisted of two small slabs of brioche topped with thin Gouda slices, a sherry-infused salted caramel spread and chopped nuts.

I loved the cheese-and-caramel combo, although the bread seemed somewhat dry to me. That, however, was the lone

blemish on an otherwise spectacular culinary showing.

A dish called quark and lemon followed, the last course on the list. Semicircles of vanilla-flavored crème fraîche and a radiant glaze made from Amalfi lemons underpinned a baked quark dumpling.

The subtle sweet-tooth appeal of the vanilla brilliantly complemented the citrusy zing, making dessert a divine double-dip for the spherical dumpling.

To finish with a flourish, I ordered a second glass of sparkling apple cider to go with the dual treat that topped off the experience. One bowl contained chocolate-covered pralines and Marcona almonds, while the other had an apple-quince foam with sesame seeds and honey. Both were superb.

All throughout the dinner, I reveled in the repertoire of lilting instrumental music in the background. Years of childhood lessons had turned me into a passable pianist who eventually discovered enjoyment in what had once been drudgery.

Pavic wrote down the Spotify playlist that was the source of the music. I called it a night after sipping the last of my sparkling cider while listening to soothing renditions of two beloved songs: "Blue" by Eiffel 65 and "Dance Monkey" by Tones and I.

I don't know when another occasion that would justify the expense will arise. But even if Thanksgiving 2025 turns out to be my only time at Die Brasserie, the recollection of that one meal alone will stay with me to the end of my days.

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This beetroot salad contains an artistic mixture of cyclamen flower petals, chopped Piedmontese hazelnuts, chive oil and other ingredients on top of a piece of panna cotta made from goat's milk.



The meat course on the current seasonal menu at Die Brasserie in Pirmasens is a breast of Challans duck served with chestnut mousseline and orange-cranberry jus.



The Gouda and sherry menu item consists of brioche topped with chopped nuts, a sherry-infused caramel spread and thin slices of Gouda cheese.



A quark dumpling surrounded by vanilla, crème fraîche and an Amalfi lemon sauce at Die Brasserie in Pirmasens.

WEEKEND: TRAVEL

Bright blend of tradition, modernity

Seoul Lantern Festival's 17th edition brings art, light to public spaces

By **ALEJANDRO CARRASQUEL**
Stars and Stripes

Seoul's winter season is shining brighter than ever with the Seoul Lantern Festival transforming the Cheonggyecheon and Uicheon streams into a vivid display of light and art.

Marking its 17th anniversary, the festival has returned with more than 400 illuminated works, blending traditional lantern craftsmanship with large-scale media art under this year's theme: My Light, Our Dreams, and the Magic of Seoul.

The event at Cheonggyecheon features four themed zones stretching from Cheonggye Plaza to Samilgyo Bridge, each offering a unique interpretation of Seoul's past, present and future.

The first zone — Miracle Seoul — presents a fusion of traditional lanterns and modern media art, including displays inspired by the first lighting of Gyeongbokgung Palace.

Nearby, Golden Secret reimagines global K-culture trends with light-art designed for younger audiences, while Dream Light uses large-scale lanterns to depict years of life along Cheonggyecheon, including shantytowns and markets.

A major attraction this year is the I LOVE Carp King collaboration with Pokémon Korea, filling a 73-meter stretch of the stream with 100 Magikarp lanterns and a massive feature piece drawing fans from across the region.

The final zone — Seoul Fantasia — includes a 15-meter moon positioned above the water, surrounded by local characters like Teenieping.

Uicheon stream will host an additional 350-meter exhibition called Soul Light, featuring crowd favorites such as Fish Matrix and new works focusing on Seoul's past through time-travel-inspired sculptures.

The Seoul Lantern Festival runs through Jan. 4, coinciding with the city's larger Winter Festa celebrations taking place across downtown.

Service members and families at Osan Air Base and Camp Humphreys can join ITT or MWR-sponsored trips for convenient transportation, coordinated itineraries and a stress-free way to experience one of Seoul's most celebrated winter traditions.

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Seoul Tourism Organization photos

The Seoul Lantern Festival's more than 400 illuminated works combine traditional lantern craftsmanship and large-scale media art.



Seoul Lantern Festival

Directions: Take Subway Line 5 to Gwanghwamun Station (Exit 5).
Times: Open daily, 6 p.m. to 10 p.m., through Jan. 4.
Costs: Free
Food: Restaurants and street vendors are plentiful along the route.
Information: Online: stolantern.com

Alejandro Carrasquel

WEEKEND: QUICK TRIPS



Snow & seasonal spirit

Lotte Town Christmas Market in Seoul brings the holiday outdoors with themed snacks, shops, giant tree and 2-story merry-go-round

BY YOOJIN LEE

Stars and Stripes

Looking for a place to enjoy your Christmas in South Korea this year? Unlike European

countries that celebrate the season with large outdoor markets and festive street lighting, South Korea has typically kept holiday decorations limited to malls or department stores.

The history of Christmas markets in South Korea is relatively short. The 2013 Sinchon Christmas Market is one of its early examples.

Fortunately, this year offers a great opportunity to experience one of South Korea's largest Christmas markets.

The 2025 Lotte Town Christmas Market in Seoul is open through Jan. 4 at Lotte World Tower's World Park. Admission is free during the day, but there is a 5,000 won, or \$3.50, entrance fee after 4 p.m.

Traditionally, Christmas in South Korea is a holiday for couples rather than cause for a family gathering, and a trip to the market makes for a warm, romantic setting.

A premium pass, which includes a bottle of wine, a cake and access to a private lounge, can be purchased online in advance. An English-available information booth on-site offers help to foreign customers.

I visited the market around 4 p.m. on a weekday and a line was already forming at the entrance. A nearly 43-foot Christmas tree at the entrance greets visitors. It was decorated with lightning hearts, and many people took pictures from every angle.

Five times a day, the Snow Shower event releases artificial snow over the Christmas tree — at 1 p.m., 3 p.m., 5:30 p.m., 7 p.m. and 8:30 p.m.

A variety of Christmas-themed snacks and shops are lined with

On the QT

Directions: Lawn Square, World Park, Lotte World Tower, Songpa-gu, South Korea. A 30-minute drive from the Millet Gate at Camp Humphreys.

Times: Open daily, 11:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. with last entry at 9:30 p.m.

Costs: Free in the daytime; 5,000 won for those entering after 4 p.m.

Food: Visitors can enjoy global foods ranging from spicy rice cake tteokbokki and dumplings to sausage stew and Belgian fries.

Information: 070-7842-5632

Yoojin Lee

twinkling lights, attracting families and friends celebrating the season.

Fifty-one booths, including 26 food and beverage vendors, are set up throughout the market.

Visitors can enjoy global foods ranging from spicy rice cake tteokbokki and dumplings to sausage stew and Belgian fries priced between 5,000 and 15,000 won. Desserts such as doughnuts,



Lotte Property & Development photos

Above: The Lotte Town Christmas Market is the largest in Seoul. Top: Snow falls on the Christmas tree at the market five times a day.

egg tarts and chocolate cakes are also available.

Popular brands such as LEGO, Olive Young and smaller shops selling ornaments and holiday gifts draw large crowds. An indoor dining area set up in the market's center allows customers to enjoy their food away from the cold.

On one side of the venue, a

two-story merry-go-round decorated with bright, festive lights attracted both families and couples. The ride is included in the admission.

The long line made me skip the ride, but seeing the smiles on people's faces was enough to make me feel happy.

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WEEKEND: LIFESTYLE

Like being in a Hallmark holiday film

Fans of love, happy endings flocking to Connecticut to see its movie sets

By Susan Haigh
Associated Press

“Christmas at Pemberley Manor” and “Romance at Reindeer Lodge” may never make it to Oscar night, but legions of fans still love these sweet-yet-predictable holiday movies — and this season, many are making pilgrimages to where their favorite scenes were filmed. That’s because Connecticut — the location for at least 22 holiday films by Hallmark, Lifetime and others — is promoting tours of the quaint Christmas-card cities and towns featured in this booming movie market, places where a busy corporate lawyer can return home for the holidays and cross paths with a plaid shirt-clad former high school flame who now runs a Christmas tree farm. (Spoiler alert: They live happily ever after.)

“It’s exciting — just to know that something was in a movie and we actually get to see it visually,” said Abby Rumfelt of Morganton, N.C., after stepping off a coach bus in Wethersfield, Conn., at one of the stops on the holiday movie tour.

Rumfelt was among 53 people, mostly women, on a recent weeklong “Hallmark Movie Christmas Tour,” organized by Mayfield Tours from Spartanburg, S.C. On the bus, fans watched the matching movies as they rode from stop to stop.

To plan the tour, co-owner Debbie Mayfield used the “Connecticut Christmas Movie Trail” map, which was launched by the wintry New England state last year to cash in on the growing Christmas-movie craze.

Mayfield, who co-owns the company with her husband, Ken, said this was their first Christmas tour to holiday movie locations in Connecticut and other Northeastern states. It included hotel accommodations, some meals, tickets and even a stop to see the Rockettes in New York City. It sold out in two weeks.

With snow flurries in the air and Christmas songs piped from a speaker, the group stopped for lunch at Heirloom Market at Comstock Ferre, where parts of the Hallmark films “Christmas on Honeysuckle Lane” and “Rediscovering Christmas” were filmed.

Once home to America’s oldest seed company, the store is located in a historic district known for its stately 1700s and 1800s buildings. It’s an ideal setting for a holiday movie. Even the local country store has sold T-shirts featuring Hallmark’s crown logo and the phrase “I Live in a Christmas Movie. Wethersfield, CT 06109.”

“People just know about us now,” said Julia Koulouris, who co-owns the market with her husband, Spiro, crediting the movie trail in part. “And you see these things on Instagram and stuff where people are tagging it and posting it.”

Big business — and a big deal to fans

The concept of holiday movies dates back to 1940s, when Hollywood produced classics like “It’s A Wonderful Life,” “Miracle on 34th Street” and “Christmas in Connecticut,” which was actually shot at the Warner Bros.



SUSAN HAIGH/AP

Norwich City Hall is decorated for the annual “Light Up City Hall” event in Norwich, Conn., Dec. 5. Scenes from the Hallmark movie “Sugar Plum Twist” were filmed at City Hall.



JESSICA HILL/AP

Christina and Raul Nieves of Windsor Locks, Conn., ride the Bushnell Park Carousel in Hartford, Conn., Dec. 5. Scenes from the Hallmark movie “Ghost of Christmas Always” were filmed at the carousel.

studios in Burbank, Calif.

In 2006, five years after the launch of the Hallmark Channel on TV, Hallmark “struck gold” with the romance movie “The Christmas card,” said Joanna Wilson, author of the book “Tis the Season TV: The Encyclopedia of Christmas-Themed Episodes, Specials and Made-for-TV Movies.”

“Hallmark saw those high ratings and then started creating that format and that formula with the tropes and it now has become their dominant formula that they create for their Christmas TV romances,” she said.

The holiday movie industry, estimated to generate hundreds of millions of dollars a year, has expanded beyond Hallmark and Lifetime. Today, a mix of cable and broadcast networks, streaming platforms and direct-to-video producers release roughly 100 new films annually, Wilson said. The genre has also diversified, with characters from a wider range of racial and ethnic backgrounds

as well as LGBTQ+ storylines.

The formula, however, remains the same. And fans still have an appetite for a G-rated love story.

“They want to see people coming together. They want to see these romances. It’s a part of the hope of the season,” she said. “Who doesn’t love love? And it always has a predictable, happy ending.”

Hazel Duncan, 83, of Forest City, N.C., said she and her husband of 65 years, Owen, like to watch the movies together year-round because they’re sweet and family-friendly. They also take her back to their early years as a young couple, when life felt simpler.

“We hold hands sometimes,” she said. “It’s kind of sweet. We’ve got two recliners back in a bedroom that’s real small and we’ve got the TV there. And we close the doors off and it’s just our time together in the evening.”

Falling in love again ... with a state

Connecticut’s chief marketing officer, Anthony M. Anthony, said the Christmas Movie Trail is part of a multipronged rebranding effort launched in 2023 that promotes the state not just as a tourist destination, but also as a place to work and live.

“So what better way to highlight our communities as a place to call home than them being sets of movies?” he said.

However, there continues to be debate at the state Capitol over whether to eliminate or cap film industry tax credits — which could threaten how many more of these movies will be made locally.

Christina Nieves and her husband of 30 years, Raul, already live in Connecticut and have been tackling the trail “little by little.”

It’s been a chance, she said, to explore new places in the state, like the Bushnell Park Carousel in Hartford, where a scene from “Ghost of Christmas Always” was filmed.

It also inspired Nieves to convince her husband — not quite the movie fan she is — to join her at a tree-lighting and Christmas parade in their hometown of Windsor Locks.

“I said, listen, let me just milk this Hallmark thing as long as I can, OK?” she said.

“I said, listen, let me just milk this Hallmark thing as long as I can, OK?”

Christina Nieves

Connecticut local tackling the Christmas Movie Trail with her husband

WEEKEND: LIFESTYLE



Learning a language like ‘mental athletics’

Older adults unlikely to become bilingual, but classes are still a worthwhile exercise for the brain

BY STEPHEN WADE
Associated Press

I speak decent Spanish, picked up working several decades ago as a news and sports reporter in Spain, Mexico and Argentina.

Now I report from Tokyo. After seven years, I still can't grasp Japanese. My weekly language classes have taught me humility more than anything else.

Ayaka Ono, my current Japanese teacher, estimates she's tutored about 600 students over 15 years. They've been mostly between 20 and 50. I'm more than a decade beyond her eldest.

"I find older students take tiny, tiny steps and then they fall back," Ono-san — "san" is an honorific in Japanese to show respect — tells me. "They can't focus as long. I teach something one minute and they forget the next."

It's well established that children have an easier time learning second languages. In recent years, scientists have studied whether being bilingual may help ward off the memory lapses and reduced mental sharpness that come with an aging brain. Much of the research on the potential benefit involved people who spoke two or more languages for most of their lives, not older adult learners.

"The science shows that managing two languages in your brain — over a lifetime — makes your brain more efficient, more resilient and more protected against cognitive decline," said Ellen Bialystok, a distinguished research professor emeritus at York University in Toronto who is credited with advancing the idea of a possible "bilingual advantage" in the late 1980s.

There's good news for older adults like me: Attempting to acquire a new language is worthwhile, and not just because it makes reading a menu easier while traveling abroad. Bialystok, a cognitive neuroscientist, recommends studying a new language at any age, comparing the challenge to word puzzles and brain-training games that are promoted to slow the onset of dementia.

"Trying to learn a language late in life is a great idea, but understand it won't make you bilingual and is probably too late to provide the protective effects of cognitive aging that come from early bilingualism," she said. "However, learning a new language is an activity that uses all of your brain, so it is like a whole-body exercise."

The latest research

A large study published by the science journal *Nature Aging* in November suggests that speaking multiple languages protects against more rapid brain aging, and that the effect increases with the number of languages.

The findings, based on research involving 87,149 healthy people ages 51 to 90, "underscore the key role of multilingualism in fostering healthier aging trajectories," the authors wrote.

Researchers acknowledged the study's limitations, including a sample population drawn only from 27 European countries with "diverse linguistic and sociopolitical contexts."

Bialystok was not involved in the project but has researched second-language acquisition in children and adults, including whether being bilingual delays the progression of Alzheimer's disease or aids in multitasking and problem-solving. She said the new study "ties all the pieces together."

"Over the lifespan, people who have managed and used two languages end up with brains that are in better shape and more resilient," she said.

Judith Kroll, a cognitive psychologist who heads the Bilingualism, Mind and Brain Lab at the University of California, Irvine, used the expressions "mental athletics" and "mental somersaults" to describe how the brain juggles more than one language.

She said there have been several efforts to examine language learning in older adults and the ramifications.

"I would say there are probably not enough studies to date to be absolutely definitive about this," she told *The AP*. "But the evidence we have is very promising, suggesting both that older adults are certainly able to learn new languages and benefit from that learning."

More studies are needed on whether language lessons help people in midlife and beyond maintain some cognitive abilities.

Kroll compared the state of the field to that of the late 20th century, when the dominant thinking was that exposing infants and young children to two or more languages put them at an educational disadvantage.

"What we know now is the opposite," she said.

Learning a language later in life

I visited Spain's Mediterranean coast in the 1990s when I worked in Madrid. I was shocked by how many non-Spaniards there had lived in the country for years and could say only a few words in Spanish.

Now I get it. When I attempt Japanese, the reaction is often an incredulous, "And you've been here how long?"

I have workarounds to navigate my hostile linguistic environment. One is saying "itsumono." It means "the same as always," or "the usual." It's enough to order morning coffee at a neighborhood cafe or lunch at several regular stops.

As an aside, Japanese is one of the most difficult languages for English speakers to master, along with Arabic, Cantonese, Korean and Mandarin. Romance languages such as French, Italian or Spanish are easier.

My once-a-week class is grueling, and one hour is my limit. I use this analogy: My brain is a closet without enough empty hangers, and Japanese doesn't go with anything in my wardrobe. The writing system is intimidating for an English speaker, the word order is flipped and politeness is valued more than clarity.

During the 4 ½ years I spent reporting from Rio de Janeiro, I got by with Portuguese — an improvised blend of Spanish and Portuguese — and the patience of Brazilians. There is no such halfway house for Japanese. You either speak it, or you don't.

I'll never progress beyond preschool level in Japanese, but overloading my brain with lessons might work in the same way that my regular weight-training sessions help maintain physical strength.

Ono-san called language-learning apps "better than nothing." Bialystok said technology can be a useful learning tool, "but progress of course requires using the language in real situations with other people."

"If old folks try to learn a new language, you are not going to be very successful. You are not going to become bilingual," Bialystok said. "But the experience of trying to learn the language is good for your brain. So what I say is this: what's hard for your brain is good for your brain. And learning a language, especially in later life, is hard but good for your brain."

WEEKEND: MUSIC

Love's legacy

Darlene Love

AP

Singer reflects on her enduring 1963 holiday classic, 'Christmas (Baby Please Come Home)'

BY HILLEL ITALIE
Associated Press

Darlene Love will never stop thinking of her holiday classic, "Christmas (Baby Please Come Home)." At this time of year, she couldn't if she tried.

"The post office, grocery store, elevator," she says with a laugh, listing a few locations where she keeps hearing the song. "It just feels funny that my song is in that many places at Christmastime."

