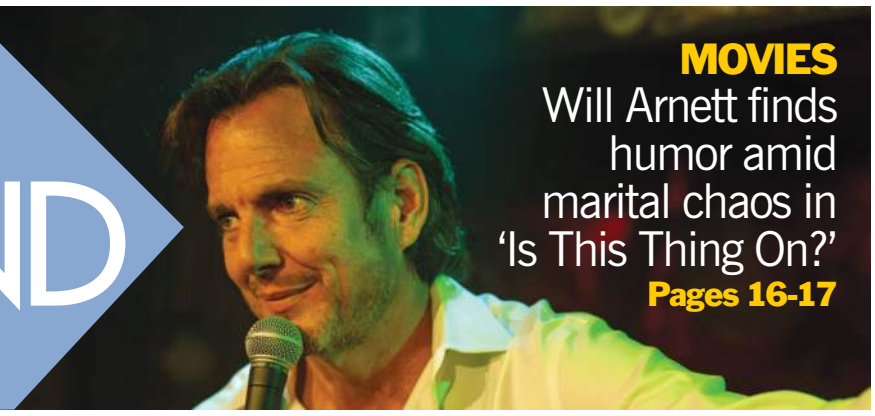
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WEEKEND
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ANGELA WILCOX/U.S. Marine Corps

U.S. Marine Corps Sgt. Brianna Eisenhower zeroes a rifle in preparation for an all-female marksmanship subject matter expert exchange between U.S. Marines and Jordanian soldiers in Al-Quwayrah, Jordan, in 2024. The Pentagon has ordered a six-month review of the "effectiveness" of women serving in combat roles.

Review of women in combat

Pentagon's order plans to look into 'effectiveness' of these roles

BY MATTHEW ADAMS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon is conducting a six-month review of women serving in combat positions.

"Our standards for combat arms positions will be elite, uniform, and sex neutral because the weight of a rucksack or a human being doesn't care if you're a man or a woman," Pentagon press secretary Kingsley Wilson said in a statement. "Under [Defense] Secretary [Pete] Hegseth, the Department of War will not compromise standards to satisfy quotas or an ideological agenda — this is common sense."

Anthony Tata, the undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness, wrote in a memorandum last month that the effort is to determine the "operational effectiveness of ground combat units 10 years after the Department lifted all remaining restrictions on women serving in combat roles."

Tata requested that the Army and Marine Corps leaders provide data on the readiness, training, performance, casualties and command climate of ground combat units and personnel. The services are to provide points of contact no later than Jan. 15 to the Institute for Defense Analyses, a nonprofit corporation that assists the government on national security issues.

The review was first reported by NPR.

SEE REVIEW ON PAGE 4

Lawmakers: Troops not anticipated in Venezuela

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Lawmakers who attended classified briefings with Trump administration officials on Wednesday said they do not expect to see troops on the ground in Venezuela though the deployment of troops in the region will continue indefinitely.

House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., described the U.S. capture of Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro as a one-off military operation and said the closed-door meetings with Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth and Secretary of State Marco Rubio did not indicate further troop involvement.

"We don't anticipate boots on the ground," Johnson said. "That is not the administration's objective, it is not their expectation and I think that sentiment is shared by everybody in the auditorium today. We don't anticipate that's going to be necessary."

Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., also said it is unlikely to see troops deployed to Venezuela. Sen. Markwayne Mullin, R-Okla., said there were no boots on the ground "right now" but the U.S. has contingency plans around the world "just in case something does happen."

President Donald Trump has said he is prepared to send American service members into Venezuela if interim President Delcy Rodriguez stops cooperating with

SEE TROOPS ON PAGE 8

RELATED
US would face hurdles if it wants 'boots on ground'
Page 8

BUSINESS/WEATHER

EUROPE GAS PRICES

Country	Super E10	Super unleaded	Super plus	Diesel
Germany	$3.400	$3.775	$4.143	$4.127
Change in price	..	..	..	..
Netherlands	..	$4.935	$5.516	$5.424
Change in price	..	..	..	..
U.K.	..	$3.812	$4.180	$3.917
Change in price	..	..	..	..
Azores	..	..	$4.043	..
Change in price	..	..	..	..
Turkey	..	..	$3.893	$3.630*
Change in price	..	..	..	..

Fuel prices are updated daily. These prices are effective Jan. 9.

PACIFIC GAS PRICES

Country	Super E10	Super unleaded	Super plus	Diesel
Japan	..	$3.799	..	$3.539
Change in price	..	-2.0 cents	..	-2.0 cents
Okinawa	$3.149	..	..	$3.539
Change in price	-15.0 cents	..	..	-2.0 cents
South Korea	$2.879	..	$3.829	$3.569
Change in price	-2.0 cents	..	-2.0 cents	-2.0 cents
Guam	$2.909**	$3.489	$3.859	..
Change in price	-2.0 cents	-2.0 cents	-2.0 cents	..

*DieselEFD **Midgrade
Pacific prices for the week of Jan. 9-15

EXCHANGE RATES

Military rates

Euro costs (Jan. 9)	0.84
British pound (Jan. 9)	$1.31
Japanese yen (Jan. 9)	152.00
South Korean won (Jan. 9)	1,413.00

Commercial rates

Bahrain (Dinar)	0.3744
Britain (Pound)	1.3432
Canada (Dollar)	1.3859
China (Yuan)	6.9965
Denmark (Krone)	6.4059
Egypt (Pound)	47.2588
Euro	0.8573
Hong Kong (Dollar)	7.7922
Hungary (Forint)	329.79
Israel (Shekel)	3.1706
Japan (Yen)	156.98
Kuwait (Dinar)	0.3068
Norway (Krone)	10.1057
Philippines (Peso)	59.13
Poland (Zloty)	3.61
Saudi Arabia (Riyal)	3.7458
Singapore (Dollar)	1.2847
South Korea (Won)	1,451.91
Switzerland (Franc)	0.7981
Thailand (Baht)	31.53
Turkey (NewLira)	43.0442

(Military exchange rates are those available to customers at military banking facilities in the country of issuance for Japan, South Korea, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. For nonlocal currency exchange rates (i.e., purchasing British pounds in Germany), check with your local military banking facility. Commercial rates are interbank rates provided for reference when buying currency. All figures are foreign currencies to one dollar, except for the British pound, which is represented in dollars-to-pound, and the euro, which is dollars-to-euro.)

INTEREST RATES

Prime rate	6.75
Interest Rates Discount rate	3.75
Federal funds market rate	3.62
3-month bill	3.60
30-year bond	4.83

WEATHER OUTLOOK

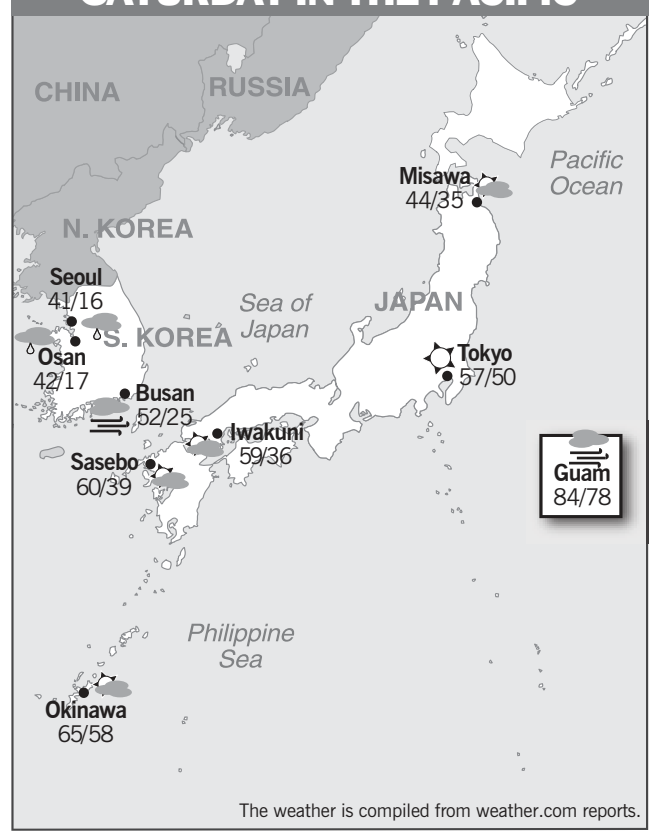
FRIDAY IN THE MIDDLE EAST



FRIDAY IN EUROPE



SATURDAY IN THE PACIFIC



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MILITARY

Contract could extend B-52H life to 2060s

By Gary Warner
Stars and Stripes

Boeing received a $2 billion contract last month to start work on extending the life of 60-year-old U.S. Air Force B-52H Stratofortress bombers into the 2060s.

The program to upgrade all 76 B-52Hs is expected to cost $48.6 billion. The Air Force will redesignate the bombers as B-52J.

The $2 billion contract awarded on Dec. 23 is to upgrade two aircraft with new engines, avionics and other systems, which can be tested before the rest of the planes are converted.

Since entering service with the Air Force in 1955, the B-52 has been powered by eight TF-33 Pratt & Whitney turbofan engines. Pratt & Whitney has said it could no longer support maintenance on the engines after 2030.

Under the Commercial Engine Replacement Program, the Air Force sought new powerplants already used in civilian aircraft that could be converted to use in the B-52.

The winning plan calls for eight Rolls-Royce F-130 engines used in the Gulfstream G650 business jet and in the military variants of the light jet transport, the C-37.

The plan would also upgrade brakes and wheels, improve avionics and communications and convert some remaining analog dials in the bombers' cockpit to digital displays.

The upgrade is expected to keep the B-52H — delivered in 1961 and 1962 — flying as late as the 2060s. The Air Force said some planes could surpass 100 years in service.



U.S. Air Force

A B-52H with possible weapons loads on display at Barksdale Air Force Base in 2006.

The Air Force wants to keep the B-52 because it can carry over 70,000 pounds of weaponry more than 8,600 miles without refueling.

The Air Force plans to retire its B-1 Lancer and B-2 Spirit bombers by the end of the decade while it receives about 100 Northrop Grumman B-21 Raider stealth bombers.

The B-52 was initially built as a high-altitude heavy bomber to replace the Convair B-36 Peacemaker strategic bomber. It could reach targets in the Soviet Union, more than 8,000 miles away.

In its conventional bomber role, it served in the Vietnam War, earning the nickname BUFF — for "Big Ugly Fat Fella," though variations substituting an expletive for "Fella" were common.

Flying at subsonic speeds with no stealth capability, the B-52 has shifted to a role as a launch platform for stand-off conventional and nuclear missiles.

"The B-52 is capable of dropping or launching the widest array of weapons in the U.S. inventory," according to an Air Force profile of the bomber. "This includes gravity bombs, cluster bombs, precision guided missiles and joint direct attack munitions."

The B-52Hs are currently assigned to the 5th Bomb Wing at Minot Air Force Base, in North Dakota, and the 2nd Bomb Wing at Barksdale Air Force Base, in Louisiana. Both wings are part of Air Force Global Strike Command. The Air Force Reserve Command's 307th Bomb Wing at Barksdale also operates the B-52H.

The first B-52 flew in 1952 and was delivered to the Air Force in 1955. The Air Force received 755 B-52s in total, with the last models — the B-52H — delivered in 1961 and 1962.

Work on the B-52 upgrades will be done in Seattle, Oklahoma City, San Antonio and Indianapolis, the Pentagon said. The work is expected to be completed in 2033.

Trump seeks $1.5T for defense in 2027

By Aamer Madhani and Konstantin Toropin
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump on Wednesday proposed setting U.S. military spending at $1.5 trillion in 2027, citing "troubled and dangerous times."

Trump called for the massive surge in spending days after he ordered a U.S. military operation to capture Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro and spirit him out of the country to face drug trafficking charges in the United States. U.S. forces continue to mass in the Caribbean Sea.

The 2026 military budget is set at $901 billion.

Trump in recent days has also called for taking over the Danish territory of Greenland for national security reasons and has suggested he's open to carrying out military operations in Colombia. Secretary of State Marco Rubio has ominously warned that longtime adversary Cuba "is in trouble."

"This will allow us to build the 'Dream Military' that we have long been entitled to and, more importantly, that will keep us SAFE and SECURE, regardless of foe," Trump said in a posting on Truth Social announcing his proposal.

The military just received a large boost of some $175 billion in the GOP's "big, beautiful bill" of tax breaks and spending reductions that Trump signed into law last year.



Emily Hazelbaker /U.S. Marines

U.S. Marines start-up Utility Task Vehicles in Camp Santiago, Puerto Rico. The president has proposed setting the defense budget at $1.5 trillion for 2027.

Insisting on more funding for the Pentagon is almost certain to run into resistance from Democrats who work to maintain parity between changes in defense and non-defense spending. But it's also sure to draw objections from the GOP's deficit hawks who have pushed back against larger military spending.

But Trump said he feels comfortable surging spending on the military because of increased revenue created by his administration through tariffs imposed since his return to office.

The U.S. government collected gross revenues of $288.5 billion last year from tariffs and other excise taxes, up from $98.3 billion in 2024, according to the Bipartisan Policy Center.

That's a meaningful increase in revenues from taxing imports. But it's not enough to cover the various promises made by Trump, who has said the tariffs can also cover dividends to taxpayers, pay down the national debt and, now, cover increased spending on the military.

LaNeve confirmed as next Army vice chief

By John Vandiver
Stars and Stripes

The Senate this week confirmed Lt. Gen. Christopher LaNeve to be the Army's next vice chief of staff, a position that comes with a fourth star.

The promotion of LaNeve, who currently serves as the senior military adviser to Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, was approved Tuesday.



LaNeve

Hegseth called him a "generational leader" and said his "decades of operational experience and will accelerate excellence at every echelon."

LaNeve will replace Gen. James Mingus, who has held the vice chief posting for two years. It wasn't announced when LaNeve will step into his new job.

LaNeve's ascent to the Army's No. 2 position amounts to a fast rise through the ranks.

He did a brief stint as commander of Eighth Army in South Korea before being selected by Hegseth in April to serve as his military adviser at the Pentagon.

Commanding Eighth Army is usually a three- or even four-year tour, but LaNeve moved on after just one year in command.

Before that, LaNeve commanded the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, N.C. He also led the 7th Army Training Command in Grafenwoehr, Germany.

MILITARY

Federal protection mission comes to an end

Troops return home from deployments mired in legal battles

BY ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

All troops assigned to federal protection missions in Los Angeles, Chicago and Portland, Ore., are returning home, putting an end to deployments that were mired in legal battles even before some cities saw service members in the streets, the military said Tuesday.

Roughly 500 National Guard troops were still deployed among the three cities as of November, though they have spent the past month training and planning — not fulfilling the operational mission of protecting federal buildings and personnel, according to U.S. Northern Command, the joint command overseeing them.

The command did not respond Wednesday about how many troops remain on the mission or the timeline to finish closing up operations.



JON SOUCY/U.S. Army

Sgt. 1st Class Andres Agag with the California Army National Guard pushes against the shields of other unit members while playing the role of an aggressive demonstrator during riot and crowd-control training in June at Joint Forces Training Base, Calif.

Troops were deployed during protests of heightened immigration enforcement operations that have included surging federal assets into cities to detain people suspected of entering the United States without authorization, which began after President Donald Trump came into office last year.

Though troops did conduct operations in Los Angeles over the summer, troops in Chicago and Portland never got the chance because of legal battles. On Dec. 31, Trump announced he would stop pushing for the deployments to move forward.

Troops are also deployed to other U.S. cities, including Washington, D.C., but those missions do not fall within the scope of Northern Command.

Trump sent troops first to Los Angeles in June as protesters marched outside of a federal building following immigration raids on area businesses. At its peak, more than 4,000 National Guard members and active-duty Marines were in the city.

Guard members also protected federal agents as they made immigration-related arrests in the area. By July, just 250 troops remained and eventually shifted to conducting training instead of operations.

Trump then sent troops to Portland in September and Chicago a month later, citing rising crime rates as a factor. However, those deployments were immediately caught up in lawsuits and troops did not actually get into the cities. Instead they conducted training as they waited out the legal battle.

"We will come back, perhaps in a much different and stronger form, when crime begins to soar again," Trump said on social media.

Review: Pentagon says it will determine 'effectiveness' of women in combat roles

FROM PAGE 1

Congress received the memo Tuesday, said an official, who was not authorized to comment publicly on the matter and spoke on the condition of anonymity.

"Contrary to the misguided beliefs of this administration, women have always made our military stronger and are more qualified to serve in their roles than Pete Hegseth is to serve as Secretary of Defense," Sen. Tammy Duckworth, D-Ill., a combat veteran who served in that state's Army National Guard, said in a statement. "This shadowy review effort from [the Defense Department] is clearly intended to shrink the number of women who bravely serve in combat roles, which would be devastating to our military readiness. There is no U.S. military as we know it without the incredible women who have earned their places in their units."

Hegseth, a 45-year-old Army National Guard veteran and former Fox News TV host, drew fierce criticism leading up to his confirmation hearing for saying women have a place in the military but not in ground-based combat positions in special operations, artillery, infantry and armor units.

"I'm straight up just saying we should not have women in combat roles," he argued on a podcast in November 2024. "It hasn't made us more effective, hasn't made us more lethal, has made fighting more complicated."

Before senators in January, Hegseth denied he ever disparaged women and said his concern was with what he believes are slipping standards and gender quotas. He said he would conduct a review of the requirements for combat positions if confirmed.

"In ways direct and indirect, overt and subtle, standards have been changed inside infantry training units, [Army] Ranger school, infantry battalions to ensure that commanders meet quotas to have a certain number of female officers or female enlisted," Hegseth said during his confirmation.

Today, thousands of women serve in Army infantry, armor and artillery jobs, hundreds are in combat roles in the Marines and dozens are in special operations positions across the military.

Kris Fuhr, a West Point graduate who worked on gender integration for the Army Forces Command at Fort Bragg, N.C., said the Army gathered data from 2019 to 2023 found "no evidence of any degradation to unit readiness or effectiveness due to the presence of women."

"The reviews have been done. This is a search for a problem that does not exist," Fuhr said in a statement.

Women fighting on the battlefield can be traced to the Revolutionary War, when Margaret Corbin fired a cannon to defend Fort Washington against invading British troops and became the first woman to receive a pension from Congress due to injury. But for much of U.S. military history, women were confined to clerical and medical roles.

That began to change with the more prominent participation of women in the Gulf War, which prompted Congress in the early 1990s to repeal a 1948 statute that had excluded women from positions that could be exposed to combat. By 1993, women gained the right to fly in combat aircraft and serve on combat ships.

More than 20 years later, amid the U.S. war in Afghanistan, then-Defense Secretary Ash Carter ordered the full integration of women into the armed forces, without exceptions. The 2015 decision, resisted most by the Marine Corps, opened about 230,000 combat positions that were previously off limits for women.



ANGELA WILCOX/U.S. Marine Corps

U.S. Marine Sgt. Angela Scolari, front, fires a rifle during an all-female marksmanship subject matter expert exchange between U.S. Marines and Jordanian soldiers during Intrepid Maven 25.1 in Al-Quwayrah, Jordan, in October 2024.

The military has long had what is largely a two-part system for physical fitness standards — routine annual fitness based on gender and age or more grueling standards for specific combat, special operations, infantry, armor, pararescue jumpers and other jobs. For some combat roles, the standards are the same for various occupations regardless of age or gender.

Since leading the Pentagon, Hegseth has sought to make "gender-neutral" or "male-level" standards for physical fitness. During his address before top military brass at Quantico in September, Hegseth said it is not about preventing women from serving.

"But when it comes to any job that requires physical power to perform in combat, those physical standards must be high and gender neutral," the secretary said.

"If women can make it, excellent, if not, it is what it is. If that means no women qualify for some combat jobs, so be it. That is not the intent, but it could be the result."

MILITARY

Ceremony is part of Army's shift to mobile brigade combat teams

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

GRAFENWOEHR, Germany — The Army in Europe took a major step toward a more agile, tech-savvy force this week as it deactivated one storied cavalry squadron and activated a parachute infantry battalion in its place.

Soldiers of the 173rd Airborne Brigade on Thursday deactivated its 1st Squadron, 91st Cavalry Regiment, and replaced it with the reactivated 3rd Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, during a ceremony at Tower Barracks.

