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SpaceX

A stack of 60 Starlink test satellites atop a Falcon 9 rocket, close to entering Earth's orbit. Western intelligence services suspect Russia is developing a new anti-satellite weapon to target Starlink satellites.

Intel: Russia may target Starlink

Analysts debate plausibility and rationality of anti-satellite weapon

By JOHN LEICESTER
Associated Press

Two NATO-nation intelligence services suspect Russia is developing a new anti-satellite weapon to target Elon Musk's Starlink constellation with destructive orbiting clouds of shrapnel, with the aim of reining in Western space superiority that has helped Ukraine on the battlefield.

Intelligence findings seen by The Associated Press say the so-called "zone-effect" weapon would seek to flood Starlink orbits with hundreds of thousands of high-density pellets, potentially disabling multiple satellites at once

but also risking catastrophic collateral damage to other orbiting systems.

Analysts who haven't seen the findings say they doubt such a weapon could work without causing uncontrollable chaos in space for companies and countries, including Russia and its ally China, that rely on thousands of orbiting satellites for communications, defense and other vital needs.

Such repercussions, including risks to its own space systems, could steer Moscow away from deploying or using such a weapon, analysts said.

"I don't buy it. Like, I really don't," said Vic-

toria Samson, a space-security specialist at the Secure World Foundation who leads the Colorado-based nongovernmental organization's annual study of anti-satellite systems. "I would be very surprised, frankly, if they were to do something like that."

But the commander of the Canadian military's Space Division, Brig. Gen. Christopher Horner, said such Russian work cannot be ruled out in light of previous U.S. allegations that Russia also has been pursuing an indiscriminate nuclear, space-based weapon.

SEE TARGET ON PAGE 6

Mattresses, repairs part of barracks improvement

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

All Marines living in barracks can expect a new mattress and furniture, while sailors will see housing improvements at 50 Navy bases as the services invest \$615 million to improve housing for junior enlisted troops.

"Quality of service is inseparable from readiness," said Vice Adm. Scott Gray, commander of Navy Installations Command, said in a news release. "Providing safe, comfortable, and clean housing is not optional. It is a responsibility we owe to every sailor who volunteers to serve."

The new funding stemmed from a Defense Department-wide barracks task force stood up in October to overhaul the military's aging housing for junior enlisted and unaccompanied service members. Government reports and the military's own assessments have found substandard conditions including mold, non-working appliances and air conditioning, plumbing issues and broken locks and windows.

SEE REPAIRS ON PAGE 6



NICHOLAS V. HUYNH/U.S. Navy

U.S. Navy Vice Adm. Scott Gray inspects a house ceiling at Naval Air Station Key West's Sigsbee Park Annex on Oct. 8, 2024.

BUSINESS/WEATHER

Instacart ends program that showed different prices

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Instacart said Monday that it's ending a program where some customers saw different prices for the same product ordered at the same time from the same store when using the delivery company's service.

The program was meant to help grocers and other retailers learn more about what kinds of prices customers would pay for items, similar to how stores offer different prices for the same products at different locations.

But the program raised alarms after a report from Consumer Reports and two progressive advocacy groups, Groundwork Collaborative and More Perfect Union, said Instacart offered nearly three out of every four grocery items to shoppers at multiple prices in an experiment.

Retailers will continue to set their own prices on the delivery website and they may still offer different prices at different brick-and-mortar locations, Instacart said, but "from now on, Instacart

will not support any item price testing services."

Some customers would simply see a slightly higher price for an item, while others would see a slightly lower price.

The experiment by Consumer Reports and the two progressive advocacy groups, for example, found that Instacart customers saw one of five different prices for the same dozen of Lucerne eggs from a Safeway store in Washington, D.C.: \$3.99, \$4.28, \$4.59, \$4.69, or \$4.79.

EXCHANGE RATES

Military rates												
Euro costs (Dec. 23)	0.83	Switzerland (Franc)	0.7922									
British pound (Dec. 23)	\$1.30	Thailand (Baht)	31.148									
Japanese yen (Dec. 23)	152.00	Turkey (NewLira)	42.8129									
South Korean won (Dec. 23)	1440.00											
Commercial rates												
Bahrain (Dinar)	0.3744	(Military exchange rates are those available to customers at military banking facilities in the country of issuance for Japan, South Korea, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. For nonlocal currency exchange rates (i.e., purchasing British pounds in Germany), check with your local military banking facility. Commercial rates are interbank rates provided for reference when buying currency. All figures are foreign currencies to one dollar, except for the British pound, which is represented in dollars-to-pound, and the euro, which is dollars-to-euro.) INTEREST RATES <table><tr><td>Prime rate</td><td>6.75</td></tr><tr><td>Interest Rates Discount rate</td><td>3.75</td></tr><tr><td>Federal funds market rate</td><td>3.62</td></tr><tr><td>3-month bill</td><td>3.62</td></tr><tr><td>30-year bond</td><td>4.83</td></tr></table>	Prime rate	6.75	Interest Rates Discount rate	3.75	Federal funds market rate	3.62	3-month bill	3.62	30-year bond	4.83
Prime rate	6.75											
Interest Rates Discount rate	3.75											
Federal funds market rate	3.62											
3-month bill	3.62											
30-year bond	4.83											
Britain (Pound)	1.3449											
Canada (Dollar)	1.3743											
China (Yuan)	7.0409											
Denmark (Krone)	6.3496											
Egypt (Pound)	47.4215											
Euro	0.8502											
Hong Kong (Dollar)	7.7789											
Hungary (Forint)	330.301											
Israel (Shekel)	3.2035											
Japan (Yen)	157.026											
Kuwait (Dinar)	0.3068											
Norway (Krone)	10.1144											
Philippines (Peso)	58.723											
Poland (Zloty)	3.5860											
Saudi Arabia (Riyal)	3.7460											
Singapore (Dollar)	1.2888											
South Korea (Won)	1477.19											

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MILITARY

IG: Military oversight lacking on equipment sent to Israel

BY LARA KORTE
Stars and Stripes

U.S. monitors haven't properly tracked or logged some of the \$13.4 billion worth of military support sent to Israel since the start of its war with Hamas two years ago, a Pentagon watchdog agency said in a new report.

The audit by the Defense Department Office of Inspector General, released last week, looked at how Pentagon agencies kept tabs on the defense equipment the U.S. sent following the Hamas attacks Oct. 7, 2023, that touched off the war.

The IG found that U.S. Central Command and the Defense Security Cooperation Agency didn't properly oversee some of the most sensitive technologies loaned to Israel to help it eradicate Hamas rule in Gaza and return hostages.

"Without effective accountability, these (sensitive) defense articles could be acquired by adversaries in the region," the audit said. "Adversaries who obtain (the) defense articles would have firsthand access and knowledge of sensitive U.S. weapon systems technology, decreasing the technological advan-

tage in the battlefield and increasing the risk to the United States, partner nations, and allies."

The report didn't specify what kinds of munitions or weapons were involved, only that they qualified for "enhanced end-use monitoring," or EEUM, under federal law.

The designation is typically used for articles that use sensitive technologies and are vulnerable to misuse. Federal law lays out detailed inspection and reporting processes for tracking EEUM articles.

The Office of Defense Cooperation-Israel, which is overseen by both CENTCOM and the Defense Security Cooperation Agency, is tasked with conducting annual checks on the articles, including serial number inventories and physical security inspections.

But the audit found that as of November 2024, only 44% of articles that were available for inspection had up-to-date reviews, a significant drop from the 69% before the war began.

The remaining 56% were more than 30 days past due for a review, according to the audit.

The office also hadn't been accu-

ately tracking articles that had been deployed or expended by Israel, the audit said.

Federal law requires monitors to keep track of the current positions of defense articles that aren't available for inventory, including obtaining official documentation explaining where they're located and why they were not available for inspection.

The office in Israel said it couldn't conduct checks in a timely manner or update the disposition statuses because of changes in the operational environment, according to the audit.

The conflict, combined with staffing shortages, made it difficult to conduct checks and obtain documentation on the status of the materials, according to the audit.

Additionally, neither CENTCOM nor the Defense Security Cooperation Agency conducted inspections or assessments of the Office of Defense Coordination-Israel that could have identified challenges in tracking the military equipment, the IG said.

U.S. forces experienced a similar problem during the Iraq War, when the Pentagon found it difficult to



ZEESHAN NAEEM/U.S. Air Force

U.S. airmen load Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense support equipment being sent to Israel from an undisclosed location in October 2024. A recent Defense Department Inspector General report says the U.S. military failed to properly track \$13.4 billion worth of equipment sent to Israel since October 2023.

conduct inspections between 2017 and 2023 due to the hostile environment.

At that time, the IG suggested guidance for conducting virtual command inspections when on-the-ground inspections are too dangerous.

The U.S. has also faced similar constraints in monitoring the hundreds of millions of dollars worth of defense gear sent to Ukraine.

The audit released last week made four recommendations for tracking military articles in Israel, one of which was completely redacted

ed from the public version of the report.

Of the remaining three, one was resolved and closed after officials took corrective action to update the disposition statuses of the deployed defense articles.

CENTCOM agreed to follow the suggestion to conduct an inspection or a remote inspection of the Office of Defense Coordination-Israel in the next fiscal year, and the Defense Security Cooperation Agency agreed it will conduct either a compliance visit or virtual compliance assessment in 2026.

Space Force celebrates its birthday as a 'sprint' to 6th

BY MATTHEW ADAMS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Space Force did not have a big birthday celebration like those marking the 250th anniversary of the Army or Navy this year, but the service keeps moving forward.

"Over the last six years we've been in a sprint to build a world-class, modern, and combat-ready force. This was only possible because of you, our Guardians," Chief of Space Operations Gen. Chance Saltzman said in his message marking the service's birthday Saturday. "Each of you has had a pivotal role in forging a stronger, more resilient and more capable Space Force for the nation."

Space Force was established on Dec. 20, 2019, by President Donald Trump as the sixth branch of the U.S. military. It became the first new branch of the armed services since the formation of the Air Force more than seven decades ago.

Saltzman added "this has been a year of tremendous growth." The service saw the 100th space launch this year from the Eastern Range, the first time crossing the triple-digit threshold at Cape Canaveral in a single year. In July, more than 700 Guardians across 55 locations exer-



RAY BAHNER/U.S. Air Force

U.S. Space Force Brig. Gen. Matthew Cantore, deputy commander of Space Training and Readiness Command, left, and U.S. Air Force Academy Cadet 1st Class Alvaro Fonseca cut a cake celebrating the Space Force's sixth birthday on Dec. 4, at the academy. The birthday was Dec. 20, but cadets celebrated early due to winter break.

cised with the Joint Force and U.S. allies during Resolute Space 25. The Space Force provided precision navigation, critical intelligence and life-saving missile warning as part of Operation Midnight Hammer, the U.S. military's strikes conducted on Iranian nuclear sites in June.

While the Space Force does not have a main celebration, local celebrations have begun. Cake-cutting ceremonies were held at Ramstein

Air Base, Germany, and the U.S. Air Force Academy.

The Army and Air Force Exchange Service is celebrating the Space Force's birthday with a sweepstakes offering more than \$15,000 in prizes, available to authorized military shoppers who enter at ShopMyExchange.com/sweepstakes through Jan. 19. Winners will be selected and notified no later than Jan. 30.

Trump meets with Rubio, Hegseth about Venezuela

Associated Press

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — President Donald Trump was gathering with top national security officials on Monday, a meeting that comes as the U.S. Coast Guard steps up efforts to interdict oil tankers in the Caribbean Sea as part of the Republican administration's escalating pressure campaign on Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro's government.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth and Navy Secretary John Phelan were scheduled to join Trump, who is vacationing at his Mar-a-Lago resort, for what the White House called a "major announcement."

Trump plans to discuss a shipbuilding initiative at the event, according to a White House official, who was not authorized to comment publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity.

But Trump's gathering of key members of his national security team also comes at yet another inflection point in Trump's four-month pressure campaign on the Maduro government, which began with the stated purpose of stemming the flow of illegal drugs from the South American nation but has developed into something more amorphous.

In the Caribbean, the U.S. Coast Guard on Monday continued for the second day to chase a sanctioned oil tanker that the Trump administration describes as part of a "dark fleet" Venezuela is using to evade U.S. sanctions. The tanker, the official added, is flying under a false flag and is under a U.S. judicial seizure order.

It is the third tanker pursued by the Coast Guard, which on Saturday seized a Panama-flagged vessel called Centuries that U.S. officials said was part of the Venezuelan shadow fleet.

The Coast Guard, with assistance from the Navy, seized a sanctioned tanker called Skipper on Dec. 10, also part of the shadow fleet of tankers that the U.S. says operates on the fringes of the law to move sanctioned cargo. That ship was registered in Panama.

Trump, after that first seizure, said the U.S. would carry out a "blockade" of Venezuela. Trump has repeatedly said that Maduro's days in power are numbered.

Last week, Trump demanded that Venezuela return assets that it seized from U.S. oil companies years ago, justifying anew his announcement of a "blockade" against sanctioned oil tankers traveling to or from the South American country.

MILITARY

Navy will build new frigate based on cutter

BY GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

Less than a month after killing the bulk of the Constellation-class frigate program, the Navy announced late Thursday plans to build a replacement “FF(X) frigate” based on a Coast Guard cutter already in service.

“I have directed the acquisition of a new frigate class based on HII’s Legend-class national security cutter design, a proven American built ship,” Navy Secretary John Phelan said in a video announcement on X.

The Navy said in a statement, “The FF(X) will be a smaller, more agile surface combatant designed to complement the fleet’s larger, multi-mission warships and enhance operational flexibility around the globe.”

Phelan said President Donald Trump and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth have already “signed off” on the “smart, quick, affordable” build. His announcement did not include information on the number of ships to be purchased or the dollar amounts of the initial and long-term contracts.

The FF(X) will be built at HII shipbuilders’ Ingalls Shipbuilding 800-acre plant in Pascagoula, Miss., Phelan said.

Using the Coast Guard cutter design for the new Navy frigates



ANDERSON W. BRANCH/U.S. Navy

Coast Guard Cutter Calhoun sails on the Hudson River during New York Fleet Week in May. The cutters will be the basis of the new FF(X) frigate announced by the Navy on Thursday.

would fast-track getting hulls into the water by 2028, Phelan said.

While HII would be the lead builder on the cutters-turned-frigates, Phelan said an open competition would likely be held to build in other American shipyards.

Phelan did not specifically say if Wisconsin-based Fincantieri Marinette Marine would be involved. The company won the 2020 competition to build the Constellation-class frigates. Originally based on a slightly modified version of a frigate already in service with France and Italy, the program has been plagued by cost

overruns, delays, worker shortages and dozens of design changes. A Navy report last year said the project was 36 months behind schedule on its \$22 billion contract.

In canceling the program last month, the Navy said it would accept the first two ships already under construction, USS Constellation and USS Congress. But the program would be terminated for any additional ships. The Constellation is projected to be delivered in 2029.

At the time of the program cancellation, Fincantieri said it was

counting on new work from the Navy to keep its Wisconsin plant open and its workforce in place. Phelan did not mention Fincantieri in the video.

“Shipyards will be measured across one outcome — delivering combat power to the fleet as fast as possible,” Phelan said.

Adm. Daryl Caudle, Chief of Naval Operations, said in the same video that the program would follow what he said was the successful development and construction of the Arleigh Burke-class of destroyers.

“Building it smart from the

start, then upgrading it in steps over time as the threats and technology evolve,” Caudle said.

Caudle said the frigate program was an attempt to build ships that were smaller than modern destroyers, which have increasingly taken on the role formerly played by cruisers in the “high-end fight” of naval warfare.

“The FF(X) is a highly adaptable vessel,” the Navy said. “While its primary mission will be surface warfare,” it has the “ability to carry modular payloads and command unmanned systems.”

Phelan said the new ships would fit into the overall Navy strategy for “the Golden Fleet,” a Trump administration initiative under development that would include larger ships, including a possible new generation of battle-ships, along with larger numbers of smaller surface ships. The ships would be augmented by uncrewed ships that would support the defense of the major warships.

Caudle said lessons learned in the Red Sea and in operations in the Caribbean showed an “undeniable” need to restructure Navy shipbuilding to faster, smaller, and more reliable models.

“Our small surface combatant inventory is a third of what we need,” Caudle said. “We need more capable blue water small combatants to close the gap.”

Coast Guard will pay members \$2,000 ‘Devotion to Duty’ bonus

BY GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

U.S. Coast Guard members will receive a one-time “Devotion to Duty” bonus at the end of 2025 as thanks for their service, Department of Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem announced Thursday.

The \$2,000 bonus will recognize the “exceptional service and success of U.S. Coast Guard members in 2025,” according to a Coast Guard statement.

“We want to show our country’s profound appreciation for their devotion to duty and the countless sacrifices they make to protect our nation,” Noem said in a statement Thursday.

The Coast Guard currently has 40,757 active-duty personnel. The bonus will cost the service about \$80 million in one-time pay.

The bonus is the first specific plan for the \$1,776 “warrior dividend” that President Donald Trump said he wants to go out to more than 1.45 million military and federal law enforcement personnel. The amount of money is meant to symbolically reflect the year of the Declaration of Inde-

pendence, 1776.

“The checks are already on the way,” Trump said Wednesday night. “Nobody deserves it more than our military.”

Trump did not say where the money would come from or exactly who would receive it.

The Coast Guard statement on Thursday did not initially specify a dollar amount, but a later statement from the service said the “special duty pay” would be \$2,000 “pre-tax.”

The Coast Guard said Thursday that the payments would be processed this month and would go to Coast Guard members in paygrades O-6 and below who are on active duty through Dec. 31.

Coast Guard members with the rank of captain and below would receive the bonus. Rear admirals and above, along with Coast Guard cadets, are not eligible.

Reserve members who have been on active duty for 31 or more consecutive days as of Dec. 31, would receive the bonus. The Coast Guard also said payments would not be paid to “service members not entitled to basic pay.”

One day after Trump took office in January, he dismissed Adm. Linda L. Fagan as commandant of the Coast Guard. Trump cited what he said was Fagan’s lack of emphasis on border security issues and an “excessive focus” on diversity, equity, and inclusion among the reasons for her dismissal. Fagan was also given three hours to vacate her official residence at Joint Base Anacostia Bolling in Washington, D.C.

Adm. Kevin Lunday, who was confirmed as commandant Thursday, has overseen a higher-profile role for the Coast Guard in drug and immigration interdiction off the U.S. coasts. Coast Guard law enforcement teams have been assigned to U.S. Navy vessels operating in the Pacific and Atlantic oceans near U.S. borders, and Coast Guard aircraft are frequently used to transport people detained by immigration authorities.

“The performance of our members — on the water, in the air, and at our shore units — is the very bedrock of our nation’s maritime security,” Adm. Tom Allan, the acting vice commandant, said in a statement Thursday.

Former service members indicted for scheme to steal, sell gear from base

BY BONNY MATEJOWSKY
The (Tacoma, Wash.) News Tribune

TACOMA, Wash. — Two former service members from Lacey, Wash., were indicted Wednesday for an alleged conspiracy to steal and sell thousands of dollars of military gear, the U.S. Attorney’s Office shared in a press release.

A grand jury formally charged Charles Ethan Fields, 27, and Levi Austin Frakes, 27, with conspiracy, four counts of government property theft, assault, robbery and attempted government property theft.

The looted property included night vision devices, armor, munitions and explosives such as flash bangs, smoke grenades and blasting caps. Some of these items are restricted and not authorized to be owned or stored in a private residence, the release read. The men allegedly sold the equipment online using false names.

The scheme stretches back to at least early 2023, when the men allegedly stole equipment from Joint Base Lewis-McChord and

brought it back to their Lacey home, the press release said.

The indictment alleges the men stole seven different times from the JBLM Ranger compound.

Fields and Frakes attempted to steal from a facility on the compound on June 1 of this year but were thwarted when an Army soldier discovered them, the release said.