Her signature song, first released in 1963, is set in the pantheon as such predecessors as Bing Crosby's "White Christmas" and such successors as Mariah Carey's "All I Want for Christmas Is You." Love sang "Christmas" for years on David Letterman's late-night show, which ended in 2015, and has since followed with appearances on "The View" and "The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon," where she performed it Thursday.

Love, 84, has a youthful, open-hearted spirit that makes you believe she could break out at any time into the joyous roar of "Christmas," or "He's a Rebel," "He's Sure the Boy I Love" and other showcases. Revered by generations of musicians, Love was inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 2011 and was among the singers featured two years later in the Oscar-winning documentary "Twenty Feet from Stardom."

She was born Darlene Wright in Los Angeles, a minister's daughter who had

been performing in front of people for years before Phil Spector signed her up in 1962. He renamed her "Darlene Love" and launched her career as a lead and backing singer whose mighty mezzo-soprano was more than equal to the producer's booming orchestrations, what he called "little symphonies for the kids."

When Spector decided to record an album of Christmas music, he featured Love on oldies ("White Christmas" and "Marshmallow World") and the original composition that became her trademark: "Christmas" was conceived by Spector and one of the great songwriting teams of the era, Jeff Barry and Ellie Greenwich. Love questioned the whole idea of a "rock 'n' roll Christmas song," but remembered a transcendent, exhausting session, and the challenge of making a summertime studio gathering feel like winter.

"What Phil Spector did was he went out and got Christmas lights and a Christmas tree and made it freezing cold in the studio," she says. "I told him, 'You can't do that because that's going to close up all our throats if you make it that cold in here.' So the only thing we had left were the lights, and everybody was in a great mood."

Standing up to Spector

Love had a troubled relationship with Spector well before his mercurial personality turned lethal and he was convicted in 2009 for the murder of actor Lana Clark-

son. (Spector died in prison in 2021). The producer infuriated Love soon after they began working together when he recorded her singing "He's Sure the Boy I Love" and, without telling her, released it as a single by another Spector act, the Crystals. In the 1990s, she sued Spector for unpaid royalties for various songs and received \$250,000.

But during her interview, she spoke warmly of Spector, recalling how she would tease him about his hairpiece and his elevated shoes, or refuse to sing another take when she was sure she had done it right. Love was in her early 20s at the time but was married (her first of three marriages) with a young son and found herself acting as elder sibling and protector for two teenagers who would become iconic in their own right — the producer's future wife, Ronnie Spector, then known as Ronnie Bennett; and the shy but tough future wife of session man Sonny Bono, Cher.

As Cher wrote in her eponymous 2024 memoir, and Love confirms, Darlene Love was unafraid to challenge the men in the room. During breaks between sessions, she would go out for hamburgers across the street and bring Cher and Bennett with her, indifferent to the objections of their controlling boyfriends.

"Come on, let's go do this. Let's go do this," she remembered urging her friends. "I was always getting everybody in trouble."

Love and Cher have worked together

often. Cher sang backing vocals on "Christmas (Baby Please Come Home)," and Love has backed Cher on tour.

A slow path to the top

"A Christmas Gift for You from Phil Spector," now regarded as a landmark, also features such long-running favorites as the Ronettes' "I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus" and "Frosty the Snowman" and the Crystals' "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town." But the album was originally famous for its tragic timing; the release date was Nov. 22, 1963, the day President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. "A Christmas Gift" would take years to fully catch on, while "Christmas (Baby Please Come Home)" only became a perennial on Letterman's show in the 1990s.

Love thinks "Christmas" endures because it's easy to sing and because the words can be about anyone: a lover, "a sister who got lost, or somebody who passed." Asked if there was another holiday song she'd like to perform as often, she quickly answers, "Silent Night."

"It's one of those songs that makes you feel good, and can make you feel sad, too," she explained. "Because you're talking about night, and you're talking about a silent night, but a clear night, where you can see all the stars. ... Somewhere in the mountains where it's black-dark. And it's millions and millions and millions of stars. So when you say 'Silent night, holy night,' you're talking about stars."

WEEKEND: MUSIC

It's good to be Jelly Roll

Singer up for 3 Grammy Awards taps hardships, celebrates victories as a vehicle to connection with loyal fans

BY MARIA SHERMAN
Associated Press

Jelly Roll is catching his breath. It's not a metaphor. He's running up a hill in South Texas when he answers The Associated Press' phone call, part of his ongoing health transformation journey. "Endorphins are flying. I feel great," he cheers. "It's time to win a (expletive) Grammy!"

He's got a lot to train for: This week, he was invited to become a member of the Grand Ole Opry. And last month, Jelly Roll learned that he was nominated for three Grammys in 2026, marking his third year in a row receiving nods. Two of those are new territory for him. He's up for his first contemporary Christian music (CCM) award, for "Hard Fought Hallelujah," his collaboration with Christian singer Brandon Lake. He is also up for his first award in the inaugural contemporary country album category. That's for "Beautifully Broken."

"It's definitely the greatest honor," he says. "Everybody wants to be nominated for a Grammy."

Since its release in 2024, Jelly Roll's album "Beautifully Broken" has connected with his passionate audience, those who view his music as both representational and aspirational. "God wanted people to know you can still be beautiful and broken," he says of the album's Grammy recognition. "It's truly my most meaningful album."

Much of his work has become associated with overcoming adversity. Take, for example, the song "Winning Streak," which tells the story of someone's first day sober, which he debuted on "Saturday Night Live." Or the direct-and-to-the-point, "I Am Not Okay."

Even though his life looks pretty great right now, Jelly Roll's no stranger to struggle.

He's been incarcerated a few times, most seriously at age 16 when he was tried as an adult for aggravated robbery. At 23, he was arrested for drug dealing.

"I'm never disconnected from it," he says of his past. It has informed his philanthropic efforts, which often focus on mental health, recovery efforts and include not infrequent performances in prisons.

"When I first started doing this, I was just telling my story of my broken self," he says of his career. "By the time I got through it, I realized that my story was the story of many. So now I'm not telling my story anymore. I'm getting to pull it right from the crevices of the people whose story's never been told. Right from them."

He jokes, "I have a nobody cries alone policy."

Jelly Roll says God has been the force driving his year, and receiving a Christian music Grammy nomination is just further proof that "He's got my back," the singer says. And while Jelly Roll rejects the idea of crossing over into CCM — "I definitely live a little too secular to be releasing Christian music" — the recognition of "Hard Fought Hallelujah" with Lake is just further proof that "God knows my heart," he says.

"Country is largely about faith, freedom and family, and those are all things I believe in," Lake told the AP. Collaborating with Jelly Roll, an artist he loves, was natural. "I believe we can change even more millions of people's lives through these songs."

Jelly Roll agrees, "It's well intentioned."

Beyond that, he sees a world that is searching for messages of hope — in his work, in country



CHRIS PIZZELLO, INVISION/AP

Jelly Roll, shown May 8 at the Academy of Country Music Awards, says God has been the force driving his year, and receiving a Christian music Grammy nomination is just further proof that "He's got my back."

music, in Christian music and beyond. "I think there really is a revival happening in America right now where people are being re-presented the gospel in a digestible way. And it doesn't seem as finger waggy and 'You're all going to hell,' you know?"

"I really don't care when the organized religions wave their finger at me," he continues. "I'm just glad to see the message, the gospel getting presented."

At the end of the day, he says, "I'm a broken dude that came from a broken place and like

Humpty Dumpty, they put me back together, baby."

He hopes his music can help others do the same.

The 68th Grammy Awards will be held Feb. 1 at Crypto.com Arena in Los Angeles. The show will stream on Paramount+.

"When I first started doing this, I was just telling my story of my broken self. By the time I got through it, I realized that my story was the story of many."

Jelly Roll

WEEKEND: PODCASTS

Killing time with true crime

Take these Washington Post staff-approved podcasts on a variety of subjects on your holiday travels

Washington Post staff

Whether your train is late, your flight is delayed or the traffic is jammed, it's nice to have a podcast in your back pocket. The holiday travel window is officially open, and if you're leaving home, you're going to need help filling the time. So we asked our Washington Post colleagues to pick 10 podcasts of any format — biography, true-crime, feel-good journalism, vintage TV recaps — to share some of their recent favorites.

‘Articles of Interest’

Born out of a recurring feature on the excellent podcast 99% Invisible, “Articles of Interest” is full of superlatives: best episodic podcast about fashion history, best mastery of how to tell a visual story in an audio format, best pack-a-day-sounding raspy voice from host Avery Trufelman. It's a rare show about clothes that can be equally enjoyed by fashion nerds and “Just grab what's at the top of the drawer” types. **Standout episode:** This season is about gear and the surprising links between the outdoor industry and the U.S. military. The episode on camouflage is particularly wild.

— Shane O'Neill

‘Darknet Diaries’

This is about cybercrime ... and while that may sound intimidating, I would describe it as a true-crime podcast about the internet, told in a way that is suspenseful and easily understandable. **Standout episode:** Xbox Underground (Part 1)

— Aaron Schaffer

‘Fela Kuti: Fear No Man’

The bio-pod from Radiolab creator Jad Abumrad asks big questions about a larger-than-life character and delivers on an equal scale. Interviews with famous fans, musical collaborators, children and wives of the titular Afrobeat pioneer add emotional insights and astounding anecdotes to fill out the life of a superstar who invented his own genre and used it to stand up to an oppressive government. **Standout episodes:** The pieces devoted to Sandra Izsadore, who introduced Fela to the American civil rights movement, and Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, his mother and an activist in her own right, are inspiring and illuminating. The story behind the song named for “expensive” s--t will leave your jaw on the floor.

— Gabe Hiatt

‘House of R’

Hosts Mallory Rubin and Joanna Robinson geek out about fictional universes, including Star Wars offshoots, “House of the Dragon” and “Stranger Things.” There is nothing better than watching an incredible few episodes of “Andor” and then racing to hear Mal and Jo dive deep into the nuances (and maybe even get as emotional as you did). They are astute watchers and chroniclers of nerd culture, offerings rankings of favorite musical moments, speeches and villains of the century. **Standout episode:** An appreciation of “Back to the Future” on its 40th anniversary. A delight for anyone who has ever uttered “Think, McFly!”

— Hannah Sampson

‘Mike Birbiglia’s Working it Out’

The comedian, actor and director brings fellow performers on to talk jokes, creative process and career arcs. “Saturday Night Live” stars, musical-theater genius Lin-Manuel Miranda and comedy-guy-turned-superhero Kumail Nanjiani all drop in. Listening to funny people crack each other up is great fun, but Birbiglia dives into the fundamentals of comedy and storytelling in a way that is also thoughtful and revealing. **Standout episode:** Bob Odenkirk unexpectedly makes parents everywhere tear up when he answers a simple question: Who are you jealous of?

— H.S.

‘The Optimist’

While most journalists hunt for what is wrong in the world, The Washington Post’s Maggie Penman seeks out what is going right in a series of week-end episodes on Post Reports. **Standout episodes:** Maggie introduces us to all kinds of people — super-agers, mega party hosts, dog whisperers, old ladies diving for garbage — who share their wisdom. You won’t want to stop hearing these stories.

— Elahe Izadi

‘Pod Meets World’

The “Boy Meets World” re-watch podcast brings back a carefree, joyous feeling, but you don’t have to be a child of the “TGIF” era to appreciate it. Hosts Rider Strong, Danielle Fishel and Will Friedle — the actors who play Shawn, Topanga and Eric on the show — take listeners back to the ’90s days of Mr. Feeny and the Matthews family. Millennials’ hearts will burst with nostalgia, but the show is more about the hosts’ perspectives and experiences growing up in front of the cameras. Inside stories about the production and young fame make this a must-listen. **Standout episode:** Any

episode featuring William Daniels, the actor who played Mr. Feeny. There is a particularly emotional and vulnerable interview with Danny McNulty, who played the bully Harley Keiner. The recap of the famous “Scream” episode. And a tense exchange between Fishel and former cast-mate Maitland Ward.

— Nick DiMarco

‘Scamanda’

This podcast investigates a woman named Amanda who led her friends and following to believe that she was dying of cancer. It’s just fascinating hearing the story unfold and seeing how far people will dig a hole rather than just admit they were caught.

— Monica Rodman

‘Swindled’

This is a binge-worthy true-crime podcast about scams, cons and, well, swindles. **Standout episode:** The Horse Queen (Rita Crundwell)

— A.S.

‘What Went Wrong’

Each episode is packed with all the lore and trivia and gossip that you want to know about how your favorite movies were made. **Standout episodes:** “Back to the Future” and “Dirty Dancing” are must-listens (did you know Sarah Jessica Parker was in the running for Baby?!) but I have yet to hear a bad episode.

— S.O.



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WEEKEND: TELEVISION

Tears, thank-you notes and Travis Kelce

Takeaways from the 1st episodes of Swift's Eras Tour docuseries

By EMILY YAHR
The Washington Post

In the first episode of Taylor Swift's new docuseries, the cameras follow her backstage while she's dressed in one of the sparkly costumes that she wore on her blockbuster Eras Tour. Just minutes before she is about to perform to London's sold-out Wembley Stadium, the pop superstar stops in an area with a small sofa, where she sits down and cries.

Her mother, also in tears, approaches with a tissue.

"I know you helped them," Andrea Swift says. "I know it doesn't seem like it, but I know you helped them."

The moment was filmed right after Swift met privately with survivors and families of the victims of horrific violence weeks earlier in Southport, England, when a 17-year-old boy stormed a Taylor Swift-themed dance class with a knife and killed three little girls. Days after the attack, Swift had to cancel shows in Vienna when police arrested men accused of plotting a terrorist attack at the concert site.

"From a mental standpoint, I just do live in a reality that's very unreal a lot of the time," Swift says in a voice-over. "But it's my job to kind of be able to handle all these feelings and then perk up immediately to perform. That's just the way it's got to be."

Soon, she's onstage beaming to the tens of thousands of ecstatic fans in the audience, who scream and sing along to every word.

It's common knowledge that the 2023-24 Eras Tour was a phenomenon. The highest-grossing concert tour in history earned more than \$2 billion, boosting local economies in every city Swift visited across a two-year, 149-show trek around the globe. So it's telling that producers included a reminder of her behind-the-scenes devastation so early in "The End of an Era," a six-episode documentary about the making of the tour that debuted on Disney+ on Dec. 12. Despite the fact that her job requires her to get onstage and provide an escape from reality for millions of people, the horrors of real life affect her, too.

The series marks the first time that Swift has spoken publicly about the tragedy in Southport or the events in Vienna. She released written statements when both occurred and said that fan safety was her priority.



Disney

The first two episodes of "Taylor Swift: The End of an Era," a six-episode docuseries, debuted on Disney+ on Dec. 12. The next four episodes air in two-part installments on Dec. 19 and 26, respectively.

And yet, her celebrity status calls for an isolation that few others can understand. Before Swift met with the Southport families at the show, the cameras showed that she sat down with her longtime friend Ed Sheeran, whom she had recruited to surprise the audience at that night's concert with a duet. Swift was struggling with nerves after the canceled Vienna shows, and she had a two-month break after her London performances.

"I'm just going to go somewhere no one can find me. I just don't want to be tracked like an animal. I just have felt, like, very hunted lately," Swift said.

"I feel like people have forgot that, like, you're a human being amongst this as well," Sheeran said.

"One hundred percent," Swift agreed. After the show, she couldn't completely relax until her tour manager Robert Allen assured her that "nothing bad" happened while she was onstage.

Swift has highlighted this idea throughout her career and continued to do so in the docuseries, which is otherwise mostly focused on her delighted audiences and the backstage mechanics of pulling off the concerts. Here are

some of other takeaways from the first two episodes. (The next four episodes air in two-part installments on Dec. 19 and 26, respectively.)

Even Swift and her crew are still trying to articulate what made the Eras Tour such a phenomenon.

Swift explains that she came up with the idea for the tour after two "unpleasant" experiences: the sale of her master recordings to record exec Scooter Braun (whose name she avoids uttering), which prompted her decision to rerecord her first six albums, planting the seed to celebrate her past work ("I feel like I'm reading my old diaries, thinking about all the different girls I was until I was this one"); and the pandemic that canceled her planned 2020 concerts, which she knew left pent-up demand for live shows.

Still, the singer says she was taken aback by the level of interest. We see brief clips of news footage about the "chaos" of fans trying to get tickets, though no mention of how the frenzy fueled a congressional inquiry into the entertainment ticketing industry.

Swift and her team attempt to explain what made the Eras Tour

stand out. "It's just a show, it's just music, but there's something more profound going on here," says Amos Heller, her bass player since 2007. Swift's theory credits a discography that spans bubbly pop songs and emotionally despairing ballads: "Life contains multitudes, and we're kind of exploring all of the dramatic edges of those things — that's what might be unlocking feelings of joy, feelings of euphoria."

The effort to bring the tour together was overwhelming.

The first two episodes offer glimpses of what it takes to mount a major stadium show: the early sketches of the stage, the sticky notes with all of her songs, the costume designs, the hundreds of crew members. Swift says she started physically training about six months before rehearsals started, while her band and dancers spent weeks learning the music and choreography. Then they all had to learn a new set when Swift added a new segment to the show, reflecting her "Tortured Poets Department" album release, as well as choreography for a special one-off performance when Florence Welch joined her in London to sing "Florida!!!"

At one point, an employee tells Swift that some of the "audio guys" got tattoos commemorating the tour. Swift asks why they incorporated an image of the Grim Reaper. Because the shows "almost killed them," her mother suggests.

Her crew was well-compensated.

Stories leaked out about Swift giving millions in bonuses to tour personnel, including \$100,000 to each truck driver. The series shows Swift writing personalized thank-you notes with wax-sealed envelopes.

We see her thanking her back-up dancers. One of them — fan favorite Kameron Saunders — is asked to read aloud a poem that would appear in everyone's envelopes: "We've traveled the world like we set out to do. We dazzled the crowd but we've missed family too. My full gratitude doesn't come from a bank. But here is [bleep] just to say thanks. Love, Taylor."

Viewers don't get to hear the bleeped amount, but given the stunned gasps and the number of dancers who broke down crying, it appeared to be quite a bit of money.

Travis Kelce is Swift's No. 1 hype man.

Fans finally got a look at Swift's relationship with her fiancé, Kansas City Chiefs star Travis Kelce, when she appeared on his podcast in August; during the two-hour episode, Kelce hyped Swift every chance he got, calling her the world's greatest songwriter. Now, in one scene, we watch Swift in a car on the way to Wembley when she gets a call from Kelce, headed to football practice. He expresses astonishment that she and Sheeran were going to quickly rehearse a medley before performing it for tens of thousands of people.