"This gives us a lot more tactical flexibility," battalion commander Lt. Col. Austin Commons said afterward. "We can move around the battlefield a lot more quickly. It's reducing soldier fatigue by getting them into light vehicles, but then our mission, our purpose, doesn't really change."

At Thursday's ceremony, the cavalry squadron's colors were rolled up and cased, and the battalion's colors were unveiled as hundreds of Sky soldiers in red berets stood at parade rest.

Commons paid homage to the lineage of both units and looked ahead to a stark, futuristic battlefield.

"A paratrooper in this formation today is just as likely to kill an enemy by flying an explosive drone into their position than by shooting them with a rifle," he said. "The U.S. Army must and will transform to dominate this battlefield."

The move is part of a modernization push called the Army Transformation Initiative, which will see the service transition from infantry brigade combat teams to mobile brigade combat teams.

As part of the endeavor to transition from overseas cavalry squadrons, cavalry scouts will reclassify as infantry.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth ordered the broad restructuring of the Army in a memo last year.

The order sought a reduction in the number of generals, as well as merged headquarters commands and prioritized drone swarms to counter peer adversaries like China.



MATTHEW M. BURKE/Stars and Stripes

Lt. Col. Austin Commons, left, commander of the newly reactivated 3rd Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, unfurls the unit's colors during a ceremony in Grafenwoehr, Germany, on Thursday.

A day later, Army Chief of Staff Gen. Randy George and Army Secretary Daniel Driscoll unveiled their plans in a joint letter.

The transformation initiative emphasizes the use of a vast range of drones. It cut hundreds of jobs from Army headquarters, required the leaner mobile brigade combat teams and shrank attack helicopter formations.

Fourteen active-duty and 20 National Guard infantry brigade combat teams will make the switch to the more mobile units over the next two years, the Congressional Research Service said in a report on Dec. 9.

The new teams will see their force reduced by 2,600 soldiers to a total of 1,900 apiece.

Individual infantry battalion assault companies will be replaced by multipurpose companies consisting of the battalion's mortar and scout platoons.

Another impending change is the creation of a unit called an "effects platoon," which will operate counter-drone systems and the battalion's primary loitering munitions, the report said.

The 173rd Airborne Brigade — which is based in Vicenza, Italy, and has battalions in Grafenwoehr — has been at the forefront of the Army's technology revolution in recent years.

They have tested autonomous vehicles and drones and even made history in August when they conducted the Army's first drone-on-drone kill during a technology summit in Alabama.

Recently reclassified infantryman Spc. Zavien Brewer said Thursday that he is optimistic about the change.

It will mean less sneaking around for reconnaissance and more direct engagement with the enemy, he said.

"It's a scary thing to look at, if you look at the wars going on right now; it's a lot of drones," Brewer said. "It's a big change, and we need to adapt. ... We're going to find our way to fight."

Poll: Most in US oppose a potential Greenland takeover

BY JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

Americans overwhelmingly oppose a possible U.S. military takeover of Greenland, according to a new poll.

Respondents in the YouGov survey conducted Wednesday also had little enthusiasm for the idea of a U.S. purchase of the Danish island territory in the north Atlantic Ocean.

Nearly three-quarters of those polled, 73%, said they're against using force to take over the island, with a majority of both Republicans and Democrats opposed to the idea. Only 8% said they favor using the U.S. military to seize the island.

Opinions on whether the United States should buy Greenland were more muddled, with divisions along party lines.

While 45% overall of those polled opposed an acquisition, Democratic respondents were far less open to the idea than Republicans.

Results among the former were 75% against, whereas only 14% of the latter rejected the idea.

Overall, 28% of those polled expressed approval of an American purchase of the island, with 51% of Republicans onboard, compared with 10% of Democrats. Meanwhile, 27% were undecided.

President Donald Trump's push to take control of Greenland has rattled NATO ally Denmark and other members of the bloc.

Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen said Monday that if the United States were to take the territory by force, that would mean the end of the NATO alliance.

White House spokeswoman Karoline Leavitt told reporters Wednesday that the idea of purchasing the territory is being discussed by Trump and his national security team.

Alarms have been raised domestically as well, with a number of lawmakers speaking out against the notion.

"When Denmark and Greenland make it clear that Greenland is not for sale, the United States must honor its treaty obligations," Sens. Thom Tillis, R-N.C., and Jeanne Shaheen, D-N.H., said in a joint statement Tuesday.

"Any suggestion that our nation would subject a fellow NATO ally to coercion or external pressure undermines the very principles of self-determination that our Alliance exists to defend," they said.

Republican Sen. Mitch McConnell of Kentucky said Wednesday that the way to strengthen the American position in the Arctic is through bolstering alliances already in place.

"Threats and intimidation by U.S. officials over American ownership of Greenland are as unseemly as they are counterproductive," McConnell said in a statement.

"And the use of force to seize the sovereign democratic territory of one of America's most loyal and capable allies would be an especially catastrophic act of strategic self-harm to America and its global influence," he added.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio said Wednesday he would meet with Danish officials next week to discuss Greenland.

After complaints, Army resumes hiring of religious support staff

BY LARA KORTE
Stars and Stripes

KAISERSLAUTERN, Germany — The Army will resume hiring religious support workers for the chaplain corps after canceling their contracts last year as part of a financial review.

The loss of assistants in assorted roles related to ministry work prompted outcry from Catholic leaders and some overseas military families.

The service recently posted initial solicitations on a federal contracting website indicating plans to fill several positions.

The listings include a Catholic pastoral life coordinator and religious education coordinator for U.S. Army Garrison Bavaria.

Hiring will resume while the investigation continues, the Army said in response to questions.

Last year, U.S. Army Installation Management Command canceled the contracts for religious support work ranging from music services to religious education and other administrative duties.

The cancellation stemmed from concerns that the job descriptions in the contracts were too similar to the duties outlined for chaplains or other religious support staff.

It is "strictly prohibited to use a different funding stream to contract for tasks and services already included in validated manning requirements," IMCOM wrote in a March memo.

Although all religious denominations were affected, pushback was particularly strong among Catholics.

In Kaiserslautern, priests who serve in the largest U.S. military community overseas said the inability to hire a pastoral life coordinator had them stretched thin.

Duties of that position include helping priests keep records of baptisms, marriages and other sacraments performed overseas with the diocese.

Archbishop Timothy Broglio, the head of the Archdiocese for the Military Services, said at the time the cancellations were announced that Catholic ministry and outreach rely heavily on the contract support workers.

He argued that they could not be adequately replaced by other Army religious support staff.

"In canceling these contracts, the Army over-burdens Catholic chaplains, harms chapel communities, and impedes the constitutional guarantee of the free exercise of religion especially for Catholics," Broglio wrote in an October letter.

Catholic priests make up about 5.5% of all Army chaplains, making it difficult for them to meet the needs of the 26% of soldiers who are Catholic, Broglio said.

The Army's official confirmation of the reinstatement of the religious support contracts follows a reassurance that Broglio said he had received from service officials last year.

PACIFIC

South Korea: Exercises with US to proceed

BY YOOJIN LEE
Stars and Stripes

The major military exercises carried out by South Korea and the United States will go on as they do each year, South Korean Defense Minister Ahn Gyu-back said this week in a televised interview.

South Korean President Lee Jae-myung in November reportedly raised the possibility of cutting back on the drills. Lee at the time said Seoul may consider scaling back training with U.S. forces to reduce tensions with Pyongyang, according to a Nov. 24 report in NK News.

"Exercises are lifeline of the military," Ahn said during a Tuesday appearance on Yonhap News TV. Military training is a practice, not an exercise in words, he said.

The allies hold two large-scale exercises each year — Freedom Shield in the spring and Ulchi Freedom Shield in summer. The training will take place this year as planned with no major changes, Ahn said.

"At this time, we plan to conduct the combined exercise as scheduled," he said. "For now, South Korea and the U.S. are thoroughly preparing in accordance with the roadmap without any major changes."

Lee, leader of the liberal Democratic Party in South Korea, took office in June following his conservative predecessor Yoon Suk Yeol's impeachment and removal from office over his failed attempt to impose martial law in December 2024.

A spokeswoman for U.S. Forces Korea said the first exercise is scheduled as usual.

"The Republic of Korea and the United States, in collaboration with United Nations Command, is scheduled to conduct Exercise Freedom Shield, an annual defense-focused exercise," said Jamie Choi, a spokeswoman for USFK, Combined Forces Command and U.N. Command. Republic of Korea is South Korea's formal name.

The training is designed to strengthen the U.S.-South Korean alliance, enhance their combined defense posture and improve joint readiness, Choi said by email Thursday.

Exact dates for the exercise will come later, she said. The U.S. typically does not release details about the drills, including locations, units or training activities.

Ahn, however, left open the possibility of adjustments, saying decisions could be made if U.S.-North Korea talks take place in April.

President Donald Trump said he plans to visit China in April, according to one of his Truth Social posts from November.

Trump while on a round of visits to Japan and South Korea in late October hoped for a meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un that did not materialize. Trump at the time told reporters he would come back for such a meeting.

Ahn on Tuesday toured the headquarters of Combined Forces Command at Camp Humphreys, about 40 miles south of Seoul, the Ministry of National Defense said in a news release that day.

Ahn chose Humphreys as his first on-site inspection of the year because firm, combined defense readiness is more important than ever, the ministry said.

During the visit, Ahn discussed security issues with U.S. Army Gen. Xavier Brunson, commander of USFK, Combined Forces Command and U.N. Command, according to the release.

"Amid the rapidly changing security environment, the combat readiness posture of 'Fight Tonight' must not falter even for a moment," Ahn said in the release.

US delivers 188 tons of aid to storm-battered Sri Lanka

BY WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

U.S. military personnel delivered roughly 188 tons of relief supplies to Sri Lanka in the week following the devastating Cyclone Ditwah in late November, the Air Force said in a news release Tuesday.

The U.S. rapidly deployed a pair of C-130J Super Hercules cargo planes from Yokota Air Base, Japan, that carried 70 personnel and relief supplies to aid hard-to-reach areas of the island nation off the southeast tip of India.

Heavy rains from the cyclone caused flooding and mudslides after the storm made landfall on Nov. 27.

As of Dec. 31, the disaster had displaced more than 205,000 people, damaged or destroyed almost 119,000 homes, killed 644 people and left 175 missing, according to the United Nations International Organization for Migration.

Twelve C-130J sorties from Katunayake Air Base — Sri Lanka's largest air force base — delivered 377,150 pounds of aid, which included caches of food, drinking water, shelters, emergency first-aid items and communications equipment, the Air Force said. The mission was supported by the 36th Contingency Response at Kadena Air Base, Okinawa.

The relief was aimed at the hardest-hit regions of Ampara, Anuradhapura, Jaffna, Mattala, Ratmalana and Trincomalee, according to the release.

The commander of Pacific Air Forces, Gen. Kevin Schneider, touted the aid as a testament to the strength of America's growing partnership with Sri Lanka.

"By working closely with our Sri Lankan counterparts, we were able to support relief efforts for communities affected by the cyclone and deliver critical assistance where it was needed most," Schneider said in the news release. "This collaboration underscores our shared commitment to saving lives and supporting one another in times of need."

The rapid deployment was possible because of a November defense agreement between the two nations that formalized cooperation in disaster response and relief, among other aspects such as joint training and cyber defense.



JACOB WOOD/U.S. Air Force

American and Sri Lankan personnel offload humanitarian relief supplies last month in Trichomalee, Sri Lanka.

That pact allowed the U.S. to issue a $2.1 million humanitarian relief package within 72 hours of the cyclone making landfall, the Air Force said.

That package included logistics equipment such as fuel trucks, forklifts, lights, generators, parts and portable cargo-loaders, the Air Force said.

No easy resolution to China-Japan rift over Taiwan, academics say

BY SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

TOKYO — China and Japan have few options available to resolve increasing acrimony over the Japanese prime minister's remarks about her country's response to a potential attack on Taiwan, two academics said Thursday.

Masayuki Masuda, who leads the China division at Japan's National Institute for Defense Studies, and John Chuan Tiong Lim, a research fellow at Tokyo University's Institute for Advanced Studies on Asia, discussed the deadlock at the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan.

Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi on Nov. 7 told the Diet that a Chinese blockade or invasion of Taiwan could trigger a Japanese military response.

"If it involves the use of warships and the use of force, I believe that this could constitute an existential threat," she told lawmakers.

Takaichi's statement did not alter Japanese policy, but it provoked a strong reaction in Beijing, Masuda told reporters.

China in response reduced commercial flights to Japan, reimposed a ban on Japanese seafood and restricted tourism. On Tuesday, it banned exports to Japan of dual-use goods that can serve military purposes.

Takaichi in December said Tokyo seeks dialogue with Beijing and a "constructive and stable relationship," The Asahi Shimbun reported Dec. 18. But her earlier statement also reflects the long-standing government position, she said, according to the newspaper.

China offers no compromise other than the withdrawal of Takaichi's statement, Masuda told reporters.

"Sino-Japanese relations show no sign of abating," he said. "Beijing has not prepared any feasible exit strategy."

Takaichi has broad domestic support in her government and among the Japanese public, Masuda added.

Beijing could improve relations with Tokyo if it chose to, Lim said.

The two nations have resolved past disputes reasonably quickly, although a rift over Japan's nationalization of the Senkaku Islands, near Taiwan, lasted from 2012 to 2014, he said.

The current crisis will likely persist until President Donald Trump visits China in April and may last until November's Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting in Shenzhen, China, Lim said.

During the dispute, Japan may curtail engagement with Taiwan, including diplomatic visits and coast guard training, he said.

China will continue using its military to signal Japan, Masuda said.

In December, for example, a Chinese fighter aimed its fire-control radar at a pair of Japanese aircraft over international waters, according to the Japanese government. Masuda said he expects that sort of activity to increase.

"China is trying to create a new normal to send a more direct message by showing military muscle to Tokyo," he said.

MILITARY



MATTHEW RYAN/U.S. Army

A battery of launch tubes for the Raytheon Coyote Block 3 Launch Effects drones are set up at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash.

Trump threatens to cut off Raytheon, others from DOD over stock buybacks

BY GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

President Donald Trump on Wednesday slammed defense contractors, particularly Raytheon, for profiting from weapons contracts by buying back stock for top corporate officers.

Posting on Truth Social, his social media site, Trump said the companies should be speeding up weapons production and investing in their facilities rather than paying dividends or rewarding executives.

"Defense Companies are not producing our Great Military Equipment rapidly enough and, once produced, not maintaining it properly or quickly," Trump posted.

Neither the White House nor Department of Defense responded to requests for more information.

Trump's initial post, which came as the stock market was closing on the East Coast, sent defense stocks lower.

Trump singled out RTX, the parent company of Raytheon based in Arlington, Va., for criticism, threatening to cut off Pentagon purchases.

"I have been informed by the Department of War that Defense Contractor, Raytheon, has been the least responsive to the needs of the Department of War," Trump posted. "Either Raytheon steps up, and starts investing in more upfront Investment like Plants and Equipment, or they will no longer be doing business with Department of War."

Trump criticized defense contractors for allowing executives to buy back stock at higher levels in order to profit from military sales.

"Also, if Raytheon wants further business with the United States Government, under no circumstances will they be allowed to do any additional Stock Buybacks, where they have spent Tens of Billions of Dollars, until they are able to get their act together," he said in his post.

RTX did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Shares of Northrop Grumman fell 5.5%, Lockheed Martin fell 4.8%, and General Dynamics fell 3.6% during afternoon trading in New York. Raytheon fell 2%.

Raytheon in August signed a 20-year, $50 billion contract to "sustain" the Patriot anti-missile program.

The company also makes Standard Missiles used on U.S. Navy ships, AMRAAM radar-guided air-to-air missiles, and portions of the Tomahawk cruise missile. In addition to the U.S., Raytheon has sold weapons systems around the world.

RTX also owns aircraft engine maker Pratt & Whitney, which makes engines for many military aircraft, including the F-35 Lightning II fighter jet.

Okinawa-based soldier succumbs to injuries from early December car crash

BY BRIAN MCELHINEY
Stars and Stripes

An American soldier died three weeks after he was critically injured last month in a single-vehicle crash on Okinawa, according to the U.S. Army.

Pvt. Tristan Murray, 18, of Knoxville, Tenn., died Dec. 26, U.S. Army Japan spokeswoman Maj. LeeAnn Saguicio said Thursday.

Murray was found unconscious with "significant injuries to his lungs, brain, as well as bone fractures to his right leg," Capt. Sean William Richardson, spokesman for the 10th Support Group at Torii Station on Okinawa, said Thursday. The incident remains under investigation.

Murray served as a satellite communication system operator with the 78th Signal Battalion on Fort Buckner, Saguicio said. He enlisted Oct. 21, 2024, and completed basic training and advanced individual training as a satellite communication systems specialist at Fort Gordon, Ga.

On Dec. 3, Murray was in a Japanese mini truck northbound on Route 58 in the Kaneku district of Kadena town when the vehicle crashed, the Okinawa Prefectural Police said at the time. They believe the truck struck an electrical pole.

Murray was taken to U.S. Naval Hospital Okinawa in critical condition, Saguicio said last month.

Murray had no pulse when first responders took him to the hospital, police said.

Oahu receives replica of DC's Vietnam wall

BY WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

A three-quarter scale replica of the iconic Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., is coming to Oahu for the first time for a six-day exhibition beginning next week.

The Wall That Heals carries the etched names of more than 58,000 service members killed during the Vietnam War, as does the original memorial that was dedicated on Nov. 13, 1982.

Over the decades since then, the memorial has become a source of remembrance and healing for veterans of the war as well as family and friends who lost loved ones in the decade-long conflict.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, which built the original memorial, unveiled The Wall That Heals in 1996, and it has been displayed in more than 800 communities across the nation since then.

The replica is 375 feet long and comprises 140 name panels made of synthetic granite.

"The traveling exhibit provides thousands of veterans who have been unable to cope with the prospect of facing The Wall to find the strength and courage to do so within their own communities, thus allowing the healing process to begin," the organization's website states.

The Wall That Heals will be displayed on the campus of the University of Hawaii-West Oahu in Kapolei, about 20 miles from the university's main campus in central Honolulu.

An opening ceremony is scheduled for 10 a.m. on Jan. 14, but the public can begin viewing it as it is assembled a day earlier, according to Sue Bauer, who along with husband Eddie Freeman, a Vietnam War veteran, spearheaded the effort to bring it to Oahu.

The couple worked as volunteers during the wall's exhibit on the islands of Maui and Hawaii in January 2024 and have since become determined to bring it to the state's most populous island, on which they live.

"We just kind of said, you know, this has to come to Oahu," Bauer said in a phone interview Tuesday. "And we just made it a mission. We've been working on it for a while, but we didn't really get final approval until September."

With the help of a local Elks Club, they established the nonprofit The Wall That Heals Oahu 2026 and navigated through a lengthy and competitive application process.

The University of Hawaii quickly agreed to host the exhibit and was instrumental in getting approval from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, Bauer said.

The transportation firm Pasha Hawaii agreed to ship the exhibit to Oahu for free, she said.

An army of volunteers will oversee the wall 24 hours a day during its exhibition, she said.

The 53-foot-long trailer in which the panels are carried is converted into an education center during the display period, Bauer said.

Digital displays provide a timeline of America's involvement in the Vietnam War. U.S. troops were directly involved in combat from 1965 to 1973, and American military advisers remained in South Vietnam until it fell to North Vietnamese forces in 1975.

The trailer also showcases service members from Hawaii who died in the war and certain artifacts left at the original wall.



JOHN QUINN/U.S. Army

Volunteers carry a panel from The Wall That Heals at the Devens Reserve Forces Training Area in Massachusetts on July 24.

VENEZUELA

‘Boots on the ground’ would be a challenge

Analyst: At least 50,000 troops would be needed

BY GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

President Donald Trump said Tuesday that the U.S. is “not at war with Venezuela” after Delta Force soldiers on Saturday extracted President Nicolas Maduro to face drug charges in New York, but he is watching to see what actions are taken by acting president Delcy Rodriguez.

Trump has said, though, that he could put “boots on the ground” in the oil-rich South American nation to enforce his demands.

An invasion or occupation, like past U.S. actions in Afghanistan, Panama and Grenada, would pose significant challenges. The U.S. would need to increase its military commitment to take over the country by force, some analysts say.

“Current assets are inadequate for larger and riskier operations,” said Mark Cancian, a former Marine officer who is now an analyst for the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington, D.C., think tank.