The men attacked the serviceman, beating him with a hammer and brandishing a knife.

The pair then ran from the compound, dropping the equipment along the way.

Investigators traced the men to their home the next day and searched for evidence, finding stolen military equipment and \$24,000 in cash. The two men were arrested June 2 and have remained in custody since.

Fields and Frakes’s arraignment was scheduled to take place Monday. Assault and stealing government property are each punishable by up to 10 years in prison. Robbery is punishable by up to 15 years in prison.

PACIFIC



RYAN M. BREEDEN/Stars and Stripes

Marines of 3rd Intelligence Battalion and Kubasaki High School JROTC cadets deliver donated toys to children at the Kin Town Community Center, Okinawa, during a Merry Marine Toy Drive event, Saturday.

Merry Marines, cadets bring Christmas to Okinawa town

BY RYAN M. BREEDEN
Stars and Stripes

KIN TOWN, Okinawa — Santa Claus, with an assist from U.S. Marines and high school cadets, handed out plushies, dolls, Lego sets and other toys to Japanese children over the weekend at the local community center.

Approximately 80 children and their parents were invited by the Kin Town Social Welfare Office to the Merry Marine Toy Drive on Saturday with Marines of the 3rd Intelligence Battalion and Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps cadets from Kubasaki High School.

This year more than 2,400 toy donations were collected from across the island, with more than 200 given away at the Kin Town Community Center, Marine Corps Installations Pacific spokeswoman Sidney Sullivan said at the event.

Miniature cars, Barbie dolls, Pokémon plushies, sport balls,

stuffed animals and action figures were among the toys given away. A large toy fire truck stood apart.

The Kubasaki JROTC program at Camp Foster launched the toy drive in 2022 as Toys from Cadets.

The following year, the Marine Corps merged existing programs and expanded it across Okinawa as the Merry Marine Toy Drive, with toys collected by Marines and their families.

Lt. Col. Ben Howe, commander of 3rd Intelligence Battalion at Camp Hansen, in opening remarks expressed his appreciation for his command's participation in toy drives since 2014.

"This is a small way for us to show how grateful we are to be here on this beautiful island of Okinawa and for our friendship with the community," said Howe at the event. "I see the future as continuing our strong engagement with Kin and potentially branching out to other communities throughout Okinawa."

The event also featured games and activity stations, including holiday-themed coloring stations, a bowling lane, a soccer-scoring activity and a Velcro baseball scoring target.

Sgt. Andrew Campbell, of Traverse City, Mich., in a holiday sweater and elf ears, said he was happy to volunteer alongside 11 other Marines.

"I think it was a great time," he told Stars and Stripes at the event. "I think any time that you can give back to any kind of community in general is what we signed up for at the end of the day."

The JROTC cadets wrapped up the event with Christmas carols.

"We are a very active program. We're always doing community events, volunteering at different locations," said Charles Redden, a retired Marine colonel and JROTC senior Marine instructor. "We're just one of many; it's a good program and cause for the kids."

USFJ denies base access for chemicals testing

BY BRIAN McELHINEY
AND KEISHI KOJA
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — U.S. Forces Japan has denied Okinawa prefecture's requests to test for so-called "forever chemicals" at three U.S. military bases, citing insufficient evidence that the facilities are sources of contamination.

USFJ denied access to Kadena Air Base, Marine Corps Air Station Futenma and Marine Corps Camp Hansen to collect samples for testing, according to a news release Friday from Japan's Ministry of Defense. A request to USFJ to conduct an environmental survey of Futenma also was denied.

"PFAS in the environment is a shared concern associated not only with military operations but also civilian industrial activities throughout Japan including fire response, sewage treatment plants, solid waste landfills, and chemical plants regardless of nationality," USFJ spokeswoman Marine Corps Staff Sgt. Savannah Mesimer said Monday.

The prefecture has sought base access four times since 2016, when elevated levels of PFAS — per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances — were first reported nearby.

The prefecture's Environmental Protection Division has made island-wide PFAS surveys since 2024 and biannual surveys since 2017.

Results from the most recent survey in May found levels of PFAS in water higher than Japan's national standard of 50 parts per trillion at 22 spots near the two airfields and two sites near Hansen.

The division concluded that contamination near Kadena and Futenma is "highly likely to be sourced from both bases."

USFJ may reconsider if the prefecture provides more evidence that U.S. military installations are

contamination sources, according to the ministry. That "represents a certain degree of progress," because of ongoing coordination with the U.S., Defense Minister Shinjiro Koizumi said Friday.

"We will continue to adhere to all relevant agreements, obligations, and procedures as good stewards of our installations and the environment through continued and close coordination with our Government of Japan counterparts as we work together towards sustainable solutions," Mesimer said Monday.

PFAS components PFOS and PFOA were commonly used in aqueous film-forming foam, a fire suppressant used by both U.S. and Japanese forces. USFJ last year said it had incinerated its remaining stockpiles of the foam.

Japan and the U.S. have no environmental standards for PFAS in soil, USFJ said.

A 2016 Marine Corps water quality survey found PFOS and PFOA at 7 parts per trillion at the inlet of Futenma's drainage channel and 6 parts per trillion at the outlet, indicating no contamination, according to USFJ in the ministry release. It cited the same survey in its refusal to conduct an environmental survey.

The prefecture stopped using the Hija and Dakujaku rivers that flow through Kadena as drinking water sources and can collect water from the airfield's drainage outlets without a permit, according to USFJ.

The command said the prefecture installed a water pipeline to supply neighboring Kin town, negating the need for sample collection on Hansen.

The prefecture has resumed water intake from the Hija river "when necessary to ensure sufficient water supply," Okinawa Gov. Denny Tamaki said in a statement Friday from the Environmental Protection Division.

Japanese driving instructor bruised in collision with Marine vehicle

BY BRIAN McELHINEY
AND KEISHI KOJA
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — A U.S. Marine Corps vehicle collided with an Okinawa driving school sedan on the Okinawa Expressway over the weekend, injuring the driving instructor, according to the Marines and police.

The crash occurred at 2:56 p.m.

Saturday in rainy conditions in Okinawa city, a spokesman with the Okinawa Prefectural Police said by phone Monday. The incident involved a Joint Light Tactical Vehicle and a four-door sedan, a second police spokesman said.

The car's driver, an 18-year-old driving school student, was uninjured, according to police. The 60-year-old instructor in the passen-

ger seat suffered a bruise on his right arm and was taken to a hospital in central Okinawa.

The JLTV driver, a 21-year-old Marine assigned to Camp Hansen, was uninjured, the first spokesman said.

A base model JLTV weighs about 7 tons, according to Oshkosh Defense, the vehicle maker. The average Japanese mid-size, four-

door sedan weighs an average 1.8 tons, according to carfromjapan.com.

First Lt. Heather Born, a spokeswoman for the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit at Hansen, Monday said that Japanese and U.S. military police responded to an accident involving a Marine Corps vehicle. The Marine Corps is cooperating with local author-

ities, Born said.

The JLTV entered the expressway at the Okinawa-Kita interchange toll booth and merged into the right lane toward the Kyoda interchange when it rear-ended the car, causing it to spin, the first spokesman said. The JLTV then struck the car's front, then collided with the guardrails and a light pole, he added.

MILITARY

Repairs: \$300M to be spent on major work across 6 bases

FROM PAGE 1

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth last month announced \$1.2 billion for barracks renovations across all service branches provided through the massive spending package signed into law earlier this year commonly referred to as the “One Big Beautiful Bill.”

The Navy will invest \$375 million into safety, comfort and cleanliness projects across the shore enterprise.

About \$75 million of that amount will support 95 prioritized projects across 50 installations and will meet the specific needs at each base.

This money will go toward kitchen updates, heating and cooling systems, new floors and new furniture, the Navy said.

The remaining \$300 million is flagged for major work at six bases:

■ **Naval Support Facility Indian Head in Maryland:** \$22 million toward the Marine Corps barracks for the Joint Chemical-Biological Incident Response Force will modernize barracks with structural, mechanical, electrical and fire suppression upgrades.

■ **Naval Air Station Oceana in Virginia:** \$91.8 million toward the Center for Naval Aviation Technical Training Student Housing for a



JESLIANNE TORRES/U.S. Marine Corps

U.S. Marine Corps Brig. Gen. Nick I. Brown and U.S. Navy Capt. Jeffrey Richer address barracks discrepancies during Operation Clean Sweep at Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, Calif., Oct. 21, 2024.

comprehensive renovation with roof replacement, HVAC, plumbing, electrical, fire system updates, mold remediation, cabinetry replacement, new flooring, closet upgrades and painting.

■ **Oceana Dam Neck Annex:** \$78.3 million toward Marine Corps Intelligence School Mardet Student Housing for a full restoration and modernization of HVAC,

plumbing, electrical system replacement, new flooring, closets, paint, updated bathrooms, new furniture and in-room refrigerators and microwaves.

■ **Joint Base Pearl Harbor Hickam:** \$30.3 million toward Building 1489 for repairs to plumbing, exterior, roofing, interior finishes, HVAC and electrical. Interior renovations include

upgrading kitchens, lounges, flooring, windows and shower areas.

■ **Joint Expeditionary Base Little Creek-Fort Story in Virginia:** \$13.5 million for Shields Hall will support major HVAC system work, dropped ceiling replacement and the installation of lockable access doors.

■ **Naval Base Kitsap in Washington:** \$12.1 million to Keppler Hall to repair damage from an August fire and sprinkler flooding, upgrade fire alarm system and interior restoration of flooring, new ceilings, updated bathrooms and electrical updates.

“This is not a one-time fix but a sustained commitment,” Gray said in the release. “We are dedicated to continuous improvement and ensuring our sailors have the quality housing they deserve throughout their careers.”

The Marine Corps said it will spend \$22 million across all installations to fund “self-help programs” and other minor repairs. Officials said this will empower commanders to act on local improvements.

Another \$55 million will purchase new barracks furniture and mattresses across all installations, and \$10 million will buy new door locks and a standardized barracks

access control system.

The Marine Corps also designated \$218 million for improvements and renovations of 16 barracks across six installations: Camp Lejeune, N.C., Camp Pendleton, Calif., Marine Corps Air Station New River, N.C., 29 Palms, Calif., Quantico, Va., and Camp Fuji in Japan.

Those renovations will cover HVAC repairs, mechanical repairs and work on major building systems.

The barracks task force also covers the Army and Air Force, though neither provided as granular a breakdown of the work to be done.

The Army will push \$50 million to local commanders for barracks improvements and another \$65 million to soldier self-help programs, the service said.

Another \$405 million will fund major renovations.

Officials said they are still inspecting barracks to find what work needs to be prioritized.

The Air Force will put \$41.5 million toward immediate dormitory fixes of door locks, sinks, exhaust fans, lights, toilets, HVAC components, mold remediation, roof, flooring and window repairs.

Another \$89 million will be used to help support larger projects.

Target: Experts express concern, skepticism over intelligence

FROM PAGE 1

“I can’t say I’ve been briefed on that type of system. But it’s not implausible,” he said. “If the reporting on the nuclear weapons system is accurate and that they’re willing to develop that and willing to go to that end, well it wouldn’t strike me as shocking that something just short of that, but equally damaging, is within their wheelhouse of development.”

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov didn’t respond to messages from the AP seeking comment.

Russia has previously called for United Nations efforts to stop the orbital deployment of weapons and President Vladimir Putin has said Moscow has no intention of deploying nuclear space weapons.

The intelligence findings were shown to the AP on condition that the services involved were not identified and the news organization was not able to independently verify the findings’ conclusions.

The U.S. Space Force didn’t respond to e-mailed questions.

The French military’s Space Command said in a statement to the AP that it could not comment on the findings but said, “We can inform you that Russia has, in recent years, been multiplying irresponsible, dangerous and even hostile actions in space.”

Russia views Starlink in partic-

ular as a grave threat, the findings indicate. The thousands of low-orbiting satellites have been pivotal for Ukraine’s survival against Russia’s full-scale invasion, now in its fourth year.

Starlink’s high-speed internet service is used by Ukrainian forces for battlefield communications, weapons targeting and other roles and by civilians and government officials where Russian strikes have affected communications.

Russian officials repeatedly have warned that commercial satellites serving Ukraine’s military could be legitimate targets.

This month, Russia said it has fielded a new ground-based missile system, the S-500, which is capable of hitting low-orbit targets.

Unlike a missile that Russia tested in 2021 to destroy a defunct Cold War-era satellite, the new weapon in development would target multiple Starlinks at once, with pellets possibly released by yet-to-be launched formations of small satellites, the intelligence findings say.

Canada’s Horner said it is hard to see how clouds of pellets could be corralled to only strike Starlink and that debris from such an attack could get “out of control in a hurry.”

“You blow up a box full of BBs,” he said. Doing that would “blanket

an entire orbital regime and take out every Starlink satellite and every other satellite that’s in a similar regime. And I think that’s the part that is incredibly troubling.”

The findings seen by the AP didn’t say when Russia might be capable of deploying such a system nor detail whether it has been tested or how far along research is believed to be.

The system is in active development and information about the timing of an expected deployment is too sensitive to share, according to an official familiar with the findings and other related intelligence that the AP did not see.

The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the non-public findings.

Such Russian research could be simply experimental, Samson said.

“I wouldn’t put it past some scientists ... to build out something like this because it’s an interesting thought-experiment and they think, you know, ‘Maybe at some point we can get our government to pay for it,’” she said.

Samson suggested the specter of a supposed new Russian threat may also be an effort to elicit an international response.

“Often times people pushing these ideas are doing it because they want the U.S. side to build

something like that or ... to justify increased spending on counter-space capabilities or using it for a more hawkish approach on Russia,” she said.

“I’m not saying that this is what’s happening with this,” Samson added. “But it has been known to happen that people take these crazy arguments and use them.”

The intelligence findings say the pellets would be so small — just millimeters across — that they would evade detection by ground- and space-based systems that scan for space objects, which could make it hard to pin blame for any attack on Moscow.

Clayton Swope, who specializes in space security and weaponry at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington, D.C.-based security and policy think tank, said if “the pellets are not trackable, that complicates things” but “people would figure it out.”

“If satellites start winking out with damage, I guess you could put two and two together,” he said.

Exactly how much destruction tiny pellets could do isn’t clear.

In November, a suspected impact by a small piece of debris was sufficient to damage a Chinese spacecraft that was intended to bring three astronauts back to the Earth.

“Most damage would probably be done to the solar panels because they’re probably the most fragile part” of satellites, Swope said. “That’d be enough, though, to damage a satellite and probably bring it offline.”

After such an attack, pellets and debris would over time fall back toward Earth, possibly damaging other orbiting systems on their way down, analysts say.

Starlink’s orbits are about 340 miles above the planet. China’s Tiangong space station and the International Space Station operate at lower orbits, “so both would face risks,” according to Swope.

The space chaos that such a weapon could cause might enable Moscow to threaten its adversaries without actually having to use it, Swope said.

“It definitely feels like a weapon of fear, looking for some kind of deterrence or something,” he said.

Samson said the drawbacks of an indiscriminate pellet-weapon could steer Russia off such a path.

“They’ve invested a huge amount of time and money and human power into being, you know, a space power,” she said.

Using such a weapon “would effectively cut off space for them as well,” Samson said. “I don’t know that they would be willing to give up that much.”

NATION

Greenland move spurs tension with Denmark

Associated Press

President Donald Trump on Sunday announced he is appointing Louisiana Gov. Jeff Landry to serve as the U.S. special envoy to Greenland, the vast, semi-autonomous territory of Denmark that Trump has said the U.S. needs to take over.

The leaders of Denmark and Greenland responded Monday, insisting that the United States won't take over Greenland and demanded respect for their territorial integrity after the announcement.

In announcing the appointment, Trump said, "Jeff understands how essential Greenland is to our National Security, and will strongly advance our Country's Interests for the Safety, Security, and Sur-

vival of our Allies, and indeed, the World."



Landry

military force to take control of the mineral-rich, strategically located Arctic island.

On Monday, Denmark's foreign minister told Danish broadcasters that he would summon the U.S. ambassador to his ministry.

"We have said it before. Now, we say it again. National borders

Trump during his presidential transition and in the early months of his return to the White House repeatedly called for U.S. jurisdiction over Greenland, and has not ruled out

and the sovereignty of states are rooted in international law," Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen and her Greenlandic counterpart, Jens-Frederik Nielsen, said in a joint statement. "They are fundamental principles. You cannot annex another country. Not even with an argument about international security."

"Greenland belongs to the Greenlanders and the U.S. shall not take over Greenland," they added in the statement from Frederiksen's office. "We expect respect for our joint territorial integrity."

The issue had drifted out of the headlines in recent months, but in August, Danish officials summoned the U.S. ambassador following a report that at least three

people with connections to Trump had carried out covert influence operations in Greenland. Earlier this year, Vice President JD Vance visited a U.S. military base on the island and accused Denmark of underinvesting there.

Trump has said that Greenland is crucial for U.S. security and hasn't ruled out taking the island by military force, even though Denmark is a NATO ally of the U.S.

Landry took office as governor in January 2024. His term ends in January 2028.

"It's an honor to serve you in this volunteer position to make Greenland a part of the U.S.," Landry wrote in a posting on X in which he thanked Trump for the appointment. He added, "This in

no way affects my position as Governor of Louisiana!"

The Trump administration did not offer any warning ahead of the announcement, according to a Danish government official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations.

Denmark and Greenland have said the island is not for sale and condemned reports of the U.S. gathering intelligence there. The U.S. push for Greenland is also opposed by Russia and much of Europe.

The Danish Defense Intelligence Service said in a report earlier this month that the United States is using its economic power to "assert its will" and threaten military force against friend and foe alike.

Vance refuses to set red lines over bigotry as conservatives feud

By JONATHAN J. COOPER AND SEJAL GOVINDARAO
Associated Press

PHOENIX — Vice President JD Vance told the Turning Point USA's annual convention Sunday the conservative movement should be open to everyone as long as they "love America."

After a long weekend of debates about whether the movement should exclude figures such as bigoted podcaster Nick Fuentes, Vance came down firmly against "purity tests."

"I didn't bring a list of conservatives to denounce or to de-platform," Vance said during the convention's closing speech.

Turning Point leader Erika Kirk, who took the helm after the assassination of her husband, Charlie Kirk, has endorsed Vance as a potential successor to President Donald Trump, a helpful nod from an influential group with an army of volunteers.

But the tension on display at the four-day gathering foreshadowed the treacherous political waters that Vance, or anyone else who seeks the next Republican presidential nomination, will need to navigate in the coming years. Top voices in the "Make America Great Again" movement are jockeying for influence as Republicans begin considering a future without Trump, and there is no clear path to holding his coalition together.

The Republican Party's identity has been intertwined with Trump for a decade, but he's constitutionally ineligible to run for reelection despite his musings about serving a third term. Tucker Carlson said

people are wondering, "who gets the machinery when the president exits the scene?"

So far, it looks like settling that question will come with a lot of fighting among conservatives. The Turning Point conference featured arguments about antisemitism, Israel and environmental regulations, not to mention rivalries between leading commentators.

Ben Shapiro, co-founder of the conservative media outlet Daily Wire, used his speech on the conference's opening night to denounce "charlatans who claim to speak in the name of principle but actually traffic in conspiracism and dishonesty."

"These people are frauds and they are grifters and they do not deserve your time," Shapiro said. He specifically called out Carlson for hosting Fuentes for a friendly interview on his podcast.

Carlson brushed off the criticism when he took the stage barely an hour later, and he said the idea of a Republican "civil war" was "totally fake."

"There are people who are mad at JD Vance, and they're stirring up a lot of this in order to make sure he doesn't get the nomination," he said. Carlson described Vance as "the one person" who subscribes to the "core idea of the Trump coalition," which Carlson said was "America first."

Turning Point spokesperson Andrew Kolvet framed the discord as a healthy debate about the future of the movement, an uncomfortable but necessary process of finding consensus.