"I don't know. How do you remember 36,000 plays that are whole tactical missions and then just go do it?" Swift says. "It's the same."

There are still a lot of unanswered questions.

Swifties had high hopes that this series would answer their burning questions: Why didn't Swift include her debut album as one of her "eras"? Why was there only one song from the "Speak Now" album? Do her beloved pet cats really travel with her to every location? So far, the docuseries seems focused on the second half of the tour rather than the lead-up, which might answer some of those questions ... but at least fans can now know what it looked like inside the fake cleaning cart in which Swift was transported to the stage each night.

WEEKEND: HEALTH & FITNESS

The warm spices in gingerbread, the woodsy aroma of pine and fir trees and the fruity tang of mulled wine are smells synonymous with the holiday season. Many people enjoy lighting candles, incense and fireplaces in their homes to evoke the moods associated with these festive fragrances.

Burning scented products may create a cozy ambiance, and in the case of fireplaces, provide light and heat, but some experts want people to consider how doing so contributes to the quality of the air indoors. All flames release chemicals that may cause allergy-like symptoms or contribute to long-term respiratory problems if they are inhaled in sufficient quantities.

However, people don't have to stop sitting by the hearth or get rid of products like perfumed candles and essential oil diffusers, said Dr. Meredith McCormack, director of the pulmonary and critical care medicine division at John Hopkins University's medical school. Instead, she recommends taking precautions to control the pollutants in their homes.

"Clean air is fragrance free," said McCormack, who has studied air quality and lung health for more than 20 years. "If having seasonal scents is part of your tradition or evokes feelings of nostalgia, maybe think about it in moderation."

What to know about indoor air quality

People in the Northern Hemisphere tend to spend more time indoors during the end-of-year holidays, when temperatures are colder. Indoor air can be significantly more polluted than outdoor air because pollutants get trapped inside and concentrated without proper ventilation or filtration, according to the American Lung Association.

For example, active fireplaces and gas appliances release tiny airborne particles that can get into the lungs and chemicals like nitrogen dioxide, a major component of smog, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Cleaning products, air fresheners and candles also emit air pollutants at varying concentrations.

The risk fragrances and other air pollutants may pose to respiratory health depends on the source, the length and intensity of a person's exposure and individual health, McCormack said.

It is also important to note that some pollutants have no smell, so unscented products still can affect indoor air quality, experts say.

Some people are more vulnerable

Polluted air affects everyone, but not equally. Children, older



AP photos

The chemicals released by the flames of a fire in a wood stove, like the one above, can cause allergy-like symptoms or contribute to long-term respiratory problems if they are inhaled in sufficient quantities.

Christmas is in the air

Health experts say that holiday traditions such as lighting candles and using fireplaces is best done in moderation to control pollutants

By CHEYANNE MUMPHREY
Associated Press



Experts say all lit candles give off air pollutants regardless of whether they are made with soy-based waxes or petroleum-based paraffin. Above, a holiday scented candle from Bath & Body Works.

adults, minority populations and people of low socioeconomic status are more likely to be affected by poor air quality because of either physiological vulnerabilities or higher exposure, according to the environmental agency.

Children are more susceptible to air pollution because of their lung size, which means they get a greater dose of exposure relative to their body size, McCormack said. Pollutants inside the home also pose a greater hazard to people with heart or lung conditions, including asthma, she said.

Signs of respiratory irritation include coughing, shortness of breath, headaches, a runny nose and sneezing. Experts advise stopping use of pollutant-releasing products or immediately ventilating rooms if symptoms occur.

"The more risk factors you have, the more harmful air pollution or poor air quality indoors can be," McCormack said.

Practical precautions

Ellen Wilkove burns candles with scents like vanilla and cinnamon when she does yoga, writes or when she is showering at her home in New Jersey. Her teenage daughter, on the other hand, likes more seasonally scented candles like gingerbread.

"The candle has a calming presence. They are also very symbolic and used in rituals and many religions," she said.

Wilkove said she leans toward candles made with soy-based waxes instead of petroleum-based paraffin. Experts note that all lit candles give off air pollutants regardless of what they are made of.

Buying products with fewer ingredients, opening windows if the temperatures allow and using air purifiers with HEPA filters are ways to reduce exposure to any pollutants from indoor fireplaces, appliances and candle displays, McCormack said. She also recommends switching on kitchen exhaust fans before starting a gas-powered stovetop and using the back burners so the vent can more easily suck up pollutants.

Setting polite boundaries with guests who smoke cigarettes or other tobacco products is also a good idea, she said.

"Small improvements in air quality can have measurable health benefits," McCormack said. "Similarly to if we exercise and eat a little better, we can be healthier."

Rachael Lewis-Abbott, a member of the Indoor Air Quality Association, an organization for professionals who identify and address air quality problems, said people don't usually notice what they are breathing in until problems like gas leaks or mold develop.

"It is out of sight, out of mind," she said.

WEEKEND: FAMILY



Gifting the necessities

Higher costs push holiday shoppers toward socks, coffee and diapers

By ABHA BHATTARAI
The Washington Post

Shirley Spillane’s holiday shopping list is decidedly no-frills this year: cutting boards, coffee and socks.

The Los Angeles-based school counselor used to spend big for Christmas. But this year, with stubbornly high prices, rent and utilities, as well as a 6-month-old baby, she’s paring back. Spillane is buying a car duster for her husband and jam for her aunt — all within her \$200 budget, made up almost entirely of gifts she can pick up at a grocery store.

“This season looks different than usual,” the 26-year-old said. “With the economy the way it is and a new baby, we’re keeping it small.”

Across the country, Americans are putting a practical spin on holiday shopping. Another year of stubborn inflation and new tariffs that have lifted the prices of appliances, shoes and toys, has led many families to think twice about what they’re buying, and why. Early holiday spending data shows people are scooping up more necessities like appliances, clothing and furniture than they did last year.

On Cyber Monday alone, online sales of refrigerators and freezers rose 1,700 percent from average levels in October, according to data from Adobe Analytics. Other run-of-the-mill products in high demand included vacuum cleaners (up 1,300 percent), small kitchen appliances (up 1,250 percent), cookware (up 950 percent), power tools (up 900 percent), and jackets (up 850 percent).

“These are items that are, in many instances, absolutely essential,” said Vivek Pandya, director of Adobe Digital Insights. “Consumers are cognizant of the broad environment and they’re being very strategic about purchases, whether it’s for themselves or gift-giving.”

While inflation has risen modestly this year, five years of price increases have led to deepening dissatisfaction with how much things cost. That sentiment helped cement political wins last month for Democrats in Virginia, New York and New Jersey and spurred President Trump to kick off an “affordability tour” touting what his administration has done for the economy. “Our prices are coming down tremendously from the highest prices in the history of our country,” he said at a Pennsylvania casino last week.

But in interviews with nearly a dozen shoppers around the country, The Washington Post found that

almost all of them said they had become more strategic about their holiday shopping this year. They were looking for discounts and comparing prices. Many were buying fewer gifts, and for fewer people.

Some parents, like Meghan Orr in Austin, Texas, said they’d begun wrapping everyday items like diapers and baby shampoo to fill the space under their Christmas trees. “At this point we’re just being silly, but it’s fun to unwrap things.”

When it came to their own wish lists, several said they wanted to do away with gifting conventions and ask family for help paying the bills — though very few thought the approach would work.

Alecia Bencze, director of career services for a law school in Akron, Ohio, has had a good year financially. Still, she’s spending about half of the \$1,000 she usually does on Christmas gifts, and is sticking to items she knows will come in handy: golf balls for her father, a barbecue set for her brother and shoes for her sister-in-law. Her own wish list includes a skillet and measuring cups.

“I’m not feeling the pinch as much as other people are, but this is the least I’ve ever spent on Christmas,” Bencze, 35, said. “I just went through and got one thing from each person’s list.”

Early holiday shopping data shows a discernible shift in spending patterns, with lower- and middle-income Americans pulling back, and the wealthy trading down from luxury stores to lower-priced retailers. Although Black Friday sales were unexpectedly strong, those gains were largely concentrated at discounters, dollar stores, off-price department stores and online marketplaces such as Amazon and eBay, according to Consumer Edge, which tracks transactions from more than 100 million credit and debit cards. The firm’s data showed that purchases between Black Friday and Cyber Monday tumbled 10 percent at high-end department stores, while luxury clothing brands saw a 5 percent decline from the same period last year, as even the most well-off looked for deals.

At Twiggy, a small business that sells tote bags and other gifts in Oahu, Hawaii, more customers are veering toward everyday items like kitchen towels, reusable snack bags and sticky notes this holiday season, owner Jessica Leong-Thomas said.

“It started during the government shutdown, when people became hesitant to buy frivolously,” she said. “Since then I’ve seen a real shift. People come in and say, ‘I want to buy something that will be useful.’”

THE MEAT AND POTATOES OF LIFE

Lisa Smith Molinari



Midnight waker means Santa’s out of the bag

Late one snowy Christmas Eve in Germany, when our three children were snuggled in their beds, my husband, Francis, and I were in our Patch Barracks apartment, yawning and putting the finishing touches on what would be another magical Christmas morning.

“This one’s for Hayden from Santa,” I said after wrapping a large Lego set. “Put it over there,” I pointed behind the Christmas tree. Francis took a chug from the glass of milk the kids left out for Santa.

“What about these carrots?” Francis asked, grimacing. He was perfectly willing to partake in the cookies and milk left for Santa each year, but he avoided vegetables unless they were drowned in ranch dressing or melted cheese.

I laughed and nibbled the carrots myself.

“We almost forgot the hoof prints and glitter!” I whispered. Our old house in Virginia had a fireplace for Santa’s entry, but our top floor stairwell apartment on Patch Barracks had none. In case we were interrogated about how Santa got all those gifts inside, we opened the slanted roof window in our family room and, using a wooden spoon, scooped reindeer tracks out of the snow and sprinkled silvery glitter on the roof. With a trail of glitter left between the window and the tree, staging was complete.

“Looks good,” Francis said, and we smiled, proud that we’d pulled off another enchanting Christmas scene while our children were fast asleep.

Or so we thought.

Unbeknownst to us, our fifth-grader Anna had woken up when she heard a noise. Thinking it was Santa making a ruckus, she’d climbed down from her bunk and peeked through a keyhole, expecting to see the jolly old elf himself.

What Anna witnessed would squash her sugar plum visions forever. It was only Dad, setting gifts under our tree.

Her mind raced with the implications of this bombshell. She’d heard rumors about Santa Claus being made up by parents, but she hadn’t believed it. For the first time, she wondered. Had it always been Dad taking bites out of the cookies we left for Santa? Was Santa’s curlycue script on the gifts really Mom’s handwriting all along?

Seeking comfort, Anna climbed into the bottom bunk with her younger sister, who was asleep. “Lilly,” she whispered. Squinting, Lilly croaked, “Whah, huh?”

“We’re going to sing Christmas carols,” Anna demanded.

Throughout their sisterhood, Anna had always been the unequivocal boss. Lilly’s birth had ushered in Anna’s reign as social director, peer mentor, master manipulator, camp counselor, benevolent queen or evil dictator, depending upon her mood. Her sovereignty had only one loyal subject — her little sister — but that was enough, at least for now, to satisfy Anna’s desire for world domination.

Lilly accepted this lot in life without question or complaint. After being roused from sleep and told to sing, she looked groggily up at her big sister, and said quite simply, “OK.”

Anna snaked her arms around Lilly’s little torso, hugging her tightly for her own solace, and began in a whisper, “Silent night, holy night ...” Lilly didn’t know the words, but she followed Anna’s lead, as usual. With their heads resting forehead to forehead on Lilly’s pillow, they sang the song over and over in the dark until Anna fell into a fitful sleep.

The next morning, Merry Christmas chaos ensued. Anna did not reveal her traumatic realization. In fact, Anna hid her secret so well, her older brother still believed in Santa for at least another year. It wouldn’t be until Anna and Lilly were in college that they divulged the story. Francis and I were heartened to learn that Anna had selflessly preserved Christmas magic for her siblings.

However, just as we were about to praise Anna for her generous sacrifice, we learned the shocking sequel. Tune in next week for the rest of the story ...

Read more at themeatandpotatoesoflife.com and in Lisa’s book, “The Meat and Potatoes of Life: My True Lit Com.” Email: meatandpotatoesoflife@gmail.com

WEEKEND: CROSSWORD AND COMICS

NEW YORK TIMES CROSSWORD

ORIGINAL THINKERS
BY KATE JENSEN / EDITED BY WILL SHORTZ

Kate Jensen is a professor of computer science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. This is her first puzzle for the paper. Kate comes from a long line of crossword lovers. “My grandmother would regularly do the New York Times puzzles,” Kate says. “I have strong memories of ‘helping’ her solve them from a young age. And my dad used to challenge me and my siblings to crossword ‘races’ — we’d print out the daily puzzles and see who could complete them the fastest.” — W.S.

ACROSS

1 Fancy dos

6 “Count me out”

11 Cantankerous captain of fiction

15 Lab provisions?

19 Bit of letter-shaped hardware

20 Attended

21 New York university based in Manhattan

22 A “bear of very little brain”

23 Nikola Tesla and Thomas Edison?

25 John James Audubon?

27 Victorian-era prescription for melancholy

28 They’ll make it up to you

30 Stumble or lurch

31 Pittsburgh-to-Buffalo dir.

32 Dictionary tag: Abbr.

34 Summer camper’s conveyance

36 Emmy-winning actor Ray

38 Samuel Morse?

43 Sir Edmund Hillary?

46 Lake that’s home to the world’s largest freshwater island

47 Bit of cacao

49 Come out on top

50 Suffix with hypn-

51 Trees commonly confused with birches

54 Deposit that might gather interest?

55 Cheeky

59 Sir Isaac Newton?

62 Cattle calls

63 “Harper Valley ____” (1968 hit)

64 TV tavern visited by Mayor Quimby

65 Shoe covering

67 It’s often rapped but never spoken

68 Like beds on lazy Saturdays

70 Cuts (back)

71 Outfit that may have a hood

73 Kofi ____, former secretary general of the United Nations

74 Like the Red Sea after a visit from Moses

76 Rain on your wedding day, perhaps

77 ...

79 Oui : non :: ja : ____

80 Gregor Mendel?

83 Hint

85 Gives a thumbs-up

86 Basic tenet of improv

87 Sister to Lex Luthor

88 With love, musically

91 A urinal, according to Duchamp

92 Remedies

93 Henry Ford?

98 Orville and Wilbur Wright?

100 Give a darn, again?

101 Food and water, e.g.

103 College located in Cedar Rapids

104 “That sounds awful!”

105 Noble title

108 Bit of letter-shaped hardware

110 Unexpected endings

115 Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung?

118 Galileo Galilei?

120 Genesis

121 Roof overhang

122 Weirdly spooky

123 Church staple

124 “Vous ____ ici” (French map phrase)

125 Part of a wooden bench

126 “In other words,” in other words

127 Trips around the sun

DOWN

1 Solos at a party, say

2 The duck in “Peter and the Wolf”

3 Future birthplace of Captain Kirk

4 Pest whose name is a homophone for what you might do when you see it

5 Gone to great lengths

6 ____ Jima

7 One of the Fab Four

8 Jelly you wouldn’t pair with peanut butter

9 Arabic greeting and farewell

10 Canned fuel used in making fondue

11 Broadcast to squad cars, in brief

12 Slim margin of victory

13 One chain x one furlong

14 Amelia ____, maid of children’s literature

15 Its showers bring flowers: Abbr.

16 Grant a mortgage, say

17 Where one’s trip begins

18 “Golly, that’s cool!”

24 Rock climber’s handhold

26 Russian crepes

29 Starter, perhaps

33 Is felt strongly

35 Firmly establishes

37 Crazy Horse and fellow tribespeople

38 Bite down hard

39 Musical tool popularized by T-Pain

40 Personification of England, Scotland and Wales

41 Sets of points, in math

42 “Jeepers creepers!”