The Pentagon confirmed that more than 15,000 U.S. personnel were deployed in the region for Operation Absolute Resolve on Saturday. Though it has assembled an armada of ships and has enough aircraft to ensure air superiority over Venezuela, Cancian said a minimum of 50,000 troops would be needed for Americans to force their way onto land and occupy key sites such as oil production facilities.

“From a doctrine standpoint, a commander would probably ask for something more like 150,000 or 200,000 troops,” Cancian said.



ALEJANDRO GRANADILLO/AP

U.S. F-35 fighter jets are parked on the tarmac as military personnel walk among the aircraft at José Aponte de la Torre Airport in Ceiba, Puerto Rico, on Jan. 3.

Two doctrines frame U.S. policy:

The Monroe Doctrine, enunciated by President James Monroe in 1823, asserts that only the United States should have influence over countries in the Western Hemisphere. Trump has repeatedly pointed to the doctrine as the touchstone of American international policy.

The other key idea is the Powell Doctrine, named after former Army Gen. Colin Powell, who served as secretary of state under President George W. Bush. It demands clear objectives, overwhelming force, and public support for military action.

“Decide what you are trying to achieve politically,” Powell said in 2009, “and apply force decisively.”

Trump has dispatched the USS Gerald R. Ford and its Carrier Strike Group 12 to the region, deploying F/A-18 Hornet attack squadrons and EA-18 Growler electronic warfare aircraft. The group includes three Arleigh Burke-class destroyers: the USS Winston S. Churchill, USS Bainbridge and USS Mahan.

The Iwo Jima Amphibious Ready Group operates in the Caribbean, featuring the USS Iwo Jima and two Landing Platform Docks — the USS Fort Lauderdale and USS San Antonio — carrying 2,200 Marines from the 22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit. Additional destroyers and two Ticonderoga-class cruisers, the USS Gettysburg and USS Lake Erie, bolster the force.

In response to Venezuelan F-16 flights near U.S. forces last year, the Pentagon deployed 10 F-35 Lightning II fighters to Puerto Rico. The M/V Ocean Trader, a special operations ship, is also in the area.

Arrayed against the United States is what is left of the Venezuelan military after Saturday’s attack. The Pentagon has not released an after-action report, but satellite images show strikes on military installations and command centers.

Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino, a Maduro loyalist, remains at the head of the Venezuelan armed forces. He called the American action “a cowardly kidnapping,” but on Tuesday issued a statement endorsing the Supreme Court ruling naming Rodríguez acting president for 90 days.

“I call on the people of Venezuela to resume economic, work, and educational activities,” Padrino said. “The homeland must follow its constitutional course.”

Venezuela’s armed forces include 123,000 active-duty personnel and 8,000 reservists. Prior to Saturday, Maduro claimed he could also call on millions of civilian militias.

The International Institute for Strategic Studies, a London-based defense analysis organization, describes Venezuela’s military as a regional power, equipped with Russian T-72 and French AMX-10 tanks, Sukhoi Su-30 fighters, U.S.-made F-16s, Mi-35 attack helicopters, and Mi-17 transports. Air defenses feature Russian S-300 long-range missiles, Pechora and Buk systems, and shoulder-launched weapons. Naval forces are limited to small patrol vessels and one Spanish-built coastal defense ship.

Drone capability remains uncertain, though ties with Iran suggest access to Mohajer and Shahed drones.

Global Firepower ranks Venezuela 50th in overall military strength, with a defense budget of $4.09 billion. The U.S. ranks first, spending $895 billion on the military.

Cancian said that any move to occupy Venezuela would likely take weeks or months to move the number of troops, vehicles and equipment needed to a staging area such as Puerto Rico.

“There could be additional missile or air strikes if the White House believes the Venezuelan government is not cooperating,” Cancian said. “But if the U.S. were to go all in and ‘put boots on the ground’ as President Trump suggests, it would not be a surprise. It would take a lot of planning and movement. You’d see, say, ships from Norfolk (Va.) going to North Carolina to pick up Marines from Camp Lejeune or the 82nd Airborne Division.”

Troops: Democratic senators seek public hearings on Venezuela policy

FROM PAGE 1

the U.S. and threatened a second strike “if they don’t behave.”

About 15,000 troops and a dozen warships are deployed in the Caribbean, and lawmakers on Wednesday said administration officials did not give any indication on how long they will be there.

Hegseth told reporters after a briefing with senators that “leverage” provided by the American military, including the seizure Wednesday of two oil tankers as part of the administration’s blockade of Venezuelan oil exports, will continue to be used.

“Our military is prepared to continue this,” he said. “We are an administration of action to advance our interests and that is on full display.”

He dismissed questions about how much the military activity around Venezuela will cost taxpayers, arguing that such questions were rarely asked when the military was operating in regions such as the Middle East.

Senators seeking to claw back Congress’ authority to declare war said they were alarmed by the escalating campaign in South America and passed a measure requiring congressional approval for any follow-up hostilities against Venezuela.

Democrats and five Republicans voted to advance the war powers resolution on a 52-47 vote and ensure a later vote for final passage, The Associated Press reported Thursday. It has virtually no chance of becoming law because Trump would have to sign it if it were to pass the House. Still, it was a significant gesture that showed unease among some Republicans.

The measure — led by Sens. Tim Kaine, D-Va., and Rand Paul, R-Ky. — is only the latest effort by lawmakers to rein in military actions that they believe violate the Constitution and put military personnel at risk. Previous war powers resolutions concerning Venezuela have failed in both the Senate and House.

Kaine and other Democrats said it was time for the Trump administration to come before congressional committees for public hearings on Venezuela rather than continue to hold closed-door meetings on Capitol Hill that bound lawmakers to secrecy.



ERIC KAYNE/Stars and Stripes

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth walks toward a secure room in the Capitol on Dec. 18 to attend a classified briefing on Venezuela.

“We are four months into a sustained military operation, more than 200 ‘enemies’ have been killed, American troops have been injured, we have the U.S. forces arrayed around Venezuela but neither the House nor the Senate have been willing to hold [a] single public hearing to put these facts before the public,” Kaine said. “Why not? We need to start doing our job.”

NATION

US will exit 66 international organizations

By Matthew Lee and Farnoush Amiri
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Trump administration will withdraw from dozens of international organizations, including the U.N.'s population agency and the U.N. treaty that establishes international climate negotiations, as the U.S. further retreats from global cooperation.

President Donald Trump on Wednesday signed an executive order suspending U.S. support for 66 organizations, agencies, and commissions, following his administration's review of participation in and funding for all international organizations, including those affiliated with the United Nations, according to a White House release.



FRANK FRANKLIN II/AP

United States' Ambassador to the United Nations Michael Waltz addresses the Security Council Monday at U.N. headquarters.

Many of the targets are U.N.-related agencies, commissions and advisory panels that focus on climate, labor, migration and other issues the Trump administration has categorized as catering to diversity and "woke" initiatives. Other non-U.N. organizations on the list include the Partnership for Atlantic Cooperation, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, and the Global Counterterrorism Forum.

"The Trump Administration has found these institutions to be redundant in their scope, mismanaged, unnecessary, wasteful, poorly run, captured by the interests of actors advancing their own agendas contrary to our own, or a threat to our nation's sovereignty, freedoms, and general prosperity," Secretary of State Marco Rubio said in a statement.

Trump's decision to withdraw from organizations that foster cooperation among nations to address global challenges comes as his administration has launched military efforts or issued threats that have rattled allies and adversaries alike, including capturing autocratic Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro and indicating an intention to take over Greenland.

The administration previously suspended support for agencies like the World Health Organization, the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees known as UNRWA, the U.N. Human Rights Council and the U.N. cultural agency UNESCO. It has taken a larger, à la carte approach to paying dues to the world body, picking which operations and agencies it believes align with Trump's agenda and those that no longer serve U.S. interests.

"I think what we're seeing is the crystallization of the U.S. approach to multilateralism, which is 'my way or the highway,' " said Daniel Forti, head of U.N. affairs at the International Crisis Group. "It's a very clear vision of wanting international cooperation on Washington's own terms."

It has marked a major shift from how previous administrations — both Republican and Democratic — have dealt with the U.N., and it has forced the world body, already undergoing its own internal reckoning, to respond with a series of staffing and program cuts.

Many independent nongovernmental agencies — some that work with the United Nations — have cited many project closures because of the U.S. administration's decision last year to slash foreign assistance through the U.S. Agency for International Development, or USAID.

Despite the massive shift, Trump administration officials say they see the potential of the U.N. and want to instead focus taxpayer money on expanding American influence in many of the standard-setting U.N. initiatives where there is competition with China, like the International Telecommunications Union, the International Maritime Organization and the International Labor Organization.

The withdrawal from the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change, or UNFCCC, is the latest effort by Trump and his allies to distance the U.S. from international organizations focused on climate and addressing climate change.

UNFCCC, the 1992 agreement between 198 countries to financially support climate change activities in developing countries, is the underlying treaty for the landmark Paris climate agreement. Trump — who calls climate change a hoax — withdrew from that agreement soon after reclaiming the White House.

Gina McCarthy, former White House National Climate Adviser, said being the only country in the world not part of the treaty is "shortsighted, embarrassing, and a foolish decision."

Florida to call special session for new congressional districts

Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. — Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis said Wednesday he plans to call a special session in April for the Republican-dominated legislature to draw new congressional districts, joining a redistricting arms race among states that have redrawn districts mid-decade.

Even though Florida's 2026 legislative session starts next week, DeSantis said he wanted to wait for a possible ruling from the U.S. Supreme Court on a key provision of the Voting Rights Act. The ruling in Louisiana v. Callais could determine whether Section 2, a part of the Voting Rights Act that bars discrimination in voting systems, is constitutional. The governor said "at least one or two" districts in Florida could be affected by the high court's ruling.

"I don't think it's a question of if they're going to rule. It's a question of what the scope is going to be," DeSantis said at a news conference in Steinhatchee, Fla. "So, we're getting out ahead of that."

Currently, 20 of Florida's 28 congressional seats are held by Republicans.

Congressional districts in Florida that are redrawn to favor Republicans could carry big consequences for President Donald Trump's plan to reshape congressional districts in GOP-led states, which could give Republicans a shot at winning additional seats in the midterm elections and retaining control of the closely divided U.S. House.



DeSantis

Nationwide, the unusual mid-decade redistricting battle has so far resulted in a total of nine more seats Republicans believe they can win in Texas, Missouri, North Carolina and Ohio — and a total of six more seats Democrats expect to win in California and Utah, putting Republicans up by three. But the redrawn districts are being litigated in some states, and if the maps hold for 2026, there is no guarantee the parties will win the seats.

In 2010, more than 60% of Florida voters approved a constitutional amendment prohibiting the drawing of district boundaries to unfairly favor one political party in a process known as gerrymandering. The Florida Supreme Court, however, last July upheld a congressional map pushed by DeSantis that critics said violated the "Fair Districts" amendment.

After that decision, Florida House Speaker Daniel Perez last August announced the creation of a select committee to examine the state's congressional map.

Florida Senate Democratic Leader Lori Berman said in a statement that what DeSantis wants the Legislature to do is clearly illegal.

"Florida's Fair Districts Amendment strictly prohibits any maps from being drawn for partisan reasons, and regardless of any bluster from the governor's office, the only reason we're having this unprecedented conversation about drawing new maps is because Donald Trump demanded it," Berman said. "An overwhelming majority of Floridians voted in favor of the Fair Districts Amendment and their voices must be respected. The redistricting process is meant to serve the people, not the politicians."

In a statement, the Florida Democratic Party called the move by DeSantis "reckless, partisan and opportunistic."

Trump invites Colombian president to White House

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump abruptly changed his tone Wednesday about his Colombian counterpart, Gustavo Petro, saying they had exchanged a friendly phone call and he'd even invited the leader of the South American country to the White House.

"It was a Great Honor to speak with the President of Colombia, Gustavo Petro, who called to explain the situation of drugs and other disagreements that we have had," Trump posted on his social media site. "I appreciated his call and tone, and look forward to meeting him in the near future."

He wrote that the upcoming meeting would take place at the White House.

That came mere days after Trump said in the wake of the U.S. operation to oust Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro over the weekend that "Colombia is very sick too" and accused Petro of "making cocaine and selling it to the United States."

In comments to reporters aboard Air Force One on Sunday, Trump added of Petro, "He's not going to be doing it very long, let me tell you." Asked whether U.S. intervention was possible, Trump responded, "Sounds good to me."

Later Wednesday, addressing thousands of protesters that he had mobilized to rally against U.S. military threats, Petro said he had spoken with Trump for roughly one hour.

"I talked about two things: Venezuela and the issue of drug trafficking," he told the crowd in downtown Bogota, where demonstrators had just minutes earlier chanted slogans against the United States at Petro's behest.

Petro explained to the audience that Colombian politicians allegedly linked to narco-trafficking misled the U.S. president about Petro's record to turn Trump against him.

"Those (people) are responsible for this crisis — let's call it diplomatic for now, verbal for now — that has erupted between the U.S. and Colombia," he said.

Trump now suddenly warming to Petro is especially surprising since Colombia's president called the U.S. operation in Venezuela an "abhorrent" violation of Latin American sovereignty. He also suggested it was committed by "enslavers" and constituted a "spectacle of death" comparable to Nazi Germany's 1937 carpet bombing of Guernica, Spain.

NATION

Minneapolis on edge after fatal shooting

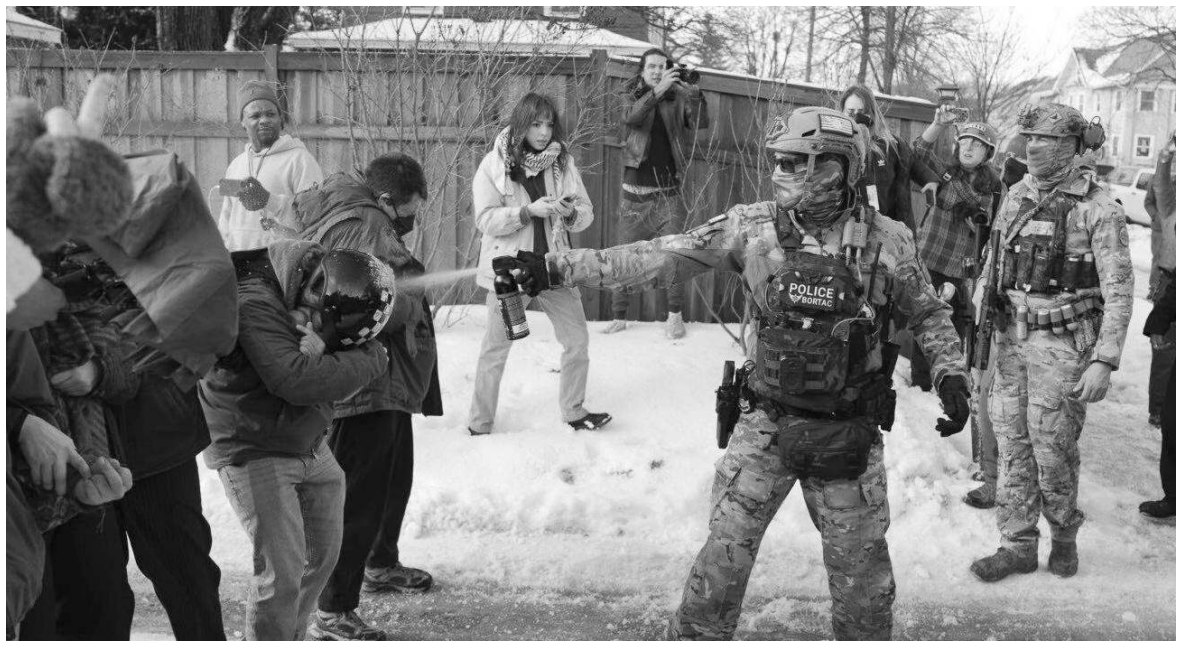
By Rebecca Santana and Tim Sullivan
Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — Minneapolis was on edge Thursday following the fatal shooting of a woman by a federal officer taking part in the Trump administration's latest immigration crackdown, with protesters venting their outrage, the governor demanding that the state take part in the investigation and schools canceling classes as a precaution.

State and local officials demanded that the immigration agents leave Minnesota after the unidentified Immigration and Customs Enforcement officer shot 37-year-old mother of three Renee Good in the head on Wednesday. But Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem said agents won't be going anywhere.

The Department of Homeland Security has deployed more than 2,000 officers to the area in what it says is its largest immigration enforcement operation ever. Noem said more than 1,500 people have already been arrested.

Dozens of protesters gathered Thursday outside of a federal building on the edge of Minneapolis that is serving as a major base for the immigration crackdown. They shouted "No More ICE," "Go Home Nazis," and other slogans as Border Patrol officers pushed them back from the gate, doused them with pepper spray and fired tear gas.



ALEX KORMANN, STAR TRIBUNE/AP

A law enforcement agent sprays a line of protesters with chemical spray at the scene of a shooting in Minneapolis on Wednesday.

Gregory Bovino, a U.S. Customs and Border Patrol official who has been the face of the crackdowns in other cities, walked along the long line of officers, looking at the crowd as protesters yelled at him, including a man who shouted, "Border Patrol should be along the border!"

The anti-immigration enforcement protests weren't confined to Minneapolis, as demonstrations also took place or were expected to Thursday in New York City, Seattle, Detroit, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, Philadelphia, San Antonio, New Orleans and Chicago. Protests were also scheduled for later this week in Arizona, North Carolina, and New Hampshire.

Bystanders captured video of Good's killing in a residential neighborhood south of downtown, and hundreds of people turned up for a Wednesday night vigil to mourn her.

The videos of the shooting show an officer approaching an SUV stopped across the middle of the road, demanding the driver open the door and grabbing the handle. The Honda Pilot begins to pull forward, and a different ICE officer standing in front of it pulls his weapon and immediately fires at least two shots at close range, jumping back as the vehicle moves toward him.

It isn't clear from the videos if the vehicle makes contact with the officer, and there is no indication of whether the woman had interactions with ICE agents earlier. After the shooting the SUV speeds into two cars parked on a curb before crashing to a stop.

In another recording made afterward, a woman who identifies Good as her spouse is seen crying near the vehicle. The woman, who is not identified, says the couple recently arrived in Minnesota and that they had a child.

Noem called the incident an "act of domestic terrorism" against ICE officers, saying the driver "attempted to run them over and rammed them with her vehicle. An officer of ours acted quickly and defensively, shot, to protect himself and the people around him."

Minnesota authorities had expected to work with the FBI on the shooting investigation. But the state Bureau of Criminal Apprehension said Thursday that the U.S. attorney's office changed course Wednesday and barred it from taking part.

Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz on Thursday demanded that the state be allowed to take part, as it would be the only way the public could be confident in its findings, noting it would be "very, very difficult for Minnesotans" to accept that an investigation that excludes the state could be fair.

2 killed in shooting outside a church in Salt Lake City

Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY — Two people were killed and six others injured in a shooting outside a Salt Lake City church Wednesday night while mourners were attending a memorial service inside, police said.

The shooting took place in the back parking lot of a house of worship for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Utah-based faith known widely as the Mormon church.

Authorities said no suspect was in custody Wednesday.

All the victims were adults. At least three of the injured were in critical condition, police said.

Police said they do not believe the shooter had any animus toward a particular faith. They also don't think the shooting was random.

"We don't believe this was a targeted attack against a religion or anything like that," Salt Lake City Police Chief Brian Redd said.

The red brick church in the northwest Salt Lake City neighborhood mostly serves Tongan congregants and holds regular worship services in their native tongue, according to its website.

Upon hearing gunshots, residents from a low-income housing complex next to the church flooded outside to help victims and console dozens of people who had been attending a funeral for a person who was not identified.

Brennan McIntire said he and his wife, Kenna, heard several loud gunshots from their apartment next to the church parking lot while watching TV. He jumped off the couch and ran outside in flip-flops to see what happened.

"As soon as I came over, I see someone on the ground," he said. "People are attending to him and crying and arguing."

Kenna McIntire came outside soon after and was rattled at the sight of first responders lifting an unconscious woman into an ambulance while people huddled around and sobbed.

The couple said they hear gunshots in their neighborhood almost daily, but never right outside their door.

"It was really heartbreaking to hear and see," she said.