"We're not hive-minded com-



JON CHERRY/AP

Vice President JD Vance speaks during Turning Point USA's AmericaFest 2025 Sunday in Phoenix.

mies," he wrote on social media. "Let it play out."

Vance acknowledged the controversies that dominated the Turning Point conference, but he did not define any boundaries for the conservative movement besides patriotism.

"We don't care if you're white or black, rich or poor, young or old, rural or urban, controversial or a little bit boring, or somewhere in between," he said.

Vance didn't name anyone, but his comments came in the midst of an increasingly contentious debate over whether the right should give a platform to commentators espousing antisemitic views, particularly Fuentes, whose followers see themselves as working to preserve America's white, Christian identity. Fuentes has a growing audience, as does top-rated podcaster Candace Owens, who routinely shares antisemitic conspiracy theories.

"We have far more important

work to do than canceling each other," he said.

Vance ticked off what he said were the accomplishments of the administration as it approaches the one-year mark, noting its efforts at the border and on the economy. He emphasized efforts to end diversity, equity and inclusion policies, drawing applause by saying they had been relegated to the "dustbin of history."

"In the United States of America, you don't have to apologize for being white anymore," he said.

Vance also said the U.S. "always will be a Christian nation," adding that "Christianity is America's creed, the shared moral language from the Revolution to the Civil War and beyond."

Those comments resonated with Isaiah White-Diller, an 18 year-old from Yuma, Ariz., who said he would support Vance if he runs for president.

"I have my right to be Christian here, I have my right to say what-

ever I want," White-Diller said.

Vance hasn't disclosed his future plans, but Erika Kirk said Thursday that Turning Point wanted Vance "elected for 48 in the most resounding way possible." The next president will be the 48th in U.S. history.

Turning Point is a major force on the right, with a nationwide volunteer network that can be especially helpful in early primary states, when candidates rely on grassroots energy to build momentum. In a surprise appearance, rapper Nicki Minaj spoke effusively about Trump and Vance.

Vance was close with Charlie Kirk, and they supported each other over the years. After Kirk's assassination on a college campus in Utah, the vice president flew out on Air Force Two to collect Kirk's remains and bring them home to Arizona. The vice president helped uniformed service members carry the casket to the plane.



SOPHIE BATES/AP

A group of water infrastructure workers and two men in the paper mill industry sit together for lunch at The Dinner Bell, in McComb, Miss., on Dec. 11. The restaurant consists of just four tables: Large and circular, they seat upward of 15 people and transform groups of people from perfect strangers to lifelong friends.

Giant lazy Susans bring people together at Miss. restaurant

Associated Press

MCCOMB, Miss. — Over the course of a steaming-hot Southern lunch, served family-style on a giant lazy Susan, restaurant owner Andre Davis has watched people go from perfect strangers to lifelong friends. His restaurant, The Dinner Bell in McComb, Miss., consists of just four tables. Large and circular, they seat upward of 15 people. In the center of each is a lazy Susan dotted with heaping platters of food, spinning back and forth as customers pile up their plates. On any given day, anyone could be sitting around the table. Davis’ customer base ranges from European tourists to locals. The tables have hosted water treatment plant workers, church groups and once, according to Davis, British actor Hugh Bonneville. “We’ve had people sitting together that had nothing in common but the table they were sitting at,” Davis said. For customers, the rotating tables provide a unique opportunity to meet new people, hear different perspectives and bond over a shared enjoyment of classic Southern food and the restaurant’s famed fried eggplant. “We’ve met doctors, lawyers, teachers,” said Wayne Dyson, a regular customer. “And find out that

most people are all good people.” “Especially if they’re eating,” he added. Dyson and his wife have met countless people from all over the country in the 40 years they have been frequenting the restaurant. Over lunch earlier this month, the couple quickly bonded with a group of strangers, laughing like they had known each other for years. Justin Monistere and his family stopped for lunch to celebrate his sister’s graduation from nursing school. By the time he left, he was referring to the Dysons as “mom” and “pop.” “Today in time we don’t talk as people. It’s either through a message or phone,” he said, adding this is the first meal he has had since he was a kid where no one pulled out a cellphone. “I think that’s a great thing that they’re doing here.” The unique dining style, which is also associated with Chinese restaurants, dates back to the early 20th century in Mississippi. The family-style restaurants evolved along railroad tracks to more easily serve large numbers of people coming on and off trains, according to Charles Morgan, who owns the now-closed Revolving Tables Restaurant in Mendenhall. The restaurant has been in Morgan’s family since it opened in 1915.

He grew up listening to people talk politics and college football around an 18-seater table. Both Morgan and Davis have watched similar restaurants close over the years, but a smattering remain across parts of the country. “You sure don’t see too many of those anymore,” said Morgan, whose own restaurant closed when his father retired in 2001. He and his sister hope to reopen. This type of dining, Davis said, isn’t for everyone. Some people retreat into their social shells, while others blossom. Some days are quiet, with just a few regulars gathered around the table swapping farming tips. Other times, the restaurant is raucous as tour groups and families chatter with the courageous folks willing to spin the roulette wheel on who they would be sitting with that afternoon. Davis said he has seen people from all walks of life conversing. Some form friendships, others a simple sense of respect. One couple, a widower and widow, met at the restaurant and later got married. “It’s been hilarious, some of the people that have ended up sitting beside each other,” Davis said. “You couldn’t do it on purpose, you couldn’t plan it, and you couldn’t make it up.”

US plans to defer to doctors on most childhood vaccines

BY LENA H. SUN
AND RACHEL ROUBEIN
The Washington Post

The Trump administration plans to shift the federal government away from directly recommending most vaccines for children and suggest they receive fewer shots to more closely align with Denmark’s immunization model, according to two people familiar with the matter. Federal health officials are weighing vaccine guidance that would encourage parents to talk to a doctor to make decisions for most shots, according to the people, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to describe internal deliberations. This approach would mark a fundamental shift in the U.S. health care system, which generally relies on federal health agencies to guide how patients are protected against disease. It was not immediately clear which shots would no longer be recommended. The plans are still in flux, the people said, but broadly align with President Donald Trump’s directive earlier this month to consider recommending fewer shots, referring to the United States as an “outlier” among developed countries. He said any changes to the country’s vaccine schedule should continue to preserve access to currently available shots. Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. has been critical of the childhood vaccine schedule for years and has called for additional scrutiny, even though he told senators during his confirmation hearings that he supports the schedule. Andrew Nixon, a spokesperson for the Department of Health and Human Services, said of the planned revisions to vaccine recommendations: “Unless you hear it from HHS directly, this is pure speculation.” The potential shift to more closely align with Denmark’s schedule was first reported by CNN. The current U.S. schedule calls for vaccinations to protect against 18 infectious diseases, including COVID-19, according to a Food and

Drug Administration presentation in December, compared with calls for vaccinations to protect against 10 infectious diseases in Denmark. Denmark does not recommend vaccinating children for influenza, respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) and chicken pox, among other common pathogens. Public health experts say comparisons to Denmark are misleading, noting the countries differ sharply in population, health systems and disease burden. They argue that what works in Denmark’s small, universal health care system does not easily translate to the far larger and more diverse U.S. population with uneven access to quality care. “You don’t just superimpose policies from other countries without context onto the United States,” said Demetre Daskalakis, who oversaw the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s center for respiratory diseases and immunization before he resigned from the agency in August. “This is not gold standard science.” Unlike Denmark, the U.S. is planning a more limited approach for recommending vaccines to children known as shared clinical decision-making, which has not been reported. This means people should consult a doctor, pharmacist or other medical professional before getting a shot, and insurers would still be required to pay for them. It’s not clear how broad the shift would be and when it would happen. This type of recommendation is usually made when there is real uncertainty about the benefits and risks, said David Higgins, an assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus. By applying it broadly to many vaccines that are now routinely recommended, it creates the false impression that experts are divided on the best way to protect health, he said. “I have never been more concerned about the future of vaccines and children’s health than I am now,” Higgins said.

Don’t wear sequins, glitter or large chains to airport, TSA warns

BY LEADA GORE
al.com

Ugly Christmas sweaters — complete with ornaments, tinsel and all things shiny — have become a staple of the holiday season. But just because you like your over-the-top attire or bright glit-

tery outfit doesn’t mean you should wear it when traveling, the Transportation Security Administration warned. In a social media message, TSA asked people to think twice about wearing some things when they come to the airport.

“The body scanners don’t love sparkles,” TSA posted. “We don’t want to dull your holiday shine but we don’t recommend wearing your sparkly holiday sweater to the airport.” The post brought out a host of comments, including one person

who asked if the recommendation covered sparkles and sequins. “Both,” TSA responded. Sequins, glitter and even metallic threads on clothing can trigger alarms on TSA’s body scanners, all but guaranteeing a hand pat-down or extra screenings.

In addition to sparkles and sequins, other troublesome attire can be large chains, belts with large buckles, underwire bras and even wet or sweat-stained clothing. Moisture from those items can alter the density of the clothing, causing scanners to alarm.

NATION



VALERIE PLESCH/For The Washington Post

Visitors tour the Smithsonian's "America's Presidents" exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery in June.

White House threatens funds for Smithsonian over content review

The Washington Post

The Trump administration escalated pressure on the Smithsonian last week, threatening to withhold federal funds if it does not submit extensive documentation for a sweeping content review. President Donald Trump earlier this year set out to purge what he called "improper ideology" from the nation's most prestigious museum system, efforts that are expected to intensify as his administration tries to shape the country's 250th anniversary celebrations next year.

In a staff email obtained by The Washington Post, sent Friday evening after the funding threat, Smithsonian Secretary Lonnie G. Bunch III said the Smithsonian had sent information to the White House in September and intended to submit more that day. He asserted that "all content, programming, and curatorial decisions are made by the Smithsonian."

The previous day, Domestic Policy Council director Vince Haley and White House budget director Russell Vought wrote to Bunch that the Smithsonian's initial submissions "fell far short of what was requested." Among the solicited documents are current exhibition descriptions, comprehensive America 250 programming files, draft plans for upcoming shows and internal guidelines used in exhibition development. The White House

gave the Smithsonian until Jan. 13 to meet the request.

"Funds apportioned for the Smithsonian Institution are only available for use in a manner consistent with Executive Order 14253 'Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History,' and the fulfillment of the requests set forth in our Aug. 12, 2025 letter," Haley and Vought wrote. The letter specifically referenced the Museum of American History, the Museum of Natural History, the Air and Space Museum, the Museum of African American History and Culture, the Museum of the American Indian, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Museum of African Art and the National Portrait Gallery.

Responding to the Trump administration, Bunch wrote in a letter Friday that was also reviewed by The Post, that the institution remains "committed to sharing information and data" and asked them to "please understand that this work has been time consuming, involving many staff and departments throughout the Smithsonian."

Bunch wrote that the government shutdown delayed the requested work and that he "would be pleased to meet and share an update on our internal efforts to review and update our content."

It was not immediately clear how much money the White House

might try to withhold, from which parts of the Smithsonian or on what authority. The institution is about 62% federally funded by a combination of congressional appropriation, federal grants and contracts.

An earlier letter, in August, called for an aggressive review of eight museums to ensure they align with the president's directive to "celebrate American exceptionalism" and asked the Smithsonian to submit all requested materials within 75 days and "begin implementing content corrections" within 120.

Amid scrutiny from Trump, the institution had already planned its own content review, with the Smithsonian's Board of Regents instructing Bunch in June "to ensure unbiased content" across the institution and report back on "any needed personnel changes."

The Smithsonian declined to comment on the latest development. In Friday's email to staff, Bunch told staff that the institution had provided the White House with information in September about their public exhibitions and displays, policies and procedures, and had planned to send more documents related to their mission, organization, and public exhibitions and displays. As they collect documents, he said they would "continue to evaluate the scope of our response."

Official defends partial release of Epstein files

BY AAMER MADHANI
AND ADRIANA GOMEZ LICON
Associated Press

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — Deputy Attorney General Todd Blanche on Sunday defended the Justice Department's decision to release just a fraction of the Jeffrey Epstein files by the congressionally mandated deadline as necessary to protect survivors of sexual abuse by the disgraced financier.

Blanche pledged that the Trump administration eventually would meet its obligation required by law. But he stressed that the department was obligated to act with caution as it goes about making public thousands of documents that can include sensitive information.

Friday's partial release of the Epstein files has led to a new crush of criticism from Democrats who have accused the Republican administration of trying to hide information.

Blanche called that pushback disingenuous as President Donald Trump's administration continues to struggle with calls for greater transparency, including from members of his political base, about the government's investigations into Epstein, who once counted Trump as well as several political leaders and business titans among his peers.

"The reason why we are still reviewing documents and still continuing our process is simply that to protect victims," Blanche told NBC's "Meet the Press." "So the same individuals that are out there complaining about the lack of documents that were produced on Friday are the same individuals who apparently don't want us to protect victims."

Blanche's comments were the most extensive by the administration since the file dump, which included photographs, interview transcripts, call logs, court records

and other documents. But some of the most consequential records expected about Epstein were nowhere to be found, such as FBI interviews with survivors and internal Justice Department memos examining charging decisions. Those records could help explain how investigators viewed the case and why Epstein was allowed in 2008 to plead guilty to a relatively minor state-level prostitution charge.

Trump, who was friends with Epstein for years before the two had a falling-out, tried for months to keep the records sealed. Though Trump has not been accused of wrongdoing in connection with Epstein, he has argued there is nothing to see in the files and that the public should focus on other issues.

Federal prosecutors in New York brought sex trafficking charges against Epstein in 2019, but he killed himself in jail after his arrest.

But Democratic lawmakers on Sunday hammered Trump and the Justice Department for a partial release.

Rep. Jamie Raskin, D-Md., argued that the Justice Department is obstructing the implementation of the law mandating the release of the documents not because it wants to protect the Epstein victims.

"It's all about covering up things that, for whatever reason, Donald Trump doesn't want to go public, either about himself, other members of his family, friends, Jeffrey Epstein, or just the social, business, cultural network that he was involved in for at least a decade, if not longer," he said on CNN's "State of the Union."

Blanche also defended the department's decision to remove several files related to the case from its public webpage, including a photograph showing Trump, less than a day after they were posted.

Nearly 30 career diplomats removed from ambassadorial positions

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Trump administration is recalling nearly 30 career diplomats from ambassadorial and other senior embassy posts as it moves to reshape the U.S. diplomatic posture abroad with personnel deemed fully supportive of President Donald Trump's "America First" priorities.

ties.

The chiefs of mission in at least 29 countries were informed last week that their tenures would end in January, according to two State Department officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal personnel moves.

All of them had taken up their posts in the Biden administration

but had survived an initial purge in the early months of Trump's second term that targeted mainly political appointees. That changed on Wednesday when they began to receive notices from officials in Washington about their imminent departures.

Ambassadors serve at the pleasure of the president although

they typically remain at their posts for three to four years. Those affected by the shake-up are not losing their foreign service jobs but will be returning to Washington for other assignments should they wish to take them, the officials said.

The State Department declined to comment on specific numbers

or ambassadors affected, but defended the changes, calling them "a standard process in any administration." It noted that an ambassador is "a personal representative of the president and it is the president's right to ensure that he has individuals in these countries who advance the America First agenda."

Risky rite of passage

Combat training for police recruits leaves trail of deaths and injuries

By RYAN J. FOLEY
Associated Press

Heather Sterling stepped into the ring at the Texas Game Warden Training Center, ready to face an ambush by instructors acting as violent assailants.

The four-on-one drill is a rite of passage for those training to be game wardens, sworn officers who enforce state conservation laws. Nationwide, thousands of local and state police recruits are allowed into the profession only after passing similar drills — simulated fights for their lives.

The barrage of force against Sterling came rapidly, video obtained by The Associated Press shows. A surprise push from behind threw her to the floor. A right-handed punch to the back of the head knocked her down. Within two minutes, she was struck at least seven times in the head, the last blow knocking off her wrestling helmet. “Protect yourself!” an instructor yelled.

Sterling completed the drill but suffered a concussion. A dozen of her classmates — a third in all — were injured that day as they were repeatedly punched, tackled on a gym floor and thrown against padded walls, records show.

While the drill was physically punishing, their experience was not unique. Since 2005, similar drills at law enforcement academies nationwide have been linked to at least a dozen deaths and hundreds of injuries, some resulting in disability, an AP investigation has found.

The drills — frequently referred to as RedMan training for the brand and color of protective gear worn by participants — are intended to teach law enforcement recruits how to defend themselves against combative suspects. They’re among the most challenging tests at police academies. Law enforcement experts say that when properly designed and supervised, they teach new officers critical skills for handling high-stress situations.

But critics say they can put recruits at risk of physical and mental abuse that runs some promising officers out of the profession. Academies have wide latitude in running such exercises, given a lack of national standards governing police training.

Sterling quit the academy after her drill. She’s now speaking out, hoping to spark change in training practices nationwide.

“I’m worried that someone is going to get killed,” said Sterling, who’d previously worked as a senior game warden and defensive tactics instructor in Wyoming. “This is a poorly disguised assault.”

An investigation by the agency that regulates law enforcement training found no wrongdoing in how the drill was conducted. An academy official told investigators the goal was to “overwhelm the cadet physically and mentally to force them to think while physically exhausted.”

An expert who reviewed the case told AP injuries happen during volatile training environments nationwide, but the Texas drill stood out for its design — recruits could not use force to defend themselves against the onslaught of assailants. He said the number of injuries was concerning.

“To teach cadets how and when to defend themselves, only to put them in a doomsday scenario with the instruction that they’re not allowed to fight back, does not match any training curriculum I’ve seen,” said David Jude, a retired Kentucky State Police



In this still image from video, Heather Sterling is hit in the head by one of her instructors, who is acting as a violent assailant, during a four-on-one training drill, last year at the Texas Game Warden Training Center in Hamilton, Texas.



Heather Sterling poses for a portrait during a hike near Daniel, Wyo., in August.

academy commander.

In October 2024, Sterling started the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department’s eight-month academy in rural central Texas, which boasts of producing “the best-trained conservation officers in the country.”

Game wardens — called conservation officers or wildlife troopers in some states — enforce hunting and fishing laws. They carry firearms, have arrest powers, are often among the first to respond to emergencies and rescue missions.

Sterling said she loved serving as a game warden for nearly five years in Wyoming, where she sometimes shooed moose and mountain lions away from towns. Patrolling without backup, she said, she had some “very tense conversations” with suspects and had to restrain some in handcuffs.

She said almost everyone she encountered during hunting season was armed and potentially dangerous, but she prided herself on responding alertly and calmly.

Sterling applied in Texas to live closer to family, hoping for a similar law-enforcement role in her home state.

The academy scheduled the four-on-one drill for Dec. 13, 2024, after five weeks of arrest and control training.

Instructors told cadets they couldn’t defend themselves and were only to punch and kick a shield held by instructors, Sterling recalled. They discussed how some cadets had been seriously injured and terminated from previous academies for performing poorly.

Sterling told AP she was confused by the drill’s purpose. She’d never been ambushed by one person, let alone four. If that happened, she’d be able to use a firearm or other force to defend herself. As an instructor, she said, she would have never approved such a scenario or allowed punches to the head and neck.

A female classmate who had previously worked as a police officer resigned rather than participate. She later told investigators she saw the drill as inappropriate and part of an academy culture of unprofessional training and hazing.

But Sterling felt she had no choice if she wanted to stay in her profession. She completed a cardio exercise, and the drill began.

Academies have discretion to design training within state guidelines, and AP found the drills take many forms at local police, county sheriff and state departments. They’re sometimes called “combat training,” “Fight Day” or “stress reaction training.”

Recruits like Sterling must ward off several assailants at once. Others fight a series of instructors, one after another. Some academies intentionally use larger, more skilled instructors. In Kentucky, one scenario requires fighting a combative suspect in a pool.

The stated goals are generally the same: to use skills learned in the academy to fend off or subdue assailants and to never give up.

Recruits and instructors wear protective gear to cushion their heads from blows. But there are no uniform safety guidelines, including whether academies must have medical personnel on site.