44 Pied-à-____

45 Michigan, in Chicago: Abbr.

48 Word after you or wanna

51 “And giving ____, up the chimney he rose”

52 Nullify

53 ____-cat

56 Like many Russian housing blocks

57 Made more enticing

58 French fashion inits.

60 Oldest independent state in the Arab world

61 Alter, as a T-shirt for a Phish concert, say

66 Idealist

67 Actress Rowlands

69 She-shed’s counterpart

70 Like some nails found in a drugstore

72 Geek (out)

73 Drone or queen

75 Want from

76 Catherine of “Best in Show” and “A Mighty Wind”

78 Uncouth

81 Farm-share program, for short

82 Hint

84 Self-proclaimed “Rap God”

85 ____ chart

89 Like many couples at theaters

90 McFlurry flavor

92 Something for canines to sink their canines into

93 Toil

94 Wish one could take back

95 Arrival announcement

96 ____ Lannister, “Game of Thrones” queen

97 Like professional publications

99 Indian flatbread

102 Trap

106 Not just theoretical

107 It runs hot

109 Drab color for una casa

111 Concerning

112 Sonic the Hedgehog company

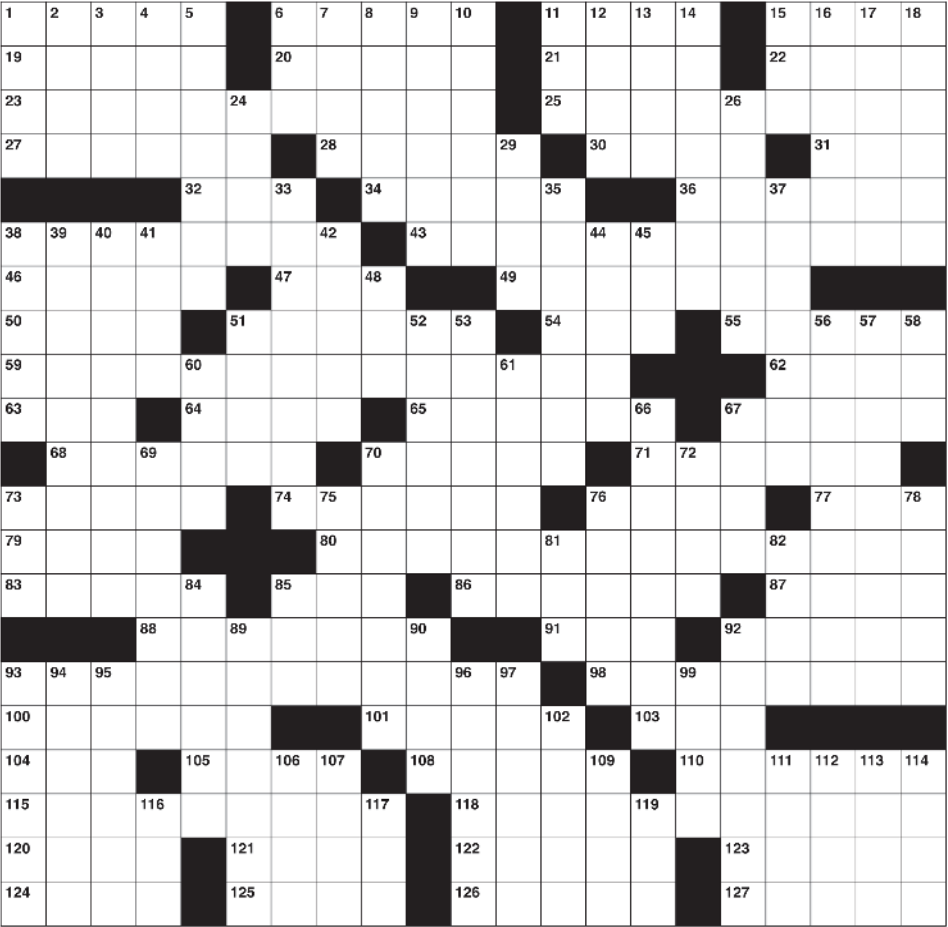
113 Feodor I, for one

114 Taxpayer IDs

116 Morning times, in brief

117 Encountered

119 Kind of nurse or suit

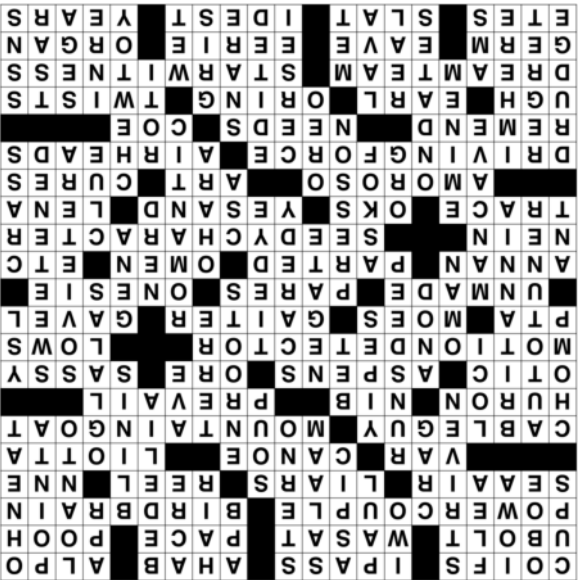


GUNSTON STREET



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

RESULTS FOR ABOVE PUZZLE





STARS AND STRIPES

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AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Review vowed after 15 injured in cable car stop

CA SAN FRANCISCO — More than a dozen people were hurt when a San Francisco cable car abruptly stopped Monday afternoon.

Fifteen people had injuries ranging from minor to moderate, the San Francisco Fire Department posted on social media. Two of them were immediately taken to hospitals and 11 others were treated for what the department described as “minor aches and pains.”

The San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency, which runs the cable cars, said it was actively investigating the incident and gave no reason for the stop.

The cable cars are a major tourist draw and were immortalized in a Tony Bennett song about leaving his heart in San Francisco. Passengers on cable cars do not wear seat belts and often hang off the cars, which are partly open-air.

Cable cars first began running in San Francisco in the 1870s and they were designated as a National Historic Landmark in the 1960s. Today there are three cable car lines in the city.

“Safety for our passengers on all Muni vehicles continues to be our top priority. We’ll be conducting a full review of incident details to ensure continued safety on the cable cars,” SFMTA said in a statement.

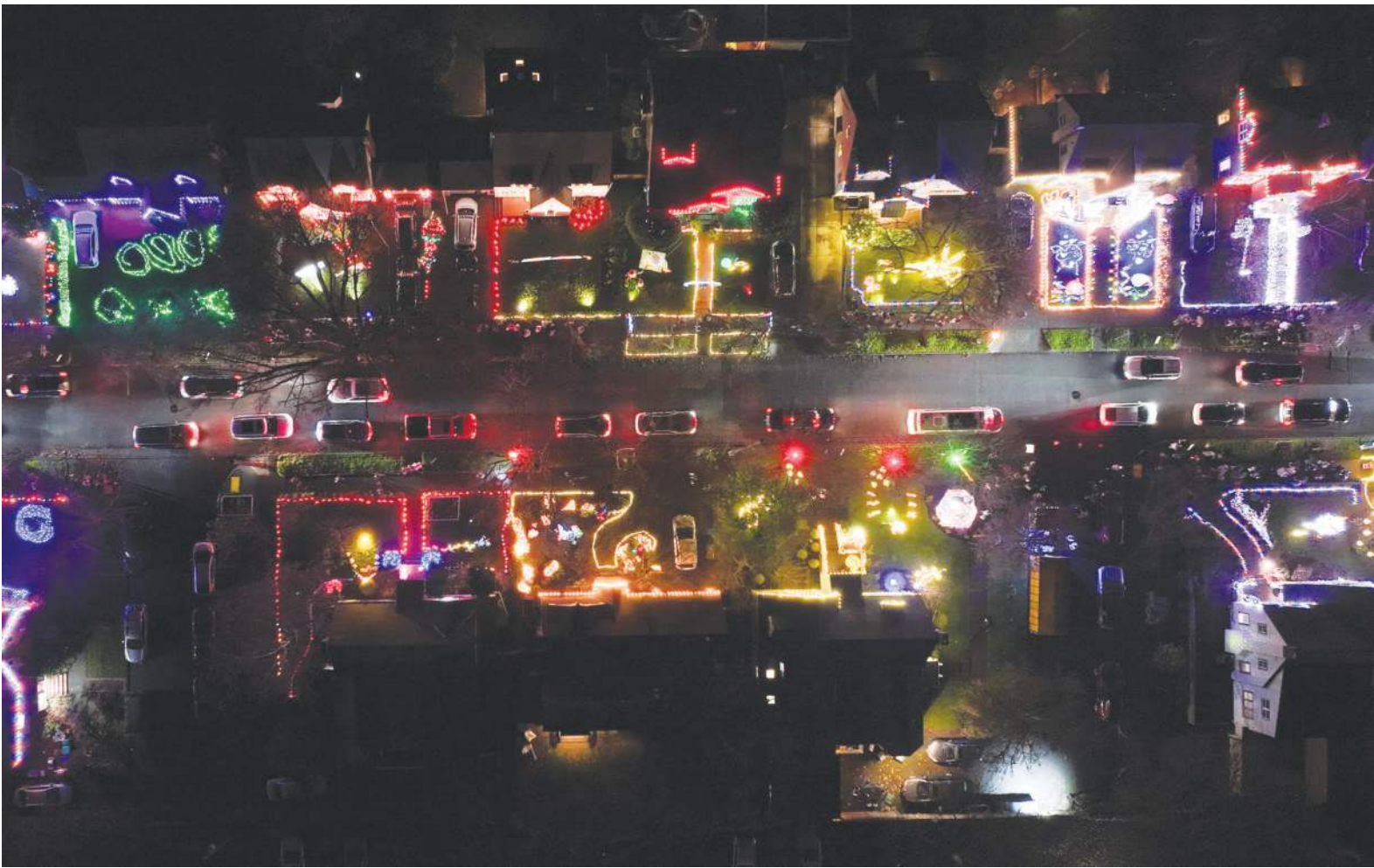
Statue of teen civil rights leader takes Lee’s place

DC WASHINGTON — The U.S. Capitol on Tuesday began displaying a statue of a teenaged Barbara Rose Johns as she protested poor conditions at her segregated Virginia high school, a pointed replacement for a statue of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee that was removed several years ago.

An unveiling ceremony of the statue representing Virginia in the Capitol took place in Emancipation Hall, featuring Republican House Speaker Mike Johnson, Democratic Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries, Republican Virginia Gov. Glenn Youngkin, Virginia’s congressional delegation and Democratic Gov.-elect Abigail Spanberger.

Johnson said more than 200 members of Johns’ family were on hand, listening on as the ceremony included renditions of “How Great Thou Art,” “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me ’Round” and “Total Praise” performed by the Eastern Senior High School choir from Washington.

Johns was 16 years old in 1951 when she led a student strike for equal education at R.R. Moton High School in Farmville, Va. The students’ cause gained the support of NAACP lawyers, who filed a lawsuit that would become one of the five cases that the U.S. Supreme Court reviewed in *Brown v. Board of Education*. The high court’s landmark 1954 decision de-



JENNY KANE/AP

Lights from below

Homes decorated with holiday light displays on Peacock Lane are seen from a different perspective on Monday, in Portland, Ore.

clared “separate but equal” public schools unconstitutional.

The statue replaces one of Lee that was removed in December 2020 from the Capitol, where it had represented Virginia for 111 years. The removal occurred during a time of renewed national attention over Confederate monuments after the death of George Floyd and was relocated to the Virginia Museum of History & Culture.

The Johns piece is part of the National Statuary Hall Collection at the Capitol, in which each state can contribute two statues. The other statue representing Virginia is of George Washington.

Officer fires gun at driver on airport access road

NY NEW YORK — An off-duty Customs and Border Protection officer fired his gun several times during a confrontation with another motorist Tuesday on an access road for New York’s Kennedy Airport, police said.

The CBP officer told authorities that he pulled his weapon after the other driver attacked him over a minor traffic crash, Port Authority police said.

It wasn’t clear if the shots hit anything. The other driver fled the scene after the shooting, according to the CBP officer, who was unhurt.

The two-vehicle crash happened shortly before 5 a.m. near the airport’s main car rental facilities on the tangle of roads and ramps that lead to the airport’s terminals, administration buildings

and cargo areas.

JFK’s roadways are currently undergoing a major construction overhaul and navigating the thicket of detours and traffic changes has been a source of frustration and confusion for many drivers.

The Port Authority didn’t say if the officer was driving an official vehicle. His name has not been released.

Veto of reparations measure is overridden

MD ANNAPOLIS — Maryland will create a commission to study potential reparations for slavery after lawmakers voted Tuesday to override a veto by Gov. Wes Moore — currently the nation’s only Black governor — that disappointed many fellow Democrats.

Moore said in his veto letter in May that it was a difficult decision to veto the bill, which was a priority of the Legislative Black Caucus of Maryland. But he wrote there has been enough study of the legacy of slavery, and it was now time to “focus on the work itself” to address it.

But Democrats who control both chambers of the Maryland General Assembly decided the commission was needed to better examine how to do that.

“This topic isn’t easy, but, again, without formal study, reparations risk being dismissed as symbolic or unconstitutional, regardless of moral merit,” said Sen. Charles Sydnor, a Democrat.

Potential reparations outlined in the bill include official state-

ments of apology, monetary compensation, property tax rebates, social service assistance, as well as licensing and permit fee waivers and reimbursement.

Maryland’s Black population is about 30%, the highest percentage of any state outside of the Deep South.

Razor blades found in bread; woman arrested

MS BILOXI — A woman who allegedly pushed razor blades into loaves of bread at two Biloxi, Miss., Walmart stores was arrested on Tuesday.

Camille Benson, 33, of Texas, has been charged with attempted mayhem. Her bond is set at \$100,000.

Customers reported finding the razor blades at a Walmart Supercenter and a Walmart Neighborhood Market, said Lt. Candace Young, a public information officer for the Biloxi Police Department.

Walmart employees told police a customer first reported finding a razor blade in a loaf purchased from the Walmart Supercenter on Dec. 5. On Dec. 8, a customer who bought a loaf at the Walmart Neighborhood Market also reported finding a razor blade.

After another customer complained to the Walmart Supercenter on Sunday, employees inspected the merchandise and found several more loaves had been tampered with, law enforcement officials said.

The Biloxi Police Department said it does not believe any other

stores have been targeted.

If customers purchase a product that has been tampered with, they should immediately throw it out and visit their local Walmart for a full refund, the company said.

‘Iconic’ home dating to 1728 goes up in flames

NC BEAUFORT — A revered coastal home that predates the American Revolution has been destroyed by fire, according to officials in Beaufort, N.C.

Known as the Duncan House, the two-story structure dates to 1728 and was part of a 12-block historic district listed on the National Register of Historic Places, town officials said.

“This is a heartbreaking moment for Beaufort,” Mayor Sharon Harker said in a news release.

“The Duncan House is part of our historic fabric, and while we are grateful no lives were lost, the emotional toll of damage to a home — especially one with deep family and historic meaning — is significant.”

The initial fire call came around 6:30 a.m. Monday, and the cause remains under investigation. No one was inside at the time, officials said.

Duncan House and “is one of only 11 properties in North Carolina designated as Statewide Properties of Significance,” town officials noted. The interior is 4,401 square feet, and it last sold in 2020, for \$2.5 million, according to Realtor.com.



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 <p>PMA Patriot Military Automobiles WWW.PATRIOT-AUTOS.NET</p>	 <p>VFW VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS.</p>	 <p>Red Velvet TATTOO STUDIO Est. 1999</p>	 <p>RAMSTEIN USED CARS Quality Cars, Quality Service</p>	 <p>kraft SPEECH OCCUPATIONAL PHYSICAL THERAPY CLINIC</p>
 <p>EULER GROUP military sales</p>	 <p>H&R BLOCK® Wiesbaden</p>	 <p>UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND GLOBAL CAMPUS EUROPE</p>	 <p>DR. BIANCA KNOLL AESTHETIC PLASTIC SURGERY</p>	 <p>H&R BLOCK® Kaiserslautern</p>
 <p>EuroTrip Adventures</p>	 <p>Midwest Family DENTISTRY</p>	 <p>SOUTH INK TATTOO STUDIO</p>	 <p>Explore Europe®</p>	 <p>docteam 42</p>
 <p>MR KFZ-TECHNIK</p>	 <p>BROADWAY...KINO... MOVIE MAGIC RAMSTEIN</p>	 <p>OXIDIO</p>	 <p>Andrews FEDERAL CREDIT UNION</p>	 <p>Auto Picper VOLVO</p>
 <p>LOGO'ERDO WESTPHALE</p>	 <p>MIRASCON INSURANCE SOLUTIONS</p>	 <p>TRAUMKLINIK</p>	 <p>AfroConcept</p>	



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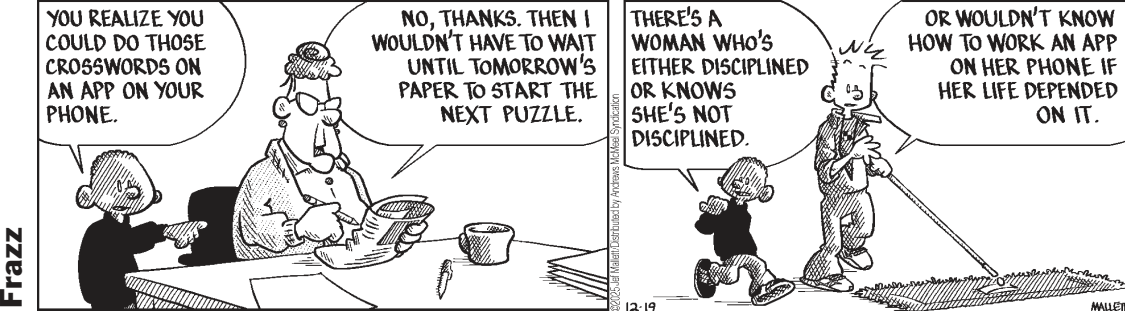
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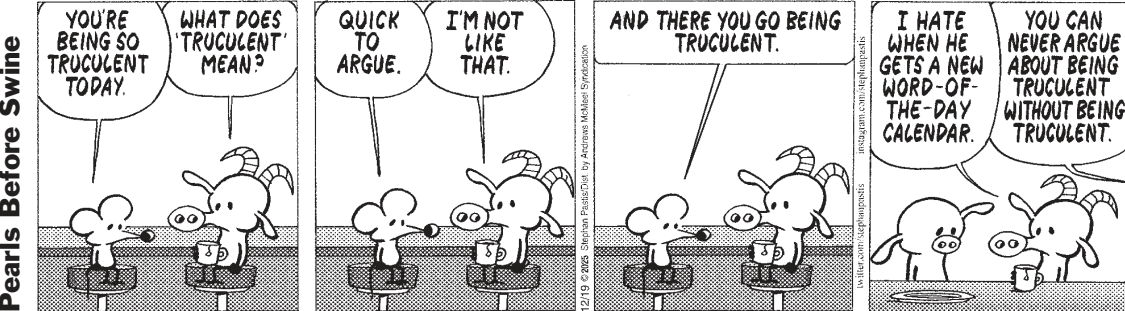
Loose Parts



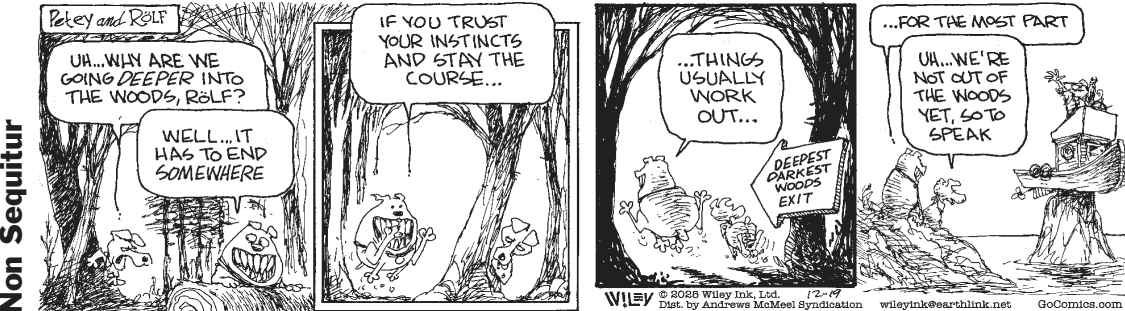
Frazz



Pearls Before Swine



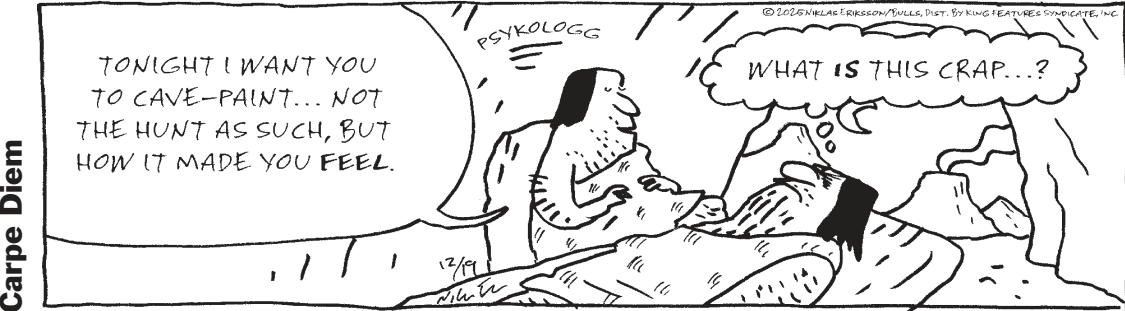
Non Sequitur



Wumo



Carpe Diem



Beetle Bailey



Eugene Sheffer Crossword

1	2	3		4	5	6	7		8	9	10	11
12				13					14			
15				16					17			
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45	46	47				48	49					
50						51				52		
53						54				55		

- ACROSS
- 1 Rent out

4 Simple rhyme scheme

8 "Don't move!"