Attorney for Reiner's son resigns but insists his client is not guilty

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — The high-profile private attorney for Nick Reiner resigned from his case Wednesday for reasons he said he could not reveal, and he later told reporters that under California law his client is definitely not guilty of murder in the killing of his parents, Rob Reiner and Michele Singer Reiner.

"Circumstances beyond our control and more importantly circumstances beyond Nick's control have dictated that, sadly, it's made it impossible to continue our representation," lawyer Alan Jackson said as he stood with his team outside a Los Angeles courthouse.

But, Jackson added, after weeks of investigation, "what we've learned, and you can take this to the bank, is that pursuant to the laws of this state, pursuant to the law of California, Nick Reiner is not guilty of murder. Print that."

Jackson would not specify what he meant and took no questions at the brief news conference, but it was the first direct statement from a Nick Reiner representative about his guilt or innocence in the 3½ weeks since the killings.

He spoke after a hearing where Reiner was supposed to be arraigned and enter a plea to two charges of first-degree murder. Instead, after meeting with Judge Theresa McGonigle in chambers, Jackson, at his own request, was replaced by a public defender and the plea hearing was postponed to Feb. 23.



Jackson

Jackson said that for legal and ethical reasons, he could not reveal why he had to resign. He first appeared in court representing Nick Reiner at a hearing a few days after the beloved actor-director and his wife of 36 years were found dead with stab wounds in their home in the upscale Brentwood section of Los Angeles. Jackson did not say how he was hired — or who hired him. Generally, defendants use public defenders when they can't pay for a private attorney.

Jackson has become one of the most prominent defense attorneys in the nation in recent years after his defense of clients including Harvey Weinstein, Kevin Spacey and Karen Read at her intensely followed trials in Massachusetts.

Deputy Public Defender Kimberly Greene took over as Reiner's attorney during the hearing.

"The Public Defender's Office recognizes what an unimaginable tragedy this is for the Reiner family and the Los Angeles community," LA County Public Defender Ricardo D. Garcia said in a rare public statement on a case from the office. "Our hearts go out to the Reiner family as they navigate this difficult time. We ask for your patience and compassion as the case moves through the legal process."

A Reiner family spokesperson said in a statement after Wednesday's hearing that "They have the utmost trust in the legal process and will not comment further on matters related to the legal proceedings."

NATION

Guidelines: Pick protein over processed foods

By Jonel Aleccia
Associated Press

Americans should eat more whole foods and protein, fewer highly processed foods and less added sugar, according to the latest edition of federal nutrition advice released Wednesday by the Trump administration.

Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins issued the 2025-30 U.S. Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which offer updated recommendations for a healthy diet and provide the foundation for federal nutrition programs and policies. They come as Kennedy has for months stressed overhauling the U.S. food supply as part of his Make America Healthy Again agenda.

"My message is clear: Eat real food," Kennedy said at a White House briefing.

The guidelines emphasize consumption of fresh vegetables, whole grains and dairy products, long advised as part of a healthy eating plan. Officials released a new graphic depicting an inverted version of the long-abandoned food pyramid, with protein, dairy, healthy fats and fruits and vegetables at the top and whole grains at the bottom.

But they also take a new stance on "highly processed" foods, and refined carbohydrates, urging consumers to avoid "packaged, prepared, ready-to-eat or other foods that are salty or sweet, such as chips, cookies and candy." That's a different term for ultraprocessed foods, the tasty, energy-dense products that make up more than half the calories in the U.S. diet and have been linked to chronic diseases such as diabetes and obesity.

The new guidance backs away from revoking long-standing advice to limit saturated fats, despite signals from Kennedy and Food and Drug Commissioner Marty Makary that the administration would push for more consumption of animal fats to end the "war" on saturated fats.



EVAN VUCCI/AP

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt, right, and Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins are seen during a White House press briefing on recommendations for a healthy diet, on Wednesday.

Instead, the document suggests that Americans should choose whole-food sources of saturated fat — such as meat, whole-fat dairy or avocados — while continuing to limit saturated fat consumption to no more than 10% of daily calories. The guidance says "other options can include butter or beef tallow," despite previous recommendations to avoid those fats.

The dietary guidelines, required by law to be updated every five years, provide a template for a healthy diet. But in a country where more than half of adults have a diet-related chronic disease, few Americans actually follow the guidance, research shows.

The new recommendations drew praise from some prominent nutrition and medical experts.

"There should be broad agreement that eating more whole foods and reducing highly processed carbohydrates is a major advance in how we approach diet and health," said Dr. David Kessler, a former FDA commissioner who has written books about diet and nutrition and has sent a petition to the FDA to remove key ingredients in ultraprocessed foods.

"The guidelines affirm that food is medicine and offer clear direction patients and physicians can use to improve health," said Dr. Bobby Mukkamala, president of the American Medical Association.

Other experts were relieved that the guidelines didn't go against decades of nutrition evidence linking saturated fat to heart disease, but they were critical of the guidelines' focus on meat and dairy as a primary source of protein instead of plant-based sources.

"Overall, if people eat the way these are recommended, they will be eating more calories, not less," said Marion Nestle, a nutritionist and food policy expert who advised previous editions of the guidance.

The new document is just 10 pages, upholding Kennedy's pledge to create a simple, understandable guideline. Previous editions of the dietary guidelines have grown over the years, from a 19-page pamphlet in 1980 to the 164-page document issued in 2020, which included a four-page executive summary.

The guidance will have the most profound effect on the federally funded National School Lunch Program, which is required to follow the guidelines to feed nearly 30 million U.S. children on a typical school day.

The Agriculture Department will have to translate the recommendations into specific requirements for school meals, a process that can take years, said Diane Pratt-Heavner, spokesperson for the School Nutrition Association. The latest school nutrition standards were proposed in 2023 but won't be fully implemented until 2027, she noted.

The new guidelines largely rejected the advice of a 20-member panel of nutrition experts convened by the Biden administration, who met for nearly two years to review the latest scientific evidence on diet and health. Kennedy had criticized the expertise of the panel members and suggested that they had ties to the food industry that influenced their advice.

Instead, the new guidance relied on new experts revealed Wednesday in supporting documents. Of the 10 experts who led the new scientific review under Kennedy, five reported financial ties to beef, pork or dairy industries or to makers of infant formula or supplements.

The new group rejected more than half the recommendations of the previous panel, the documents showed.

The guidelines advise avoiding or sharply limiting added sugars or non-nutritive sweeteners, saying "no amount" is considered part of a healthy diet. No one meal should contain more than 10 grams of added sugars, or about 2 teaspoons, the new guidelines say.

The new guidelines also roll back previous recommendations to limit alcohol to one drink or less per day for women and two drinks or less per day for men. Instead, the guidance advises Americans to "consume less alcohol for better health." They also say that alcohol should be avoided by pregnant women, people recovering from alcohol use disorder and those who are unable to control the amount they drink.

As New England digs out, more snow, ice, freezing rain coming

Associated Press

SCARBOROUGH, Maine — Messy winter weather brought snow, ice, freezing rain and dangerous driving to the New England states on Wednesday as the region prepared for more unpleasant conditions later in the week.

The combination of rain, snow and slush blanketed the region, causing dozens of school districts to close for the day or begin on a delay. Snow accumulations were not expected to be high, but the road conditions made it unsafe for buses on Wednesday morning, districts said.

About a tenth of an inch of ice coated some areas — a little less than the amount that can cause power outages from falling tree limbs, but more than enough to create unsafe roads. Nonetheless, there were a few thousand power outages, mostly in Maine, with several hundred in Massachusetts.



KRISTOPHER RADDER, BRATTLEBORO (VT.) REFORMER/AP

A sidewalk plow from the Brattleboro, Vt., Department of Public Works clears off the sidewalk on Green Street on Wednesday.

"With icy conditions forecast during both the morning and afternoon bus routes, ensuring the safety of our students and staff is our highest priority," said the administration of Maine Regional School Unit 21, based in Kennebunk, in a statement.

All six New England states were under National Weather Service winter weather advisories, and the service issued several hazardous weather outlook statements for northern areas that could be hit with winter storms in the coming days. The possibility of heavy rain followed by dropping temperatures could create treacherous driving conditions later in the week, the service said.

Highway authorities in Maine, New Hampshire and Massachusetts reported numerous accidents and vehicle spinouts in those states, though there were no serious injuries reported as of late Wednesday morning. At least five New England airports, including Logan International Airport in Boston, had aircraft being treated with deicing fluid for snow and ice.

In southern Maine, the National Weather Service issued a winter weather advisory despite the potential for only two inches of snow in some areas, said Jerry Combs, meteorologist with the service in Gray, Maine. And more hazardous weather could be on the way, as another system is expected to bring rain Friday night into Saturday, followed by the potential for snow Saturday into Sunday, he said.

The service typically holds off on issuing an advisory unless there is the potential for four inches of snow, but other kinds of messy weather necessitated it on Wednesday, Combs said.

"That was for the freezing rain and sleet and snow mixture," he said. "That makes the road conditions that much worse."

WORLD

Protests in Iran spread nationwide

By Jon Gambrell
Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Protests in Iran sparked by economic woes have spread nationwide across the Islamic Republic, activists said Thursday, signaling both their staying power and intensity as they challenge the country's theocracy.

Wednesday saw the most-intense day of demonstrations, reaching rural towns and major cities in every province though still localized enough for daily life to continue in Tehran, Iran's capital, and elsewhere. So far, violence around the demonstrations has killed at least 38 people while more than 2,200 others have been detained, said the U.S.-based Human Rights Activists News Agency.

The growth of the protests increases the pressure on Iran's civilian government and its Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. So far, authorities haven't shut down the internet or fully flooded the streets with security forces like they did to put down the 2022 Mahsa Amini demonstrations. But any intensification may see them act.

Meanwhile, the protests themselves have remained broadly leaderless, though a call for protests by Iran's exiled crown prince will test whether or not demonstrators are being swayed by messages from abroad.

"The lack of a viable alternative has undermined past protests in Iran," wrote Nate Swanson of the Washington-based Atlantic Council, who studies Iran.

"There may be a thousand Iranian dissident activists who, given a chance, could emerge as respected statesmen, as labor leader Lech Walesa did in Poland at the end of the Cold War. But so far, the Iranian security apparatus has arrested, persecuted and exiled all of the country's potential transformational leaders."

On Wednesday, at least 37 protests took place across the country, activists said. They included Shiraz, where online videos purported to show an anti-riot truck using a water cannon to target demonstrators. The state-run IRNA news agency, which has largely been silent about the demonstrations, reported on a mass demonstration in Bojnourd, as well as demonstrations in Kerman and Kermanshah.

Iranian officials have offered no acknowledgment of the scale of the protests. However, there has been reporting regarding security officials being hurt or killed. The judiciary's Mizan news agency report a police colonel suffered fatal stab wounds in a town outside of Tehran, while the semiofficial Fars news agency said gunmen killed two security force members and wounded 30 others in a shooting in the city of Lordegan in Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari province.

Demonstrations continued Thursday, with merchants closing their shops in Iran's Kurdistan province and soon after in other cities.



Danny Lawson/AP

Mick Ellerton climbs a frozen waterfall Wednesday in Gordale Scar near Malham Cove in the Yorkshire Dales National Park, as ice warnings are in place across the U.K.

UK braces for heavy snow amid cold snap

Associated Press

LONDON — Britain braced Thursday for potentially life-threatening winds, rains and snowfall as a severe storm headed in from the southwest of England during what already has been one of the country's worst cold snaps in years.

The Met Office, Britain's national meteorological service, issued a rare red weather warning — its highest — for the southwest of England for Thursday evening. It warned of "violent gusts" up to 100 mph for Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, which are exposed and thinly populated parts of the U.K. The agency warned of damage to buildings and homes, flying debris, widespread travel cancellations and power cuts.

Red weather warnings are issued when the forecaster considers it to be "very likely that there will be a risk to life, with substantial disruption to travel, energy supplies and possibly widespread damage to property and infrastructure."

The storm, which has been named Goretti by French weather service France Meteo, is then expected to traverse through central England, where snowfall of as much as 12 inches is expected just a few hours, disrupting schools, travel and commerce, especially in rural areas.

"This multi-hazard event will bring significant disruption to many," said Neil Armstrong, chief forecaster at the Met Office. "This is a complex spell of severe weather."

In the Netherlands, the bad weather eased on Thursday, helping Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport, which saw hundreds of flights canceled this week, trying to return to normal.

However, it was briefly hit by a power outage in the morning.

Dutch national carrier KLM said there were still long lines of passengers at the airport but added that it was "doing everything possible to ensure departing passengers leave on time."

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Transportation 944

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WEEKEND



Grammys recognize artistic album covers

Music, Page 29

Serious stand-up

Will Arnett pulls emotional torment to the surface for his first lead drama role in 'Is This Thing On?'

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MARVIN JOSEPH/The Washington Post

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WEEKEND: GADGETS & TECHNOLOGY

What to use instead of overrated ChatGPT

AI bot challenges indicate best tool dependent on task

By Geoffrey A. Fowler
The Washington Post



iStock

Your early-adopter friend swears by ChatGPT for meal planning. Your boss thinks Microsoft Copilot will "10x productivity." Your social media feed thinks Meta AI is a slop machine. They're mostly going off vibes.

I can tell you which artificial intelligence tools are worth using — and which to avoid — because I've been running a chatbot fight club.

I conducted dozens of bot challenges based on real things people do with AI, including writing breakup texts and work emails, decoding legal contracts, answering tricky research questions, editing photos and making "art." Human experts including bestselling authors, reference librarians, a renowned scientist and even a Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer judged the results.

After a year of bot battles, one thing stands out: There is no single best AI. The smartest way to use chatbots today is to pick different tools for different jobs — and not assume one bot can do it all. Case in point: ChatGPT, the Kleenex of chatbots, won none of my head-to-head battles. And even the winners rarely eked out the equivalent of a human passing grade.

According to the judges, Anthropic's Claude bot drafted a better breakup text than yours truly. Most bots got stumped by the question "How many buttons does an iPhone have?" And ChatGPT beat a top doctor on one real medical question — but also doled out advice that could seriously hurt you.

Having human experts judge these tests changed how I think about chatbots, and how I use them in my own life. Even if you're anxious about AI taking jobs, harming the environment or invading privacy, there's something to learn from how today's AI tools actually perform when you strip away the hype. Developing AI literacy can help you see that bots are not actually "intelligent" while still getting the most out of their real capabilities.

Which chatbot is right for you?

ChatGPT kick-started the generative AI race three years ago, and now its maker, OpenAI, says it's used by 800 million people each week. It used to be my default when I wanted to brainstorm synonyms or look up trivia. But when I started testing methodically, ChatGPT never ranked higher than second among the most popular bots. (The Washington Post has a content partnership with OpenAI.)

OpenAI recently issued an internal "code red" telling employees to pull focus away from projects like a web browser and back onto improving ChatGPT's responses. "We're excited to keep making ChatGPT even better in 2026," said spokeswoman Taya Christianson.

Based on my fight club, I now turn to different bots for different kinds of tasks. Here's how that plays out in practice:

■ For writing and editing, I use Claude. It's got a better turn of phrase, can occasionally crack jokes and is least likely to open emails with the soul-crushing phrase "hope you're well." In one of my tests — writing an apology letter — judge Pamela Skillings said Claude "communicates real human emotion and thoughtful consideration."

■ For research and quick answers, I use Google's AI Mode — not the AI Overview that pops up in regular Google results, which is far less reliable. AI Mode, a chatbot-style search tool, can conduct dozens of searches before it provides an answer. That helps it give more up-to-date information, too: In my research test, it correctly identified currently recommended treatments for mastitis, a breast infection, while other bots offered outdated approaches.

■ For working with documents, I use Claude. In my document-analysis tests, it was the only bot that never made up facts. When I asked the bot to suggest changes on a rental agreement, Claude's answer came closest to being a "good substitute for a lawyer," said judge Sterling Miller, a longtime corporate lawyer.

■ For images, I use Google's Gemini, which trounced the competition in every test I devised. When I asked the bots to remove one of two subjects from a photograph, the result was so convincing — including details like light bouncing from sequins on a dress — that judge David Carson, a photojournalist, said "wow." He couldn't tell Gemini's output was AI generated.

When bots fail us

When we tested the ability of AI to answer trivia, our librarian judges reported they could have found most of the answers with an old-fashioned Google search. AI sped up getting an answer back — the catch was that some of those answers were wrong.

The most useful kind of AI literacy comes from watching bots fail. In my trivia test, they had a hard time saying how many buttons are on an iPhone. ChatGPT said four, Claude and Meta AI said three and Copilot said six. The answer is five, on recent high-end iPhones. Why the confusion? Bots are over-reliant on text and not yet good at reading pictures.

Today's chatbots have a strong drive to give you something that feels like an answer right away. They're very bad at communicating uncertainty.

For example: In my trivia competition, I asked the bots, "What score did 'The Fantastic Four' get on Rotten Tomatoes?" At the time, it was the No. 1 movie at the box office. But even AI Mode, our overall winner, got it wrong and gave the score for an infamous 2015 "Fantastic Four" film. It didn't stop to ask which one I meant.

In my writing tests, bots often came across as insincere when they failed to fit their words to the context. ChatGPT had a cringey moment by using the passive-aggressive phrase "that said" in a breakup text: "I think you're a great person. That said, I've realized I don't see this moving forward."

If I could change one thing about today's AI tools, I'd make them better at asking follow-up questions that could completely change the answer.

Something stuck with me when I asked Bob Wachter, chair of the department of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, to judge ChatGPT's responses to real medical questions. The difference between a bot with access to infinite knowledge and a good human doctor, he noted, is that the doctor knows how to answer a question with more questions. That's how you actually solve someone's problem.

Wachter suggested an AI strategy I now use regularly: front-load your queries to a chatbot with as many details as you can think of, knowing that the AI might not stop to ask for some of them before trying to answer. Instead of "summarize this lease," try "summarize this lease for a renter in D.C., flagging clauses about fees, renewal and early termination."

I've also added a "custom instruction" to my chatbots, telling them to "ask for clarification before answering if a prompt is vague."

I hope these techniques will help you get more useful answers from AI. These tools will keep evolving — and so will their problems. The push toward personalizing bot responses based on your data increases the risk of privacy invasion and manipulation. I always change the bots' default settings to protect my data.

We'll inevitably have more AI products thrown at us in 2026 and beyond. How do we stay on top of it? For me, the answer is the same as it's been all year: keep the bot fight club running — and keep humans in the judge's chair.

A great noise-canceling headset for everyone

By Gregg Ellman
Tribune News Service

The OXS Storm A2 over-the-head wireless gaming headset with Hybrid ANC ($129.99 but currently on sale with a $30 coupon) is a good choice at a buyer-friendly price.

Gamers understand the value of having a single headset compatible with multiple gaming units, including PlayStation 4 and 5, PC, Nintendo Switch, PCs, laptops, and smartphones, via Bluetooth 5.4, USB-A Dongle, USB-C Dongle and USB-C wired.

Each soft, padded earcup of the ergonomic, adjustable headset is constructed from breathable memory foam for long-term use.

A 40mm neodymium driver on each side supplies top-notch sound for gamers or nongamers like me, who just want to hear great sound from a playlist. It delivers cutting-edge 7.1 surround sound powered by Xspace audio technology, resulting in crystal-clear audio with the right amount of bass. A lot of this is credited to the Storm A2's active noise cancellation.

It's listed to last up to 70 hours before needing a recharge, which is ideal for a marathon gaming session. If the battery runs low, no problem — the Storm A2 will play while charging.

A gamer-grade detachable omnidirectional boom microphone features advanced 5-mic ENC technology, voice isolation and wind reduction, ensuring that those on the other end hear you clearly with minimal, if any, background noise.

Online: oxsaudio.com/en-us/products/oxs-storm-a2


OXS/TNS

The OXS Storm A2 over-the-head wireless gaming headset with Hybrid ANC isn't super expensive but lasts up to 70 hours.

WEEKEND: VIDEO GAMES

Bay Area hikes inspire Keeper

Players explore through walking lighthouse as fixed camera gives cinematic sensation



MICROSOFT/TNS

In Keeper, players control a walking lighthouse that is trying to venture to the top of a mountain.