Lawyers for some Black and female former trainees have alleged that instructors targeted their clients with excessive force to try to run them out of the profession. Several of the deaths have been of Black men hoping to join disproportionately white police forces.

Amid the deaths and criticism, experts are encouraging academy directors to re-

tire or modify any problematic drills.

The drills “can quickly devolve into abusive rites of passage” without appropriate focus and oversight, said Brian Baxter, who oversaw training at the Texas Department of Public Safety and now leads a group that studies the use of force. Some instructors want to win rather than allow recruits to practice their skills, he added.

“The idea that we’re just punching each other to see who’s toughest ... that’s when it becomes inappropriate,” said Baxter, whose former agency overhauled its practices after a trooper died in 2005 from getting hit several times in the head. “There needs to be a problem that’s being solved by this training. And that problem needs to be directly related to public service.”

For Sterling, the drill came to an end when she simulated holding her assailants at gunpoint and put them in handcuffs.

Later that day, she had a pounding headache. Her knee swelled, and she’d skinned her elbow on the floor.

At least 13 of 37 cadets reported injuries: concussion symptoms; a fractured wrist; a torn MCL; sprained wrists and knees; a bruised nose, records show.

Two recruits needed surgery. Some were told the injuries were due to their lack of preparation and poor technique, and had to redo the drill.

Sterling said she wasn’t offered medical care. She recalled vomiting while driving herself for emergency treatment. A doctor found she suffered a concussion that resulted from an assault, a medical record provided by Sterling shows.

Sterling had passed the drill, but turned in her resignation.

“I have a very high sense of what is right and what is wrong,” she told AP. “I did not want to be part of what was happening at the academy anymore.”

Nationwide, deaths and injuries have been blamed on a mix of trauma from punches and other force, overexertion, heat stroke, dehydration, and organ failure.

Alarmed by the injuries to Sterling and others, a state lawmaker’s office contacted the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement to seek an investigation.

After reviewing videos, investigating the injuries, and interviewing instructors and some recruits, the investigation found the drill was conducted in a “control and organized manner, with safety measures in place and training objectives clearly communicated.” The videos did not show instructors acting overly aggressive to Sterling, or any other “actions that were inappropriate or inconsistent with the established training guidelines,” it found.

“While multiple cadets sustained minor to moderate injuries during the drill, the majority recovered without extended medical consequences or changes to their training status,” the report said.

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department declined to comment and refused to release records, citing the potential for litigation.

Sterling, who has returned to Wyoming and still works in law enforcement, was outraged by the state’s defense of the drill, which she compared to a gang initiation ritual.

“New members are physically beaten down by the gang membership,” she said, “which now considers you as its property.”

NATION

Mourners offer their 2 cents on penny's fate

Tongue-in-cheek DC funeral for coin draws fans, Lincoln impersonators

By JUAN BENN JR.
The Washington Post

The mourners had taken their seats. Many were dressed in black. Others wore veils and large hoop skirts, reminiscent of Victorian-era fashion.

When the clock struck 1:01 p.m. (a time, organizers said, representing the one-cent coin that costs nearly four cents to make), a brass trio started playing “Amazing Grace.”

“Make way for the Lincolns,” a woman announced, as six men wearing top hats and long black coats carried a white casket through the crowd.

Who, or what exactly, was being grieved that afternoon?

The penny.

Hundreds gathered at the base of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington on Saturday afternoon to mark the end of an era for the penny, after the U.S. Mint pressed the final coins last month.

President Donald Trump had called for the Treasury Department to stop making pennies in a Truth Social post in February, calling it a “wasteful” expense. Ending production, the Treasury said, would save the federal government \$56 million per year. The final U.S. cents — 232 sets of three pennies — were sold at an auction earlier this month, raking in a whopping sum of \$16.76 million.

The tongue-in-cheek funeral was hosted by Ramp, an expense management platform that helps companies “automate inefficient spending,” said Amber Joy Layne, a creative producer for the business.

Jarell Mique, a co-producer and field producer for the event, said he was hired to “create a silly moment.” He gathered actors and comedians from D.C., New York City, Utah, Texas and North Carolina.

One by one, they gave remarks at the event, including interpretations of a jealous Mary Todd Lincoln, a pompous George Washington and a frightened Thomas Jefferson, who was scared that the nickel with his face on it might be the next to get axed.

A Ramp employee who said he is Abraham Lincoln’s second cousin, six times removed, offered words of comfort to the grieving crowd.

During her speech, the supposed Mary Todd Lincoln asked the audience a question.

“Find a penny, pick it up and all day you’ll have good luck. Who here has said this phrase before?” she asked. Many raised their hands.

“The penny poured out all its



MARVIN JOSEPH/The Washington Post

Mariliette A. Cruz, 9, wears a top hat honoring former President Abraham Lincoln at the event.



JULIA DEMAREE NIKHINSON/AP

People gather to throw pennies into a casket during a mock funeral for the penny, which was discontinued earlier this year, on Saturday, in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington.



JULIA DEMAREE NIKHINSON/AP

Men dressed as Lincoln carry a casket down the steps in front of the Lincoln Memorial during the mock funeral for the penny. About 300 billion pennies remain in circulation, the Treasury estimates.

good luck for us and saved none for itself. If only the penny could have picked up another penny for good luck. A penny for a penny.”

Then Abraham Lincoln himself — or the cosplayer and impersonator Alan Edwards, who goes by the handle @honestbabelincoln online — stepped up to the podium.

“Abe,” the crowd chanted.

“You all are pretty as a penny,” he responded.

Despite the sniffles in the crowd, the coin is unlikely to disappear anytime soon. About 300 billion pennies remain in circulation, the Treasury estimates. (Though many of them are likely stuck in couch cushions, piggy banks and car cupholders.)

It would take an act of Congress to officially end the coin’s use as American tender, but the U.S. could follow in Canada’s footsteps. The country stopped mak-

“You all are pretty as a penny.”

Alan Edwards

Abraham Lincoln cosplayer and impersonator, addressing the crowd

ing its pennies in 2012 and pulled most of them from circulation in 2013. However, Canadians can still use the coins if they happen to find some stashed away.

Now that U.S. pennies are no longer being made, retailers are expected to round prices to the closest five-cent mark, but experts say consumers are just as likely to gain a few cents at checkout as they are to lose them.

The funeral also featured a guest book, a glass bowl with water where attendees could throw in pennies to make a wish, and a penny press branded to mark the



MARVIN JOSEPH/The Washington Post

Mourners remember the penny. The event also featured a guest book, a glass bowl with water where attendees could throw in pennies to make a wish, and a penny press branded to mark the occasion.

occasion.

At one point, an announcer wanted to know who had the oldest penny. The winner, he said, would get a \$75 gift card from Ramp.

Two men held up their coins, both from 1904 and five years before Lincoln’s face was added to the coin, making it the first to feature a real person.

The winner was decided with a coin toss.

Anna Kate Spotts, a 29-year-old speech pathologist, traveled from Baltimore to pay her respects.

“I think it’s very special to be able to take a moment of my life to celebrate, you know, something that has lasted through generations,” said Spotts, a black lace veil covering her face.

Her grandmother’s gold brooch held together a black shawl covered in velvet flowers. The copper-tinted gem in the center of the

brooch, she said, “reminds me of a penny.”

Caroline Warren, 26, stood on the lower steps of the memorial, holding a large cardboard penny with a hole in the middle for her face. She’s been collecting pennies since childhood, and her mother keeps a five-gallon jar full of them at home, she said.

She’s devastated that the penny is no longer being minted.

“I don’t know how I’ll ever get over it,” Warren said.

At the end of his speech, Edwards stood before the memorial named after his look-alike and sighed.

“So farewell to the poor penny,” he said, telling the coin that he wished it could throw itself “in a wishing well and ask for a longer life.”

As guests left, they bid their goodbyes and tossed pennies into the casket.

MILITARY

Troops' tree brought Christmas cheer to post-war Berlin

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

Staff Sgt. Carroll "Bud" Kelsh wasn't one of the lucky ones who made it home for Christmas following the end of World War II in 1945.

After spending three months recovering in French and English hospitals from wounds he sustained during the Battle of the Bulge, the wireman from the 78th Infantry Signal Company found himself returned to duty in bombed-out Berlin.

Kelsh and soldiers from his unit scavenged copper wire and found some light bulbs. They strung them around a 35-foot-tall evergreen miraculously left standing on the famed Unter den Linden, a boulevard whose name refers to a type of tree.

He later told his family that the tree was a unifying symbol that brought together German citizens and the occupying U.S. soldiers.

Eighty years after the lights were plugged into a humming Army generator, the spirit of what has been described as the "greatest celebration in American history" endures.

"I think it's a reminder that we as an American people can be unified," Kelsh's son, Bruce Kelsh, said recently from his Oregon home. "I think it's also a reminder of when America was seen after the war as kind and generous and forgiving, and that's very much in the spirit of Christmas."

The U.S. declaration of war on



An soldier poses for a photograph after placing the star atop a makeshift Christmas tree in Berlin ahead of Dec. 25, 1945.

Germany came on Dec. 11, 1941, four days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on Dec. 7. The attack prompted U.S. entry into WWII, and American forces were deployed to the Pacific and European theaters.

The first action Kelsh saw was in the Battle of the Bulge, a last-gasp German offensive to rupture the Allied lines in December 1944 and January 1945, he said during an oral history interview with the Fargo, N.D., Air Museum in 2007.

Kelsh was hit in the chest with shrapnel from a large artillery round and knocked unconscious while laying wire on the German side of the Rhine River. He received a Purple Heart for his injuries.

The surrender of Germany on May 8, 1945, happened while he was in the hospital. On Sept. 2, the war in the Pacific came to a close weeks after the atomic bombings of the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Even before Japan's surrender, there was a strong public outcry to bring back the millions of troops overseas in time for Christmas, using the slogan "Home Alive By '45," according to the website of National World War II Museum in New Orleans.

As a result, the Army and Navy launched Operation Santa Claus, an effort to process military discharges in record time. Operation Magic Carpet transported an average of 22,000 Americans home

per day for a year.

Soldiers and sailors streamed stateside using any available means to have the long-anticipated opportunity to lock loved ones in warm yuletide embraces.

December 1945 was the busiest month of Magic Carpet, with nearly 700,000 service members being returned, the museum website states.

The celebration at the White House and in New York City's Rockefeller Center promised to be the biggest in years, author Matthew Litt wrote in his book "Christmas 1945: The Story of the Greatest Celebration in American History."

Such exhaustive planning stood in contrast to the makeshift merri-

ment that U.S. troops like Kelsh had to devise.

World War II had reduced much of the Continent to rubble. In Berlin, 600,000 apartments were destroyed and only 2.8 million of the city's original 4.3 million inhabitants remained, the city website states.

"We didn't have the light bulb sockets, but we found a place in Berlin," he told his interviewers in 2007, a glint in his eye. "We wired these things all together in our barracks."

As a memento, he brought home a solitary photo of a soldier on a ladder after placing the star on the Tannenbaum's top.

"I think it was the first Christmas tree in Berlin after the war was over," Kelsh said in the oral history interview. "Maybe I'm wrong, but it felt good anyway."

After the war, Kelsh used the skills he had learned in communications and worked for four decades for AT&T and Northwestern Bell.

He married Joyce Hardwick in 1948 and the couple had five children. He died in 2010 at 87, Bruce Kelsh said.

During Christmas 1945, the world celebrated peace for the first time in over five years.

Americans, meanwhile, united in healing, Litt said in an interview, adding that the mood was euphoric.

"Whether it was veterans who came back and sacrificed years of their lives, or even for families who had lost someone who wasn't coming home again, there was this feeling of, 'This is what it was for. My son or husband or brother didn't die in vain,'" he said.

STARS AND STRIPES

SERVICE DIRECTORY

The Daily Guide to Navigating The Military Business Market

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WORLD

Car bomb kills Russian general in Moscow

Associated Press

MOSCOW — A car bomb killed a Russian general on Monday, the third such killing of a senior military officer in just over a year. Investigators said Ukraine may be behind the attack.

Lt. Gen. Fanil Sarvarov, head of the Operational Training Directorate of the Russian Armed Forces' General Staff, died from his injuries, said Svetlana Petrenko, the spokesperson for Russia's Investigative Committee, the nation's top criminal investigation agency.

"Investigators are pursuing numerous lines of inquiry regarding the murder. One of these is that the crime was orchestrated by Ukrainian intelligence services," Petrenko said.

Since Moscow sent troops into Ukraine nearly four years ago, Russian authorities have blamed Kyiv for several assassinations of military officers and public figures in Russia. Ukraine has claimed responsibility for some of them. It has not yet commented on Monday's death.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that President Vladimir Putin had been immediately informed about the killing of Sarvarov, who fought in Chechnya and had taken part in Moscow's military campaign in Syria.

Russia has blamed a series of other apparent assassinations on Ukraine.

Just over a year ago, Lt. Gen. Igor Kirillov, the chief of the mil-



AP

Damage is seen Monday after Russian Lt. Gen. Fanil Sarvarov was killed by an explosive device placed under his car in Moscow.

itary's nuclear, biological and chemical protection forces, was killed by a bomb hidden on an

electric scooter outside his apartment building. Kirillov's assistant also died. Ukraine's security ser-

vice claimed responsibility for the attack.

An Uzbek man was quickly arrested and charged with killing Kirillov on behalf of the Ukrainian security service.

Putin described Kirillov's killing as a "major blunder" by Russia's security agencies, noting they should learn from it and improve their efficiency.

In April, another senior Russian military officer, Lt. Gen. Yaroslav Moskalik, a deputy head of the main operational department in the General Staff, was killed by an explosive device placed in his car parked near his apartment building just outside Moscow. A suspected perpetrator was quickly arrested.

Bondi Beach suspect conducted firearms training with his father

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — A man accused of killing 15 people at Sydney's Bondi Beach conducted firearms training in an area of New South Wales state outside of Sydney with his father, according to Australian police documents released on Monday.

The documents, made public following Naveed Akram's video court appearance from a Sydney hospital where he was treated for an abdominal injury, said the two men recorded footage justifying the meticulously planned attack.

The state government confirmed Naveed Akram was trans-

ferred Monday from a hospital to a prison. Authorities identified neither facility.

The 24-year-old and his father began their attack by throwing four improvised explosive devices toward a crowd celebrating an annual Jewish event at Bondi Beach, but the devices failed to explode,

the documents said.

Police described the devices as three aluminum pipe bombs and a tennis ball bomb containing an explosive, gunpowder and steel ball bearings.

None of the devices were detonated, but police described them as "viable" IEDs.

Authorities have charged Akram with 59 offenses, including 15 counts of murder, 40 counts of causing harm with intent to murder in relation to the wounded survivors and one count of committing a terrorist act.

His father was killed in the shooting.

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AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Muddy eruption at park's Black Diamond Pool

MT YELLOWSTONE — “Kablooeey!”

That’s the word U.S. Geological Survey volcanic experts used to describe a muddy eruption at Black Diamond Pool in Yellowstone National Park on Saturday morning.

Video shared by the USGS on social media shows mud spraying up and out from the pool just before 9:23 a.m. in Biscuit Basin about midway between park favorites Old Faithful and Grand Prismatic.

So-called dirty eruptions reaching up to 40 feet have occurred sporadically since then.

“We got a nice clear view of one of these dirty eruptions under bright blue skies with the surroundings covered in snow (ah, winter in Yellowstone!),” USGS Volcanoes said on social media.

Free Christmas trees help liven holidays for airmen

WA BELLEVILLE — Hundreds of soldiers at Fort Leonard Wood and airmen at Scott Air Force Base are enjoying the holidays with a free Christmas tree.

It’s part of a national program to help service members and their families who are far from home. Trees for Troops is run by the Christmas Spirit Foundation and connects private donations to tree farms around the country. FedEx ships the trees to dozens of military installations.

“It’s great getting a free tree. It helps with the holiday spirit,” said Cpl. Noah Rodriguez, stationed at Fort Leonard Wood. He; his wife, Cheyenne; toddler Braxton and infant Paisley got one of the free trees.

This year, Fort Leonard Wood gave away about 400 trees, and Scott Air Force base had about 300 trees for airmen and their families.

Man who stole police car at Quik Trip led chase

SC ROCK HILL — A man who stole a patrol vehicle Saturday night led law enforcement officers on a long, multi-county chase that included one deputy getting injured in a crash before the pursuit ended, according to the Spartanburg County Sheriff’s Office.

The incident began at about 9 p.m., when deputies responded to a call about a man, later identified as 34-year-old William Waters, experiencing a mental health episode at the Quik Trip gas station/convenience store in Inman, the sheriff’s office said in a news release.

At about 9:45 p.m., Waters got behind the wheel of a deputy’s patrol vehicle, and despite attempts to stop him, drove away, according to the release.

A pursuit ensued through Spar-



RAHMAT GUL/AP

Winter White House wonderland

Tourists look at the trees decorated with student-created ornaments representing every U.S. state, territory, and the District of Columbia on Thursday at the display surrounding the National Christmas Tree on the Ellipse behind the White House in Washington.

tanburg County, Laurens County and into Newberry County, according to the release.

The pursuit ended when Waters finally surrendered about 50 miles from the Quik Trip where the patrol vehicle was stolen.

Four siblings charged for illegal game rooms

HI HONOLULU — Four adult siblings are the first under a state law enacted to target people who knowingly let illegal game room operators set up their businesses.

Kelfred Chang, 59; Gifford Chang, 57; and Amelia Chang, also known as Amelia Watanabe, 63; were arrested Dec. 13 at the main police station.

The fourth Chang sibling, Hubert Chang, 65, was arrested Dec. 12 at his home in East Honolulu.

Each Chang is facing four counts of promotion of gambling in the second degree.

On July 9, 2024, Gov. Josh Green signed into law Act 249, which broadened the scope of “advancing” gambling activity to include forms of material aid such as maintaining equipment and managing financial operations.

Power mostly restored after wind-rain punch

CT NEW HAVEN — Power outages were mostly restored after Sunday’s high winds

and Friday’s wind-and-rain storm left thousands in the dark in Connecticut.

There were 166 outages still being reported in the state as of 10 p.m. Sunday, according to Eversource, the state’s largest electrical provider.

Eversource released a statement Saturday, noting “lineworkers continue to work nonstop to restore power to customers following fierce winds that brought down trees and tree limbs onto electric lines and equipment across the state.”

Outside crews were brought in to assist with those efforts, according to Eversource.

Fentanyl dealer given 5 years in federal prison

CA OAKLAND — A 31-year-old man was sentenced to five years in federal prison for trafficking fentanyl throughout the Bay Area, in a case where authorities say he was arrested inside a home that contained 54 pounds of the deadly drug.

Darwin Licona, of Oakland, pleaded guilty to a federal fentanyl trafficking charge, stemming from a traffic stop in 2023, in Oakland, where more than two pounds were recovered, according to court records. Licona was arrested in January 2024, in a San Francisco home where authorities allegedly found 54 pounds of fenta-

nyl, 3.7 pounds of methamphetamine, more than 16,000 counterfeit Xanax pills and other suspected drugs, as well as more than \$13,000 in currency, in a “common area” of the home, according to the criminal complaint.

Licona’s attorney argued for a 29-month sentence, saying Licona accepted responsibility and that it would be an “understatement” to say his life has been difficult to this point.

Affidavit: Man interrupted crime, later shot to death

NC CHARLOTTE — A Charlotte man found shot multiple times outside a city child care facility last week was killed after he had interrupted a crime in progress hours earlier, a police affidavit reports.

The shooting happened around 3 a.m. Monday, Dec. 15, in the parking lot of Tender Hearts Child Care on North Sharon Amity Road, and two men have been charged, Charlotte-Mecklenburg police said in a Dec. 19 case update.

Investigators believe 44-year-old Albert Lowery was targeted for confronting a suspected thief at the 24-hour child care operation a couple of hours earlier.