12 Slangy suffix

13 "Fight Club" actor Jared

14 "Peter Pan" dog

15 Well site

17 Sty cry

18 Covert

19 Evergreen tree

21 Em halves

22 Beginnings

26 Salamanders

29 Help

30 Mentalist Geller

31 Raw minerals

32 Wise bird

33 Enfold

34 Cistern

35 — -Manuel

36 Weavers' machines

37 Attack

39 Carpool-lane abbr.

40 Ump's call

41 Vast expanses

45 Scoff

48 Plant-based shampoo ingredient

50 Skip

51 Tidy
- 52 — Jam (video-game series)

53 Actress Gershon

54 Welles portrayal

55 Mentalist's claim
- 24 Streetcar
- 25 Tries the wine
- 26 Bright star
- 27 "Taylor Swift: The — Tour" (2023 concert film)
- 28 Saturates
- 29 Plant bristle
- 32 Fuel container
- 33 Like a tapestry
- 35 Actress Lucy
- 36 Pinpoint
- 38 Main artery
- 39 Wrestler Hulk
- 42 Top-notch
- 43 Pen tips
- 44 Duel prompter
- 45 Warm-up run
- 46 Brit. record label
- 47 Aachen article
- 49 Actor Stephen

Answer to Previous Puzzle

R	A	P	T		C	H	A	P		N	E	D	
U	L	E	E		O	B	I	E		E	P	I	
N	O	R	T	H	P	O	L	E		T	E	T	
S	E	U	R	A	T				L	O	P	E	Z
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D	E	R			A	D	D	S		T	I	N	S

12-19 CRYPTOQUIP

ZM MGI KZBSIC CFJBD KZQMU

GIVC FT MGI FBI BQIZW JGDK,

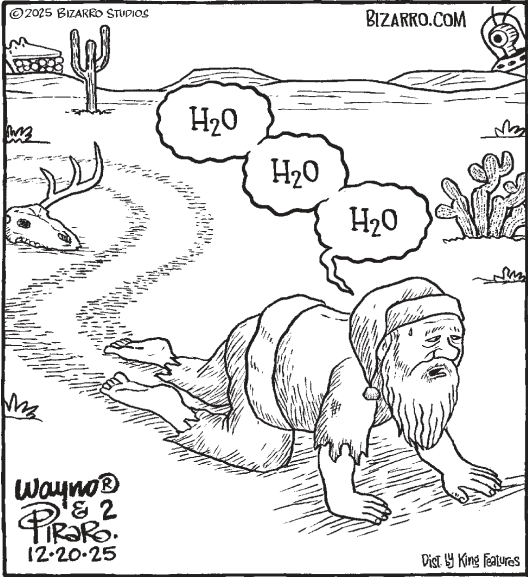
WZTU KIDKVI CZTBIC JGZSI

MD JGZSI.

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: IF A BABY SHEEP NEEDS TO BE RUSHED TO THE HOSPITAL, SHOULD SOMEBODY FIRST CALL A LAMB-ULANCE?

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: K equals P

Bizarro



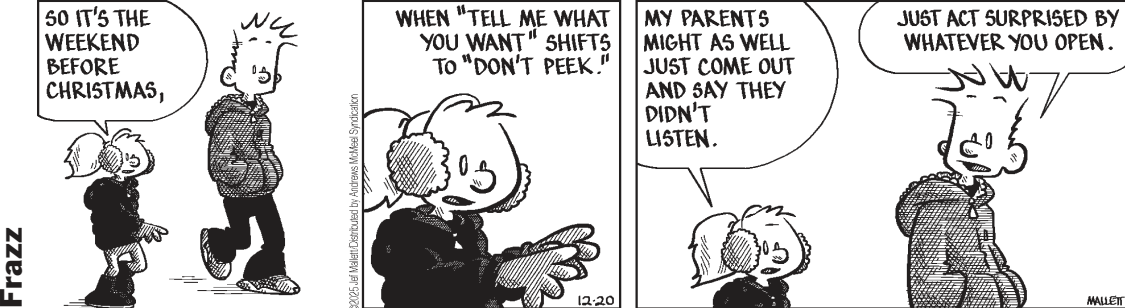
Loose Parts



Eugene Sheffer Crossword

	1	2	3	4	5		6	7	8	9	10	11
12							13					
14							15					
16					17	18				19		
			20	21				22	23			
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32			33				34					
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		38		39		40			41			
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50			51				52	53				
54							55					
56							57					

Frazz



Pearls Before Swine



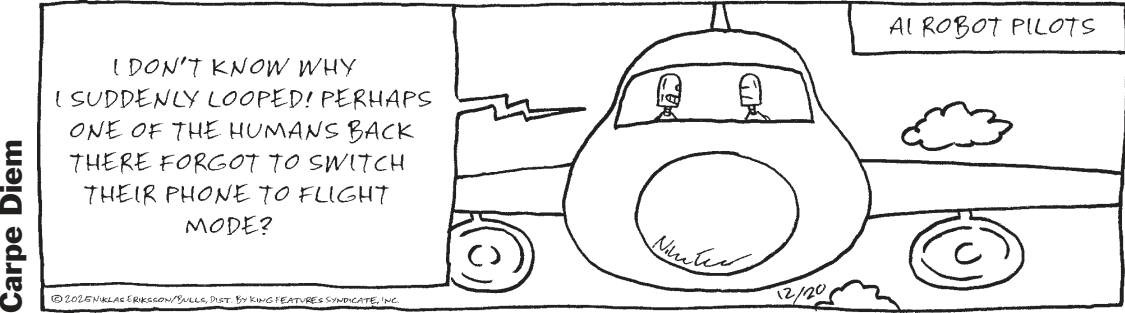
Non Sequitur



Wumo



Carpe Diem



Beetle Bailey



ACROSS

- 1 Michelangelo masterpiece
- 6 Blame
- 12 Composer Mahler
- 13 Tousles
- 14 Melodious
- 15 Tennis great Gibson
- 16 Sean of "Mystic River"
- 17 Honeycomb unit
- 19 Big bird
- 20 "Don't move!"
- 22 Knight's address
- 24 Sheepish "Hello!"
- 27 Notion
- 29 Perfume brand
- 32 Fruity liqueur
- 35 Sulk
- 36 Meeting, in slang
- 37 "My word!"
- 38 Work unit
- 40 Halt
- 42 Jokester
- 44 "— girl!"
- 46 Footnote abbr.
- 50 Car part that may purr
- 52 Set afire
- 54 Living things
- 55 Jot down
- 56 Nike symbol
- 57 Cheeky

DOWN

- 1 Chaste
- 2 "The doctor —"
- 3 Short jackets
- 4 Prof's aides
- 5 Guacamole needs
- 6 Human rights lawyer Clooney
- 7 Extracts
- 8 Chicago winter hrs.
- 9 Theater worker's job
- 10 Appear
- 11 Jacob's twin
- 12 Opening exam
- 21 Twitch
- 23 Journalist Tarbell

- 24 "Kapow!"
- 25 GI's address
- 26 Broken chord
- 28 Declines to vote
- 30 Verse by Neruda
- 31 Reuben bread
- 33 Suffix with cash
- 34 Greek P
- 39 Jets and Sharks
- 41 Pub orders
- 42 Spiders' snares
- 43 Fresh
- 45 New Age pianist John
- 47 Prejudice
- 48 — -bitty
- 49 Ruby of films
- 51 Daughter of Cadmus
- 53 Small Indian state

Answer to Previous Puzzle

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

12-20

CRYPTOQUIP

TWDB TKJCG IKJ HDCC BWVFXN
CVLS PSCCN DFG DCDQE HCKHLN
BWDB DQS BKBDCCI PQKLSF?
GSDG QVFXSQN.
Yesterday's Cryptoquip: AT THE PACKED DISCO PARTY HELD IN THE ICE CREAM SHOP, MANY PEOPLE DANCED SHAKE TO SHAKE.
Today's Cryptoquip Clue: C equals L



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OPINION

Is the ‘most cynical of all the generations’ ready to lead?

By THEODORE R. JOHNSON
Special to The Washington Post

For Gen X, few things signaled coming of age like a house key. It was a symbol of after-school autonomy beyond the watchful eyes of authority figures. This newfound independence was as much a gift as it was a necessity; the simultaneous rise of two-income households and divorce rates in the 1970s and ’80s meant empty homes on weekday afternoons, turning a generation of children into latchkey kids.
In our formative years, Gen Xers such as myself learned to handle matters on our own and became experts in tending to our parents’ things. Freedom came with responsibilities — the chores and homework, the watching over siblings and the not breaking stuff. But for a little part of each weekday, we had the keys to the kingdom.
Now middle-aged, this generation is increasingly in charge of a country in which just 17% of Americans have faith in government. More than 80% of Americans believe democracy is in crisis or facing serious challenges. The sensible step for a nation feeling this way is to undertake fundamental reforms and improve the government’s design and structure, which generations before us have done and the majority of Americans support. Instead, there’s a crippling deference to authority, the status quo and the long-standing structures of democracy, which are behaving like partisan outposts.
The country is in dire need of reform and principled leadership. Is Gen X up to the job? It remains to be seen. Scholars have shown that this generation’s work ethic is characterized by creativity, pragmatism and independence. But they have also found that it lacks assertiveness and is the “most cynical of all the generations, with little faith in corporations, company loyalty, or authority.” Gen X — the 65 million of us born between 1965 and

1980 — now tends to be Republican-leaning; in the 2024 election, no generation was more pro-Trump. But it is also more progressive than older generations on social issues such as immigration, race relations, abortion and same-sex marriage. In this way, Gen X itself mimics the partisan divide in the country — those born before 1973 practice a more conservative politics than those born after, who are more likely to support Democrats. Sociologists have described them as “a generation of low expectations but high achievement.”
Latchkey childhoods helped foster a politics of stewardship that describes Gen X today. Sandwiched between baby boomers, who have ascended to the top of institutions, and millennials, who prefer transformational leadership, Gen X bridges these two larger generations and possesses characteristics of both. It carries their parents’ respect for institutions and structure alongside a recognition that sweeping change and progress are required to meet the times. That sensibility is a growing part of government. Gen X is now the largest cohort in the U.S. House, four of the nine Supreme Court justices and the largest share of the federal workforce.
It’s not that Gen X isn’t adaptable — its members came of age facing recessions and inflation, Watergate, the spread of AIDS and the end of the Cold War. But the present moment needs more than stewardship; it needs new ideas, new systems and democratic renewal — high expectations and high achievement. Previous generations amended the Constitution, expanded voting access, rebalanced federal and state power and reworked public institutions to account for social and cultural changes. Gen X, by contrast, has attended a long season of institutional drift — ascending in an antiquated system overdue for reform. The one constitutional amendment ratified during its adulthood concerned congressional pay, typifying the generation’s frustratingly practical nature.

Gen X inherited these weakening structures — courts, legislatures, elected office, fair governance — and now must rebuild them or move out of the way of people who will. There’s already a sense that it will be the generation history skips, with reports finding that they’re increasingly being passed over for CEO positions and may be the generation that fails to win the presidency. Its upbringing came with a requirement for gratitude and the understanding that their parents’ and grandparents’ generations had done the heavy lifting — won world wars, resolved economic depressions, established civil rights and grew into a global power. And just as Gen X reached middle age, Donald Trump arrived with a nostalgia-filled, revanchist appeal to improve the country by reclaiming an imagined America of previous generations’ youth, the version we learned to revere.
This matters because democracy is not self-sustaining. It requires updates and renewal that cannot afford to be in awe of how things used to be. Trump’s return to office was not just a matter of populist grievance or partisan loyalty. It was also the consequence of a system that’s lost the people’s trust — and of a governing generation that’s responding by deferring to institutions rather than changing them.
Having the keys to the house does not signal the ability or the readiness to lead; it is responsibility without authority. The generation that grew up watching adults manage institutions imperfectly now occupies the same halls of power, tasked with management in an era that demands leadership, traditionalists in a time requiring redesign. Independence, once a temporary freedom in an after-school house, is as much a reward for sound management as it is a responsibility to make it anew.

Theodore R. Johnson, a contributing columnist for The Washington Post and retired naval officer, writes on issues of race, democracy, and American identity. He’s the author of the book “If We Are Brave.”

Caring for elders is challenging. A new program could help.

By CARRIE LUKAS
Special to The Washington Post

Inflation eased this past year, but not for everything: In-home elder care costs surged by nearly 10%, which is more than three times the overall inflation rate. Brace for continued double-digit price increases without policy change.
Elder care costs are rising because demand is rising. By 2030, the number of people aged 65 and older will exceed 73 million; that’s a 30% increase in just one decade. Yet instead of preparing for this reality, policymakers have constructed a system that discourages flexibility and rewards bureaucracy. The average cost of full-time, in-home assistance is nearly \$80,000 a year. Residential facilities are pricier: roughly \$127,000 per year for a room in a private nursing home and around \$70,000 for a room in assisted living. These costs are rising faster than wages, savings and public budgets.
Most older Americans don’t want to end up in residential facilities. A 2022 AARP survey found that 77% of adults aged 50 and older said they want to “age in place.” Unfortunately, government policy often stands in the way of seniors staying in their homes.
One culprit is the 2013 “Home Care Rule,” a Labor Department reinterpretation of the Fair Labor Standards Act that gutted the long-standing companionship exemption. Families who once hired live-in companions through agencies for light caregiving and daily living

assistance suddenly faced overtime and wage rules. While some families employ live-in help as household employees or independent contractors, more than three-quarters of home care aides are hired through agencies. While those rules may make sense for traditional employers, they don’t work for private households — instead, they make in-home elder care needlessly complex and prohibitively costly.
The Trump administration is working to rescind that rule, which is a crucial step in the right direction. It would allow families to negotiate caregiving arrangements that meet their needs without violating a tangle of labor laws. But more can be done. Policymakers should look beyond regulatory rollback to innovation. They can start by making it easier for seniors to offer rent-free housing as partial compensation for caregiving services. Under the current interpretation of labor laws, room and board cannot be considered part of compensation if it’s offered as a condition of employment. Changing this provision would make hiring live-in assistance financially viable for middle-income seniors. This could be a win-win for caregivers and seniors alike. Millions of seniors live in homes with unused bedrooms and face a challenge with loneliness, which can lead to deteriorating mental and physical health; caregivers often struggle to afford housing.
Pairing seniors with live-in caregivers or

companions could address both the cost and social dimensions of aging, enabling seniors to have meaningful, daily, in-person interactions. A long-standing, proven model is the State Department’s au pair program, which for decades has matched families with young foreign nationals who provide child care in exchange for room, board and a modest stipend. The program’s genius is that it allows for human exchange while being light on regulation and clear in its caretaking expectations. A similar framework, administered by the Labor Department, could be adapted for elder care. Rather than creating another visa program, the administration could enable Americans — students, retirees or others seeking housing — to earn income and free room and board while providing companionship and assistance to older adults.
With reasonable vetting and safeguards — including medical checks to ensure that seniors are mentally and physically capable enough to safely welcome a companion into their homes — an “American Companion Program” could relieve pressure on families, create new work and housing opportunities for workers, and help millions of seniors remain independent. Reforming elder care shouldn’t mean another trillion-dollar program; it should mean clearing the way for creative, human-scale solutions.