BY GIESON CACHO
The Mercury News

Inspiration for video games can sprout from anywhere. A slice of pizza turned into Pac-Man. Trouble driving up a hill in the snow inspired a key mechanic in director Hidetaka Miyazaki's Souls series. When it comes to Keeper, the latest game from Double Fine Productions, creative director Lee Petty took inspiration from the Bay Area outdoors.

"I've been a longtime hiker and backpacker," he said. "I live in Almaden Valley. There's a quicksilver mine. There are a lot of hiking trails and machinery."

He said being out in nature helps him process and think, and in that South Bay environment during the pandemic, he picked out details along the trails. The machinery from the mines and the unpleasant quiet. That hike and others trips led to a project, in which players control a walking lighthouse.

The protagonist for Keeper is unusual, and it takes players time to connect to such an odd world. It's a place where humanity is gone, but the ruins remain, and in our place, other creatures flourish. Players discover this as they trundle through a six-hour campaign that lacks dialogue but boldly conveys a story through the environment and achievement blurbs.

Keeper puts players and the protagonist in the same boat as they figure out the gameplay of exploration. The experience is unusual because Keeper has a fixed camera that's a throwback to the original PlayStation era, echoing games like Resident Evil and Final Fantasy VII. It creates a more cinematic feeling, but it's also necessary because players move the lighthouse with the left analog stick and use the right one to shine light on the environment. The Fresnel lens fends off shadowy creatures and unlocks parts of the world. It helps players uncover secrets or activate objects. Beyond that, birds called Twigs hang out with the lighthouse and grow with it. Players send out the feathered helpers to wind levers or grab needed objects.

The first few hours are spent teaching the players these mechanics and establishing a hauntingly weird but compelling setting. At its core, Keeper is a puzzle game, where players have to figure out how to advance using the simple abilities at hand.

The scenarios aren't difficult, but one of the bigger obstacles is trying to figure out what Petty and his team wants players to do. The designers' efforts register more hits than misses as they offer clues on what action to take. In a way, it's much like a hike, where no one is going to hold backpackers' hands. They have to read signs and find their own way.

The lighthouse's goal is to reach the top of a mountain, which beckons to it. Over the journey, it gains abilities and loses them. The hike is never straightforward. The lighthouse endures pitfalls along the way, and that's where the campaign grows more compelling as the lighthouse changes forms and gains new ways to travel.

They see more of the world and adapt to new puzzles in the surrounding waters and the narrow chutes built into the mountain's caves. The Keeper constantly surprises players, and that shared sense of adventure builds a player's connection to the lighthouse, Twigs and other characters. Even though humanity is absent, it feels as though it exists among the characters.

That's the human touch. At a time when artificial intelligence is worming its way into the artistry of games, the creativity in Keeper, both in terms of concept and visuals, is something to be hailed and embraced. It feels authentic because it's based on human experience — in this case, it's Bay Area hiking — and that should be more valued now than any hyper-realistic visuals or something a machine dreams up.

Platforms: PC, Xbox Series X and S

Online: doublefine.com/games/keeper

Intriguing games from Day of the Devs showcase

BY GIESON CACHO
The Mercury News

With so many projects vying for attention, it's difficult for indie developers to break through. That's where Day of the Devs comes in. The nonprofit pores over hundreds of submissions and highlights some of the best.

Even with that filter, the number of games shown during last month's presentation was overwhelming. Here are the titles that stuck out and should be on your radar, though there are no firm release dates yet.

Awaysis

Kyoto, Japan-based studio 17-bit brings in new ideas to the dungeon brawler by adding physics to the mix. It isn't realistic, but rather, it blends with the gameplay to add weight to the weapons and a bit of unpredictability to the movement. Combine this with four-player co-op, and it could be a fantastic formula for a weekend of fun.

The game is scheduled for release in 2026 on Xbox Series X and Series S and PC

Lucid Falls

This psychological horror title has eye-popping visuals reminiscent of Senua's Saga: Hellblade 2 with its twilight hues and mysterious natural environments. Eldamar Studio developer Yurii Radkevych said the game plays fast and loose with the law of gravity.

The game is listed on Steam.

Rockbeasts

Dozens of management-type games have been published in recent years in which players build gas stations, a newspaper empire and the like. Liccthund offers a more glamorous protagonist: the manager of a 1990s rock band on the rise. Players will take the foursome from performing in ratty bars to selling out stadiums and being on the equivalent of the world's MTV. As band manager, they'll also have to manage egos and the members' self-destructive tendencies.



KEPLER/TNS

Players take on the role of Panko, who cooks for Caretakers in Beastro.

It's scheduled to release on PC, Xbox Series X and S, PlayStation 5, Nintendo Switch and Nintendo Switch 2.

Stretchmancer

Gamers looking for a Portal fix will find an intriguing option with this title from Triangle Wave. It's another first-person puzzle game in which players have the ability to stretch the environment — pushing on objects to lengthen them, for instance. Players can also pull objects, which can create bridges to cross chasms. Players have to use these skills and more to defeat the Claustro Empire in this adventure: The title is listed on Steam.

Beastro

Here, Timberline Studio combines a restaurant sim with a card-battler. Beastro is divided into two parts. It focuses on Panko, a restaurateur who cooks food for Caretakers who guard the town. Players farm the ingredients and cook them to power the heroes defense. In the second half, the Caretakers regale Panko with details of their adventures. It's seen as a puppet show that doubles as an interactive card battle game. The deck is augmented by the food Panko feeds the caretakers before the adventure, tying the two elements together.

The demo is now available on Steam. It is scheduled for release on PC and Xbox Game pass.

Scramble Knights Royale

At first glance, this title from Funktronic Labs looks like it was pulled from recent 2D The Legend of Zelda games, but when players expand out, they'll see up to 40 players on the map, all trying to defeat each other until there's one standing. This isn't Fortnite, though. Players will have to explore short dungeons to power up their character and get gear to defeat the other characters.

Scramble Knights Royale also features dashes and rolls to create a fighting game element. The game will have a solo queue, but it also supports teams and couch co-op.

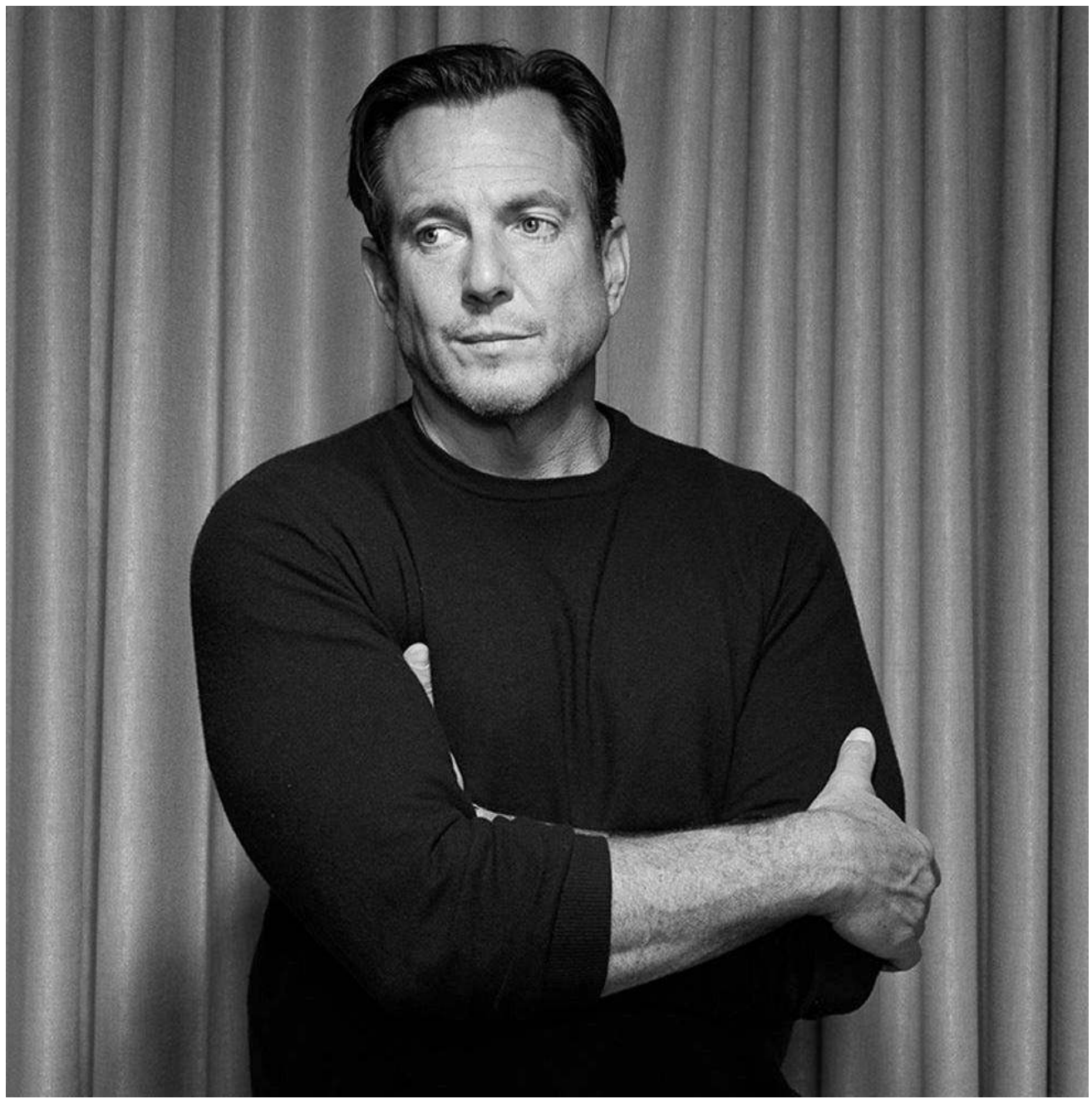
This title is scheduled for release in 2026 on PC and Xbox Series X and Series S.

WEEKEND: MOVIES

Will Arnett's latest punch line: drama

Actor brings torment to the surface as a stand-up comic in 'Is This Thing On?'

BY SONIA RAO
The Washington Post



MARVIN JOSEPH/The Washington Post

Will Arnett drew on his divorce from comedian Amy Poehler in making "Is This Thing On?", though he doesn't share details about specifics. The film is based on the story of British comedian and television presenter John Bishop, who stumbled on his career while processing his emotions about his impending divorce doing stand-up in a comedy club.

Will Arnett trails off midsentence as a publicist places a steaming Americano in front of him.

"God, this will be my fourth coffee of the day," he says, his eyes growing as big as the saucer. "What am I doing?"

Over the course of his 30-year acting career, Arnett has become a welcome screen presence playing stressed-out dudes driven to extreme — and extremely funny — coping methods. In his latest role, though, being funny is *how* he copes.

When we spoke in November, he'd just arrived in Washington from New York after doing a stand-up set in Greenwich Village. A month had passed since the New York Film Festival premiere of "Is This Thing On?," the comedy-drama in which he plays a man who processes his marital separation onstage at open mic nights.

Arnett is well accustomed to the hectic nature of a press tour. But he still seems a bit anxious while seated in a suite at the St. Regis hotel. (All that caffeine probably isn't helping.) "Is This Thing On?" marks Arnett's first time leading a dramatic feature. The project forced him out of his comfort zone — certainly over the course of the 33-day shoot, directed by his good pal Bradley Cooper, but even now as he reflects on the experience months later.

Cooper "asked me to trust him that I could do it and really try to go there," Arnett says. "That was daunting as a 55-year-old. That's why I moved to New York when I was 20, to do that, but I had never really been given the opportunity to do it."

Arnett has been celebrated for his hilarious turns as a self-absorbed failson in "Arrested Development," the professional nemesis of Alec Baldwin's character in "30 Rock" and a depressed animated horse in "BoJack Horseman." (Together, these shows earned him seven Emmy nominations.) While his role as novice comedian Alex Novak takes advantage of Arnett's established persona, his performance is grounded in the bittersweet recognition of how miscommunication and passivity hurt a marriage.

You often hear a lot that it's harder to be funny than dramatic and that the most effective comedic performances, no matter how exaggerated, are rooted in realism. In that sense, Arnett was already at the top of his game. The biggest joke about Gob Bluth on "Arrested Development" is that he's screaming on the inside. "Is This Thing On?" finally allowed Arnett a chance to pull that kind of emotional torment to the surface.

"For the first time in my life, I wasn't playing for a result in a scene," he says. "I was just trying to be sensitive to what the material was and what the situation was in those moments, and trust that whatever happened was going to be the most authentic."

Seven years ago, Arnett joined friends for lunch on a canalboat in Amsterdam and met John Bishop, a British comedian and television presenter who regaled him with the tale of how he stumbled upon the career.

The story went that Bishop and his wife were on the brink of a divorce. When he swung by a Manchester comedy club to lift his spirits, he decided to sign up for an open mic slot to avoid paying the entrance fee. His confessional set was well received by the crowd, so he returned to the club week after week to work through his emotions onstage.

One night, near the end of their divorce proceedings, Bishop's soon-to-be ex happened to be in the crowd. She listened to him reflect on their relationship and how much he missed her, and they ended up reconciling. They remain married to this day.

Arnett couldn't stop thinking about this fateful series of events. About a week later, while driving down Olympic Boulevard in Los Angeles, he called his friend Mark Chappell, a London-based writer with whom he created the Netflix series "Flaked," and told him about meeting Bishop. It turned out Chappell not only knew the comedian's story but had unsuccessfully tried to adapt it into a film himself about 15 years before.

"Mark and I are very in tune that way," Arnett says. "And so we said, 'Great. Let's do it.'"

"Is This Thing On?" tweaks details of Bishop's life to better suit an American couple: The protagonist and his wife, Tess (Laura Dern), live with their two young sons in the New York suburbs. Tess is retired from playing professional volleyball, a career she sorely misses, while Alex vaguely alludes to being "in finance" (whereas before comedy, Bishop worked in pharmaceuticals). They each vent about their lost senses of purpose to their longtime friends, played by actors who include Andra Day, Sean Hayes and Cooper (whose character, Balls, lives up to the silliness of his name).

Despite these fictional additions, Arnett and Chappell made sure to preserve the primary beats of Bishop's admittedly too-good yarn.

"There have been a couple people who have said, 'That's just outlandish that she would come and see his set,'" Arnett says. "But that's the part that's absolutely true."

Chappell says he has limited experience working with other writers — "the writers room exists a little bit now in the U.K., but it was always more of an American idea" — but didn't hesitate to reteam with Arnett. He admires how Arnett can "inhabit things on a more visceral level" than the average writer, given his performing background.

Whereas Chappell tends to set difficult scenes aside to revisit later, he says, "the actor in Will gets to those moments almost immediately and makes sense of the emotional truth to them. It forces a sense of immediacy ... that creates a nice blend."

A third screenwriting credit on "Is This Thing On?" belongs to Cooper, whom Arnett met years ago through his relationship with Amy Poehler. The two men are close; in 2022, Cooper appeared on the 100th episode of Arnett's popular podcast "SmartLess," which he co-hosts with Hayes and Jason Bateman, and remembered how Arnett helped him get sober when they lived next door to each other in the aughts.

Arnett credits the "SmartLess" conversation with introducing a level of vulnerability to their already meaningful friendship. That same year, Searchlight Pictures signed on to make "Is This Thing On?" after a deal with Focus Features had fallen through during the pandemic. Arnett asked Cooper — already a frequent Oscar nominee — to read the working script.

"He was on a break from shooting 'Maestro' and said, 'Send it to me,'" Arnett recalls. "I just wanted to get free notes from him, really. So I sent it to him and a week later he FaceTimed me out of the blue and goes, 'If it's okay, I'd like to do this with you.'"

SEE ARNETT ON PAGE 17

Marriage mic check

Dramedy 'Is This Thing On?' takes familiar story of divorce and midlife crises and makes it both resonant and hilarious

By Stephanie Merry
The Washington Post

The film "Is This Thing On?" wastes no time in telegraphing all we need to know about middle-aged dad Alex Novak. The opening scene is set in an elementary school gym, where children squeal and marvel at a Lunar New Year celebration that features performers maneuvering a giant red lion around a basketball court. The camera pans from the ecstatic onlookers to Alex, who's wearing a black suit and sitting on a bench in a far corner, head resting on a wall, eyes unseeing.

For Alex, played by Will Arnett, malaise is the default setting. Later, his wife, Tess (Laura Dern), takes a break from brushing her teeth to tell him, "We need to call it." And by "it" she means their marriage. It would be unfair to say that Alex puts up no fight, because that would imply he has the energy to so much as sneeze at an opponent. He does not. Somewhere along the way, someone or something pulled an invisible plug, and Alex's vitality swirled down the drain.

In some ways, this dramedy, directed by Bradley Cooper, is a familiar story about midlife crises and marital dissatisfaction, but it quickly swerves in a fresh direction, resulting in a movie that's both resonant and hilarious. For one thing, there's little bitterness between Tess and Alex. After the pair have dinner with friends — their "last hurrah" — they walk to the subway and chat like old buddies; they split a pot-laced cookie Tess pilfered from their hosts' kitchen. Then Alex wanders around New York and winds up at a bar where he signs up to perform stand-up at an open mic only to avoid paying the $15 cover.

Any viewer with even a mild case of stage fright will hold their breath as Alex walks toward the stage like a man heading for the gallows, and the camerawork turns a screw on the tension. Cinematographer Matthew Libatique maintains a tight shot on Alex's face under the bright lights, so that we can practically see synapses fire as he second-guesses his life choices, unleashes a string of throat-clearing noises and then haltingly launches into a brief recap of his recent misery.

At first, chuckles from the audience are as awkward and tentative as Alex's delivery, but his demeanor soon transforms, ever so slightly, as the crowd warms up to his deadpan storytelling. Afterward, the newly minted comedian goes to the bathroom, adrenaline still coursing as he exuberantly shout-sings "Ole! Ole! Ole!" into the mirror. For a moment, we're reminded of those kids in the gym, the way their feelings seemed to get too big for their bodies, spilling out as shrieks and shimmies.

The title "Is This Thing On?" is a reference to the microphones that Alex begins handling with increasing frequency as he turns stand-up into a therapeutic hobby, but the question could be just as easily applied to the man himself. Alex — and Tess, too — have become spectators in a life they don't even seem to want to watch.

The screenplay, a collaboration between Cooper, Arnett and sitcom writer Mark Chappell, mines the couple's parallel reawakenings for gems both comedic and poignant. When Alex, in his sad single-dad apartment, folds the laundry of his 10-year-old sons ("Irish twins," Alex clarifies onstage, which is why, he says, he pulled an Irish goodbye), the very act guts him, though it's easy to imagine a moment in the not-so-distant past when he would have sleepwalked through such a mundane chore.

Arnett and Dern are pros at threading a needle, conveying anguish without turning the mood maudlin, acting irrationally in the most plausible and sympathetic of ways. The script's many mournful moments are balanced by levity, especially in Cooper's supporting role as a hapless actor named Balls who's either constantly high or a little stupid (both?) and Arnett's evolving stand-up material, delivered with a sardonic voice that sounds like gravel in a garbage disposal.

The movie makes compelling points about how easy it is for parents to lose themselves and for partners to lose each other — the way things left unsaid begin to pile up alongside the dirty dishes and overflowing laundry. Although the bulk of the movie focuses on Alex's experiences, we occasionally see things from Tess' perspective, getting a sense of the grief she feels over letting go of her past as an elite athlete, leaving a hole that marriage and motherhood never managed to fill. (In a funny twist, her closest confidante is Alex's warm and witty mother, played by Christine Ebersole.)

As Alex and Tess begin to find fulfilling ways to spend their time and envision new, separate futures for themselves, a question nags at them: Was it really the marriage that made them miserable, or did they do that on their own? There's no easy answer to that one. But watching them work it out is great fun.



Searchlight Pictures

The title "Is This Thing On?" is a reference to the microphones that Alex (Will Arnett) begins handling with increasing frequency as he turns stand-up into a therapeutic hobby, but it could just as easily be applied to Alex and his wife Tess (Laura Dern), who have become spectators in their own lives.

"Is This Thing On?" is rated R for strong language, drug use and sexual situations. Running time: 124 minutes. Now playing at select on-base theaters.

Arnett: Pal Cooper's rewrite lent script gravitas, authenticity

FROM PAGE 16

Cooper reworked the script to underscore the breakdown of communication between Alex and Tess, which "completely elevated it," Arnett says, adding: "Mark and I always joked that if it was left to us, it might have ended up a really good rom-com." Cooper's empathetic approach lends gravitas to Alex and Tess' midlife struggles.