The shooting happened more than two hours after he caught a man trying to take the catalytic converter off an SUV in the parking lot, police said. Surveillance

footage confirmed Lowery was armed when he confronted a man who is seen under an SUV in the parking lot, the affidavit reports.

The suspects have been identified as Rethanachantra Em, 33, and Borein Ngiem, 32, CMPD said in a news release. Both live in Charlotte.

3 men charged for online child sexual exploitation

CT NORTH HAVEN — Police said “Operation Silent Night” ended in three Connecticut men being taken into custody on online child sexual exploitation-related charges.

Police said Kenneth Richardson, 30, of Bridgeport, was charged with second-degree criminal attempt to commit sexual assault, risk of injury to a minor, enticing a minor, possession of heroin and possession with intent to sell.

Christian Manuel Espinosa, a 33-year-old New Haven man, was also charged with second-degree criminal attempt to commit sexual assault, risk of injury to a minor and enticing a minor, police said.

Police said the last man, Shawn Stearns, 44, of East Haven was charged with second-degree criminal attempt to commit sexual assault, risk of injury to a minor, enticing a minor and possession of a controlled substance.

FACES

Hot start for ‘Fire and Ash’

‘Avatar’ film has year’s second-best launch with \$88M domestically, \$345M worldwide

By JAKE COYLE
Associated Press

“Avatar: Fire and Ash” opened with \$345 million in worldwide sales, according to studio estimates Sunday, notching the second-best global debut of the year and potentially putting James Cameron on course to set yet more blockbuster records.

Sixteen years into the “Avatar” saga, Pandora is abundant in box-office riches. “Fire and Ash,” the third film in Cameron’s science-fiction franchise, launched with \$88 million domestically and \$257 million internationally. The only film to open bigger in 2025 was “Zootopia 2” (\$497.2 million over three days). In the coming weeks, “Fire and Ash” will have the benefit of the highly lucrative holiday moviegoing corridor.

But there was a tad less fanfare to this “Avatar” film, coming three years after “Avatar: The Way of Water.” That film launched in 2022 with a massive \$435 million

globally and \$134 million in North America. Domestically, “Fire and Ash” fell a hefty 35% from the previous installment. Reviews for “Fire and Ash” were also more mixed, scoring a series-low 68% “fresh” score on Rotten Tomatoes.

Yet those quibbles are only a product of the lofty standards of “Avatar.” The first two films rank as two of the three biggest box-office films of all time. To reach those heights, the “Avatar” films have depended on legs more than huge openings.

“Avatar” (2009) opened with \$77 million domestically but held the top spot for seven weeks. It ultimately grossed \$2.92 billion worldwide. “The Way of Water” also held strong to eventually tally \$2.3 billion globally.

“The openings are not what the ‘Avatar’ movies are about,” said David A. Gross, a film consultant who publishes a newsletter on box-office numbers. “It’s what they do after they open that made



20TH CENTURY STUDIOS/AP

Oona Chaplin stars in “Avatar: Fire and Ash,” which had the second-best global opening of 2025.

them the No. 2 and No. 3 biggest films of all time.”

For “Fire and Ash” to follow in those footsteps, it will need robust ticket sales to continue for weeks. Working in its favor so far: strong word of mouth. Audiences gave it a CinemaScore of “A.”

With a production budget of at least \$400 million, “Fire and Ash” is one of the costliest movies ever made.

“Fire and Ash” was especially boosted by premium format showings, which accounted for 66% of its opening weekend take. A narrow majority of moviegoers (56%)

chose to watch it in 3D.

The “Avatar” films have always been especially popular overseas. “Fire and Ash” was strongest in China, where its \$57.6 million opening weekend surpassed those of the two previous movies.

A trio of other new wide releases made it into theaters in hopes of offering some counterprogramming: Lionsgate’s “The Housemaid,” Angel Studios’ “David” and Paramount Pictures’ “The SpongeBob Movie: Search for SquarePants.”

In the race for second place, “David” came out on top. The ani-

imated tale of David and Goliath collected \$22 million, notching the best opening weekend ever for Christian-oriented Angel Studios.

“The Housemaid,” Paul Feig’s twisty psychological thriller starring Sydney Sweeney and Amanda Seyfried, opened with \$19 million. The Lionsgate release, which cost about \$35 million to make, is set up to be one of the top R-rated holiday options.

“The SpongeBob Movie: Search for SquarePants” opened with \$16 million. The G-rated animated film is the first “SpongeBob” theatrical movie since 2015.

New this week: ‘Ne Zha II,’ Disney, ‘Stranger Things’

Associated Press

Here’s a collection curated by The Associated Press’ entertainment journalists of what’s arriving on TV, streaming services and music platforms this week.

Movies

■ Jennifer Lawrence plays a new mother whose behavior becomes increasingly erratic in Lynne Ramsay’s “Die My Love,” streaming on Mubi on Tuesday. Robert Pattinson plays her husband in this story adapted from Ariana Harwicz’s novel. In his review for The Associated Press, film writer Jake Coyle called it “a jagged, go-for-broke psychodrama” raging with a “primal punk spirit.” He added, “there’s plenty to admire in Ramsay’s uncompromising and delirious portrait of marital hell, particularly in the bracingly raw performance of Lawrence.”

■ The Chinese animated epic “Ne Zha II,” which is the highest grossing animated movie of all time with more than \$2.2 billion in ticket sales, is coming to HBO Max on Wednesday. The film tells the story of a rebellious little child, Ne Zha, born as the reincarnation of a demon to mortal parents, who is out to prove his fate is not predetermined. Michelle Yeoh lent her voice to the English language dub, which she said “immerses you into our culture.” The first film is avail-

able to stream on Netflix, but it’s possible to just dive right into the sequel.

■ If you like holiday movies with a side of tears, “Goodbye June,” streaming on Netflix on Wednesday, might just be the ticket. Kate Winslet directs and stars in this family drama about four adult children (Winslet, Andrea Riseborough, Johnny Flynn, Toni Collette) coming to terms with the fact that their mother, June (Helen Mirren), is dying.

■ Speaking of holiday viewing, Prime Video is getting two of the year’s biggest movies: “A Minecraft Movie,” on Monday, and “Sinners,” on Friday.

— AP Film Writer Lindsey Bahr

Music

■ It’s wholesome holiday fun for the whole family! Music fans can tune into the annual Disney Parks Magical Christmas Day Parade, which kicks off Thursday at 10 a.m. ET on ABC and streams at 11 a.m. ET on Disney+, Hulu and the Disney YouTube channel.

It’s not just for the kids: The special will feature musical performances from Gwen Stefani, Coco Jones, Iam Tongi, Lady A, Nicole Scherzinger, Mariah the Scientist and Bebe Rexha.

— AP Music Writer Maria Sherman



DISNEY/AP

Mickey Mouse and many more will take part in the Disney Parks Magical Christmas Day Parade, streaming on Disney+, Hulu and the Disney YouTube channel on Christmas Day.

Television

■ The next block of installments of “Stranger Things” — that’s episodes 5-7 — drop like a present on Thursday as the fifth and final season continues. When we last checked out Hawkins, Vecna was deep into a dastardly plan, Demogorgons were menacing and Will Byers was coming into his own powers. The very last episodes will stream on New Year’s Eve.

■ Simu Liu stars as an intelligence analyst whose brain has been hacked in Peacock’s new espionage thriller, “The Copenhagen Test.” All episodes drop Saturday on Peacock.

— AP Entertainment Writer Mark Kennedy

Bowen Yang tearfully departs ‘SNL’ midseason

Bowen Yang bid an emotional farewell to “Saturday Night Live” with music, laughter and help from his “Wicked” buddy Ariana Grande, who hosted the episode.

“We love you so much,” Grande told Yang, who was a constant presence throughout the Dec. 20 episode and drew huge applause with each appearance.

Yang joined the show as a writer in 2018, became a featured player the following season and was promoted to the main cast two seasons after that.

In a Dec. 20 Instagram post, Yang wrote: “i loved working at SNL, and most of all i loved the people. i was there at a time when many things in the world started to seem futile, but working at 30 rock taught me the value in showing up anyway when people make it worthwhile.”

Yang co-hosts the podcast “Las Culturistas” with fellow comedian Matt Rogers. He was in “Wicked” and “Wicked: For Good” as Pfannee and co-starred in the remake “The Wedding Banquet” this year.

Other news

■ James Ransone, the actor who played Ziggy Sobotka in the HBO series “The Wire” and appeared in many other TV shows and movies, has died. He was 46. The Los Angeles County Medical Examiner’s office said in online records that Ransone died Dec. 19 by suicide.

From The Associated Press



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OPINION

How Trump convinced me on the Senate filibuster

BY JASON WILLOCK
The Washington Post
At least two Republican senators who resisted nuking the Senate filibuster in 2025 might take a different tack in 2026. “It’s something I’m giving serious consideration to now,” Kansas Sen. Roger Marshall told Fox News, citing “the last government shutdown” and the prospect of another in January. Sen. Markwayne Mullin of Oklahoma announced: “My position on the filibuster has changed.” He told Fox News host Will Cain that there is a “conversation” in the GOP caucus about eliminating the filibuster “when it comes to appropriations.”
My views are also changing. I’ve always thought of the Senate’s 60-vote requirement for passing most legislation as a healthy check on narrow partisan majorities in the legislature. But how well is that working now? Donald Trump is showing that when a party narrowly wins the White House, it can impose sweeping policy change through the executive branch. At the end of Trump’s first year back in office, the filibuster is looking less like a moderating force and more like an excuse for presidents to ignore Congress.
Trump’s second term has brought a historic burst of executive policymaking. The Pew Research Center tallies 221 executive orders in 11 months, compared with 162 in President Joe Biden’s four years. Trump has overhauled immigration, imposed worldwide tariffs, restructured government agencies, sent progressive universities into retreat and brought the U.S. to the brink of war with Venezuela — all without votes of Congress.
Some of those policies I agree with, some I don’t. The point is that the White House is the sole driver. Instead of debating and authorizing Trump’s agenda, the Republican-controlled Congress has been a potted plant. It seems incongruous to maintain a restriction

only on Congress’ ability to act while the executive goes into overdrive.
Put differently: The filibuster functions as a brake on radical change when Congress is the center of the political system. When the president is at the center, the benefits are less clear. The costs also become more apparent because the filibuster, as an obstacle to legislating, becomes a pretext for presidential overreach.
Want to change U.S. trade policy? The Senate’s free-traders might filibuster a bill; better to comb the statute books to find authority for the president to tariff unilaterally. Want to threaten military force against Venezuela? The Democrats will muster more than 40 votes to block a congressional authorization; better to build an armada around the country without congressional debate. As Thomas Harvey and Thomas Koenig argued in a 2023 article in National Affairs, reforming the filibuster so legislation is easier to pass could help restore some of Congress’ importance.
The way the filibuster has eroded amplifies the problem. Democrats started the process in 2013 when they eliminated the 60-vote threshold for most presidential nominees. That means presidents can staff the executive branch with subordinates who are unlikely to push back on ambitious White House policies.
That change was coming sooner or later, and it won’t be reversed. But from a separation-of-powers perspective, it might have been better if the legislative filibuster had been nuked first instead. That way, it would have been easier for Congress to pass laws but harder for presidents to install boundary-pushing partisans in high executive office. The current regime — simple majorities for personnel, supermajorities for legislation — tilts the system toward executive-led governance, with legislation as an afterthought.
One check on executive branch nominations remains: the blue slip, a custom that al-

lows senators to block presidential nominees for judge and prosecutor in their state even if the nominee would win a majority in the Senate. The blue slip has interfered with Trump’s efforts to get prosecutions he wants in Virginia and New Jersey. If his executive blitz has lowered my opinion of the filibuster, it has raised my opinion of the blue slip as a (mild) safeguard against partisan prosecution.
One reason the blue slip tradition might be durable is senators’ self-interest. Both Republican and Democratic senators want a say in picking the prosecutor who might one day investigate them. The benefits of the legislative filibuster are more asymmetric. Democrats probably have more to gain as a matter of policy from eliminating it; that would give them a path to confer legal status on people in the country illegally, pack the Supreme Court and create a national right to abortion. They came within a hair’s breadth of eliminating it in 2022 to rewrite state election laws.
I’d probably hate most of the legislation Democrats would pass if they controlled the House, Senate and White House. But the continuing drift toward rule-by-executive might be more dangerous for the republic than hare-brained policies arrived at through the representative process, where senators are accountable for their votes.
The partisan case for nuking the filibuster grows out of enthusiasm. My increasing openness to the nuclear option grows out of resignation. The filibuster is supposed to promote stability, but the 21st century has seen one president after another radically reverse the policies of his predecessor. If we’re going to have political volatility, better that it’s at least channeled through Congress, with deliberation and debate.

Jason Willock is a Washington Post columnist focusing on law, politics and foreign policy.

The Battle of the Bulge, Christmas 1944: Hell on Earth

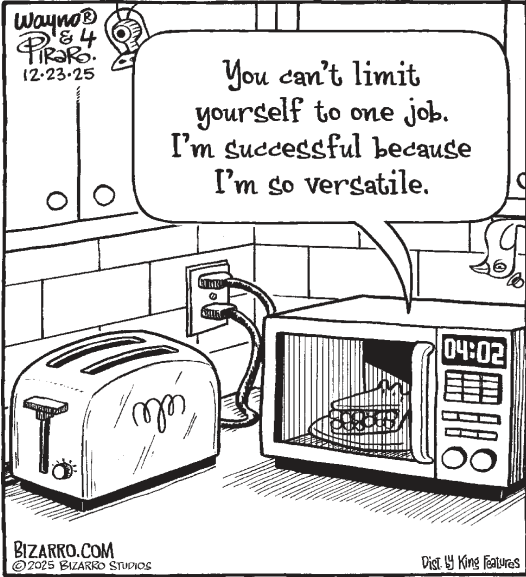
BY ARTHUR I. CYR
Christmas includes the anniversary of the Battle of the Bulge, the largest land battle fought by the United States. The battle was hell on earth.
On Dec. 16, 1944, Nazi Germany launched an enormous offensive through the quiet, thinly defended Ardennes Forest in Belgium. Adolf Hitler and planners in Berlin achieved total surprise. German forces rapidly gained ground.
For Europeans among the Allies, the attack was reminiscent of the stunning 1940 German drive that overran France and secured Nazi domination of Europe. Among Dwight D. Eisenhower’s associates at Supreme Allied Headquarters, fear was visible with alarm.
The tide of the battle did not clearly turn until Gen. George S. Patton’s Third Army broke through to the 101st Airborne Division, surrounded by the Wehrmacht in Bastogne, Belgium, the day after Christmas.
Brutal fighting continued through January. However, with the relief of Bastogne the Nazi vision of the future of Europe — and the world — faded.
Other battles in U.S. history were more costly or complicated. During the Civil War, Gettysburg and other engagements resulted in a higher percentage of casualties among combatants. During the Second World War, such enormous amphibious invasions as Normandy, Iwo Jima and Leyte Gulf in the Philippines

were inherently more complex in logistical terms than the Bulge. In the European theater, the scale of the war on the eastern front was much greater than in the west.
Nonetheless, in American history the Battle of the Bulge remains our biggest single land engagement. Approximately a quarter of a million U.S. troops were pitted against a comparable number of German forces.
Basic lessons of the Bulge include personnel and materiel, and leadership. Eisenhower’s skills include getting difficult personalities to work together, constant attention to logistics, and organizational genius. Both sides suffered enormous losses, in men and supplies. The Allies could replace them; the Germans at that point could not.
Controversial Patton undeniably was a brilliant combat leader. At Kasserine Pass in Tunisia in early 1943, Field Marshal Erwin Rommel’s Afrika Korps decimated poorly led American troops. Eisenhower put Patton in command. A month later, these same troops defeated Rommel’s troops at El Guettar.
Patton immediately, accurately evaluated the Ardennes offensive, and acted fast. Patton’s Third Army traversed the distance to Bastogne remarkably quickly, and were able immediately to engage German forces. Relief of the 101st Airborne was a major victory with comprehensive strategic implications. Allied morale rose markedly, while German forces were denied a main transportation hub.
During the Bulge, African-American sol-

diers were offered combat service, previously denied, but only if they sacrificed earned military seniority. Thousands volunteered, and were vital to Allied victory.
At the tactical level, Cpl. Henry F. Warner near Dom Butgenbach, Belgium, knocked out two German tanks, and then his 57 mm anti-tank gun jammed. He was firing a pistol at a third approaching tank when the German driver backed up and withdrew.
One of Warner’s shots had killed the commander, and the crew was unable to proceed, a common reaction of German troops. American, British and other Allied soldiers were much more likely to improvise and continue fighting after officers went down.
Warner, killed later in combat, received the Medal of Honor.
When the Nazi Reich surrendered, Eisenhower commented the war was over but not won. True victory meant Germany embracing stable democracy. Admirable and effective German Chancellor Angela Merkel was Time Magazine’s 2015 “Person of the Year.” The Allies have won the war, by Eisenhower’s demanding standard of success.
Honor contemporary Germany, which is economically strong, firmly democratic and committed to European peace.
Honor the men who faced, fought and won this momentous battle.

Arthur I. Cyr is author of “After the Cold War – American Foreign Policy, Europe and Asia.”