SCOREBOARD

COLLEGE FOOTBALL			
Scores		FCS playoffs	
Wendesday Dec. 17		Semifinals	
EAST		Saturday, Dec. 22	
Delaware 20, Louisiana-Lafayette 13		Illinois St. vs. Villanova	
SOUTH		Montana State vs. Montana	
Old Dominion 24, South Florida 10		Championship	
College Football Playoff		Monday, Jan. 5	
First Round		Semifinal winners	
Friday, Dec. 19		NCAA Division II playoffs	
No. 9 Alabama (10-3) at No. 8 Oklahoma (10-2)		Championship	
Saturday, Dec. 20		Saturday, Dec. 20	
No. 10 Miami (Fla.) (10-2) at No. 7 Texas A&M (11-1)		NCAA Division III playoffs	
No. 11 Tulane (11-2) at No. 6 Mississippi (11-1)		Semifinals	
No. 12 James Madison (12-1) at No. 5 Oregon (11-1)		Saturday, Dec. 20	
Quarterfinals		John Carroll vs. North Central (III.)	
Wednesday, Dec. 31		Johns Hopkins vs. UW-River Falls	
At Cotton Bowl		Championship	
Arlington, Texas		Sunday, Jan. 4	
Miami/Texas A&M winner vs. No. 2 Ohio State		Semifinal winners	
Thursday, Jan. 1		Bowl Gance	
At Orange Bowl		Dec. 16	
Miami Gardens, Fla.		Salute to Veterans Bowl	
James Madison/Oregon winner vs. No. 4 Texas Tech		Jacksonville State 17, Troy 13	
At Rose Bowl		Dec. 17	
Pasadena, Calif.		Cure Bowl	
Alabama/Oklahoma winner vs. No. 1 Indiana		Orlando, Fla.	
At Sugar Bowl		Old Dominion vs. South Florida	
New Orleans		68 Ventures Bowl	
Tulane/Miss. winner vs. No. 3 Georgia		Mobile, Ala.	
Semifinals		Louisiana vs. Delaware	
Thursday, Jan. 8		Dec. 18	
At Fiesta Bowl		Xbox Bowl	
Glendale, Ariz.		Frisco, Texas	
TBD		Arkansas State vs. Missouri State	
Friday, Jan. 9		Dec. 19	
At Peach Bowl		Myrtle Beach Bowl	
Atlanta		Conway, S.C.	
TBD		Kennesaw State vs. Western Michigan	
		Gasparilla Bowl	
		Tampa, Fla.	
		Memphis vs N.C. State	

COLLEGE BASKETBALL	
Wednesday men’s scores	
EAST	
Albany 71, Stony Brook 55	
New Hampshire 59, Stonehill 58	
Pittsburgh 103, Binghamton 63	
Quinnipiac 85, Monmouth 75	
Robert Morris 80, Youngstown St. 77, OT	
Syracuse 76, Mercyhurst 62	
Vermont 83, Siena 69	
Wagner 78, Maryland-Eastern Shore 64	
SOUTH	
Alabama 104, South Florida 93	
Charleston 82, The Citadel 78	
East Carolina 74, Presbyterian 53	
Eastern Kentucky 62, Jacksonville St. 59	
Elon 73, Richmond 70	
Florida 102, St. Francis (PA) 61	
Florida A&M 72, Jacksonville 65	
Middle Tennessee 68, Kennesaw State 67	
Nicholls State 79, Houston Christian 64	
North Carolina Central 96, Mid-Atlantic Christian 62	
N.C. State 108, Texas Southern 72	
Oakland 82, Northern Kentucky 77	
Old Dominion 77, James Madison 68	
Ole Miss 80, Alabama A&M 66	
South Alabama 96, Louisiana-Monroe 92, 2OT	
Tulane 61, Louisiana Tech 53	
UAB 101, Cleveland State 77	
UCF 81, Mercer 63	
USC Upstate 98, Southern Wesleyan 63	
Vanderbilt 77, Memphis 70, OT	
Wake Forest 71, Longwood 68	
West Georgia 70, Brewton-Parker College 49	
MIDWEST	
Bellarmine 79, Chattanooga 64	
Central Michigan 85, Olivet 65	
Cincinnati 88, Alabama State 51	
Creighton 98, Xavier 57	
Georgetown 78, Marquette 69	
Green Bay 67, UC Santa Barbara 64	
Northern Iowa 60, UIC 54	
Saint Louis 112, Bethune-Cookman 53	
South Dakota 80, Dakota State 71	
Wichita State 84, Wofford 73	
SOUTHWEST	
Arkansas State 89, Texas State 70	
Arkansas-Pine Bluff 138, Champion Christian College 73	
Central Ark. 102, Kansas Christian 47	
Rice 94, Southwestern Christian 47	
Stephen F. Austin 69, Texas A&M-CC 60	
FAR WEST	
Colorado 84, Portland State 73	
Gonzaga 98, Campbell 70	
Montana Tech 82, Montana 75	
Oregon 94, Portland 69	
Sam Houston 85, Oregon State 75	
San Diego State 81, Air Force 58	
San Francisco 85, Loyola Chicago 71	
Santa Clara 63, North Texas 60	
Seattle 79, UC Davis 78	
Stanford 76, Texas-Arlington 60	
UCLA 90, Arizona State 77	
USC 97, UTSA 70	
Utah Valley 90, Weber State 74	
Washington State 78, Eastern Washington 63	

Dec. 22		Gator Bowl	
Famous Idaho Potato Bowl		Jacksonville, Fla.	
Utah St. vs. Washington St.		Missouri vs. Virginia	
Dec. 23		Texas Bowl	
Boca Raton Bowl		Houston	
Louisville vs. Toledo		LSU vs. No. 21 Houston	
New Orleans Bowl		Dec. 29	
Western Kentucky vs. Southern Miss		Birmingham Bowl	
Frisco Bowl		Georgia Southern vs. Appalachian State	
Frisco, Texas		Dec. 30	
Ohio vs. UNLV		Independence Bowl	
Dec. 24		Shreveport, La.	
Hawai’i Bowl		Coastal Carolina vs. Louisiana Tech	
Honolulu		Music City Bowl	
Cal vs. Hawaii		Nashville, Tenn.	
Dec. 26		Tennessee vs. Illinois	
GameAbove Sports Bowl		Alamo Bowl	
Detroit, Mich.		San Antonio, Texas	
Central Michigan vs. Northwestern		No. 16 Southern Cal vs. TCU	
Rate Bowl		Dec. 31	
Phoenix		ReliaQuest Bowl	
New Mexico vs. Minnesota		Tampa, Fla.	
First Responder Bowl		No. 14 Vanderbilt vs. No. 23 Iowa	
Dallas, Texas		Sun Bowl	
FIU vs. UTSA		El Paso, Texas	
Dec. 27		Arizona St. vs. Duke	
Military Bowl		Citrus Bowl	
Annapolis, Md.		Orlando, Fla.	
Pittsburgh vs. East Carolina		No. 13 Texas vs. No. 18 Michigan	
Pinstripe Bowl		Las Vegas Bowl	
Bronx, N.Y.		No. 15 Utah vs. Nebraska	
Clemson vs. Penn St.		Jan. 2	
Fenway Bowl		Armed Forces Bowl	
Boston		Fort Worth, Texas	
UConn vs. Army		Texas State vs. Rice	
Pop-Tarts Bowl		Liberty Bowl	
Orlando, Fla.		Memphis, Tenn.	
No. 12 BYU vs. No. 22 Georgia Tech		Navy vs. Cincinnati	
Arizona Bowl		Duke’s Mayo Bowl	
Tucson, Ariz.		Charlotte, N.C.	
Fresno St. vs. Miami (OH)		Mississippi St. vs. Wake Forest	
New Mexico Bowl		Holiday Bowl	
Albuquerque		San Diego, Calif.	
No. 25 North Texas vs. San Diego St.		No. 17 Arizona vs. SMU	

DEALS	
Wednesday’s transactions	
BASEBALL	
Major League Baseball	
American League	
ATHLETICS — Agreed to terms with RHP Mark Leiter Jr. on a one-year contract.	
BALTIMORE ORIOLES — Sent C Maverick Handley outright to Norfolk (IL). Agreed to terms on 2026 minor league contracts with RHP Albert Suarez and INF Willy Vasquez.	
CHICAGO WHITE SOX — Named Bobby Hearn assistant pitching coach, Jose Legner first base and outfield coach, Chris Denorfia major league field coordinator, Bennett Markinson bullpen catcher and Tony Medina major league assistant.	
CLEVELAND GUARDIANS — Acquired LHP Justin Bruhl from Toronto in exchange for cash. Designated 1B/OF Jhonkensy Noel for assignment.	
DETROIT TIGERS — Agreed to terms with RHP Kenley Jansen on a one-year contract.	
KANSAS CITY ROYALS — Agreed to terms with OF Lane Thomas on a one-year contract.	
NEW YORK YANKEES — Released RHP Allan Winans.	
TAMPA BAY RAYS — Signed LHP Shane McClellanahan to a one-year contract.	
National League	
CHICAGO CUBS — Agreed to terms with LHP Caleb Thielbar on a one-year major league contract.	
COLORADO ROCKIES — Named Jeff Pickler major league bench coach.	
NEW YORK METS — Claimed C Drew Romo off waivers from Baltimore.	
SAN FRANCISCO GIANTS — Designated OF Joey Wiener for assignment.	
ST. LOUIS CARDINALS — Designated LF Matt Koperniak for assignment. Signed free agent RHP Dustin May.	
BASKETBALL	
National Basketball Association	
HOUSTON ROCKETS — Fined Coach Ime Udoka \$25,000 for public criticism of officiating.	
FOOTBALL	
National Football League	
ARIZONA CARDINALS — Released DT Justin Jones from injured reserve.	
BALTIMORE RAVENS — Designated LB Jay Higgins to return from injured reserve.	
BUFFALO BILLS — Designated WR Mecole Hardman to return from injured reserve. Signed K Michael Badgley to the practice squad.	
CAROLINA PANTHERS — Designated WR David Moore to return from injured reserve. Signed RB Montrell Johnson to the practice squad.	
CLEVELAND BROWNS — Signed G Wesley French to the practice squad.	
DALLAS COWBOYS — Designated DE Payton Turner, RB Phil Mafah and CB Josh Butler to return from injured reserve.	
DENVER BRONCOS — Designated LB Karene Reid to return from injured reserve. Signed G Nash Jones to the practice squad.	
GREEN BAY PACKERS — Reinstated RB MarShawn Lloyd from injured reserve. Placed LB Micah Parsons on injured reserve. Designated G John Williams to return from the PUP list.	
HOUSTON TEXANS — Designated DE Darrell Taylor to return from injured reserve. Signed DT Marcus Harris to the practice squad.	
KANSAS CITY CHIEFS — Signed DT Zacch Pickens to the active roster. Placed QB Patrick Mahomes on injured reserve. Signed WR Jimmy Holiday to the practice squad. Designated TE Jake Briningstool and CB Nazeeh Johnson to return from injured reserve.	
LAS VEGAS RAIDERS — Signed DE Jahfari Harvey to the active roster from the practice squad. Signed G McClendon Curtis to the practice squad.	
MIAMI DOLPHINS — Signed LB Jackson Woodard to the active roster from Houston’s practice squad. Waived LB Matthew Judon. Signed LB Andre Carter II to the practice squad. Released TE Tanner Conner from the practice squad.	
MINNESOTA VIKINGS — Placed S Joshua Metellus and OLB Jonathan Greenard on injured reserve. Designated TE Gavin Bartholomew to return from injured reserve.	
NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS — Signed LB Amari Gainer to the practice squad.	
NEW ORLEANS SAINTS — Signed RB Nyheim Hines to the practice squad.	
PITTSBURGH STEELERS — Signed RB Trey Sermon to the practice squad. Signed WR John Rhys Plumlee to the practice squad.	
SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS — Re-signed QB Adrian Martinez to the practice squad.	
TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS — Reinstated DB Rashad Wisdom from injured reserve. Waived DB Kaevon Merriweather from the active roster.	
TENNESSEE TITANS — Designated OLBs Oluwafemi Oladejo and Ali Gaye and WR Bryce Oliver to return from injured reserve.	
HOCKEY	
National Hockey League	
BUFFALO SABRES — Reinstated D Michael Kesselring from injured reserve.	
MINNESOTA WILD — Recalled D Carson Lambos from Iowa (AHL). Placed D Jonas Brodin on injured reserve.	
NASHVILLE PREDATORS — Activated F Cole Smith from injured reserve.	
NEW YORK ISLANDERS — Sent D Travis Mitchell to Bridgeport (AHL).	
NEW JERSEY DEVILS — Placed F Arseni Gritsyuk on injured reserve. Activated D Brett Pesce from injured reserve.	
NEW YORK RANGERS — Sent Fs Jaroslav Chmelar and Brett Berard to Hartford (AHL). Recalled Fs Gabe Perreault and Brennan Othmann from Hartford.	
SAN JOSE SHARKS — Sent F Michael Misa to Team Canada for the World Junior Championships.	
VEGAS GOLDEN KNIGHTS — Reinstated D Jeremy Lauzon from injured reserve.	
SOCCER	
Major League Soccer	
D.C. UNITED — Acquired F Tai Baribo from the Philadelphia Union in exchange for \$4 million.	
MINNESOTA UNITED — Signed D Britton Fischer to an MLS contract.	
NASHVILLE SC — Re-signed MF Bryan Acosta to a one-year contract.	
NEW YORK RED BULLS — Acquired F Cade Cowell on loan from Chivas Guadalajara.	
REAL SALT LAKE — Signed D Sam Junqua to a long-term contract.	
SEATTLE SOUNDERS FC — Signed free agent D Ryan Sailor to a one-year contract.	
COLLEGE	
OHIO UNIVERSITY — Fired head football coach Brian Smith.	

PRO HOCKEY	
NHL	
EASTERN CONFERENCE	
Atlantic Division	
	GP W L OT Pts GF GA
Detroit	35 19 13 3 41 108 115
Boston	34 20 14 0 40 113 106
Tampa Bay	33 18 12 3 39 106 88
Florida	33 18 13 2 38 106 103
Montreal	33 17 12 4 38 106 117
Toronto	32 15 12 5 35 105 104
Ottawa	32 15 13 4 34 101 104
Buffalo	32 14 14 4 32 98 109
Metropolitan Division	
	GP W L OT Pts GF GA
Carolina	33 22 9 2 46 112 91
N.Y. Islanders	34 19 12 3 41 102 96
Philadelphia	32 17 9 6 40 96 89
Washington	33 18 11 4 40 106 88
New Jersey	34 19 14 1 39 99 104
Pittsburgh	32 14 9 9 3

OLYMPICS

Shiffrin dominating slalom as Games approach

Associated Press

COURCHEVEL, France — Mikaela Shiffrin isn't just winning every slalom of the Olympic season. She's winning them by an average of more than 1.5 seconds — an eternity in ski racing.

The American skiing standout claimed a record-extending 105th World Cup victory after several of her top challengers went out during a night race Tuesday.

Shiffrin added to her first-run lead and finished 1.55 seconds ahead of Swiss skier Camille Rast and 1.71 ahead of German racer Emma Aicher.

Shiffrin has now won the opening four slaloms of the season — and five straight including the final race of last season.

All of her margins of victory this season have topped a full second — and three of them more than 1.5 seconds: 1.66 in Levi, Finland; 1.23 in Gurgl, Austria; and 1.57 in Copper Mountain, Colo., before her latest performance in the French Alps.

Do the math and the average margin is 1.5025 seconds.

"I'm just pushing. I'm not asking questions. Sometimes you just got to take it and roll with it," Shiffrin said. "Lock in this feeling."

Rivals ran into difficulty

Germany's Lena Duerr, who stood third after the first run, went off course early in her second run.

Lara Colturi, the Italian-born skier who races for Albania, straddled a gate toward the end of her opening run — ending a streak of three consecutive slalom podiums.



GIOVANNI AULETTA/AP

The United States' Mikaela Shiffrin competes in a women's World Cup slalom in Courchevel, France, on Tuesday. Shiffrin earned her 105th World Cup victory, and has won the first four slaloms of the season.

Wendy Holdener finished seventh despite a mishap at the end of her first run.

Holdener hit a hole in the finish area, got flipped up into the air and landed on her back. After grimacing

in pain for a few moments, she got up and walked away. It wasn't immediately clear if she was injured but she competed in the second run.

Defending World Cup slalom

champion Zrinka Ljutic and Olympic silver medalist Katharina Liensberger, the next two starters, went out midway down.

It's the third consecutive slalom that Ljutic has failed to finish.

Katharina Truppe, of Austria, finished fourth and American skier Paula Moltzan moved up from ninth to fifth with the fastest second run.

Shiffrin earned her 68th World Cup slalom victory. She also won gold in slalom at the 2014 Sochi Olympics — then took gold in giant slalom four years later at the Pyeongchang Games.

Shiffrin didn't medal at the 2022 Beijing Games.

Women's Alpine skiing at the Milano Cortina Olympics, which run from Feb. 6-22, will be held in Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy — where Shiffrin won four medals in her four events at the 2021 world championships and where fellow American Lindsey Vonn holds the record of 12 World Cup victories.

Vonn races again soon

Vonn, who won a downhill last week at age 41, no longer competes in slalom.

Vonn will be back in action this weekend for a downhill and a super-G in nearby Val d'Isere.

Rast and Aicher move up

Rast recovered from a mistake midway through the second run to earn her sixth career podium.

Aicher, who also won a downhill last weekend, is one of the few skiers competing in all four events.

Rast and Aicher moved up to third and fourth in the overall standings, respectively.

Shiffrin leads the overall with 558 points, followed by Alice Robinson (394), Rast (343) and Aicher (319).

New Zealand's Robinson will be top challenger in Milan

By Andrew Dampf

Associated Press

In the Northern Hemisphere's winter, she competes on the Alpine skiing World Cup circuit in the Alps.

In the Southern Hemisphere's winter, she trains at home in New Zealand.

Alice Robinson hardly ever gets to put her flip-flops on and enjoy summer.

And that's just fine with her.

"It's just been my yearly routine for so long that I don't really know much better," Robinson said. "I definitely miss some summer but I'm definitely a lot more comfortable in the winter climate."

Is she ever.

Robinson is off to quite a start to the Olympic season, shaping up as Mikaela Shiffrin's biggest challenger in the overall World Cup standings.

Beating Goggia and Vonn

In four giant slaloms, Robinson has registered two victories and a third-place finish.



ROBERT F. BUKATY/AP

New Zealand's Alice Robinson competes in a women's World Cup giant slalom on Nov. 29 at Copper Mountain, Colo.

Then, on Sunday, she finished ahead of Sofia Goggia and Lindsey Vonn in the season-opening super-G for her first career victory in a speed discipline.

The victory in St. Moritz, Switzerland, made Robinson the first man or woman from New Zealand to win a super-G. That came after a giant slalom victory last month — the fifth win of her career —

made her the most successful women's World Cup winner from a non-European or North American nation.

Nearly two months into the season, Robinson sits second in the overall standings, 164 points behind Shiffrin.

Expanding to the speed disciplines has been something that Robinson has been considering

ever since she announced herself to the skiing world by winning the season-opening giant slalom on the Rettenbach glacier in Sölden, Austria, six years ago as a 17-year-old.

Dual medal contender

Robinson's results make her a multi-medal contender for the Feb. 6-22 Milan Cortina Olympics — where she could become the first Alpine skiing gold medalist from her country.

New Zealand's only Olympic medal in Alpine skiing was a silver in slalom by Annelise Coberger at the 1992 Albertville Games.

Coberger's brother, Nils Coberger, is one of Robinson's coaches.

At last season's world championships, Robinson took silver behind Federica Brignone in giant slalom for New Zealand's first medal in the biggest skiing competition outside of the Olympics.

Constantly being on snow does have some draw backs, though.

"My one advantage being from

New Zealand is that I get to train at home in the offseason when everyone else is traveling around," Robinson told reporters earlier this season.

Title lost

Robinson entered the final giant slalom of last season leading the discipline standings and set to clinch the first crystal globe of her career.

But she struggled with a gate in her first run at the World Cup finals in Sun Valley, Idaho, last March, veered off course and handed the title to Brignone.

Robinson said that failure "definitely kept the fire burning for this offseason to try and work harder to be more prepared and to mentally know how to deal with those higher intensity, higher pressure moments."

This time she has a new plan.

"With it being in Cortina, which is a familiar World Cup venue for us, I kind of just want to go into it treating it just like another World Cup race," Robinson said.