Alex begins the film as "a guy who lost track of why he's unhappy," according to Arnett, who notes that while watching a performance at his children's school in the opening scene, the character appears "catatonic." Cooper shoots Alex from a distance early on, mimicking the space he feels in his personal relationships, but finally depicts him head on when he performs in the club and acknowledges the reality of his situation.

"For whatever reason, he's able to communicate how he's feeling in front of a room full of strangers," Arnett says. "It's the first time he says that he's getting divorced."

Despite his extensive résumé in comedy, Arnett had never tried stand-up until preparing to play Alex. And yet there was never a question he would portray the character, Chappell says. It was "exciting as a friend to be able to write a script for him that would be a challenge I had no doubt he would be able to meet."

Before shooting the film in February, Arnett started swinging by Manhattan's Comedy Cellar to perform in character as Alex Novak. (The venue's manager, Liz Furiati, appears in "Is This Thing On?" as herself.) He'd workshop different sets from throughout the film, relaying the various stages of Alex coming to terms with how he contributed to the demise of his marriage, and then go home to rewrite lines the next day.

"People would laugh and think I'm having a nervous breakdown," Arnett says. "Stand-up is incredible. It's so scary. There's nowhere to hide. You can't really bulls—, either. People either like it or they don't. And I bombed a bunch, really hard."

In many ways, Alex resembles the version of Arnett that film and television audiences have come to love. His distinctive baritone endures, its trademark rasp lending welcome texture to the finance-bro character. "SmartLess" fans will recognize Arnett's dry, playful wit in the protagonist, whose humor shines through even in his depressive state.

Arnett and Chappell couldn't help but pull from their own lives while writing their initial drafts of the film. Chappell looked to his marriage to better understand how a long-term relationship can evolve over time. (His wife is actually the one who told him about Bishop: She "heard this story on the radio — not even a podcast," he says. "That's how far ago it was.") Arnett and Poehler split amicably in 2012 after nine years of marriage, though he remains coy on the specifics of how this influenced the script. (The actor is currently dating supermodel Carolyn Murphy.)

"I think it's impossible when you're working on something in whatever capacity, whether you're writing or acting, to not bring your own experience into something," he says. "That's what we do as humans, and I think that's what we do as artists."

And yet, the actor also shows up in "Is This Thing On?" as we've never seen him before. There is little buffoonery here. And no magic tricks (sorry, Gob). Pain lurks behind Alex's eyes, and in the smile with which he greets Tess after they separate. As this sad man fumbling through life, Arnett feels like a mild revelation.

He credits the film's authenticity to the understanding — fostered by Cooper's rewrite — that some of the biggest moments in life, the ones that make you change course, happen "in a bathroom, in the kitchen, on the staircase — and there's no buildup."

"It's the banality of those moments," Arnett says. "There's emotional buildup, of course, but there's no, like, 'Let's go and have the talk.' It doesn't happen on a beach. It happens in the car in the parking lot of a grocery store. When somebody says to somebody else, 'I'm not feeling it.' 'Me, neither.' And then you realize it's over."

One of the earliest scenes in "Is This Thing On?" sets the tone for what is to come. Alex and Tess are beside each other in the upstairs bathroom, brushing their teeth, as their kids sleep in a room down the hall. Tess turns to her husband, with whom she has been romantically involved for a total of 26 years, and says, "We need to call it, right?" Alex responds, "I think so, too." That's it. No fuss. It's just how things go.

"S— happens on a Wednesday," Arnett says, taking a sip of coffee.

WEEKEND: MOVIE REVIEWS

‘Greenland 2’ a predictable disaster sequel

Butler action movie gives optimistic view of aftermath of fallout

By Katie Walsh
Tribune News Service



LIONSGATE/TNS

Gerard Butler as John Garrity, Morena Baccarin as Allison Garrity, Amber Rose Revah as Dr. Casey Amina and Roman Griffin Davis as Nathan Garrity in “Greenland 2: Migration.”

Gerard Butler is the Prince of January. You could print calendars now with the knowledge that the Scottish actor will invariably open the year with some kind of action bombast, ranging from the goofy (last year’s “Den of Thieves 2: Pantera”) to the earnest — this year’s disaster movie sequel “Greenland 2: Migration.” Butler reunites with his “Kandahar,” “Angel Has Fallen” and “Greenland” director Ric Roman Waugh for the film, and much like “Den of Thieves 2,” the film sees our star setting out for the south of France, under, of course, very different circumstances.

In the surprisingly effective 2020 film “Greenland,” Butler’s John Garrity and family just barely survive a comet named Clarke, which destroys 75% of the planet on impact. Five years later, when “Greenland 2: Migration” takes place, they’re living in a nuclear fallout bunker in Greenland, sheltering from radioactive storms with a group of survivors. This little society has to make a choice: stay put in a relatively safe but increasingly untenable place, or make a move for (possibly) greener pastures. Those potential pastures are in Clarke’s impact crater, where a scientist, Dr. Casey Amina (Amber Rose Revah), believes that new life may have sprung, shielded from the toxic air.

That decision is made for them when the bunker is destroyed by earthquakes, and the Garrity family escapes across the Atlantic with a small group of survivors. They alight in a waterlogged Liverpool, and discover the broken social factions that have cropped up in the wake of environmental collapse. From there, John and his wife Allison (Morena Baccarin) and teenage son Nathan (Roman Griffin Davis) make their way to London, then Dover, and then France, in search of Clarke’s landing spot.

Their journey takes them from destinations that are comfortingly homey (a barricaded memory care home in London), outlandish (traversing a dry English Channel via ladder), and even weirdly historical (trench warfare has returned in France). Waugh’s location shooting in the U.K. and Iceland makes for some stunning landscape imagery, and keeps the world grounded in reality — for the most part — as he did with “Greenland,” previously. The only difference is that Butler fades to the background, oddly, with Baccarin, Davis and the rotating cast of people they meet on the way drawing focus.

There is an interesting comparison to make with “Greenland 2: Migration,” to Danny Boyle’s 2025 zombie sequel “28 Years Later.” Both feature stories about fathers and young teen sons venturing to the U.K. from an island enclave years after disaster, but Boyle (and writer Alex Garland) are willing to get freaky with it, while Waugh and writers Mitchell LaFortune and Chris Sparling walk a very predictable and straightforward path.

While we get a glimpse of the Liverpool lunatics roaming the streets, as well as faceless marauders and insurgents that make outside even more dangerous than the radioactive air, for the most part, the people the Garrity family encounter prove to be trustworthy. I kept expecting a twist, a rug pull, some spin on the material, or even a strange new life-form birthed by Clarke. I’m not sure why I thought that was an option, considering the first film. Everything proceeds exactly as one might expect.

That is in line with the film’s overall ethos. John hopes for his son that he is able to rebuild a world based on kindness and compassion, and his vision of what the world could be is indeed reflected back at him. Conflict rages over resources, but people are, for the most part, decent.

But who gets to enjoy the spoils of the new world? The message that Waugh, LaFortune and Sparling impart is that those who dare to dream that it exists, who endure the journey to get there, rather than clinging to tenuous safety, are the ones who have earned the prize of new life and the abundance that comes with it. “Greenland 2: Migration” offers up a proudly, even defiantly, optimistic view of what comes after disaster, which can serve for the viewer as either cathartic fictional balm, or Pollyanna-ish fantasy — pick your poison.

“Greenland 2: Migration” is rated PG-13 for some strong violence, bloody images and action. Running time: 98 minutes. Now playing at select on-base theaters.

‘Primate’ effectively unleashes face-ripping monkey mayhem

By Adam Graham
The Detroit News



PARAMOUNT PICTURES/TNS

Jessica Alexander as Hannah and Miguel Torres Umba does motion-capture work as Ben, a simian who turns on his human friends in “Primate.”

There’s something wrong with Ben.

And there’s something right with “Primate,” the killer monkey horror entry kicking off January’s box-office sweepstakes. It’s a time of year well-suited to horror movies, action titles and Gerard Butler thrillers, and when the weather outside gets cold, there’s something warming about the prospect of watching an out-of-control chimp wreaking havoc on a bunch of teenagers.

That’s Ben, the simian at the center of “Primate,” who turns on his human friends after he’s bitten by a rabies-infected mongoose. We don’t spend too much time getting to know Ben before the inciting incident, as director and co-writer Johannes Roberts (“47 Meters Down,” “The Strangers: Prey at Night”) prefers to get right down to business. Monkey see, monkey kill.

The humans in question include Lucy (Johnny Sequoyah), a college student returning home to Hawaii for the summer with her friends Kate (Victoria Wyant) and Hannah (Jessica Alexander), and Lucy’s father Adam (“CODA” Oscar winner Troy Kotsur), who is deaf. Adam is an author of what seems to be a wildly popular series of deaf-themed thrillers (“A Silent Scream,” “A Silent Cry”), so he’s able to afford a cliffside home and a pet chimp with its own enclosure on the grounds.

Ah, but Ben’s not acting right, and he has already removed one unlucky caretaker’s face before the opening credits start rolling. The gruesome sequence — heavy on gore and practical effects — is a good indicator of what’s to come, as “Primate” essentially becomes a slasher movie, with Ben stalking his victims one by one. (Ben is played by Miguel Torres Umba performing inside an animatronic suit, work usually reserved for the likes of Andy Serkis.)

As in any slasher worth its mettle, the character development is thin as the genre mechanics take over, and Roberts stages several tense, impressively staged sequences that pit man vs. monkey. Ben has the upper hand over his human counterparts, and the sound department does its part by giving him a heaving, menacing snort and growl that makes him sound somewhere between a grizzly bear and the Predator.

They also give Ben, so seemingly cute and cuddly in his red T-shirt, a finishing move of sorts, as he’s particularly fond of removing the lower jaws of his victims. Unlike 2024’s neutered January horror entry “Night Swim,” “Primate” delivers its share of grown-up gore.

None of it is to be taken too seriously, but Roberts sells the fear of the story by delivering it with a straight face and never winking at the audience. “Primate” is an old-school horror thriller that uses craft and technique to deliver a face-ripping good time.

“Primate” is rated R for strong bloody violent content, gore, language and some drug use. Running time: 89 minutes. Now playing at select on-base theaters.

WEEKEND: MOVIE REVIEWS

The feel-bad movie of 2025

‘If I Had Legs I’d Kick You’ chronicles a mom hitting her breaking point with humor, horror



A24

Conan O’Brien, left, plays the therapist to Rose Byrne’s Linda, who’s dealing with having to solo parent a sick child and solve a water leak in her ceiling, in “If I Had Legs I’d Kick You.”

BY SONIA RAO
The Washington Post

Linda needs a moment alone. But she knows this is a nearly impossible request, as her only breaks from solo parenting a sick child who must be monitored at all times are work and therapy. The latter option will have to do. She lies down on her therapist’s couch without saying a word, relishing the silence. Then he tries to ask her questions, and she snaps: Doesn’t he understand that this is the only time she has to herself?

These therapy sessions, while combative, are as much of a reprieve for Linda as they are for the audience of “If I Had Legs I’d Kick You,” an exhausting psychological dramedy about a beleaguered mother (Rose Byrne, in perhaps the most stunning performance of her career) struggling to balance all her responsibilities. Her unnamed daughter (Delaney Quinn) suffers from a mysterious illness, maybe an eating disorder, and can’t be unhooked from beeping machines until she gets her weight up.

Linda’s husband, Charles (Christian Slater), is busy captaining a faraway cruise ship but still finds time to criticize her parenting skills over the phone. Oh, and it turns out Linda also works as a therapist, right down the hall from her own! But Linda is far more negligent than her shrink (Conan O’Brien), too tired to notice alarm bells going off whenever one of her clients, a new mom (Danielle Macdonald), speaks of her paranoid anxieties.

On top of it all, a water leak creates a gaping hole in Linda’s apartment ceiling, meaning she and her kid have to live out of a dingy motel for weeks until it gets fixed. Tired yet?

Written and artfully directed by Mary Bronstein (“Yeast”), “If I Had Legs” has been described as “Uncut Gems” for mothers, given its overwhelming chaos and Linda’s tendency to make the most maddening choice possible in any situation. The new film was also produced by Ronald Bronstein (the director’s husband) and Josh Safdie, both of whom co-wrote “Uncut Gems.”

The comparison is helpful shorthand but undermines the distinctly feminine perspective Bronstein offers of a woman tormented by her own life. Inspired by personal experiences, the filmmaker traps viewers in Linda’s turbulent mind — terrain that may feel terrifying to some viewers, and familiar to anyone whose head reflexively swivels when a kid shouts, “Mom!”

It’s a bold, claustrophobic movie that wouldn’t work without Byrne. While best known for her purely comedic roles, including the one-upping socialite Helen in the 2011 hit “Bridesmaids,” the actress delivers a gut-wrenching performance as Linda. She conveys the character’s misery with great conviction, her voice straining as she explains her relentless challenges to skeptical audiences (usually male). But she also finds a way to be funny, employing her sharp comedic timing to convey Linda’s sardonic humor.

Byrne finds a worthy screen partner in O’Brien, who ditches his usual warmth to play Linda’s impenetrable therapist. The comedian surprises in this dramatic role, countering Byrne’s frenetic energy with a level of restraint her character interprets as a minimization of her struggles. Linda finds solace in friendly motel employee James (A$AP Rocky, fresh off Spike Lee’s “Highest 2 Lowest”) until lashing out at him, too.

Bronstein favors tight frames, often keeping her camera uncomfortably close to Byrne’s face. Viewers can almost feel Linda’s jaw tighten at each of her daughter’s outbursts. The girl isn’t shown until the final scene of the film, a stylistic choice that clarifies her focus: This isn’t about the terrors of raising this specific child, but about the unbearable responsibilities of motherhood as a whole.

If it isn’t clear by now, “If I Had Legs” is the feel-bad movie of 2025 (when it first premiered on the film festival circuit). It follows other films such as Marielle Heller’s “Nightbitch” and Maggie Gyllenhaal’s “The Lost Daughter” in presenting an unflinching look at embittered mothers, but dials the visceral distress up to 11.

Bronstein doesn’t seem to be aiming for lofty social commentary so much as a vivid experience. Misery loves company, so here’s your invitation.

“If I Had Legs I’d Kick You” is rated R for language, some drug use and bloody images. Running time: 113 minutes. Now playing at select on-base theaters.

‘I Was a Stranger’ a powerful debut for filmmaker

BY MARK MESZOROS
The News-Herald (Willoughby, Ohio)

Early on in “I Was a Stranger,” we follow Amira (Yasmine Al Massri), a physician working at a hospital in war-torn Syria in the late 2010s. As she tries to save the lives of wounded men, explosions rattle outside the building, bullets crash through a window and a patient pulls a gun on her.

When her shift is over, she finds her young daughter, Rasha (Massa Daoud), has come to fetch her; it is Amira’s birthday, a fact she has forgotten. It will prove to be the worst of her life.

Going wider this week after a recent limited theatrical release, “I Was a Stranger” is the undeniably impressive — and, at times, heartbreaking — feature debut of writer-director Brandt Andersen, who adapted it from his award-winning short film “Refugee.”

Boasting an international cast and narrative set in multiple nations, the drama features a largely non-English narrative and makes use of subtitles throughout its less-than-two-hour runtime.

Before dropping us into the hell that is Aleppo at this time, Andersen presents text attributed to William Shakespeare that asks that you consider the plight of those coming from another land in search of better lives and from which the original title of the film, “The Strangers’ Case,” was taken. Then we see the Windy City — and, undoubtedly not coincidentally, the Trump International Hotel & Tower Chicago — where we originally see Amira working, years later.

Soon, the narrative begins in earnest with the first of five chapters, “The Doctor,” the one centered around Amira. From there, it progresses through the remaining four:



ANGEL STUDIOS/TNS

Omar Sy, left, and Ziad Bakri in “I Was a Stranger.”

- “The Soldier,” also set in Aleppo and featuring Yahya Mahayni’s Mustafa, whose limits are pushed by the brutality of a superior officer;
- “The Smuggler,” shifting the action to Izmir, Turkey, and centering on the work of Omar Sy’s Marwan, who makes good money sending desperate folks off in a cramped boat with something far from a promise that Greece’s Hellenic Coast Guard will rescue them;
- “The Poet,” tracking the bid of Ziad Bakri’s Fathi to get his family to safety via Marwan’s questionable services;
- and “The Captain,” showcasing how the efforts to save those seeking asylum are taking a great toll on Constantine Markoulakis’ Stavros, who leads a boat in the aforementioned arm of the Greek military.

Each slice of this narrative is powerful in its own way. And while you may wish the vignettes overlapped just a bit more than they do, taken as a whole, they illustrate how conflicts such as the Syrian civil war can be devastating in ways that stretch beyond the tragic mass loss of human life.

“I Was a Stranger” is at least a borderline-stunning first feature from the filmmaker, who has producer credits on movies including 2015’s “Everest,” 2016’s “Silence” and 2017’s “American Made” and whose activism has seen him visit refugee camps and found the organization REEL Foundation. He takes an effective less-is-more approach here, with the possible exception of the film’s final moments back in Chicago, which feel a little heavy-handed.

His film benefits significantly from the work of director of photography Jonathan Sela (“John Wick,” “Deadpool 2”), whose camerawork is kinetic without being frenetic, and editor Jeff Seibenick (“The Mandalorian”), who helps Andersen punctuate the film’s impactful moments.

There is no shortage of such moments in “I Was a Stranger,” which, unsurprisingly, earned its share of accolades in 2024 on the film festival circuit. And, given some of what continues to happen around the world, it feels like something pretty darned close to essential viewing.

“I Was a Stranger” is rated PG-13 for strong violent content/bloody images, thematic material, a racial slur and smoking. Running time: 104 minutes. Now playing at select on-base theaters.

A chewy conduit for your inner child

Nordic candy shops making sweet waves across the US

By Ethan Beck
The Washington Post

Nordic candy was almost inescapable for Maddie Langlois.

Anytime she opened TikTok last year, she encountered sweets of all shapes and sizes from the New York shop BonBon. It had tiny strawberry squids, various types of sour fish, foam skulls and raspberry puckers. Soon enough, other confectionery companies — including Swedish brand Bubs and the Los Angeles-based Sockerbit — began swarming social media. Nearly all of these candy enterprises sourced their sweets from Europe.

This was good news for Langlois, 26, who had long been self-conscious about preferring gummies to chocolate.

"In my mind, gummy candy is immature," said Langlois, who works as a publicist in Boston. "I felt like chocolate was more widely acceptable. So, when gummies were, like, popping off, I was like, 'Oh, sweet, I need one of these stores near us, so I can go in and get all this gummy candy that I want to try.'"

She got her wish. This year, a handful of stores that stock Nordic candies opened in Boston, beginning in February with Madeleine's Candy Shop. They're part of a larger wave of boutique, social media-friendly shops cropping up around the country off the back of the viral Swedish candy craze.

In 2024, Elly Ross opened a quaint West Village shop called Lil Sweet Treat, before rapidly adding six more locations in Manhattan, Boston, Philadelphia and (as of late 2025) Washington, D.C.

Farther north, in Portland, Maine, Nikoline Østergaard founded Sodt, alongside her mother and sister, after seeing that there was a market for treats from her native Denmark.

In Utah, the two co-founders of a Swedish-inspired clothing brand brought some Nordic sweets to a pop-up event. Seeing the fervor that the candy caused, Malia Bradburn, Olive Redd and Greta Sunderlage decided to open So Swede in an extra office space.

These shops bring Nordic sweets into the neighborhoods of online candy connoisseurs. But inside the shops, the line blurs between the digital sphere and reality: With bright wallpapers, cute baggies and the pick-and-mix setups, these stores are playgrounds for those making TikTok videos and Instagram posts.

It's that sleek, fancy feel that defines many of these shops, including Madeleine's Candy Shop, which "feels like you're at like a boutique clothing store or a boutique grocery store," according to Marina Gearhart, 31, who first encountered Madeleine's while looking for a specific elderflower fish candy from BonBon. "The wallpaper in there feels like a hotel. They really know what they're doing."

That emphasis on elevating candy culture comes from Scandinavia, where a weekly dose of candy for kids is as standard as recess.

Leo Schaltz, one of BonBon's co-founders, remembers biking to pick up sweets for lördagsgodis, a Swedish and Norwegian tradition where children eat candy only on Saturdays.