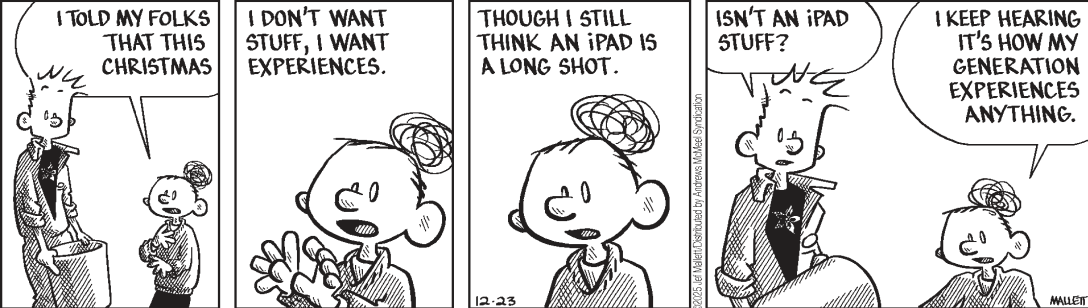
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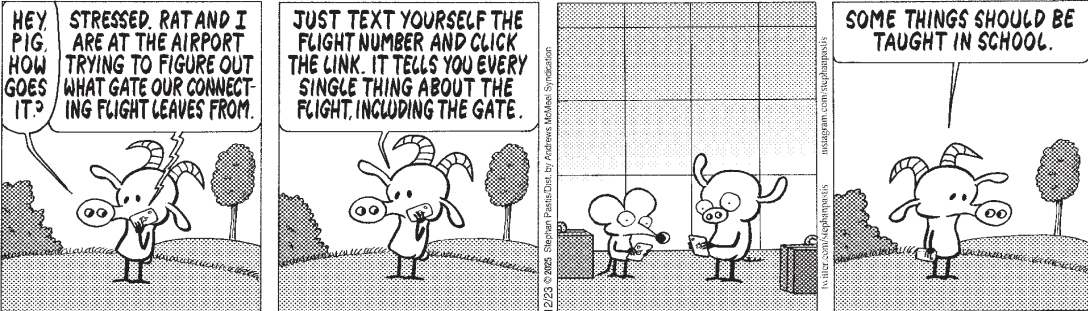
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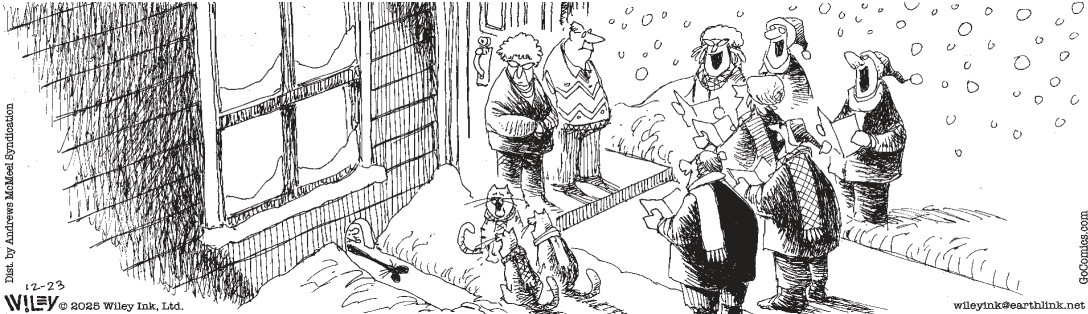
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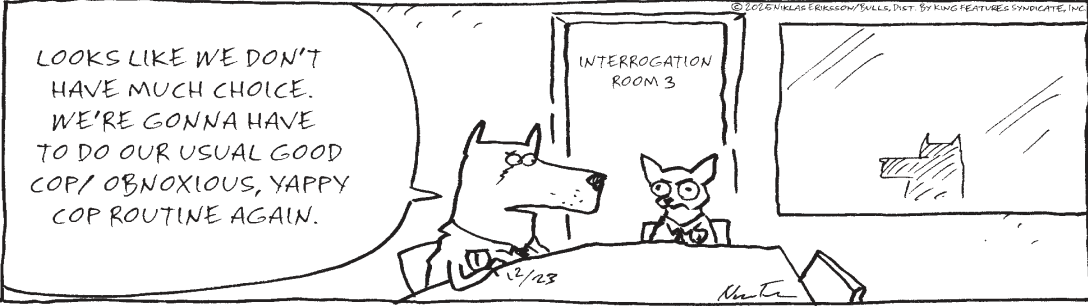
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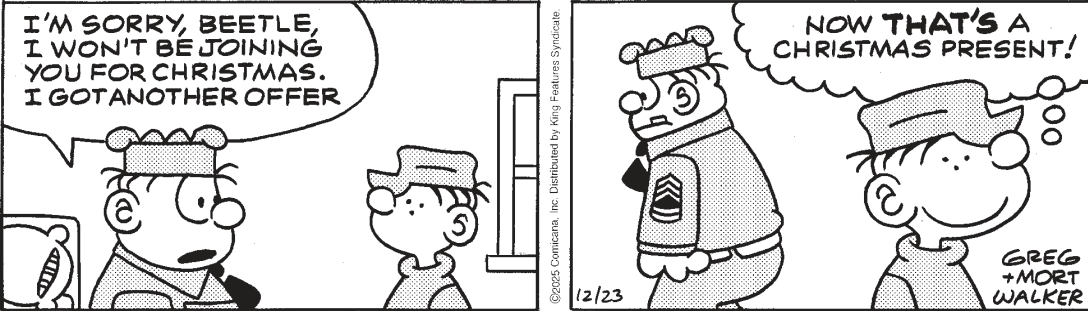
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Carpe Diem



Beetle Bailey



Eugene Sheffer Crossword

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15					16				17			
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47						48				49		
50						51				52		
53						54				55		

- ACROSS**
1 Union jack?
5 "The Voice" network
8 The "A" of UAE
12 Killer whale
13 "Alley —"
14 Vegas game
15 Rural tract
16 Orchestra winds
18 Bungled
20 Storage site
21 Nay undoer
22 Attorneys' org.
23 Actress Witherspoon
26 Befuddle
30 Shade tree
31 — polloi
32 Wall St. debut
33 Make fuller-looking, as a pillow
36 "Awesome!"
38 Corn serving
39 Yucatan year
40 Orchestra strings
43 Viral winter woes
47 Toothpaste ingredient, often
49 Scottish slope
50 Yemen neighbor
51 Karaoke prop, for short
52 Dust jacket ID
53 — -chef
- DOWN**
1 Remove, as a hat
2 Russian river
3 Off-white
4 Brazilian dances
5 Type of checking
6 Brazen
7 "Brain" of a computer
8 Japanese dogs
9 Kick back
10 Con
11 Pear variety
17 Perfume by Dana
19 "See ya!"
22 Boxer Laila
23 Ump
24 Right angle
25 Outback bird
26 Dandy guy
27 Dead heat
28 Ecol. watchdog
29 Decay
31 "Ben- —"
34 Criminals
35 Equitable
36 Bearded antelope
37 "Barbie" star Margot
39 "Smart" guys?
40 Fiscal execs
41 Ticklish Muppet
42 Hawaiian feast
43 Bank acct. protector
44 — Minor
45 Yaks
46 Emailed
48 Little rascal

Answer to Previous Puzzle

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

12-23 CRYPTOQUIP

LXZJA UKA CHZ KHT VQINZ

NAHQE IY TNAGGXZV XZ H

CIZHLUAQE YIQ CHZE EAHQL,

KA UKQAN XZ UKA JING.

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: IF A POLICEMAN NEEDS TO ARREST ALL THE MEMBERS OF A MUSICAL GROUP, MIGHT HE USE BAND-CUFFS?

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: V equals G

SCOREBOARD/COLLEGE BASKETBALL

COLLEGE BASKETBALL	
Sunday's men's scores	
EAST	
Boston University 88, UMass Lowell 76 Cornell 83, Albany 75 Delaware State 73, Holy Family 61 Drexel 74, Maine 56 Hofstra 74, Quinnipiac 66 Manhattan 87, Presbyterian 81 Marist 70, Stony Brook 51 Monmouth 76, Lehigh 62 Mount St Marys 73, Penn State-Brandywine 42 Navy 70, Rosemont College 23 Pittsburgh 80, Penn State 46	
SOUTH	
Alabama 92, Kennesaw State 81 Charleston 85, Northern Kentucky 74 Charlotte 88, UIC 76, OT Chattanooga 73, Alabama A&M 66 Clemson 68, Cincinnati 65 Florida 90, Colgate 60 Furman 84, Charleston Southern 76 George Mason 86, Loyola (Md) 79 Miami (FL) 105, North Florida 67 Middle Tennessee 74, Cumberland University 58 North Carolina State 76, Ole Miss 62 Radford 97, VMI 90 South Florida 94, UMBC 69 Tennessee 94, Gardner-Webb 52 UAB 72, UNC Asheville 47 UNC Greensboro 131, Virginia-Lynchburg 53 Vanderbilt 98, Wake Forest 67 Winthrop 107, Clinton College 41	
MIDWEST	
Bradley 73, Southern Illinois 69 Drake 66, Evansville 65 Illinois State 85, Indiana State 65 Iowa State 91, Long Beach State 60 Michigan 102, La Salle 50 Milwaukee 81, Cleveland State 71 Minnesota 78, Campbell 50 Murray State 85, Valparaiso 79 Nebraska 78, North Dakota 55 Purdue Fort Wayne 72, Notre Dame 69 Saint Louis 93, New Hampshire 79 UConn 72, DePaul 54 Wichita State 88, Eastern Kentucky 57	
SOUTHWEST	
Baylor 111, Southern University 67 Incarnate Word 90, Northern Arizona 66 Norfolk State 72, UTEP 71 Oklahoma State 94, Cal State Fullerton 89 SMU 99, Central Arkansas 82 Stephen F. Austin 103, Dallas 55 TCU 80, Florida A&M 56 Texas A&M 118, East Texas A&M 77 UC Irvine 74, North Dakota State 73	
FAR WEST	
California 74, Columbia 56 Gonzaga 91, Oregon 82 Idaho 83, Cal Poly 80, OT New Mexico State 87, Sam Houston 78 Oregon State 78, Arizona State 75 Pacific 95, Nicholls State 82 San Francisco 94, Morgan State 64 UC Davis 93, Idaho State 83 USC 102, UC Santa Cruz 63	
Sunday's women's scores	
EAST	
Akron 94, Le Moyne 68	

COLLEGE FOOTBALL	
College Football Playoffs	
First Round Friday, Dec. 19	
No. 9 Alabama 34, No. 8 Oklahoma 24	
Saturday, Dec. 20	
No. 10 Miami (Fla.) 10, No. 7 Texas A&M 3 No. 6 Mississippi 41, No. 11 Tulane 10 No. 5 Oregon 51, No. 12 James Madison 34	
Quarterfinals Wednesday, Dec. 31 At Cotton Bowl	
No. 2 Ohio St. (12-1) vs. Miami (11-2)	
Thursday, Jan. 1 At Orange Bowl	
No. 4 Texas Tech (12-1) vs. Oregon (12-1)	
At Rose Bowl	
No. 1 Indiana (13-0) vs. No. 9 Alabama (11-3)	
At Sugar Bowl	
No. 3 Georgia (12-1) vs. Mississippi (12-1)	

DEALS	
Sunday's transactions	
BASEBALL Major League Baseball American League	
CHICAGO WHITE SOX — Agreed to terms with INF Munetaka Murakami on a two-year contract.	
CLEVELAND GUARDIANS — Agreed to terms with RHP Shawn Armstrong.	
BASKETBALL National Basketball Association	
NBA — Fined Minnesota head coach Chris Finch and Denver head coach David Adelman \$35,000 each for directing inappropriate language toward game officials and failing to leave the court in a timely manner (Finch: Dec. 19 vs. Oklahoma City; Adelman: Dec. 20 vs. Houston).	
SAN ANTONIO SPURS — Signed G Stanley Umude to a Two-Way contract. Waived G Kyle Mangas.	
HOCKEY National Hockey League	

Albany 52, Hofstra 43 American 65, UMBC 61 Bryant 72, Franklin Pierce 45 Duquesne 84, Pittsburgh 69 Fairfield 84, Merrimack 65 Fordham 86, St. Francis (PA) 61 George Washington 75, Northwestern 62 Holy Cross 78, UMass Lowell 56 Loyola (MD) 65, Morgan State 58 Maine 59, Harvard 57 Mount St Marys 65, Iona 55 Providence 68, Georgetown 61, OT Quinnipiac 76, Marist 67 Richmond 70, Penn State 54 Sacred Heart 61, Rider 59 Saint Joseph's 73, Delaware 66 Saint Peter's 81, Niagara 72 Siena 73, Canisius 56 West Virginia 101, Houston 46	SOUTH Alabama 77, Troy 59 Bradley 62, Northern Kentucky 61 Clemson 84, North Florida 62 Cleveland State 82, Puerto Rico-Bayamon 45 Detroit Mercy 59, Delaware State 46 East Carolina 81, Campbell 59 East Tennessee State 51, Charlotte 50 Elon 58, Norfolk State 41 Georgia 82, Coppin State 55 Jacksonville State 74, Presbyterian 39 LSU 110, UT Arlington 45 Longwood 98, UNC Wilmington 72 Mercer 70, Tulane 67, OT Miami (FL) 85, Kennesaw State 55 North Carolina 93, Charleston Southern 74 North Carolina State 68, Davidson 59 Northwestern State 60, Lamar 57 Ole Miss 86, Old Dominion 57 South Florida 86, Navy 74 Tulsa 74, Florida 67 Virginia Tech 79, Radford 47 West Georgia 72, Florida A&M 57
Dayton 75, Evansville 66 Indiana 71, Western Carolina 44 Iowa State 79, Kansas 76 Lindenwood 87, Eastern Illinois 55 Michigan 97, Oakland 54 Michigan State 115, Indiana State 66 Minnesota 68, Drake 43 Missouri 84, North Alabama 57 Nebraska 87, California Baptist 56 Northern Iowa 58, St. Thomas 40 Notre Dame 110, Bellarmine 38 Oklahoma State 91, Cincinnati 63 Purdue 93, Jackson State 62 Texas 70, South Dakota State 51 Wisconsin 81, IUPUI 72	SOUTHWEST SMU 74, Southern University 62 Santa Clara 84, North Texas 72 Texas A&M 93, Prairie View A&M 60 Texas Tech 61, Baylor 60
FAR WEST Arizona State 79, Colorado 63 Gonzaga 68, UC Riverside 62 Loyola Marymount 76, Southern Utah 68 Portland 98, Portland State 53 San Jose State 61, Sacramento State 56 Stanford 64, Oregon 53 USC 61, California 57 Washington 90, Pacific 50 Weber State 74, Omaha 61	



CRAIG MITCHELLDYER/AP

Gonzaga forward Graham Ike, right, dribbles past Oregon forward Kwame Evans Jr. during the first half in Portland, Ore., on Sunday. Ike had 17 points and 11 rebounds in the Bulldogs' 91-82 victory.

TOP 25 ROUNDUP

No. 7 Gonzaga pulls away late in victory over Oregon

Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. — Braeden Smith scored 21 points, Braden Huff had 20 points and No. 7 Gonzaga beat Oregon 91-82 on Sunday at Moda Center.

Graham Ike added 17 points and 11 rebounds for the Bulldogs (12-1). Steele Venters scored 14 points, and Tyon Grant-Foster had 10.

Nate Bittle had 28 points and nine rebounds for the Ducks (6-6). Kwame Evans Jr. added 14 points, Takai Simpkins had 13 and Jackson Shelstad 12.

Oregon played Gonzaga tough in a back-and-forth first half, led by 16 points from Bittle, and it was tied in the final seconds before Grant-Foster's buzzer-beating 3-pointer put the Bulldogs up 42-39. Gonzaga pulled away in the second half, leading by 15.

No. 2 Michigan 102, La Salle 50: Freshman Trey McKenney led a balanced attack with 17 points and the host Wolverines overwhelmed the Explorers.

Michigan also had four other players in double figures as it reached the 100-point mark for the sixth time this season and the fifth time in the last six games.

No. 4 Iowa St. 91, Long Beach St. 60: Milan Momcilovic made seven 3-pointers and scored 27 points and the host Cyclones routed the Beach to improve to 12-0.

Momcilovic, who entered the

game leading the Big 12 in 3-point shooting accuracy at 52.6%, made his first six shots from beyond the arc for his best start since he was 7 of 7 against Fairleigh Dickinson on Nov. 3. He finished 7-for-9 on 3s and was 9-for-11 overall from the field.

No. 5 UConn 72, DePaul 54: Alex Karaban scored 21 points and the visiting Huskies shut down the Blue Demons for a rugged victory.

Playing without Solo Ball, UConn (12-1, 2-0 Big East) posted its eighth consecutive win. It also improved to 22-1 against DePaul.

No. 13 Vanderbilt 98, Wake Forest 67: Tyler Nickel hit eight 3-pointers on his way to 26 points and the visiting Commodores continued their surprise season as one of a handful of schools in the country that are still undefeated with a win over the Demon Deacons.

Duke Miles had 17 points and nine assists, Tyler Harris scored 14 off the bench and Devin McGlockton and Tyler Tanner scored 11 each for Vanderbilt (12-0), which holds its highest in-season ranking since 1992-93.

No. 15 Nebraska 78, North Dakota 55: Berke Buyuktuncel had 12 points, 11 rebounds and 10 assists for a triple-double and the host Cornhuskers overcame first-half shooting woes to beat the Fighting Hawks.

At 12-0, Nebraska is off to the best start in school history. Braden

Frager came off the bench to lead the Huskers with 17 points. Sam Hoiberg finished with 15 points, and Jamarques Lawrence added 13.

No. 16 Alabama 92, Kennesaw State 81: Aiden Sherrell scored a career-high 21 points to lead the Crimson Tide over the Owls.

The neutral-site game in northern Alabama included a pro-Tide crowd and hosted a coming-out party for Sherrell. The sophomore from Detroit scored 15 points in the first half and helped Alabama (9-3) build a 26-point lead.

No. 20 Tennessee 94, Gardner-Webb 52: Ja'Kobi Gillespie had 15 points and nine assists, Amaree Abrams scored 15 points and the host Volunteers beat the Runnin' Bulldogs.

Jaylen Carey added 12 points for Tennessee (9-3). J.P. Estrella had 10 points, and DeWayne Brown II finished with 14 rebounds.

No. 23 Florida 90, Colgate 60: Xaivian Lee scored 19 points, Thomas Haugh added 17 and the host Gators pulled away late to beat the Raiders and extend their home-winning streak against nonconference opponents to 18.

Florida (8-4) won its third in a row since dropping back-to-back games to Duke and UConn. Ruben Chinyelu finished with 16 points and 12 rebounds. Alex Condon had 16 points, 10 boards, five assists, two blocks and two steals.

NBA

Scoreboard

Eastern Conference					
Atlantic Division					
	W	L	Pct	GB	
New York	20	8	.714	—	
Boston	17	11	.607	3	
Philadelphia	16	11	.593	3½	
Toronto	17	13	.567	4	
Brooklyn	8	19	.296	11½	
Southeast Division					
	W	L	Pct	GB	
Orlando	16	12	.571	—	
Miami	15	14	.517	1½	
Atlanta	15	15	.500	2	
Charlotte	9	19	.321	7	
Washington	5	22	.185	10½	
Central Division					
	W	L	Pct	GB	
Detroit	22	6	.786	—	
Cleveland	15	14	.517	7½	
Chicago	13	15	.464	9	
Milwaukee	11	18	.379	11½	
Indiana	6	22	.214	16	
Western Conference					
Southwest Division					
	W	L	Pct	GB	
San Antonio	21	7	.750	—	
Houston	17	9	.654	3	
Memphis	13	15	.464	8	
Dallas	11	18	.379	10½	
New Orleans	7	22	.241	14½	
Northwest Division					
	W	L	Pct	GB	
Oklahoma City	25	3	.893	—	
Denver	20	7	.741	4½	
Minnesota	19	10	.655	6½	
Portland	12	16	.429	13	
Utah	10	17	.370	14½	
Pacific Division					
	W	L	Pct	GB	
L.A. Lakers	19	8	.704	—	
Phoenix	15	13	.536	4½	
Golden State	14	15	.483	6	
L.A. Clippers	7	21	.250	12½	
Sacramento	7	22	.241	13	
Sunday's games					
Chicago 152, Atlanta 150					
Sacramento 125, Houston 124, OT					
San Antonio 124, Washington 113					
Minnesota 103, Milwaukee 100					
Brooklyn 96, Toronto 81					
New York 132, Miami 125					
Monday's games					
Charlotte at Cleveland					
Indiana at Boston					
Dallas at New Orleans					
Utah at Denver					
Memphis at Oklahoma City					
Detroit at Portland					
Orlando at Golden State					
Tuesday's games					
Brooklyn at Philadelphia					
Washington at Charlotte					
Chicago at Atlanta					
Milwaukee at Indiana					
New Orleans at Cleveland					
Toronto at Miami					
Denver at Dallas					
New York at Minnesota					
Oklahoma City at San Antonio					
L.A. Lakers at Phoenix					
Memphis at Utah					
Detroit at Sacramento					
Orlando at Portland					
Houston at L.A. Clippers					
Wednesday's games					
No games scheduled					
Thursday's games					
Cleveland at New York					
San Antonio at Oklahoma City					
Dallas at Golden St.					
Houston at L.A. Lakers					
Minnesota at Denver					
Friday's games					
Miami at Atlanta					
Charlotte at Orlando					
Toronto at Washington					
Boston at Indiana					
Philadelphia at Chicago					
Phoenix at New Orleans					
Milwaukee at Memphis					
Detroit at Utah					
L.A. Clippers at Portland					
Scoring leaders					
Through Sunday					
	G	FG	FT	PTS	AVG
Doncic, LAL	21	220	205	716	34.1
Gil-Alex., OKC	27	296	226	878	32.5
Maxey, PHI	25	272	153	792	31.7
Mitchell, CLE	26	278	138	799	30.7
Jokic, DEN	27	287	164	794	29.4
Brown, BOS	26	278	153	763	29.3
Brunson, NY	26	267	149	757	29.1
Edwards, MIN	22	209	133	623	28.3
Markkanen, UTA	24	223	151	667	27.8
Reaves, LAL	21	178	168	583	27.8

ROUNDUP

Schroder, Kings top Rockets in OT

Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — Dennis Schroder made a 3-pointer with 2.2 seconds remaining in overtime, lifting the Sacramento Kings to a 125-124 victory over the Houston Rockets on Sunday night. Schroder finished with 24 points, 10 rebounds and seven assists off the bench to help Sacramento rally after trailing by five in the final two minutes of regulation.