NBA/WOMEN'S COLLEGE BASKETBALL

NBA scoreboard

Eastern Conference					
Atlantic Division					
	W	L	Pct	GB	
New York	18	7	.720	—	
Toronto	16	11	.593	3	
Boston	15	11	.577	3½	
Philadelphia	14	11	.560	4	
Brooklyn	7	18	.280	11	
Southeast Division					
	W	L	Pct	GB	
Orlando	15	11	.577	—	
Atlanta	15	12	.556	½	
Miami	14	12	.538	1	
Charlotte	8	18	.308	7	
Washington	4	20	.167	10	
Central Division					
	W	L	Pct	GB	
Detroit	21	5	.808	—	
Cleveland	15	13	.536	7	
Chicago	11	15	.423	10	
Milwaukee	11	16	.407	10½	
Indiana	6	20	.231	15	
Western Conference					
Southwest Division					
	W	L	Pct	GB	
San Antonio	18	7	.720	—	
Houston	16	7	.696	1	
Memphis	13	14	.481	6	
Dallas	10	17	.370	9	
New Orleans	5	22	.185	14	
Northwest Division					
	W	L	Pct	GB	
Oklahoma City	24	2	.923	—	
Denver	19	6	.760	4½	
Minnesota	17	10	.630	7½	
Utah	10	15	.400	13½	
Portland	10	16	.385	14	
Pacific Division					
	W	L	Pct	GB	
L.A. Lakers	18	7	.720	—	
Phoenix	14	12	.538	4½	
Golden State	13	14	.481	6	
Sacramento	6	20	.231	12½	
L.A. Clippers	6	20	.231	12½	
Wednesday's games					
Chicago 127, Cleveland 111					
Memphis 116, Minnesota 110					
Thursday's games					
Atlanta at Charlotte					
New York at Indiana					
Miami at Brooklyn					
Houston at New Orleans					
L.A. Clippers at Oklahoma City					
Toronto at Milwaukee					
Washington at San Antonio					
Detroit at Dallas					
Golden State at Phoenix					
L.A. Lakers at Utah					
Orlando at Denver					
Sacramento at Portland					
Friday's games					
Miami at Boston					
Philadelphia at New York					
Chicago at Cleveland					
San Antonio at Atlanta					
Oklahoma City at Minnesota					
Saturday's games					
Houston at Denver					
Boston at Toronto					
Dallas at Philadelphia					
Indiana at New Orleans					
Charlotte at Detroit					
Washington at Memphis					
Phoenix at Golden State					
Orlando at Utah					
Portland at Sacramento					
L.A. Lakers at L.A. Clippers					
Sunday's games					
Chicago at Atlanta					
Toronto at Brooklyn					
Miami at New York					
San Antonio at Washington					
Milwaukee at Minnesota					
Houston at Sacramento					
Rebounding leaders					
Through Wednesday					
	G	OFF	DEF	TOT	AVG
Jokic, DEN	25	75	234	309	12.4
Towns, NY	24	74	211	285	11.9
Zubac, LAC	26	92	207	299	11.5
Duren, DET	23	91	161	252	11.0
Hartenstein, OKC	20	70	142	212	10.6
Gobert, MIN	27	101	183	284	10.5
Johnson, ATL	24	37	214	251	10.5
Ware, MIA	26	83	183	266	10.2
Clingan, POR	22	100	124	224	10.2
Nurkic, UTA	23	56	164	220	9.6

Bucks not thinking about big changes

BY STEVE MEGARGEE
Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — Milwaukee Bucks coach Doc Rivers remains confident in his team and doesn't plan on making any major changes in the wake of a 45-point loss to Brooklyn that matched the Nets' most lopsided victory in franchise history.

Milwaukee (11-16) hasn't won two straight games since Oct. 28-30 as it struggles to deal with the absence of two-time MVP Giannis Antetokounmpo, who has been out for the past two weeks with a right calf strain.

"We like our team," Rivers said Wednesday after practice. "I really like this team. We're not playing well. We're not playing well for a lot of reasons. You don't recreate the wheel. You just don't. Teams that do that, then they fail. I'm just being honest. I've been around this long enough."

The Bucks won four of their first five games but have gone 7-15 since. They had three days off after their blowout loss to Brooklyn before hosting Toronto on Thursday.

"It was just an embarrassing game for us, at the end of the day," guard Ryan Rollins said.

The time off has given Milwaukee an opportunity to practice on back-to-back days, a rarity during an NBA regular season. The Bucks said they used that time to try to make sure they correct what



Bucks head coach Doc Rivers talks with Kevin Porter Jr. during a game against the Boston Celtics on Dec. 11 in Milwaukee.

went wrong against the Nets.

"I don't think there's many losses in NBA history like the one we just had last game," guard Kevin Porter Jr. said. "I think a loss like that wakes you up, and you don't ever want to be on the end of that stick. Having those days (off) and having to sit on that loss definitely makes it worse. I think we all had an eye opener."

They apparently haven't spent this time off pondering wholesale changes to the scheme or lineup.

"Yeah, we want to do things bet-

ter," Rivers said. "We want to tweak things. We like what we run. We like our defensive package overall. We've just got to do it better. We've got to take care of the ball. But we like the parts of this team, and that has not changed. This is not, 'OK, guys, we're five games under .500, let's blow it all up.' This is not where we're at. We're not even thinking in those terms."

Milwaukee's slow start has led to increased leaguewide speculation about Antetokounmpo's fu-

ture, though Rivers has disputed an ESPN report that the nine-time All-NBA selection was talking with Bucks officials about whether he's best suited to stay in Milwaukee or get traded.

The Bucks have gone 2-8 when they don't have Antetokounmpo, who was out with a left adductor strain before injuring his calf.

Milwaukee can take comfort in the fact that it has some impressive wins. The Bucks beat Boston three nights before the debacle in Brooklyn. They defeated Golden State without Antetokounmpo early in the season. They beat Detroit on Dec. 3 even after Antetokounmpo left with his calf injury just three minutes into the game.

But they have also fallen to Washington, Charlotte, Brooklyn and Sacramento, all of whom have lost more than twice as many games as they've won.

Myles Turner said this has become a "play-hard league" and noted Milwaukee must consistently show the same effort and energy that was apparent in the NBA Cup games that took place the past few days. He believes the Bucks must recapture the joy they showed when they were playing well early in the season.

"When you start to lose, obviously it knocks your spirit a bit," Turner said. "Again, it's just really no time for excuses at this point. You have to go out there and perform."

Transfers have No. 9 TCU rolling once again

BY STEPHEN HAWKINS
Associated Press

FORT WORTH, Texas — Olivia Miles just wanted to make the right decision on where to play her final season in college, and the dynamic guard picked a TCU squad coached by Mark Campbell coming off its first NCAA Elite Eight appearance.

Marta Suarez, the 6-foot-3 forward with elite guard skills, said with a smile that she chose the No. 9 Horned Frogs because, "they told me Olivia Miles was coming."

Miles and Suarez, who just became only the second NCAA Division I teammates with triple-doubles in the same game, are part of another TCU roster replenished by transfers. The undefeated defending Big 12 champion (12-0) plays its conference opener at home Saturday against Kansas State.

"I talked to endless people about (Campbell), about the team culture, because that was something I really prioritized coming in. I wanted a really selfless group and a caring and loving environment, and that's all that I heard about TCU," said Miles, who is averaging 18.1 points, 7.1 rebounds

and a Big 12-best 7.9 assists a game. "So I kind of took a leap of faith. Ultimately, you don't really know until you're in it, and it's paying off."

The Horned Frogs have extended their school-record home winning streak to 33 games, with Miles and Suarez both having triple-doubles in the latest, 109-54 over Arkansas-Pine Bluff on Tuesday. That was the third triple-double in a row and ninth overall for Miles, who played 101 games for Notre Dame the past five years and missed all of 2023-24 because of a torn right ACL.

Miles was a projected WNBA draft lottery pick before opting instead for another season in college. The 5-10 guard's last game with the Fighting Irish was an NCAA Sweet 16 loss to TCU in March, with transfers Haley Van Lith and Sedona Prince wrapping up their college careers.

Along with being the third Division I women's player with three straight triple-doubles — nobody has four — Miles has at least 15 points and five assists in every game. That 12-game streak is an NCAA record for consecutive 15-5 games to start a season.



TCU's Marta Suarez (7) and the rest of the Horned Frogs' bench celebrate after guard Olivia Miles sunk a 3-pointer in the second half against Arkansas-Pine Bluff in Fort Worth, Texas, on Tuesday.

The Big 12 is the fourth major conference for Suarez, who was in the Southeastern Conference at Tennessee for three years before 66 starts at California the past two seasons, first in the Pac-12 before the Bears moved to the Atlantic Coast Conference. She is averaging 18.7 points, 6.4 rebounds and 3.1 assists with TCU. Her 20-10-10 game Tuesday was her first career triple-double.

"We're just lucky to have an amazing group of girls that care about the team, care about this journey that we're on and care about each other, and I think it translates," Suarez said. "I think we have a lot of fun with it. ... People like us that have come from different schools, we know that's what matters. You win more when you have fun with it and you love the people around you."

NFL

Packers face 1st test without Parsons

Associated Press

GREEN BAY, Wis. — Green Bay Packers defensive coordinator Jeff Hafley offered a bold prediction regarding Micah Parsons’ eventual return from the torn anterior cruciate ligament that ended the superstar pass rusher’s season prematurely.

“If I were a betting man, I would bet that he comes back even better and probably breaks the sack record next year,” Hafley said Wednesday.

Hafley is also bullish about Green Bay’s chances of continuing to play quality defense even without Parsons, who injured his left knee in the third quarter of the Packers’ 34-26 loss at Denver on Sunday.

Green Bay (9-4-1) plays its first full game without Parsons this season Saturday when it visits the Chicago Bears (10-4) with the NFC North lead at stake.

Statistics suggest the Packers’ defense could struggle without Parsons, who had a team-high 12½ sacks.

Although Green Bay has allowed the sixth-fewest yards per game (294.6) and eighth-fewest points per game (20.1) of any NFL team, its game at the Broncos exposed its vulnerability when it’s not applying a consistent pass rush. Denver’s Bo Nix wasn’t sacked as he threw for 302 yards and four touchdowns.

Parsons’ league-high 83 quarterback pressures according to NFL Next Gen Stats were nearly



JACK DEMPSEY/AP

Green Bay Packers defensive coordinator Jeff Hafley believes Micah Parsons, left, will thrive next season after his recovery from a torn ACL.

twice the total of any other Packer. Green Bay will need former first-round picks Rashan Gary and Lukas Van Ness to recapture the form they showed early in the season when they capitalized on all the attention offenses were giving to Parsons.

Gary ranks second on the team with 42 pressures, but all 7½ of his sacks this season came in the Packers’ first seven games.

Van Ness had 1½ sacks in Green Bay’s first five games, then missed seven of the Packers’ next eight games with a foot injury. He returned to play 22 snaps and post two tackles against the Broncos.

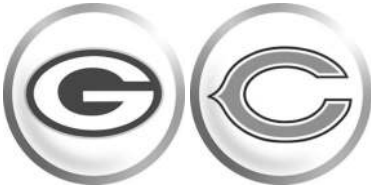
Gary said Green Bay plans to

play the rest of the season in a way that would impress Parsons.

“The No. 1 thing is, he wants us to turn the page and continue to play ball and get wins,” Gary said.

The Packers still have many of the key players from a defense that ranked fifth in yards allowed and sixth in points allowed last season. That gives them confidence they can still contain offenses even without Parsons chasing quarterbacks.

Green Bay did send three-time Pro Bowl defensive lineman Kenny Clark to Dallas in the trade that got them Parsons. They also lost Devonte Wyatt, whose four sacks rank third on the team, to a season-



**Green Bay Packers (9-4-1)
at Chicago Bears (10-4)**
AFN-Sports2
2 a.m. Sunday CET
10 a.m. Sunday JKT

ending ankle injury.

Yet the Packers still have confidence they can continue to thrive without Parsons.

If Green Bay can pick up the slack and make a deep postseason run after losing Parsons, it should feel even better about itself next year, whenever it gets him back. Hafley said he expects the 26-year-old to come back better than ever.

After Hafley talked about the possibility of Parsons breaking the single-season sack record next year, he was asked if he specifically meant the league record. Michael Strahan set that record with 22½ in 2001 and T.J. Watt tied that mark 20 years later, though Cleveland’s Myles Garrett currently has 21½ with three games left in his season.

Hafley didn’t back down from his faith in Parsons or the rest of his players.

“He’s the type of guy — give Micah adversity and watch what happens.” Hafley said.

Scoreboard

American Conference							
East							
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	
New England	11	3	0	.786	382	276	
Buffalo	10	4	0	.714	411	324	
e-Miami	6	8	0	.429	296	324	
e-N.Y. Jets	3	11	0	.214	276	397	
South							
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	
Jacksonville	10	4	0	.714	376	292	
Houston	9	5	0	.643	323	228	
Indianapolis	8	6	0	.571	392	303	
e-Tennessee	2	12	0	.143	225	394	
North							
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	
Pittsburgh	8	6	0	.571	336	326	
Baltimore	7	7	0	.500	335	320	
e-Cincinnati	4	10	0	.286	314	437	
e-Cleveland	3	11	0	.214	226	332	
West							
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	
x-Denver	12	2	0	.857	342	261	
L.A. Chargers	10	4	0	.714	315	284	
e-Kansas City	6	8	0	.429	328	268	
e-Las Vegas	2	12	0	.143	196	363	
National Conference							
East							
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	
Philadelphia	9	5	0	.643	320	271	
Dallas	6	7	1	.464	407	420	
e-Washington	4	10	0	.286	291	375	
e-N.Y. Giants	2	12	0	.143	300	396	
South							
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	
Tampa Bay	7	7	0	.500	327	354	
Carolina	7	7	0	.500	264	317	
e-Atlanta	5	9	0	.357	281	341	
e-New Orleans	4	10	0	.286	226	332	
North							
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	
Chicago	10	4	0	.714	365	338	
Green Bay	9	4	1	.679	348	281	
Detroit	8	6	0	.571	428	345	
e-Minnesota	6	8	0	.429	289	307	
West							
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	
x-L.A. Rams	11	3	0	.786	420	261	
Seattle	11	3	0	.786	405	242	
San Francisco	10	4	0	.714	344	293	
e-Arizona	3	11	0	.214	302	388	
x-clinched playoff spot e-eliminated from playoffs							
Saturday's games							
Philadelphia at Washington Green Bay at Chicago							
Sunday's games							
Buffalo at Cleveland Cincinnati at Miami Kansas City at Tennessee L.A. Chargers at Dallas Minnesota at N.Y. Giants N.Y. Jets at New Orleans Tampa Bay at Carolina Atlanta at Arizona Jacksonville at Denver Las Vegas at Houston Pittsburgh at Detroit New England at Baltimore							
Monday's games							
San Francisco at Indianapolis							
Thursday, Dec. 25							
Dallas at Washington Detroit at Minnesota Denver at Kansas City							
Saturday, Dec. 27							
Houston at L.A. Chargers Baltimore at Green Bay							
Sunday, Dec. 28							
Arizona at Cincinnati Jacksonville at Indianapolis New England at N.Y. Jets New Orleans at Tennessee Pittsburgh at Cleveland Seattle at Carolina Tampa Bay at Miami N.Y. Giants at Las Vegas Philadelphia at Buffalo Chicago at San Francisco							
Monday, Dec. 29							
L.A. Rams at Atlanta							
Sunday, Jan 4							
Arizona at L.A. Rams Baltimore at Pittsburgh Carolina at Tampa Bay Cleveland at Cincinnati Dallas at N.Y. Giants Detroit at Chicago Green Bay at Minnesota Indianapolis at Houston Kansas City at Las Vegas L.A. Chargers at Denver Miami at New England New Orleans at Atlanta N.Y. Jets at Buffalo Seattle at San Francisco Tennessee at Jacksonville Washington at Philadelphia							

Commanders QB Daniels frustrated by injuries

BY HOWARD FENDRICH
Associated Press

ASHBURN, Va. — Jayden Daniels was “frustrated, disappointed” during his second year in the NFL, he said Tuesday, by the various injuries he called “just freak accidents” that limited him to seven games before the Washington Commanders shut him down.

Speaking to reporters for the first time since coach Dan Quinn announced Monday that Daniels wouldn’t play again this season, the quarterback who was the AP NFL Offensive Rookie of the Year for 2024 said he wasn’t thrilled with the decision to limit him to practicing the rest of the way, but he understood it.

“It was obviously disappointing. I’m a player, I want play,” Daniels said. “But I wasn’t medically cleared to go.”

He said he was surprised to have missed so much time, including with a sprained left knee, a bad right hamstring and, most recently, a dislocated left elbow that sidelined him for more than two months after it was hurt during a blowout loss to Seattle on Oct. 5.

Daniels returned from that inju-



**Philadelphia Eagles (9-5) at
Washington Commanders (4-10)**
AFN-Sports2
11 p.m. Saturday CET
7 a.m. Sunday JKT



ABBIE PARR/AP

**Washington Commanders
quarterback Jayden Daniels
missed over two months with an
elbow injury and returned Dec. 7,
only to then be sidelined for the
rest of the season.**

21 victory over the New York Giants.

Mariota will be back under center Saturday against the Super Bowl champion Eagles (9-5) in a rematch of last season’s NFC title game. Washington then hosts Dallas on Dec. 25, before ending the season at Philadelphia.

“They’re building for the future,

and (Daniels) should feel confident ... that they’re making a decision that they feel is best for the entire organization,” Mariota said. “It’s, at the same time, tough as an athlete. You want to be out there. We all understand that.”

As a rookie, Daniels appeared in all 20 of the Commanders’ games — including leading them to a 12-5 record in the regular season — and completed 69% of his passes for 3,568 yards with 25 touchdowns and nine interceptions. He also ran for 891 yards with six TDs.

This season, the 2023 Heisman Trophy winner at LSU and No. 2 overall pick in the 2024 NFL draft owns a completion rate of 60.6% with 1,262 yards, eight touchdowns and three interceptions. His passer rating slid from 100.1 to 88.1. He ran for 278 yards with two scores.

Asked whether he can work on anything during the offseason to avoid the health issues he’s had, Daniels responded: “That’s a tough question. I mean, I can’t really avoid the injuries that I’ve dealt with — those are just freak accidents.”

NFL

Ravens’ poor home mark threatens playoff hopes

BY NOAH TRISTER
Associated Press
OWINGS MILLS, Md. — The Baltimore Ravens can expect a playoff-type atmosphere this weekend when they host the New England Patriots under the lights on national television.

In the past, this type of environment seemed to bring out the best in Baltimore, but that hasn’t been the case this year.