"To a Swede, going to buy your candy on Saturday is the closest thing we have to a religious tradition," he said.

Sweets shops are, of course, not exclusive to Europe. Across America, penny candy shops used to be well-represented at general stores and apothecaries, on boardwalks and in vacation towns. Often featuring specific, locally made treats, many of them began to close because of corporate consolidation or because the candy manufacturers moved overseas between the 1970s and '90s, according to Sasha Zabar, who owns Glace Candy in Manhattan and whose family runs Zabar's.

"A lot of the smaller-scale candy businesses became co-packers and manufacturers for nutraceuticals, like vitamin gummies and also THC-related stuff as well," Zabar said. "There's not a lot of companies that make candy anymore, especially in the U.S."

These new European-inspired shops are just the latest in a long history of upscale sweet spots, according to Susan Benjamin, a candy historian and the founder of the True Treats store. In contrast to inexpensive, corner store-type shops, Benjamin notes a long history of posh places selling bonbons and truffles or advertising French-style chocolates. Madeleine's and Lil Sweet Treat are among the latest places to capitalize on Americans' curiosity about European snacks.

"Even though they may not know it, they're going back to the old model of candy being special, where you get a sample when you go in a candy store on a little silver plate and you try a little bit, or where it's got special lighting," Benjamin said. "It's almost like a jewelry store, the way they used to do it."

For the candy fans The Washington Post spoke to for this story, the polished look of these stores doesn't hurt, but the thrill is around the novelty: different flavors, chewy textures and a freedom to buy whatever amount they want through the mix-and-match system.

In these stores, sweets are presented as a conduit to the customer's inner child. Schaltz said that he has a touch of Peter Pan syndrome, which is how BonBon came up with its tagline: "Growing up is a trap." After all, it's hard for customers to be upset about work or politics or parenting when they're considering whether to purchase marshmallow squeezes or tart gummies.

Some of these shops don't exclusively carry European candy. But a broader selection of treats brought Gearhart right back to her childhood when she first went to Madeleine's.

"Walking in there, seeing ones like sour Airhead belts — something that I remember having at summer camp when I was a kid — is really nostalgic," she said.

The demand for higher-quality candy also helps. Several treat slingers noted that customers are intrigued by European health regulations, where ingredients such as titanium dioxide and potassium bromate, which can be found in some fruity candies, are banned.

Nearly all of the shop owners The Post spoke with mentioned that, just after opening, they had to quickly place additional orders or close because they sold out of candies. A few spots — Lil Sweet Treat, So Swede and BonBon — have plans to expand, while others are just trying to keep up with the demand of a single location.

"I don't need to have 17 locations," said Madeleine Brason, the founder of Madeleine's Candy Shop. "I want to be that nostalgic neighborhood local store that hopefully has longevity."

Integrating Madeleine's into the surrounding community in Boston was always part of Brason's plan. Otherwise, she fears, these candy stores might go the way of the frozen yogurt boom. Even if retail is struggling, the brick-and-mortar shops help candy become a way for people to connect, according to shop owners.

The remarkable staying power of those colorful Swedish candies was a shock to Madison Banks, 25, who thought "we would move on to maybe a different nationality or a different niche" by now. But hearing that So Swede was regularly selling out of sweets this summer, Banks decided to drop by the shop, where the continued success began to click:

"Everyone was in there, gathering around these jars of candy, talking about what they wanted."



Marvin Joseph/The Washington Post

Many of these new candy stores use a pick-and-mix setup, including the Lil Sweet Treat location in D.C.'s Georgetown neighborhood.



Lauren Bulbin/The Washington Post

One of the biggest sellers at Lil Sweet Treat, which has locations in New York, Boston, Philadelphia and Washington, D.C., is Bubs, a Swedish candy brand that has gone viral.

"In my mind, gummy candy is immature. I felt like chocolate was more widely acceptable. So, when gummies were, like, popping off, I was like, 'Oh, sweet, I need one of these stores near us, so I can go in and get all this gummy candy that I want to try.'"

Maddie Langlois
gummy candy fan

Gibraltar: Britain's rocky bite of Spain

When in southern Spain, I can't resist popping into the British colony of Gibraltar. Gibraltar is hardly signposted in Spain, as if Spain wishes the British colony didn't exist. (Drivers follow highway signs to La Línea, the last Spanish town before the border.) But that famous "Rock of Prudential" standing boldly above the sea indicates it's here to stay.

The 30,000 people living along a 2½-mile lip of land under the famous and strategic rock are happily English. And quirky Gibraltar is determinedly not Spanish. But while more than 90 percent of its citizens chose to stay with Britain in a 2002 referendum, almost 96 percent chose to stay with the European Union during the 2016 Brexit referendum, showing the complicated position the colony faces going forward.

Along with being "not Spanish," the colony is part English and part ... not. Gibraltarians have the big three-pronged British electrical plugs, their own currency (it's the pound sterling — but, like the Scots, they have their own version), and their own Web domain (.gi). Gibraltar's Anglican Church is proudly "headquarters of the Anglican Church in Europe" (not very centrally located for the business of administering that vast parish).



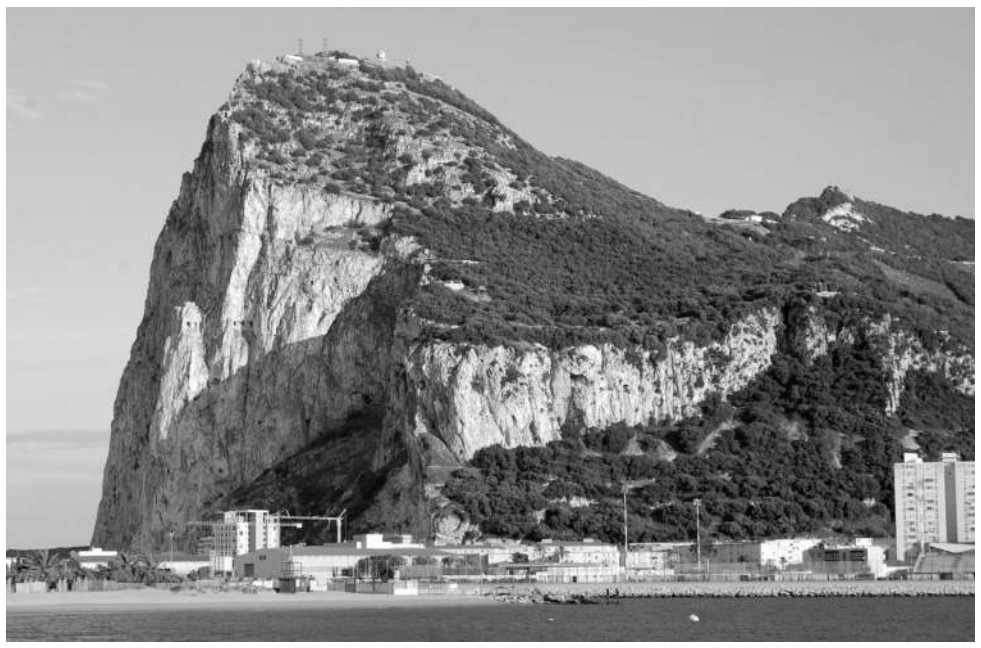
Rick Steves

The people have that typical British correctness — I got lectured by the woman at the tourist board for not giving them advance notice of my visit.

Gibraltar's economy, once dominated by the military, is now based mostly on tourism. And that includes quickie weddings — that are nonetheless "legally British." Sean Connery got married here. And, of course Beatle fans remember from the "Ballad of John and Yoko" that Mr. and Mrs. Lennon, too, got "married in Gibraltar, near Spain."

While the British military presence is now dwarfed by the British sun-seeker presence, the colony is encrusted with military souvenirs — stout ramparts, war memorials and 30 miles of defense-related tunnels drilled into its rock. As you drive the military roads that switchback to the summit of the rock, you notice big rusted iron rings spiked into the pavement every 20 yards — designed to enable soldiers to hoist up the giant cannons that once helped the Brits seal off the Mediterranean.

The town of Gibraltar is pretty humble. Spaniards come for duty-free sugar, tobacco and booze. For sightseers, the attraction here is the rock itself, with its viewpoint on the summit; gregarious "apes" (actually a gang of about 200 tailless monkeys — whose presence here supposedly assured the continued British control of the colony); and siege galleries — tunnels drilled for military purposes over the centuries. Several hundred yards of tunnel are open to visitors, allowing you to hike across the face of the rock and actually peer out of the cannon holes back at Spain. The cable car to the summit is under renovation until 2027, but Gibraltar's taxi drivers are trained to give a fun circuit around the rock with several stops, grand views and — the highlight for many — some fun with those precocious monkeys. The 90-minute taxi tour costs about $60.



Rick Steves

The craggy, famous Rock of Gibraltar overlooks its namesake town below.

The Gibraltar business sense is quirky. The hotels are twice as expensive as those across the border in Spain, but not as comfortable. For quite a while now, I've been quick to tell travelers that English food no longer deserves its bad reputation. But after several Gibraltar visits I'm now quick to add that the cliche is still accurate in Gibraltar. And the businesses here pad their bottom line by gouging anyone who comes in and spends euros. Businesses are keen to advertise that they accept euros; it's only later that most tourists realize this "convenience" comes with about a 20 percent loss in the exchange rate.

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Destination ideas include Olympics, solar eclipse, art installations

Where to go and what to do in 2026? Right now, countless newspapers, magazines, websites and other travel-related publications are waxing poetically over trending destinations and can't-be-missed experiences. While the best vacation plans will always involve one's personal interests, industry insider ideas can alert us to events that might otherwise pass us by. Here's a look at what some experts are suggesting in the year to come:

One-off events

The 2026 Winter Olympics will take place in and around Milan and Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy, from Feb. 6-22. For just over two weeks, some 2,900 of the world's best winter sport athletes will gather to compete for 114 sets of medals in eight sports and 16 disciplines. New this year is Ski Mountaineering, combining uphill climbing and downhill skiing. Tickets to a number of competitions, from snowboarding to ice hockey to figure skating, remain available on the official Olympics website. The Paralympic Winter Games are set to follow March 6-15. Online: olympics.com/en/milano-cortina-2026



Karen Bradbury

On Aug. 12, a solar eclipse will briefly envelop a small part of Earth in darkness, with the moon projecting its shadow — the so-called path of totality — over Greenland, Iceland and Spain. Places where it might be possible to experience the first eclipse to reach Europe in the 21st century (absent cloudy skies) include the Snæfellsnes Peninsula in Iceland or Gijón, Palencia, or Burgos, Spain.

Top experiences

The British media and hospitality company Time Out has compiled a roundup of the best new things happening in the world in 2026, seven of which will occur in Europe.



iStock

Messinia's Voidokilia beach is one of the filming locations of the upcoming Christopher Nolan movie "The Odyssey" on Greece's Peloponnese peninsula.

From June 6-28, Paris' Pont Neuf bridge will be covered by an immersive art installation, "La Caverne du Pont Neuf," temporarily transforming the bridge into a stone grotto. Other suggestions include a trek along the soon-to-be-completed King Charles III Coastal Path, spanning the entire coast of England; studying the sky at the Skyspace installation in Aarhus, Denmark; or losing oneself inside the UBS Digital Art Museum, an immersive art installation in Hamburg, Germany. Online: tinyurl.com/mrxmbf6k

Lonely Planet writers have suggested a more generic lineup of activities, including attending a match between any of England's Premier League football teams; whale and dolphin spotting on the islands of the Azores, Portugal; dancing the night away at a club in Belgrade, Serbia; exploring the street art of Bristol, England; and visiting Eileen Gray's E-1027 villa, an inspiration for modernist design, on the French Riviera between Menton and Monaco. Online: tinyurl.com/47thxnzt

Trending destinations

European entries on Condé Nast's "The Best Places to Go in 2026" include Brussels, Belgium, an emerging hub for modern arts, particularly with the November 2026 opening of the Kanal-Centre Pompidou Museum; Greece's Peloponnese peninsula, to explore the filming locations of Christopher Nolan's film "The Odyssey," set for release this July; Saint-Gervais-les-Bains, France, for its Glaciorium glacier and climate center and a new fleet of energy efficient trains, which point toward a new era of sustainable Alpine tourism; and Upper Carniola (Gorenjska), Slovenia, the highland home of the Julian Alps. Lake Bled and Triglav National Park will welcome the opening of the Muzej Lah, a contemporary art museum on the slopes of Bled Castle. Online: tinyurl.com/4bacaj7s

Lonely Planet's picks for best destinations include Finland (experiencing the great outdoors, from Baltic coasts to Arctic forests); Sardinia, Italy (sunbathing on pristine beaches, exploring Bronze Age archaeological sites); Tipperary, Ireland (hiking, food, castles and pubs); Cádiz, Spain (celebrating carnival and sipping sherry) and Utrecht, Netherlands (bi-level canals, shopping in boutiques). Online: tinyurl.com/3sr7nncy

Finding its way onto National Geographic's Best of the World List is Hull in Yorkshire, England, a city that's undergone a huge transformation thanks to major investment. Hull celebrates 800 years of maritime heritage with the refurbishment of the Hull Maritime Museum, the launch of the North End Shipyard Visitor Centre and the restoration of two ships — the Arctic Corsair and the Spurn Lightship, both permanently docked and open to the public. Online: tinyurl.com/4epvbz2k

WEEKEND: QUICK TRIPS

Getting off on the right foot in Pirmasens

German city, whose official designation translates to 'shoe city,' invites you to get a new pair just off autobahn A62

By David Edwards
Stars and Stripes

It's amazing how many long-ago footwear references have been triggered in my memory since my first visit to Pirmasens, whose official German designation translates to "shoe city."

My childhood years coincided with the advertising heyday of Nike's Air Jordan sneakers, and even if I wanted to, I'll never be able to forget the commercials in which Spike Lee alter ego Mars Blackmon declared "it's gotta be the shoes."

Then there was the December evening that my favorite hometown radio station played the tearjerker tune "The Christmas Shoes."

The most impactful flashback came from the miniseries "Chernobyl," in which nuclear physicist Ulana Khomyuk warns a local apparatchik about the danger, only to be told that he prefers his opinion to hers.

"Before you were deputy secretary, you worked in a shoe factory," she retorts. "Yes, I worked in a shoe factory, and now I'm in charge," he says.

This last reference is the most apt to Pirmasens, which used to abound in the shoe factories that were its economic lifeblood for decades. In the record-setting year of 1969, more than 32,000 workers were employed in the local shoe industry, whose production peaked at 62 million pairs of shoes.

Nowadays, the Rheinland-Pfalz city about 20 miles from Kaiserslautern still wears its shoemaking heritage proudly, and I decided to explore it through a combination of shopping and shoe-leather investigation.

The retail therapy aspect of my two journeys introduced me to several German brands, including Peter Kaiser, Semler and Salamander.

Eight outlet stores interspersed through the city offer wares from assorted manufacturers. Three of them are conveniently located along or near a stretch of Blocksbergstrasse in the southwestern part of town.

The first stop for me and my German fellow traveler was Kennel & Schmenger. On the way inside, I noticed a parked Porsche Cayenne, which probably should have tipped me off to the cost of the merchandise.

Men's shoes occupied a minute section surrounded by a sea of stilettos, boots and other women's footwear so diverse that comprehensive categorization is beyond me.

My travel companion commented on the prices as I was about to pick up a sneaker for a closer look, and upon turning it over, I saw a price tag of 100 euros. She was focused on a sticker that said B-Ware, meaning it was in the second quality tier in the German system.

That was enough buyer beware for me, so we headed down the street to a place that on Google Maps is called MST Shoe Outlet. The three brands sold there were Bugatti, TT.Baggatt and Salamander.

After trying on several pairs, I settled on a pair of forest green Bugatti boots that I absolutely loved. With the 20% discount offered that day, I paid about 70 bucks for them.

The marketing tactics for Salamander shoes also caught my attention. Native to the Baden-Württemberg city of Kornwestheim, the brand features a fire salamander as its symbol.

In the rear of the outlet store is a colorful toylike salamander statue with an outstretched arm, presumably inviting customers to be photographed alongside it.

Although it was too late in the day to look further at the inventory, I tracked down the website of the company that owns the three brands showcased in the store and found that an online Salamander store was launched last year. That should make for fun browsing sometime.

I made a subsequent sojourn to Pirmasens after Christmas to check out the wares of Peter Kaiser, Germany's oldest shoe brand. But the huge Lemberger Strasse facility shown on an outlet store map I had is, as I later learned, permanently closed.



Photos by David Edwards/Stars and Stripes

A wall of mosaics on Bahnhofstrasse in Pirmasens, Germany, has images that allude to the city's long history as the hub of German shoe manufacturing.



A selection of Salamander brand shoes for sale at an outlet store in Pirmasens. The company was founded in Kornwestheim in 1885 and became one of the icons of the German footwear industry.

The brand's new home is at Caprice, the only one of the three southwestern stores I had skipped on the earlier visit. My hopes were dashed when the salesperson said the fairly sparse Peter Kaiser inventory there consisted entirely of women's shoes.

The bad timing continued at the Semler factory and outlet store, which was deserted that day because, well, that's year-end Germany for you. At least I was able to get my bearings for next time thanks to the short walk from Pirmasens' namesake church, a helpful landmark that overlooks the city's signature tiered fountain and central square, Schlossplatz.

The square is also home to Old City Hall, where a museum inside includes an exhibition on the shoe history of Pirmasens. Alas, that spot too was closed until the week after New Year's.

So I checked out a different testament to feet feats, dropping by the Schuster-Joss fountain just down the pedestrian street through the old town. It depicts a man holding a shoe and is ringed with angular walls bearing inscriptions celebrating the shoemaker's craft.

Between the shoe factories and the museum, I have plenty of incentive to return to Pirmasens and hope to carve out a full day in the very near future.

That should afford me enough time to check out another cool attraction I learned about, the German Shoe Museum in nearby Hauenstein. Besides the Guinness record-holding largest shoe in the world, its displays include ads past and present as well as a Salamander collection of more than 4,000 pairs and single shoes produced between the late 19th century and 2004, when the company was dissolved.

And lastly, after seeing a postcard with a lovely artist's rendering of the Schlossplatz and St. Pirmin Church, I can't wait to see what that stunning fountain looks like when the water is flowing.

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One of the two swan statues adorning the Schlossplatz fountain in Pirmasens has images on its wings that depict human footprints and various types of shoes.

On the QT

Addresses: MST Shoe Outlet, Am Klosterpfuhl 1; Kennel & Schmenger, Im Erlenteich 5; Caprice and Peter Kaiser outlet store, Blocksbergstrasse 158; Semler outlet store, Alleestrasse 36; Old City Hall museum, Hauptstrasse 26
Cost: Varies by store. Old City Hall museum admission, 2.50 euros
Hours: For MST Shoe Outlet, 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Monday through Friday and 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturday. For Kennel & Schmenger, 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Monday through Friday and 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturday. For Caprice, 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Monday through Friday and 9 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturday. For Semler, 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Monday through Friday and 10 a.m.-2 p.m. Saturday. All stores closed Sunday. For the Old City Hall museum, 2-5 p.m. Tuesday through Friday; closed Monday.
Information: Online: mst-service.de/outlets, outlet.kennel-schmenger.com/en-de, semler.de, brand.capriceshoes.com/en/caprice/shoe-outlet

David Edwards

Pineapple pizza meets its match

Bavarian eatery takes fruit fray into meatier territory with limited-time topped schnitzel

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

Amid the raging widespread debate about pineapple as a pizza topping, a Bavarian eatery has upped the ante by pairing the sweet tropical fruit with a beloved German staple.

Metzgers' Kich in Neustadt an der Waldnaab keeps its menu fresh with alternating weekly themes and variations on typical dishes.

It ended 2025 with what was dubbed "schnitzel week."

The menu standout then for this fan of Hawaiian pizza was a fried cutlet topped with large slices of pineapple and melted cheese. My family accompanied me for this meal at the establishment, which is about 15 miles east of Grafenwoehr.

The restaurant featured three other specialty schnitzels: one made of turkey, one topped with Italian meat sauce and melted cheese, and another with bacon and a fried egg. All dishes were served with a side salad and french fries.

But once I saw the pineapple schnitzel on the menu, I could not bring myself to order anything else. Before it arrived, though, I worried that it would be a soggy mess.