DeMar DeRozan had 27 points and nine assists, and Russell Westbrook added 21 points and 13 rebounds to help the Kings end a five-game skid. Keegan Murray scored 26 points while Maxime Raynaud had 12 points and 14 rebounds

Schroder's game-winner came 8 seconds after Houston's Jabari Smith Jr. made two of three free throws for a two-point lead.

Sacramento forced overtime after a late surge in the fourth quarter

After Durant's two free throws gave the Rockets a 112-107 lead with 2:16 remaining, DeRozan scored on a dunk and Westbrook made a corner 3-pointer to tie it.

There were multiple lead changes in overtime, and Westbrook missed a go-ahead 3-pointer with 30 seconds left to play.

Houston grabbed the rebound and went ahead 124-122 on Smith's free throws before DeRozan drove the lane then dished to Schroder wide open in the left corner.

Now, the Atlanta Hawks can shift their focus to healing their ailing defense.

Atlanta ranked 22nd in scoring defense before Sunday's 152-150 loss to the Chicago Bulls in the NBA's highest-scoring game this season.

Chicago had nine scorers in double figures, led by Matas Buzelis with 28 points. The Bulls' 152 points set a season high. They also set season highs with 41 assists, 57.6% field goal percentage and 47.6% 3-point shooting (20 of 42).

Young scored a season-high 35 points with nine assists. Jalen Johnson had 36 points with 11 rebounds and nine assists.

The Hawks also had Onyeka Okongwu score 23 points and Vit Krejci add 20. Young's encouraging showing and all the offense wasn't enough to overcome the



ALAN GRETH/AP

Kings guard Dennis Schroder, left, drives to the basket against Portland Trail Blazers center Robert Williams III during the second half Saturday in Sacramento, Calif.

The Rockets got off to a sluggish start and trailed by 10 less than four minutes into the first quarter before finding their stride in the second quarter. Durant and Sengun combined for more than half of their team's points in the second quarter, rallying Houston to a 68-57 lead.

Spurs 124, Wizards 113: De'Aaron Fox scored 27 points and sank five 3-pointers to help

visiting San Antonio ease to a victory over Washington.

Luke Kornet had 20 points and 12 rebounds, and Stephon Castle added 18 points and 11 assists as the Spurs won their sixth in seven games and second in four days against the Wizards.

Bub Carrington scored 21 points for Washington, which rested starters Alex Sarr (adductor) and Khris Middleton (knee) after they

leaky defense. Chicago set another season high by scoring 83 points in the first half.

"It's kind of tough winning games when you give up 80 points in the first half," Johnson said. "It's kind of embarrassing in a sense. Hopefully we cut down on some of the things we're doing."

Atlanta (15-15) has lost three straight and seven of nine to fall back to .500.

Young started for the second time in three games after missing 21 games with a right MCL sprain.

"I think everybody is excited to have Trae back," Johnson said. "He's been out for a while. ... The fact he's found his rhythm already in his second game is a good sign."

Coach Quin Snyder said Young may need more time before he's ready to play back-to-back games.

Young logged 26 minutes against the Bulls, which he said was his limit for his second game back.

"I feel amazing," Young said. "They did their job, put me right at



COLIN HUBBARD/AP

Hawks guard Trae Young, right, shoots over Chicago Bulls guard Ayo Dosunmu during the second half Sunday in Atlanta.

26 minutes. They weren't allowing me to do any more. ... I feel great."

Young led the NBA in assists

both played in Saturday's 130-122 win at Memphis.

Timberwolves 103, Bucks 100: Anthony Edwards scored 24 points despite a poor night shooting and host Minnesota rode timely 3-pointers from Donte DiVincenzo and Terrence Shannon Jr. to a victory over Milwaukee.

Two days after closing out defending champion Oklahoma City in its third loss of the season, Edwards went 7 for 24 from the field and 2 for 11 from 3-point range, leading six Timberwolves in double figures.

DiVincenzo made 4 of 8 3-point attempts for 18 points, and Rudy Gobert had 11 points and 18 rebounds, becoming the 45th NBA player with 10,000 rebounds.

Nets 96, Raptors 81: Michael Porter Jr. scored 24 points, Noah Clowney added 19 and host Brooklyn beat Toronto.

Rookie Egor Demin had 16 points and Nic Claxton finished with 12 for the Nets, who led by 15 points in the third quarter, fell behind early in the fourth and then surged ahead again.

Knicks 132, Heat 125: Jalen Brunson scored a season-high 47 points and host New York overcame Karl-Anthony Towns' quiet night to beat Miami.

While Towns had just two points and six rebounds in 29 minutes, Mikal Bridges scored 24 points on 6-of-7 3-point shooting and Josh Hart added 13 points and 10 rebounds. The Knicks improved to 20-8 overall and 14-2 at home.

last season and is a four-time All-Star. He scored only eight points in 20 minutes in his first game back, a 133-126 loss at Charlotte on Thursday night. He was back in his high-scoring form against Chicago, but missed a last-second jumper that would have tied the game.

"Those are shots that he makes," Snyder said. "You feel good about getting the ball in the right guy's hands."

Snyder said the Hawks "had a lot of breakdowns in execution" on defense in the first half. The Bulls scored 69 points in the second half and made 54.3% of their shots from the field, but Snyder said his defense "did a better job with that in the second half as far as making them work hard."

Young said the high-scoring pace was no surprise.

"It's how both teams play," Young said. "Both teams play fast. Teams are coming in here and playing fast against us. We've got to figure out how to stop a team that can only play fast."

Crosby sets Penguins scoring mark

Lemieux's record falls in 1st period against Canadiens

BY DAN SCIFO
Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — As far as Sidney Crosby is concerned, Mario Lemieux is still No. 1 in his book.

But after Sunday night, Lemieux is now officially No. 2.

Crosby broke Lemieux's franchise scoring record with a goal and an assist in the first period of the Pittsburgh Penguins' 4-3 shootout win against the Montreal Canadiens on Sunday night.

"I don't think you can put a stat line or a number on what he means to this team and to hockey, so yeah, in my mind, he's still No. 1," Crosby said.

Crosby, who began the night one point behind Lemieux, now has 645 goals and 1,079 assists for 1,724 points in 1,387 games. It also moved him past Lemieux for the eighth-most points in NHL history.

Crosby tipped Erik Karlsson's point shot at 7:58 of the first period for a goal to tie the record. He then broke the mark with 7:20 left in the period when his shot on a power play hit Bryan Rust and Rickard Rakell tapped the rebound behind Jakub Dobes.

Crosby, Rust and Rakell embraced behind the net after the goal and the Penguins spilled over the bench to congratulate their captain. Later in the period, a 30-second video message recorded by Lemieux congratulating Crosby on the accomplishment was played.

"I knew when we played together in 2005 that you were going to be a very special player and accomplish a lot of great things in your career," Lemieux said in the message. "Here we are 20 years later, you're now one of the best to



GENE J. PUSKAR/AP

The Penguins' Sidney Crosby (87) skates back to the bench after celebrating with teammates for surpassing Mario Lemieux's team points mark in the first period against the Montreal Canadiens in Pittsburgh on Sunday.

ever play the game." A hush fell over the arena as fans intently listened to Lemieux's message.

"Seeing the crowd go quiet when Mario's message come on, that was pretty special," Crosby said. "If you don't understand the impact he's had here and you were here tonight, I think you understand it a little bit better given how quiet it got."

Lemieux, the Hall of Famer, who also owned the franchise following his second retirement, became Pittsburgh's all-time points leader, surpassing then-assistant coach Rick Kehoe on Jan. 20, 1989, when Crosby was 17 months old. Lemieux, who was in the lineup when Crosby recorded his first NHL point, finished his career with 1,723 points in 915 games.

"I have so much appreciation for having the opportunity to play with him, live with him and learn

from him," said Crosby, who lived with Lemieux and his family early in his career. "You grow up watching him, you never expect you're going to make it to the NHL let alone play with him. He was a big part of helping me out and a huge influence on me."

Crosby is now third on the NHL's all-time points list with a single franchise, behind only Steve Yzerman (1,755) and Gordie Howe (1,809), both with Detroit.

Crosby also passed Phil Esposito (449) for sole possession of the ninth-most even-strength goals in NHL history. He also tied Adam Oates for the eighth-most assists in NHL history in the first period. Crosby, who has 20 goals this season, achieved his 18th 20-goal season. Only six players in NHL history have more.

The biggest number Sunday was Lemieux's franchise scoring record.

"Having an opportunity to play on the same line and connect on a few goals ... those are things that I'll always remember," Crosby said. "The impact he's had on me, this team and hockey in general is pretty amazing."

Rakell had a goal and an assist in regulation and Noel Acciari also scored for the Penguins. Arturs Silovs had 23 saves for his first win since Nov. 6 against Washington.

Oliver Kapanen, Ivan Demidov and Noah Dobson scored for Montreal, which saw a brief two-game win streak end. The Canadiens are 4-1-2 since a 6-1 loss against Tampa Bay on Dec. 9. Dobes had 28 saves.

Kevin Hayes also scored for Pittsburgh in the shootout and Cole Caulfield tallied for Montreal. After Rakell gave the Penguins the lead in the third round, Silovs denied Nick Suzuki on the Canadiens' last attempt.

Scoreboard

Eastern Conference								
Atlantic Division								
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA	
Detroit	37	21	13	3	45	116	119	
Montreal	36	19	12	5	43	117	122	
Tampa Bay	35	19	13	3	41	113	94	
Boston	37	20	16	1	41	120	120	
Florida	35	19	14	2	40	112	112	
Ottawa	35	18	13	4	40	117	110	
Buffalo	35	17	14	4	38	109	115	
Toronto	35	15	15	5	35	109	118	
Metropolitan Division								
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA	
Carolina	35	22	10	3	47	119	101	
Washington	36	19	12	5	43	114	96	
N.Y. Islanders	36	19	13	4	42	105	103	
Philadelphia	34	17	10	7	41	103	99	
New Jersey	36	20	15	1	41	102	108	
N.Y. Rangers	38	18	16	4	40	97	102	
Pittsburgh	35	15	11	9	39	107	113	
Columbus	35	14	15	6	34	105	124	
Western Conference								
Central Division								
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA	
Colorado	35	26	2	7	59	141	80	
Dallas	37	25	7	5	55	133	97	
Minnesota	37	22	10	5	49	115	96	
Utah	38	18	17	3	39	116	111	
St. Louis	37	14	15	8	36	94	127	
Nashville	35	15	16	4	34	100	119	
Winnipeg	35	15	17	3	33	103	107	
Chicago	35	13	16	6	32	98	111	
Pacific Division								
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA	
Anaheim	36	21	13	2	44	128	123	
Vegas	34	16	8	10	42	103	102	
Edmonton	37	18	13	6	42	125	127	
Los Angeles	34	15	10	9	39	88	90	
San Jose	36	17	16	3	37	107	122	
Calgary	36	15	17	4	34	97	108	
Vancouver	35	15	17	3	33	101	117	
Seattle	33	13	14	6	32	83	104	
Note: Two points for a win, one point for overtime loss. Top three teams in each division and two wild cards per conference advance to playoffs.								
Sunday's games								
Detroit 3, Washington 2, OT								
Colorado 5, Minnesota 1								
Buffalo 3, New Jersey 1								
Dallas 5, Toronto 1								
Nashville 2, N.Y. Rangers 1								
Utah 4, Winnipeg 3, OT								
Ottawa 6, Boston 2								
Pittsburgh 4, Montreal 3, SO								
Edmonton 4, Vegas 3								
Monday's games								
St. Louis at Tampa Bay								
Vancouver at Philadelphia								
Columbus at Los Angeles								
Seattle at Anaheim								
Tuesday's games								
Pittsburgh at Toronto								
Dallas at Detroit								
Buffalo at Ottawa								
Florida at Carolina								
Montreal at Boston								
N.Y. Rangers at Washington								
New Jersey at N.Y. Islanders								
Nashville at Minnesota								
Calgary at Edmonton								
Philadelphia at Chicago								
Utah at Colorado								
San Jose at Vegas								
Seattle at Los Angeles								

ROUNDUP

Keller scores quick in OT to give Mammoth victory over Jets

Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY — Clayton Keller scored 13 seconds into overtime and the Utah Mammoth beat the Winnipeg Jets 4-3 on Sunday.

Lawson Crouse, JJ Peterka and Alexander Kerfoot also scored for Utah, and Karel Vejmelka stopped 22 shots. The Mammoth won for the second time in three games.

Kyle Connor had two goals and Morgan Barron also scored for Winnipeg, which lost its fourth straight (0-2-2) and has just three wins in its last 16 games (3-10-3). Connor Hellebuyck had 18 saves.

Avalanche 5, Wild 1: Nathan

MacKinnon scored twice, Cale Makar and Brock Nelson each had a goal and two assists, and visiting Colorado beat Minnesota.

Martin Necas also scored and Gabriel Landeskog had two assists for the Avalanche, winners of five straight. Mackenzie Blackwood made 28 saves.

Oilers 4, Golden Knights 3: Connor McDavid opened the scoring midway through the first period and set up Ryan Nugent-Hopkins' two power-play goals in host Edmonton's victory over Vegas.

Connor Ingram stopped 26 shots in his Oilers debut and first NHL

game of the season. Ingram played for Utah last season before entering the NHL/NHLPA Players Assistance Program in March. He has been with Edmonton's AHL affiliate in Bakersfield, where he was 4-5-2 with a 4.04 GAA and .856 save percentage.

Red Wings 3, Capitals 2 (OT): Moritz Seider scored at 4:36 of overtime and host Detroit beat Washington to sweep a home-and-home series.

John Leonard and Lucas Raymond also scored for the Red Wings, and Cam Talbot made 31 saves.

Senators 6, Bruins 2: Fabian Zetterlund scored two goals, Tim Stutzle and Dylan Cozens scored 19 seconds apart in the second period and visiting Ottawa beat Boston for its fourth straight victory.

Drake Batherson and Claude Giroux each had a goal in the first when the Senators opened a quick 3-0 edge. Batherson and Cozens each had two assists and former Bruins goalie Linus Ullmark made 17 saves.

Sabres 3, Devils 1: Josh Norris and Zach Benson scored in the second period and visiting Buffalo beat New Jersey for its sixth

straight victory. Peyton Krebs also scored and Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen made 17 saves to help the Sabres get their eighth win in 11 games.

Predators 2, Rangers 1: Filip Forsberg and Steven Stamkos scored, Justus Annunen made 16 saves and host Nashville beat New York.

Stars 5, Maple Leafs 1: Jason Robertson scored his first goal in 10 career games against Toronto, the last team he had not scored against, and Jake Oettinger made 27 saves for his 16th win as host Dallas beat the Maple Leafs.

Scoreboard

American Conference							
East							
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	
x-New England	12	3	0	.800	410	300	
Buffalo	11	4	0	.733	434	344	
e-Miami	6	9	0	.400	317	369	
e-N.Y. Jets	3	12	0	.200	282	426	
South							
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	
Jacksonville	11	4	0	.733	410	312	
Houston	10	5	0	.667	346	249	
Indianapolis	8	6	0	.571	392	303	
e-Tennessee	3	12	0	.200	251	403	
North							
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	
Pittsburgh	9	6	0	.600	365	350	
Baltimore	7	8	0	.467	359	348	
e-Cincinnati	5	10	0	.333	359	458	
e-Cleveland	3	12	0	.200	246	355	
West							
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	
x-Denver	12	3	0	.800	362	295	
L.A. Chargers	11	4	0	.733	349	301	
e-Kansas City	6	9	0	.400	337	294	
e-Las Vegas	2	13	0	.133	217	386	
National Conference							
East							
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	
y-Philadelphia	10	5	0	.667	349	289	
e-Dallas	6	8	1	.433	424	454	
e-Washington	4	11	0	.267	309	404	
e-N.Y. Giants	2	13	0	.133	313	412	
South							
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	
Carolina	8	7	0	.533	287	337	
Tampa Bay	7	8	0	.467	347	377	
e-Atlanta	6	9	0	.400	307	360	
e-New Orleans	5	10	0	.333	255	338	
North							
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	
x-Chicago	11	4	0	.733	387	354	
Green Bay	9	5	1	.633	364	303	
Detroit	8	7	0	.533	452	374	
e-Minnesota	7	8	0	.467	305	320	
West							
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	
x-Seattle	12	3	0	.800	443	279	
x-L.A. Rams	11	4	0	.733	457	299	
x-San Francisco	10	4	0	.714	344	293	
e-Arizona	3	12	0	.200	321	414	
e-Eliminated from playoffs							
x-clinched playoff spot							
y-clinched division							
Thursday's game							
Seattle 38, L.A. Rams 37, OT							
Saturday's games							
Philadelphia 29, Washington 18							
Chicago 22, Green Bay 16, OT							
Sunday's games							
Buffalo 23, Cleveland 20							
Carolina 23, Tampa Bay 20							
Cincinnati 45, Miami 21							
L.A. Chargers 34, Dallas 17							
Minnesota 16, N.Y. Giants 13							
New Orleans 29, N.Y. Jets 6							
Tennessee 26, Kansas City 9							
Atlanta 26, Arizona 19							
Jacksonville 34, Denver 20							
Houston 23, Las Vegas 21							
Pittsburgh 29, Detroit 24							
New England 28, Baltimore 24							
Monday's game							
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							

ROUNDUP

Panthers top Bucs for division lead

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — The playoff-starved Carolina Panthers left the locker room Sunday happy, but not yet satisfied.

The Panthers finally figured out a way to beat Baker Mayfield and the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, a 23-20 victory that gave them sole possession of first place in the NFC South with two games remaining. But they are well aware they may need to do it again in Week 18 to earn their first division title in a decade and snap a seven-year playoff drought.

Carolina (8-7) could wrap up with the NFC South next Sunday with a win over Seattle and a Tampa Bay (7-8) loss to Miami. However, if the Bucs beat the Dolphins, Carolina would need to beat Tampa Bay in the regular-season finale to end the Bucs' four-year reign as division champions.

Panthers coach Dave Canales said the team's locker room is filled with "hope and belief" that the franchise's fortunes could be about to change.

And third-year quarterback Bryce Young continues to make big plays when it matters most.

Young threw for 191 yards and two touchdowns, and rookie safety Lathan Ransom intercepted Mayfield with 42 seconds left. Of Young's 14 wins as an NFL starter, 12 have come on game-winning drives in the fourth quarter or overtime.

"We have the utmost confidence in Bryce," said tight end Ja'Tavion Sanders, who caught a 6-yard touchdown pass late in the third quarter after Young eluded three defenders in the pocket. "He isn't our quarterback for no reason. Everything he has gone through to get to this point today, the resilience and the mental toughness and the way he carries himself, it all plays a part in that."

It was the third straight loss for the reeling Buccaneers, who were hoping the return of injured wide receiver Mike Evans and Jalen McMillan might spark a playoff run.

With the Bucs down 23-20 and driving for the go-ahead score — or at least the tying field goal — there was a miscommunication on a second-and-9 pass play at the Carolina 42 between Mayfield and Evans, and rookie safety Lathan Ransom made a sliding catch for the interception.

"I was trying to find a lane to step through and make a throw to him," Mayfield said. "(Evans) thought I was going to scramble, which based on some of the scrambles earlier to that, so you can't blame him."

Vikings 16, Giants 13: J.J. McCarthy ran for a touchdown be-



JACOB KUPFERMAN/AP

Carolina Panthers wide receiver Tetairoa McMillan catches a touchdown pass despite the defense of Tampa Bay Buccaneers cornerback Jamel Dean during the first half on Sunday in Charlotte, N.C.

fore leaving with an injury to his right, throwing hand, and backup quarterback Max Brosmer helped visiting Minnesota win its third game in a row, beating New York in a matchup of teams eliminated from playoff contention.

McCarthy was injured on a strip sack by Brian Burns in the final minute of the first half, when it appeared the Vikings (7-8) were going to let the clock run out. Instead, Burns forced McCarthy to fumble with a crushing hit and Tyler Nubin returned it 27 yards for a touchdown.