“I think we kind of have mentioned how we have to play better at home,” safety Alohi Gilman said. “It’s not a big jump, it’s just little things here and there. That’s not a question of our character, culture or identity. It’s just a matter of executing on a high level, on a more consistent basis.”

If the season ended today, the Ravens wouldn’t make the playoffs, and their 3-5 home record is a big reason. A loss Sunday night against New England would make this the worst home season in franchise history. That distinction is currently held by Baltimore’s 2015 squad, which went 3-5 — back before a team could have nine home games during a regular season.

In John Harbaugh’s 18 seasons as coach, the Ravens have been particularly dominant at night, going 44-21 in prime time games and 22-5 at home. But they began this season with a Sunday night loss at Buffalo and then fell at home to Detroit on a Monday night in Week 3.

Perhaps the most disturbing defeat so far was at home against Cin-



New England Patriots (11-3)
at Baltimore Ravens (7-7)
AFN-Sports
2:15 a.m. Monday CET
10:15 a.m. Monday JKT

cinnati on Thanksgiving night. Baltimore’s lone prime-time win this season was at Miami on a Thursday night in October.

“Obviously, someone is coming into our house. We have to win games,” center Tyler Linderbaum said. “We have to put on a show for our crowd and end up getting wins like how we’re supposed to.”

If there’s one issue that might explain why the Ravens’ home-field advantage hasn’t helped much, it’s that they have tended to start slowly. They’ve scored only two first-quarter touchdowns in their eight home games, and they’ve been outscored 86-59 in the first half on home turf.

That’s not how you maintain an intimidating atmosphere.

“It’s so important starting fast, and again, just kind of having energy,” linebacker Tavarius Robinson said. “When your brother makes a play, go celebrate. Gets that energy flowing in the crowd, the team and all that, so it’s very important for sure.”



Ravens quarterback Lamar Jackson, left, is tackled by the Pittsburgh Steelers defense during the second half Dec. 7 in Baltimore.



Miami Dolphins quarterback Tua Tagovailoa, left, is sacked by Steelers linebacker Payton Wilson in the second half in Pittsburgh on Monday. Tagovailoa’s struggles this season have led to his benching.

Dolphins bench Tagovailoa in favor of rookie Ewers

BY ALANIS THAMES
AND ROB MAADDI
Associated Press
MIAMI GARDENS, Fla. — Miami Dolphins quarterback Tua Tagovailoa was unsure what his future with the team will look like following Wednesday’s benching for rookie Quinn Ewers.
For now, the former first-round draft pick said he will contribute in whatever way he can despite his disappointment with how this season has gone.

“Disappointed,” Tagovailoa said at his locker about coach Mike McDaniel’s decision to demote him for Ewers. “I mean, I’m not happy about it, but it’s something out of my control.”

The decision came after Tagovailoa struggled in a loss to Pittsburgh, which eliminated Miami (6-8) from postseason contention. Ewers, a seventh-round pick by the Dolphins earlier this year, will make his first career start Sunday against the Cincinnati Bengals, McDaniel said Wednesday.

McDaniel said the decision came down to who he felt gave Miami the best chance to win. The



Cincinnati Bengals (4-10)
at Miami Dolphins (6-8)
AFN-Atlantic
7 p.m. Sunday CET
3 a.m. Monday JKT

Dolphins fell 28-15 at the Steelers on Monday night, closing the door on their playoff hopes with three games left in the season.

Tagovailoa threw for just 65 yards through three quarters Monday, and the areas in which he has appeared to regress were evident again, from questionable decision-making to a lack of mobility that has hampered him throughout the season. He leads the NFL with 15 interceptions and hasn’t played up to his contract after signing a four-year, \$212.4 million extension in July 2024.

Ewers was 5 for 8 for 53 yards in his only action this season in a lop-

sided loss to Cleveland in October. He was the 231st player selected in the draft last April after starting three seasons at Texas.

“I’m super thankful that the staff believes in me to go out there and give us an opportunity to go win an NFL football game,” Ewers said.

The 27-year-old Tagovailoa had started every game this season but has a history of concussions. He missed six games last season because of a concussion and hip injury after playing 17 games in 2023.

Tagovailoa said he didn’t think his injury history contributed to his regression this season. His 15 interceptions are a career high, he is on pace to finish the season with his worst passer rate (88.5) since his rookie season, and he has failed to throw for more than 200 yards in eight of his 14 starts. Before this year, he hadn’t had more than three such games in a season since 2021, his first year as a starter.

“I would say the biggest thing, and it’s being honest with myself as well, had been my performance,” Tagovailoa said. “I haven’t been performing up to the level and the capabilities that I have in the past.”

NFL on AFN



Tampa Bay Buccaneers (7-7)
at Carolina Panthers (7-7)
AFN-Sports
7 p.m. Sunday CET
11 a.m. Monday JKT



Buffalo Bills (10-4)
at Cleveland Browns (3-11)
AFN-Sports2
7 p.m. Sunday CET
11 a.m. Monday JKT



Jacksonville Jaguars (10-4)
at Denver Broncos (12-2)
AFN-Sports
10 p.m. Sunday CET
6 a.m. Monday JKT



Las Vegas Raiders (2-12)
at Houston Texans (9-5)
AFN-Atlantic
10:25 p.m. Sunday CET
6:25 a.m. Monday JKT



Pittsburgh Steelers (8-6)
at Detroit Lions (8-6)
AFN-Sports 2
10:25 p.m. Sunday CET
6:25 a.m. Monday JKT



COLLEGE FOOTBALL PLAYOFF

Oklahoma, Alabama meeting again as Rose Bowl at stake

By Cliff Brunt
Associated Press

NORMAN, Okla. — Oklahoma and Alabama will meet Friday for the third time in 13 months in the most significant game of their budding rivalry.

Last year, the underdog Sooners stunned the Crimson Tide 24-3 and cost Alabama a spot in the College Football Playoff. Last month, Oklahoma won 23-21 at the Tide in a matchup of highly ranked teams that put the Sooners in position to reach the playoff.

Now, their seasons will be on the line in a playoff game, with the winner facing No. 1 seed Indiana in the Rose Bowl on Jan. 1.

Oklahoma coach Brent Venables, as usual, showed great respect for Alabama.

“They’ve been very, very disruptive all year long, very, very well-coached in all three phases,” he said. “We’ve got a lot of familiarity, don’t want to be real redundant. We just played these guys a couple weeks ago and had a lot of great things to say.”

The Sooners caught several breaks to win the first meeting. They got an 87-yard interception return for a touchdown from Eli Bowen, and quarterback John Mateer made just enough plays at critical times to save them. Oklahoma won the turnover battle 3-0 and Tate Sandell made three field goals to offset the Crimson Tide’s 406-212 advantage in total yardage.

Venables said the Sooners will



CFP First Round
No. 9 Alabama (10-3)
at No. 8 Oklahoma (10-2)
AFN-Sports
2 a.m. Saturday CET
10 a.m. Saturday JKT

have to be better in the rematch against a program that has won six national championships since the start of the 2009 season.

“They’re a great program — great players, great coaches,” Venables said. “That’s the way they’ve been for 100-plus years. And so the enormity of the challenge is real. We’re going to have to be an improved version of ourselves.”

Alabama (10-3) likes the chance to make things right.

“What a great opportunity,” Tide quarterback Ty Simpson said. “It’s a new season. Nobody’s won or lost. We know what happened last year, this year, but we can’t worry about that. We can control what we can control and we can control our attitude, how we play and how we prepare.”

Venables said all indicators are that this game will come down to the end.

“We’ve got two great teams going at it, and it’s going to be a one-

possession game,” he said. “It’s going to be a game that every play has tremendous magnitude.”

Running games

The team that finds its running game could be in position to advance.

In the first matchup, Alabama rushed for 80 yards on 33 attempts and Oklahoma gained just 74 yards on 28 carries.

The Crimson Tide have struggled with their ground game at times, rushing for minus-3 yards in a 28-7 loss to Georgia in the Southeastern Conference championship game.

Star receivers

Oklahoma’s Isaiah Sategna was a first-team AP All-SEC selection. He has 65 catches for 948 yards and seven touchdowns. He is also a dangerous punt returner, with 23 runbacks for a 13-yard average.

Alabama has two standouts. Gernie Bernard has 57 catches for 762 yards and seven scores. Ryan Williams has 42 catches for 631 yards and four touchdowns.

Series history

Oklahoma considered the Tide a rival long before leaving the Big 12 for the SEC.

It goes back to former Sooners coach Bob Stoops, who voiced his disagreement with the notion that the SEC was better than the Big 12. Stoops backed up his talk when Oklahoma beat Alabama in the Sugar Bowl after the 2013 season.



Oklahoma won its last meeting with Alabama, on Nov. 15, on a fourth-quarter field goal from kicker Tate Sandell (29). The Sooners will hope for similar success against the Crimson Tide in the CFP.

He had a 3-0 career record against the Crimson Tide.

Alabama beat the Sooners 45-34 in the playoff in 2018, but Oklahoma has won both meetings since. Despite the Tide’s overall success, the Sooners have won five of the past six meetings and hold a 5-2-1 overall record in the series.

Thomas returns

Oklahoma’s R Mason Thomas is off the injury report after missing more than a month.

The dominant edge rusher’s right hamstring was injured while he returned a fumble 71 yards for a touchdown against Tennessee. He was named second-team AP All-SEC despite missing the final three games of the regular season, including the first matchup with Alabama.

Despite the missed time, he leads the team with 6½ sacks and is third with 9½ tackles for loss. He anchors a defense that leads the nation in sacks and tackles for loss.

Special Sooners

Oklahoma had the first-team All-SEC kicker and punter, weapons that could be critical in a tight game.

Sandell made his final 23 field goal attempts of the regular season, setting SEC and school records. He has made all 10 of his tries from at least 45 yards and has made four from 55 yards.

Grayson Miller, a transfer from Central Oklahoma, ranks 12th nationally with 46.1 yards per punt and has had 24 downed inside the 20-yard line.

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COLLEGE FOOTBALL PLAYOFF

Napier back in changed Sun Belt with JMU

By Mike Barber
Associated Press

HARRISONBURG, Va. — Four years ago, Billy Napier walked away from a Sun Belt Conference powerhouse he had built at Louisiana-Lafayette. It was, in part, because he wasn't sure how that program would handle the financial challenges of new rules allowing college athletes to profit from their name, image and likeness.

Four years later, Napier is returning to the league with James Madison. And the Dukes' ability to compete financially was one of the main drivers behind his decision to become the successor to UCLA-bound Bob Chesney.

"This place has what it takes to dominate the competition for sure," Napier said of a program ranked No. 19 in the AP Top 25 and headed to the College Football Playoff.

Napier went 40-12 in four seasons at Louisiana-Lafayette, dominating Sun Belt competition. His Ragin' Cajuns won the Western Division all four years he was there and claimed league championships in his final two seasons. He was twice named the league's coach of the year.

But after posting a 12-1 record and his second Sun Belt title in 2021, Napier left for Florida.

"I stayed at Louisiana after Year 2 when we had opportunities, after Year 3 when we had opportunities," Napier said. "And we probably, truth be known, would have stayed longer if it wasn't for NIL. Because we know that was coming. We knew that roster was going to be tough to keep together."



Florida head coach Billy Napier directs players during the second half against Mississippi State on Sept. 18 in Gainesville, Fla. Napier, fired by the Gators, was hired by James Madison to replace Bob Chesney.

Napier went 22-23 with the Gators, starting this season 3-4 when he was fired in his fourth year at the helm.

As he surveyed the landscape, considering his future, he thought a lot about how college football had changed since he first took over at Louisiana-Lafayette in 2018. The NIL rules allowing college athletes to cash in on their fame went live in summer 2021, while this year marked the arrival of revenue sharing following the \$2.8 billion House antitrust settlement.

"It's very different," Napier said. "Obviously (revenue sharing) is ultimately a huge difference maker at the Group of Six level. Now, you evaluate jobs relative to alignment, resources — which basically means building infrastructure and hiring a great staff — and then the rev share that allows you to compensate really good players."

Napier said the transfer portal and roster limits following the House settlement have changed the game since he last coached in the Sun Belt.

"But ultimately, football's football," Napier said. "We're going to need to evaluate well. Basically going to recruit a high school cycle each year. Then you're going to recruit a portal cycle each year. Then start over."

Those changes aren't something Napier is thinking about in the abstract.

He jumps right into one of the most awkward positions in the country — seeking to retain players of a CFP-bound team while their current coach is presumably hoping to take some of JMU's top talent



CFP First Round
No. 12 James Madison (12-1)
at No. 5 Oregon (11-1)
AFN-Sports
1:30 a.m. Sunday CET
9:30 a.m. Sunday JKT

with him west to UCLA. That won't begin until Chesney finishes his Dukes tenure, the last leg of which begins Saturday night when No. 12 James Madison faces No. 5 Oregon.

"I'm for transparency," Napier said. "Let's rip the Band-Aid off. Who are you taking? And who wants to go?"

When Curt Cignetti left the Dukes for Indiana, he took 13 of the program's top players with him. That group includes the Hoosiers' leader in rushing touchdowns (Kaelon Black), its leader in receiving scores (Elijah Sar-ratt), its leader in pass breakups (D'Angelo Ponds) and its second-leading tackler (Aiden Fisher).

JMU president Jim Schmidt expressed confidence the Dukes will remain successful under Napier no matter how the fight over players turns out.

"I have no doubt that we may lose some talented players to UCLA," Schmidt said. "We certainly lost some talented players to Indiana. I believe that we will retain the right players and I believe Coach Billy will bring some great players to round that out."

Rise: Howell drawn to Aggies by high-level coaching staff, facilities, defensive legacy

FROM PAGE 48

Howell remembered how he felt being a "lower type of recruit" and said it fueled him.

"As a 16 or 17-year-old kid, just trying to make a way for himself, it hurt me back then," he said. "Just seeing that these programs, none of them thought that you were good enough. So it just put a chip on my shoulder going into Bowling Green, because I just had a feeling that I can play, and I will play at the highest level."

Howell was drawn to Texas A&M in part by the coaching staff and top-notch facilities. But he was additionally enamored with the legacy of tremendous defensive ends at the school, particularly Myles Garrett and Von Miller, who both went on to star in the NFL.

"Whenever A&M first started reaching out to me when I was in the portal the first thing that came



CFP First Round
No. 10 Miami (10-2)
at No. 7 Texas A&M (11-1)
AFN-Sports
6 p.m. Saturday CET
2 a.m. Sunday JKT

to my mind was Von Miller and Myles Garrett," Howell said. "I was obviously pretty ecstatic to know that those are some great, great football players and great, great men that's come out of A&M. So the fact that A&M was interested in me and also A&M sent those guys to the league it gave me hope on what could potentially happen."

Howell's 11½ sacks are the most for the Aggies since Garrett had the same number in 2014. Miller, who had 17 sacks in 2009 for the second-most in a single season in school history, said he doesn't know Howell personally but has kept an eye on his career.

"He's a really good rusher," he said. "I pay attention to the Aggies. Tony Jerod-Eddie, his defensive line coach, is a really good friend of mine, and I see all the Aggie games, and Cashius is always phenomenal, and he's got a really bright future."

The 6-foot-2, 248-pound Howell went viral after Texas A&M's 49-25 victory at LSU in October when he was shown ranting at the Tigers' offensive line after dominating them all night in a two-sack performance. In the clip he cuts an intimidating figure, wearing his jersey in signature fashion pulled high up and baring almost his en-



GERALD HERBERT/AP

Texas A&M defensive end Cashius Howell celebrates his sack of LSU quarterback Garrett Nussmeier on Oct. 25 in Baton Rouge, La.

tire midsection as he gets in the linemen's faces.

Asked about that moment and other times where he might have gotten a little too hyped up, Howell said it's simply him appreciating how far he's come since being told he wasn't even worth a roster spot.

"I like to just think about all the

hard times and stuff that I've been through to get to this point," he said. "And I just like to channel that into something positive, and with playing football, I feel like that's a good outlet for me to be able to channel it and it helps not only myself, but it also helps the team as well."

SPORTS



Making a change
Dolphins benching QB Tagovailoa for rookie Ewers » **NFL, Page 45**



Texas A&M defensive end Cashius Howell (9) rushes Samford quarterback Quincy Crittendon during the first quarter Nov. 22 in College Station, Texas.

SAM CRAFT/AP

From no offers to CFP

Texas A&M defensive end Howell has proven plenty wrong amid rise

By KRISTIE RIEKEN
Associated Press

COLLEGE STATION, Texas — Cashius Howell heard the same thing repeatedly from power-conference schools when he was being recruited out of high school.

“They just didn’t feel like I was worth it to waste a roster spot on,” he recalled.

Five years later, the defensive end has proven those schools wrong, becoming one of the nation’s top defenders and a projected first-round draft pick. On Saturday, he’ll lead seventh-seeded Texas A&M against 10th-seeded

Miami in the Aggies’ College Football Playoff debut.

When Howell didn’t get any power-conference offers in Missouri, he ended up at Bowling Green. He redshirted in 2021 before earning a starting spot in 2022. His career began to take off in his last season with the Falcons in 2023 when he led the MAC with 9½ sacks and had 10½ tackles for loss.

Howell’s performance with Bowling Green helped his confidence grow.

“It kind of gave me the feeling that I wasn’t crazy and that the

thoughts and intuitions that I had within my mind it wasn’t like just shooting blanks,” he said. “It was actually real and it just added fuel to the fire to just continue to see how far I can take it honestly.”

He entered the transfer portal and joined Texas A&M, where he continued his success last season with four sacks and 8½ tackles for loss playing behind current NFL rookies Nic Scourton and Shemar Stewart before making a huge jump this season.

Howell wowed when he had a sack on three consecutive plays against Utah State and has 41

quarterback pressures this season, according to Pro Football Focus. He also has a knack for batting down passes and ranks second in the nation among defensive ends with six pass breakups.

Howell led the Southeastern Conference and ranked fourth in the nation with 11½ sacks to earn the league’s defensive player of the year honor. He was also a finalist for the Bronko Nagurski Trophy, Lombardi Trophy and Chuck Bednarik Award.

On Monday, he was named to the first team of The Associated Press All-America team.

Coach Mike Elko, who is in his second season as Texas A&M’s coach, said Howell was one of the first players he and his staff recruited and he values that he believed in their vision from the beginning.

“He came here to grow and develop and challenge himself,” Elko said. “And then to see him rise to those challenges where he’s on a plane going to an awards banquet as (a) defensive player of the year in the country... it’s a phenomenal story.”

SEE RISE ON PAGE 47

Bucks not looking at big changes amid slide » **NBA, Page 43**