Before getting hurt, McCarthy completed 9 of 14 passes for 108 yards and had a would-be pick-6 negated by an offside penalty on Abdul Carter.

The Giants (2-13) lost their ninth consecutive game and fifth since Mike Kafka took over as interim coach when Brian Daboll was fired on Nov. 10. They have not won since Oct. 9.

Bengals 45, Dolphins 21: Joe Burrow rebounded from his first time being shut out to throw for 309 yards and four touchdowns as visiting Cincinnati routed Miami.

Miami (6-9) and Cincinnati (5-10) were both eliminated from playoff contention last week, but the teams insisted they were still motivated for the final three games of the season.

It appeared that way in the first half. Cincinnati held a 17-14 half-time lead before blowing the game open with 28 points off four straight Dolphins turnovers.

Bills 23, Browns 20: James Cook rushed for 117 yards and two touchdowns, Josh Allen played through a foot injury and Buffalo drew closer to a playoff berth with a road victory over Cleveland.

Ty Johnson also had a rushing score for the Bills (11-4), who have won four straight and five of six.

Allen played the second half despite injuring his right foot during the second quarter. He favored the foot after being sacked by Cleveland's Myles Garrett and Alex Wright.

Allen was 12-for-19 for 130 yards and also rushed for 17 yards on seven carries.

Shedeur Sanders completed 20 of 29 passes for 157 yards and a touchdown. He also was the Browns' leading rusher with four carries for 49 yards.

Tight end Harold Fannin Jr. scored both Browns' touchdowns, including a 1-yard run in the third quarter to get them within 23-17.

Titans 26, Chiefs 9: Cam Ward threw for 228 yards and two touchdowns, and Tennessee snapped an 11-game home skid by beating Kansas City.

The Titans (3-12) improved to 1-7 at home this season with their first win at Nissan Stadium since Nov. 3, 2024.

With two games left, the Chiefs (6-9) are assured of their first losing record since 2012 — their most recent season without Andy Reid as their coach. Kansas City has lost four straight and six of seven.

A week after Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes suffered a season-ending torn ACL, his backup, Gardner Minshew, was knocked out of the game with a knee injury early in the second quarter.

Saints 29, Jets 6: Chris Olave caught touchdown passes from Tyler Shough and Taysom Hill, Charlie Smyth tied a Saints record with five field goals and New Orleans extended its winning streak to three with a home victory over reeling New York.

Cameron Jordan had two sacks for New Orleans (5-10), giving him 130 for his career and moving the 15th-year defensive end two ahead of Hall of Famer Rickey Jackson for 17th most in NFL history.

Falcons 26, Cardinals 19: Bijan Robinson gained 171 yards from scrimmage and had a touchdown catch, Kirk Cousins threw two TD passes and ran for a score, and visiting Atlanta held on to beat Arizona.

The Falcons (6-9) won for the second straight week, with both coming on the road.

Arizona (3-12) has lost seven straight and 12 of 13 since starting the season 2-0.

Texans 23, Raiders 21: C.J. Stroud threw a touchdown pass, Derek Stingley returned an interception for a score and host Houston beat Las Vegas for their seventh straight victory and the Raiders' ninth loss in a row.

Houston (10-5) has its longest winning streak since a nine-game run in 2018.

The Texans remain a game behind first-place Jacksonville — a winner in Denver on Sunday — in the AFC South. The Raiders are 2-13.

NFL

Herbert, Chargers close in on playoff spot

By Schuyler Dixon
Associated Press

ARLINGTON, Texas — Justin Herbert is getting more comfortable by the week with his broken left hand that's heavily protected. Facing a beleaguered defense that isn't getting the quarterback on the ground sure helps. Herbert threw two touchdown passes and ran for a score and the Los Angeles Chargers closed in on a playoff spot with a 34-17 victory over the Dallas Cowboys on Sunday.

The Chargers' fourth consecutive victory gave them a chance before Week 17 to clinch their second postseason berth in two seasons under coach Jim Harbaugh. Los Angeles (11-4) would be in with a loss or tie by Indianapolis, which played Monday night. The AFC West race isn't over, either. Division-leading Denver lost to Jacksonville and has a one-game lead over the Chargers with two to go. LA would have the tie-breaker with a season sweep by winning the regular-season finale at the Broncos.

"I think the really cool thing about this team is, we've kind of taken it week by week, and we're never looking too far ahead, and we're never looking too far back," Herbert said. "In the past couple of weeks, I think the defense has done such a great job of just helping us out. And today we were able to kind of help out a little bit."

Dak Prescott had TD passes on his first two drives but couldn't find the end zone again for Dallas, which was eliminated from the playoffs for the second year in a row with Philadelphia's NFC East-clinching victory at Washington on Saturday.

The Cowboys (6-8-1) have lost three in a row since a three-game winning streak that put them over



Chargers quarterback Justin Herbert carries the ball against the Dallas Cowboys on Sunday in Arlington, Texas. Herbert threw two touchdown passes and ran for a score in Los Angeles' 34-17 victory.

.500 for the only time in coach Brian Schottenheimer's first season. "They played a better full game than us," said Prescott, who was 21 of 30 for 244 yards as both QBs went without an interception. "The first half, we're rolling, and we didn't get the stop on defense. The second half, we got the stops on defense and we weren't doing much."

In his third full game with his left hand completely covered, Herbert led the Chargers to touch-

downs on all three drives in the first half. Omarion Hampton scored on a 5-yard run in the second half. A 23-yard TD toss to Quentin Johnston, who played college football a few miles from Dallas' home stadium at TCU, was followed by 25-yarder to Ladd McConkey before Herbert's 1-yard plunge on a modified version of the tush push. Johnston had four catches for 104 yards. Defensive coordinator Matt Eberflus' move to the coaching

booth from the sideline didn't help the Cowboys defense—or his case to keep this job. Herbert was 23-for-29 — a season-high 79% — for 300 yards and Los Angeles finished with 452 total yards, another season best. The Chargers didn't reach 300 yards in the first two full games after Herbert's injury. "It's getting better," said Herbert, who broke the hand in the first game on the current winning streak. "I think the swelling's going down. I've got much better

grip on the ball now. And so I think every week, every day helps. And just getting used to it and allowing the bone to heal."

LA punted on the first possession of the second half and was facing third-and-7 on the next drive when Herbert escaped Kenneth Murray's grasp in the backfield and sprinted 33 yards, leading to Cameron Dicker's 27-yard field goal for a 27-17 lead with 9 minutes remaining.

Herbert was slow getting up and appeared to be favoring the injured hand, but said after the game he landed on the elbow. He didn't miss any time. "He's amazing, his accuracy, his escapability, his ability to throw on the run," said Dallas cornerback Trevon Diggs, who played for the first time since Week 6 after dealing with a concussion and issues with his knees. "He's got it all."

The Cowboys went without a sack for the second consecutive week, this time against a makeshift offensive line that has struggled to protect Herbert. He already has a career in sacks, having gone down 49 times.

"We got the ball out quick, had a great protection plan and really were on our stuff this week," Herbert said. "So it's a shout-out to the front five for just communicating, talking and blocking as well as they did."

Prescott's first TD pass was a 5-yarder to Ryan Floutney, who had another TD wiped out by a holding penalty before exiting with a knee injury and not returning. George Pickens scored on a 38-yard catch when Prescott hit him in stride in the end zone. Pickens had seven yards on 130 catches coming off two sub-par games that led to criticisms about his playing style.

Statement: Jaguars embrace being underestimated in league

FROM PAGE 24

But he changed his mind after owner Shad Khan fired general manager Trent Baalke. Coen has quickly turned the Jags into Super Bowl contenders. "Just thankful that a small market team like us can come into a place like Mile High and get it done," Coen said with sarcasm. Coen wants everyone to continue underestimating Jacksonville. "We really don't care about the narrative," he said. "I'm sorry to say that, but it's only helping us, so I want the narrative to keep coming."

Several teams have embraced the underdog role in the past, using it as a rallying cry. The 2017 Philadelphia Eagles started wearing dog masks on the sideline because they weren't expected to

have playoff success after losing starting quarterback Carson Wentz to a knee injury. Backup Nick Foles led them to a stunning victory over Tom Brady and the Patriots in the Super Bowl. "Keep doubting us," Jaguars cornerback Jarrian Jones said. "We want to show up every Sunday and you have to play us no matter where we're at. We play in the snow, we play in the rain, whatever you want to do. I think the Jags are going to be ready to play."

Lawrence threw three touchdown passes and ran for a score. He has 12 TD passes and no interceptions over the past four games, posting a passer rating above 105 in each one. "I hope we don't get any (respect)," Lawrence said. "So ev-

erybody out there, just keep it up. It's great. It was a big game and just proud of the guys. It was fun."

Tomlin's team

A few weeks ago, Steelers fans were chanting: "Fire Tomlin!" Even Ben Roethlisberger and James Harrison joined the critics, saying it was time for Pittsburgh to move on from coach Mike Tomlin. But the Steelers have won three in a row, including Sunday's wild, 29-24 upset at Detroit. They lead the AFC North and would secure their first division title since 2020 with one more win or a loss by Baltimore (7-8). Rodgers and the offense are clicking at the right time for Pittsburgh. Running backs Jaylen Warren and Kenneth Gainwell ex-

celled against the Lions. But the Steelers might lose wide receiver DK Metcalf to a suspension after he took a swipe at a Detroit fans during the game.

Playoff picture

Five of the seven NFC playoff spots have been secured while only one team has clinched in the AFC, though three more teams can join the club if the 49ers beat Indianapolis. The Eagles (10-5) are NFC East champions. Carolina (8-7) beat the Buccaneers (7-8) to move into first place in the NFC South. But Tampa Bay would win its fifth straight division title with victories at Miami next week and over the Panthers in Week 18. Chicago (11-4) needs one more win or one loss by Green Bay (9-

6-1) to lock up the NFC North. Seattle (11-4) leads the NFC West with the Rams (11-4) and San Francisco (10-4) in the mix. The Lions (8-7) have a tough path. They have to win out and need the Packers to lose two to get a wild-card spot. The Broncos are the lone AFC team already in, but their lead in the West is down to one game over the Chargers. Jacksonville, Buffalo and Los Angeles would get in with a loss by the Colts on Monday night. New England will clinch the AFC East with another win or a loss by the Bills. Pittsburgh is on the verge of clinching the AFC North. The Jaguars lead the Texans in the AFC South while Indy needs to win out and get help to have a chance.

NFL

Steelers beat Lions after penalty negates Goff's winning pass

By LARRY LAGE
Associated Press

DETROIT — The Pittsburgh Steelers survived a wild finish, pushing the Detroit Lions to the brink of playoff elimination and boosting their chances of winning their division for the first time in five years.

Pittsburgh held on for 29-24 win over Detroit on Sunday when Jared Goff's touchdown on the final play was negated by an offensive pass-interference penalty on Amon-Ra St. Brown.

"It's been playoff-type football for us the last three weeks," Aaron Rodgers said.

The Steelers (9-6) have won three straight after a midseason slump, surging into the AFC North lead with two games remaining.

"Certainly weren't perfect, a lot of adversity, some of it created by us. But they didn't blink and that's what's required this time of year," coach Mike Tomlin said.

Pittsburgh secured its 22nd straight season with at least a .500 record, breaking the NFL record it previously shared with Dallas, which had a 21-year run without a losing season from 1965-85.

The Lions almost pulled off an amazing comeback after trailing by 12 points with four-plus minutes left, but they had two touchdowns negated by penalties in the final minute.

On the last play of the game, Goff threw a fourth-down pass to St. Brown just short of the goal line. The receiver pushed off cornerback Jalen Ramsey to get free, and before the Steelers could bring St. Brown to the ground, he threw a lateral to the quarterback to set up an apparent score by Goff.

Officials huddled for a couple of minutes on the field before announcing the decision to the dismay of the crowd.

With 22 seconds left, rookie Isaac TeSlaa was called for pass interference for setting a pick that freed up St. Brown, negating

Goff's 1-yard TD pass.

Detroit (8-7) dropped two straight games for the first time in more than three years, ending its outside shot to win a third straight NFC North title. While the Lions haven't been eliminated from the playoffs, they only have an 8% chance of earning a spot, according to the NFL.

Jaylen Warren had two 45-yard touchdown runs in the fourth quarter and finished with a career-high 143 yards for Pittsburgh, which had a 230-15 advantage in rushing yards.

Detroit's defense forced the Steelers to settle for a 37-yard field-goal try with 2:05 left, and Chris Boswell missed it.

The Lions had a fourth-and-2 from their 35 and Pittsburgh was called for pass interference and tripping on consecutive plays, moving the ball to the Steelers 35 and setting up the wild finish.

Rodgers finished 27 of 41 for 266 yards. He threw a 45-yard touchdown pass to Kenneth Gainwell to close the first half that was initially ruled incomplete, then changed to a TD after a review. Gainwell made the catch while lying on his left side and got his right arm under the ball, then popped to his feet and scampered to the end zone.

Goff was sacked by blitzing Kyle Dugger for a safety to give Pittsburgh a 12-10 lead in the third quarter.

The Steelers converted a pair of fourth downs on the ensuing drive and elected not to go for it a third time from the Detroit 5, settling for a field goal and a five-point lead after a 17-play, 64-yard drive that took nearly 10 minutes.

Pittsburgh went ahead 3-0 when Boswell capped their first possession with a 59-yard field goal.

The Lions could have tied the game on the ensuing possession, but coach Dan Campbell went for it on fourth-and-goal from the 3 and Goff's pass to St. Brown in the end zone was broken up by Joey Porter Jr.



RYAN SUN/AP

From left, Pittsburgh's Asante Samuel Jr., Joey Porter Jr. and Jalen Ramsey celebrate after the Steelers beat the Lions 29-24 on Sunday in Detroit. Pittsburgh opened up a two-game lead in the AFC North.



STEPHANIE SCARBROUGH/AP

New England quarterback Drake Maye passes against the Ravens during the second half Sunday in Baltimore. Maye threw for a career-best 380 yards as the Patriots beat the Ravens 28-24.

Maye, Patriots top Ravens to secure playoff return

By NOAH TRISTER
Associated Press

BALTIMORE — Hopefully the rest of the NFL enjoyed the respite.

The New England Patriots are back in the playoffs — with an unflappable quarterback and a coach who is thirsty for more.

Sound familiar?

Drake Maye guided New England to a pair of fourth-quarter touchdowns, rallying his team from an 11-point deficit to a 28-24 victory over Baltimore on Sunday night that clinched a postseason spot for the Patriots and dealt a devastating blow to the Ravens' playoff hopes.

"We're going to try to win the division. We're going to focus on that," New England coach Mike Vrabel said. "I'm excited. All the credit to the players. When we win, it's because of them."

Seven years after Tom Brady and Bill Belichick won their final Super Bowl together with the Patriots — and four years after Belichick reached the playoffs with Mac Jones at quarterback — New England is returning to the postseason in Maye's second year behind center. Maye certainly didn't hurt his MVP case Sunday, throwing for a career-best 380 yards and two touchdowns.

Down 24-13, Maye connected on a 37-yard scoring strike to Kyle Williams, and a 2-point conversion pass to Rhamondre Stevenson made it a three-point game with 9:01 to play.

After the Patriots forced a punt, they drove 89 yards for the winning touchdown. Baltimore's pass rush, which was nonexistent ear-

lier in the game, was much better toward the end, but Maye showed why he and his team are in first place in the AFC East.

New England remains a game ahead of second-place Buffalo despite losing to the Bills last week.

"It was kind of a wake-up call last week — we got a chance to win the game with a game-winning drive, and this week it was like, man, let's not have that feeling two weeks in a row," Maye said. "It was kind of the elephant in the room."

Maye went 12 of 14 for 139 yards in the final quarter, although the winning touchdown came on one of the Patriots' few productive running plays, a 21-yard dash by Stevenson with 2:07 left.

The Ravens, who lost Lamar Jackson to a back injury in the second quarter, turned the ball over on their final drive on a fumble by Zay Flowers. Baltimore (7-8) is now two games behind the AFC North-leading Steelers with two to play. To win the division, the Ravens would need to win at Green Bay and Pittsburgh and have the Steelers lose to lowly Cleveland in Week 17.

"We didn't do the winning things we need to do. We made some mistakes that cost us," Baltimore coach John Harbaugh said.

Pittsburgh beat Detroit earlier in the day. The dramatic ending of that game came after many fans had already entered the Ravens stadium and Steelers-Lions was shown on the big screen.

Pittsburgh's win put immense pressure on Baltimore, and things went from bad to worse when New England took a 10-7 lead and then Jackson left late in the second

quarter with yet another injury.

Tyler Huntley — who led the Ravens to a huge win in Week 8 over Chicago when Jackson was out with a hamstring problem — helped Baltimore rally. Flowers scored on an 18-yard end around to give the Ravens a 17-13 lead in the third quarter. They then snuffed out a fake punt near midfield and went ahead by 11 on Henry's 2-yard run with 12:50 left in the fourth.

But that was the last time Henry touched the ball — another baffling set of decisions in another fourth-quarter collapse by a Baltimore team that's had plenty of those in recent years.

The Ravens took a 7-0 lead on a 21-yard run by Henry — just their third first-quarter touchdown in nine home games this season. After Maye was intercepted, Baltimore's offense was rolling before Henry fumbled. The Patriots tied it on a 1-yard pass from Maye to Hunter Henry.

It was 10-all at halftime.

New England lost Rookie of the Year candidate TreVeyon Henderson when the running back left with a head injury in the second quarter.

Another night-mare

The Ravens entered the season 22-3 under Harbaugh in prime time games at home, but they've gone 0-3 this season, losing to Detroit, Cincinnati and now New England. In fact, Baltimore went 3-6 on its home schedule, the worst mark in franchise history.

The Patriots, meanwhile, improved to 7-0 on the road in Vrabel's first season at the helm.

SPORTS



Broken record
Crosby passes Lemieux as Penguins' all-time top scorer » **NHL, Page 20**



Jaguars quarterback Trevor Lawrence runs for a touchdown against the Broncos on Sunday in Denver. Jacksonville's 34-20 win was a major milestone against the AFC's best team. BART YOUNG/AP

Mile High moment

Jaguars get statement win on the road against Broncos

By ROB MAADDI
Associated Press

Maybe the Jacksonville Jaguars and coach Liam Coen will get the credit they deserve now. Trevor Lawrence and the Jags went to Denver and scored 34 points against one of the NFL's best defenses, extending their winning streak to six games with a 34-20 victory on Sunday that gave the Broncos their first loss since Week 3. This was an impressive, convincing win for an underrated team that's been overlooked throughout the season. Denver (12-3) and New England (12-3) deserved recognition for double-digit win-



Coen

ning streaks. Indianapolis (8-6) was the talk of the AFC the first two months during a 7-1 start. Buffalo (11-4) and Josh Allen are always in the spotlight. Aaron Rodgers and Pittsburgh (9-6), Justin Herbert and the Chargers (11-4) and C.J. Stroud and Houston (10-5) also get more attention. Even the demise of Kansas City has been a bigger storyline than the rise of Jacksonville. But no team is playing better right now than the Jaguars (11-4). They lead the AFC

South and are in the mix for the No. 1 seed. They were in line to clinch a playoff berth if the Colts lost to San Francisco on Monday night. It's been a remarkable turnaround for a team that finished 4-13 last season. Coen has led the way since replacing Doug Pederson. He almost didn't take the job after initially declining an in-person interview with Jacksonville. Coen had agreed to a three-year contract to remain the offensive coordinator in Tampa Bay, a deal that would've made him the league's highest-paid assistant. **SEE STATEMENT ON PAGE 22**



DAVID ZALUBOWSKI/AP

Jaguars cornerback Jarrian Jones celebrates after intercepting a pass against the Broncos in the second half.

No. 7 Gonzaga holds off gritty Oregon » College basketball, Page 18