That worry proved unfounded, as the giant breaded slab of meat arrived crisp and clean, without a single drop of juice or water on the plate, which was heaped with fries seasoned right on the money for my tastes.

With its uniform glaze of cheese, the schnitzel looked almost too perfect, like one of the plastic display meals I used to see in restaurant windows when I lived in Japan.

The pineapple slices were circular and appeared to be from a can. The pounded cutlet was expertly cooked medium and moist inside with a crispy, pan-fried exterior.

I experienced an explosion of flavor as I bit into the unique pairing. The subtle sweetness of the tropical fruit complemented the salty and savory breading and cheese. It was a match made in heaven.

I have to credit the chef at Metzgers' Kich, because in previous Hawaiian pizza experiences I had yet to see someone adequately deal with the juice leaking from the fruit, even after being baked or grilled. It was an impressive feat.

My son chose the schnitzel topped with minced meat, a tomato-based sauce and the same cheese that had topped my plate. His too was crispy and had the cheese evenly melted over the entire dish. The thin layer of savory sauce made the dish taste almost like veal Parmesan.

My wife ordered the plain schnitzel with mushroom cream sauce off the regular menu. The combination of moist pork, flavorful sauce and spaetzle, which offered a textural counterpoint, was delicious.

For dessert, my son ordered a scoop of strawberry ice cream, and it was gone before I could take a picture of it. My wife and I split a piece of the chocolate cake, which was moist and decadent with a thick and rich fudge frosting.

The staff at Metzgers' Kich was engaging and friendly. We found the dining room spacious and homey, despite the clinical cafeteria-style floor tiles that came with the building.

Another distinctive feature of the restaurant is its recurring "snack" weeks, which begin on the first Wednesday of the month and run through the following Sunday, with expanded hours Wednesday through Saturday.

On those days, regional snacks and fresh beer are served from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., while Sunday follows the regular hours of 11 a.m. to 10 p.m.

People interested in trying the dish I ordered will have to wait for the next schnitzel week. Metzgers' Kich plans to finish January with burger, fish and pasta week options. I can't wait to try their other themed menus.

For now, I'll just say that the pineapple schnitzel was delicious. Let the debate begin.

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AFTER HOURS GERMANY

Metzgers' Kich

Address: Am Hofgarten 1, Neustadt an der Waldnaab, Germany
Hours: 5-10 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday; 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Sundays and public holidays; closed Monday and Tuesday.
Prices: The schnitzels cost between 15.90 and 18.90 euros. One scoop of strawberry ice cream was 1.70 euros. A variety of toppings are available for extra. The chocolate cake was 2.90 euros.
Information: Phone: +49 9602-918-455; online: www.metzgerskich.de

Matthew M. Burke



PHOTOS BY MATTHEW M. BURKE/Stars and Stripes

The pineapple schnitzel at Metzgers' Kich in Neustadt an der Waldnaab, Germany, is available only sporadically because it's one of the items on the special "schnitzel week" menu. The sweet fruit is a nice foil to the salty and crispy cutlet topped with cheese.



The plain schnitzel with mushroom cream sauce off the regular menu delighted with its creaminess and rich, earthy mushroom flavor. The spaetzle offered a brilliant textural counterpoint.



This schnitzel, from Metzgers' Kich's "schnitzel week" menu, topped with minced meat, sauce and cheese, tasted a lot like veal Parmesan.



Sample sake at the source

PHOTOS BY SETH ROBSON/Stars and Stripes

Workers prepare rice for making sake at the Dassai brewery in Yamaguchi prefecture, Japan. After the cooked rice is spread, mold is added to achieve fermentation.

Taste and learn at Dassai brewery tour near Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni

BY SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

Sake drinkers hoping to watch seasoned craftsmen show off ancient skills with antique wooden equipment will be out of luck on a tour of the Dassai brewery in Yamaguchi prefecture.



Sakurai

The gleaming 12-story brewery, about 40 minutes' drive from Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni, is a high-tech facility that wouldn't look out of place at a NASA launch site. That makes sense given the company's connection to the International Space Station and plans to take its product to the moon.

Company president Kazuhiro Sakurai, a suave gentleman in a tailored suit, will tell you all about it if you run into him during a tour of the brewery.



A hostess prepares Dassai sake samples for tasting in a room next to the factory where it's brewed in Yamaguchi prefecture, Japan.



Bottles of Dassai sake make their way along the line at the brewery.

The company recently sold a single, 100-mL bottle of sake brewed on the space station for 100 million yen (about $645,000).

A tour of the Yamaguchi brewery starts with visitors donning rubber slippers, protective coats and hairnets, then stepping into an air shower to make sure they don't bring contaminants inside.

To get a close-up view of sake making, visitors climb stairs and trek through galleries filled with machinery. There's an explanation of rice polishing and examples of various grades of polished rice to check out. You can see a massive metal rice steamer in another part of the plant.

In one room, staff spread cooked rice on tables before adding mold. A much colder room houses dozens of fermentation tanks that exude a strong alcoholic odor.

Dassai's crew of young brewers analyze every part of the sake-brewing process, according to Sakurai.

There's a room full of printed charts that show test results used to create the perfect brew. Nearby, the brewers, clad in white coats, look like rocket scientists as they analyze sake samples.

Once you've learned all there is to know about sake brewing, it's time to taste the product.

Cross the road and a small bridge and you'll find yourself in a shop equipped with small tables where you can sample several types of sake or even eat sake ice cream while you enjoy the peaceful, green scenery of the countryside.

You can also purchase sake brewed on site such as a 720-mL bottle of the company's flagship brand Dassai 23, which sells for 5,200 yen.

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@SethRobson1

On the QT

Directions: 2167-4 Shutomachi Osogoe, Iwakuni, Yamaguchi 742-0422
Times: Brewery tours start at 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. daily; the sake shop is open 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily.
Costs: The brewery tour costs 1,000 yen, with an additional 500-yen tasting fee.
Food: Sake-flavored ice cream sells for 1,000 yen.
Information: Online: dassai.com/tour

Seth Robson

WEEKEND: FOOD & DINING



PHOTOS BY RYAN M. BREEDEN/Stars and Stripes

Pastries and desserts await at 58 Sweets, a local bakery within the base library on Camp Foster, Okinawa.

Book it to 58 Sweets

You're overdue for macarons sold inside Marine Corps library on Okinawa

BY RYAN BREEDEN
Stars and Stripes

Tucked within the quiet, book-lined stacks of the Camp Foster library lies an unexpected gem dedicated to elegant pastries and desserts.

The shop, 58 Sweets, serves a variety of decadent treats at this Marine Corps base on Okinawa. The first impression is of an upscale bakery, illuminating an already sophisticated atmosphere, and is a delightful contrast to a charming library.

With meticulous artistry, 58 Sweets offers a tempting selection of delicate cakes, French macarons, refreshing frozen yogurt and coffee. Everything is made in-house with a dedication to quality and detail.

The desserts range from classic layered pieces of fluffy sponge cake to highly intricate pastries decked out with frosting and cream. The frozen yogurt is tangy and flavorful with various toppings available.

I decided to indulge in the standout item, French macarons, at $1.75 each. With more than a dozen flavor choices, I opted for pistachio, strawberry cheesecake and shikuwasa — a local Okinawan citrus fruit. The macarons are light and crisp, and perfectly balance taste and texture.

The menu may appear small, but there are multiple options for multiple visits. The macarons came in chocolate, coconut, Earl Grey, birthday versions and even holiday favorites like peppermint or white mocha.



A variety of pastries and desserts are available at 58 Sweets, a local bakery that delightfully contrasts the library at Camp Foster.

The cakes start at $4.50 a slice and you'll see options such as pistachio ricotta, cinnamon apple and mixed berry, with seasonal options like pumpkin cheesecake.

The staff at 58 Sweets are knowledgeable, friendly and eager to recommend their own favorites. There is an obvious passion for baking evident in each item. Even their to-go packaging was presented as a gift box topped with a bow.

More than a bakery within a military base, 58 Sweets is a culinary sanctuary. It is a perfect spot to indulge in a bit of luxury without breaking the bank.

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AFTER HOURS OKINAWA

58 Sweets

Location: Inside the Camp Foster Library, building 5679; Less than 5 minutes south of Gate 5.
Hours: Open daily, 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily; parking available outside the library or at the nearby commissary.
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Ryan Breeden

Soothe mind, body with comforting cabbage soup

BY G. DANIELA GALARZA
The Washington Post

After weeks of buttery sweets, crisp latkes, rich stews and cheese-laden casseroles, I'm in the mood for meals that are lighter but still warming and cozy. Baechu Doenjang Guk, or Cabbage and Doenjang Soup, as it's called in English, is Joanne Lee Molinaro's way of soothing her mind and body.

Known to online audiences as the Korean Vegan, Molinaro has a new cookbook, "The Korean Vegan: Homemade," that is full of easy but gratifying recipes. Molinaro invites readers into her inner world in her latest book, sharing deeply personal remembrances from her childhood and early adulthood.

As I flipped through the recipes, the one for this soup stood out. "Baechu Doenjang Guk is for when you're feeling a little blue or a little tired. It will lift your spirits with both its healing properties (the cabbage is so good for the tummy) and its mouthwatering flavor," she wrote.

I called her to chat about how she created the dish. "Personally, I was having stomach problems at the time, and I had read that something that could help with stomach issues was cabbage, so I started cooking with a lot of cabbage," she said. "I remembered this Korean recipe with cabbage and doenjang. I had just been talking to a friend who's a total foodie about where you draw the line between guk and chigae, soup and stew. I knew I wanted this to be a soup. One distinction is that there's not too much protein ... so it's meant to be easy on the tummy and curative."

Molinaro originally used standard green cabbage here, and although that worked well, she



LAUREN BULBIN/The Washington Post

Doenjang, mushrooms and onions provide much of the texture and taste for Baechu Doenjang Guk.

decided to try it with the cabbage Koreans have been using for centuries. "I thought it was OK with regular cabbage, but when I used napa cabbage, it felt like it came to life for me," Molinaro said. "...The flavor of doenjang is the most comforting flavor in my culinary vocabulary. It's the flavor I go back to when something is really tough."

Doenjang is a fermented soybean paste, similar to Japanese miso but more deeply savory and more pungent. Molinaro included a recipe for spicy doenjang chigae, a traditional Korean stew flavored with doenjang, in her first cookbook. It's a dish her mother avoided making if a non-Korean was coming to the house, because she worried they'd be put off by the smell. In a surprising twist, that recipe was a hit among Molinaro's readers. "I'd spent so much of my childhood being embarrassed at the smell and appearance of doenjang, and so the surprising popularity of this humble stew signaled to me what I'd always suspected deep down — despite all the boundaries we've erected to divide us, we have far more in common than we realize," Molinaro wrote. "We all just love delicious food!"

Baechu Doenjang Guk (Cabbage and Doenjang Soup)

Total time: 35 minutes
Servings: 4 (makes 8 cups)

Ingredients

1½ teaspoons olive oil
1½ teaspoons toasted sesame oil
8 fresh shiitake mushrooms (about 5 ounces), stems removed, sliced
1 small yellow onion (5 ounces), halved and thinly sliced
2 tablespoons doenjang
4 cups vegetable broth, preferably low-sodium, divided
1 teaspoon reduced-sodium soy sauce
4 large napa cabbage leaves, cut into 1-inch chunks
One (14-to-16-ounce) package silken tofu, drained

Directions

In a large Dutch oven, Korean clay pot or other heavy-bottomed pot over medium heat, heat the olive and sesame oils until shimmering. Add the mushrooms and onion, and sauté until fragrant and softened, 4 to 5 minutes. Stir in the doenjang until the vegetables are evenly coated.

Add 1 cup of the broth and the soy sauce, and use a wooden spoon to scrape up any browned bits on the bottom of the pot. Add the remaining 3 cups of broth, increase the heat to medium-high and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to medium-low and simmer for 10 minutes, so the flavors meld.

Stir in the cabbage, then use a dinner spoon to scoop the tofu into the soup. Cook until the cabbage is tender but not limp, 2 to 4 minutes. Taste, and stir in more doenjang and soy sauce, if desired. Ladle into bowls and serve hot.

WEEKEND: TRAVEL



PHOTOS BY SALWAN GEORGES/The Washington Post

Sunrise above the clouds on the summit of Mount Fuji in Japan. Washington Post writer Salwan Georges described it as "breathtaking. Unforgettable. Sacred, even." Today, hundreds of thousands make the difficult climb up the mountain each summer.



Keiko Seki's service at her udon shop Taiyokan, halfway up the mountain, stuck with Georges. She offered him pork miso udon and ceremonial matcha.

Does food taste better eaten at 12,400 feet?

Washington Post writer aims to find out on overnight hike up Mount Fuji in Japan

BY SALWAN GEORGES
The Washington Post

The climb doesn't reveal its difficulty all at once. It starts slowly, before sunrise, where the trail winds through thick forest and long stretches of volcanic rock.

A few hours in, the temperature drops. Clouds swirl. Your legs throb.

The higher you go, the more the wind cuts. Your breath shortens. Your body pleads to stop.

At the summit, hot bowls of soup await with thick udon noodles swimming in a curry broth.

Many climbers swear that your exhaustion makes the food taste better at 12,400 feet. I wanted to know if that was true.

Could a bowl of noodles justify the climb?

For someone who loves Japanese food, the idea was irresistible.

I've always loved being outdoors, chasing stories and adventure in the mountains. Last year, I climbed a glacier in Peru. The year before, I stood on the jagged front lines of a disappearing landscape in the Arctic.

Fuji felt different — less about survival, more about pilgrimage.

Mount Fuji isn't just a mountain. For centuries, it has been revered as a sacred site — home to gods, a subject of countless poems and paintings.

Rising from the plains southwest of Tokyo, it dominates the landscape, its snowcapped peak visible for miles.

Fuji is tied deeply to both Shinto and Buddhist traditions. Shrines dedicated to Konohanasakuya-hime, the goddess of Mount Fuji, stand at its base.

In the Edo period, worshipers from across Japan formed Fuji-ko pilgrim associations and walked for days to reach its slopes. They chanted prayers at each station, burning cedar sticks as offerings, their ascent both a physical and a spiritual act.

Today, hundreds of thousands of people still make the climb each summer, though the offerings are often replaced by cameras.

Some rituals remain: wooden walking sticks stamped with hot brands at every hut, climbers pressing palms together at summit shrines.

But for many, the mountain is not to be touched.

"People from the nearby towns don't climb Fuji," said Brent Potter, a co-founder of Fuji Mountain Guides, the

SEE FUJI ON PAGE 27

WEEKEND: TRAVEL

Fuji: Mountain's best meal found in an unexpected place

FROM PAGE 26

company I used for my climb. "There's an old saying here: Fuji is a mountain to look at, not climb."

My journey began at Tokyo Station, where I boarded a bus to Gotemba, a city at the foot of the mountain. The next morning, I joined 50 other climbers at the Fuji Mountain Guides headquarters.

The group included a patchwork of accents from all over the world, all of us chasing the same sunrise.

During orientation, the guides explained the mountain's four official trails.

Luke Cummings, one of our guides, smiled when he told us we would be avoiding the Yoshida Trail, which is the most crowded, and taking Subashiri instead.

"It's more rugged, fewer huts, fewer people," he said. "You really feel Fuji there."

The Subashiri Trail begins in a lush forest. The air was thick with the scent of pine, and the ground was soft underfoot. It felt almost tropical, a world away from the volcanic slopes above.

At each stop, we branded our wooden sticks with stamps — the modern continuation of an old pilgrim ritual.

The sticks became diaries carved in ash, proof of progress and persistence.

As the hours passed, the air grew thinner.

At the sixth station, the sky cracked open with lightning and we scrambled for cover inside a hut. For an hour, we listened to thunder roll across the mountain. The silence in the rain felt peaceful.

Outside, rain streaked the volcanic gravel into rivers of mud. When we emerged, clouds pressed low, mist swirled through the trees, and the temperature had dropped.

Fuji was reminding us who was in control.

After more than seven hours of climbing, we reached the new seventh station. There, perched on the slope, stood a hut for an udon shop called Taiyokan.

Keiko Seki, the 80-year-old woman who operates the shop, welcomed us inside.

Seki is from Subashiri. She said she ran the business with her husband for more than 50 years before his death last year.

As we watched her work, her movements were steady, practiced.

Inside, she handed me a steaming bowl of pork miso udon. Taiyokan was the first hut on Fuji to serve it.

The noodles were thick and chewy. The broth was savory and restorative. The steam rose into my tired face like medicine.

Seki watched me eat with a quiet smile, the way someone might watch over a grandchild.

Then she prepared ceremonial matcha. Her weathered hands moved gracefully. In 1988, she told me, she performed the same ceremony for the emperor when he visited her hut.

"I was nervous," she admitted, laughing softly. "But tea is tea."

Since her husband died, Seki runs the hut alone, with only the help of seasonal workers from nearby towns.

"The mountain doesn't let you rest," she said. "But it keeps me company."

Her food was more than fuel. It was everything I needed to keep going.

That night, after ascending more than 3,600 feet, I spread a traditional blanket on the floor of a shared room, shoulder to shoulder with 10 other climbers. My legs ached. My head throbbed.

I was just over halfway up the mountain.

At 1 a.m., we stepped back into the dark.

The trail above us shimmered with hundreds of headlamps, a glittering river of light winding up the black slopes toward the crater's rim.

Stars wheeled overhead. The air was biting cold, each breath a puff of white.

For three hours, we climbed in near silence. Our boots crunched volcanic gravel. Our bodies swayed with fatigue.

By the time we reached the summit, the horizon was beginning to pale.

The top of Fuji was not the quiet temple I had imagined. It was a bustling village.

Shops sold souvenirs. A shrine offered stamped seals. A vending machine hummed with cold drinks.

Large groups queued for breakfast food, curry rice steaming in the cold dawn air.

And then the light came — a slow bleeding of orange, then red, then gold across the horizon.

Clouds turned to fire. Hundreds of us stood in silence as the sun rose over Japan.

It was breathtaking. Unforgettable. Sacred, even.

Near the crater rim was one of the noodle huts I had heard so much about from my guides. You can reach it only by climbing to the top.

There is no cable car, no road, nothing mechanical that can deliver you to its door.

Every worker who serves you has come up the same steep trails as the climbers.

By the time I stepped inside, I could feel the altitude pressing into every part of my body.



PHOTOS BY SALWAN GEORGES/The Washington Post

Washington Post writer Salwan Georges and his Fuji Mountain Guides group started the second half of their climb up the mountain at 1 a.m. in the dark. Shown above, the river of headlamps on the trail wind up the black slopes toward the crater's rim.



Getting a wooden walking stick stamped with a hot brand at every hut is a ritual on the climb.



Summit udon is a lifesaver, helping to bring Georges "back to life" after the rest of the exhausting, cold climb. But although satisfying, he said it also felt too hurried and commercial, "consumed more for the story than for the soul."

My legs were shaking, and the cold had settled deep into my fingers.

But the moment the door opened, the smell of broth, curry and steam wrapped around me like a blanket.

As my group waited to squeeze inside for breakfast, another large group was already filing out, making room for us.

The menu was handwritten on wooden boards: curry udon, miso ramen, hot rice bowls, green tea and canned coffee.

As my group began placing their orders, a single server navigated the rush, one eye on us and the other on the door as yet another wave of climbers tried to come in.

I ordered the curry udon, taking the advice of my guide, who climbs to the summit multiple times a week to give people a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

I finally sat down with my group and took my first bite.

We barely spoke.

The bowl of soup seemed to bring us back to life.

The warmth hit me instantly, spreading through my palms and into my chest.

The curry was bold and salty, the noodles thick and soft — exactly what my body needed in that moment.

With each slurp, the cold felt a little less sharp, the exhaustion a little less overwhelming.

It was satisfying, yes. But it also felt hurried, commercial, consumed more for the story than for the soul.

After our meal, we began the descent.

The way down was harder than the way up — five hours of zigzagging through volcanic sand, each step like skiing on ash.

The sun beat down as the sky cleared. Heat radiated from the dark rock.

My knees strained under the weight, and my stick sank deep into the gravel.

The mountain was not done humbling us.

And as I stumbled down, I was not thinking of the noodles or the spectacular view at the summit. I thought of the Taiyokan hut.

Seki's pork miso udon had been the best food on Mount Fuji. Her matcha, poured with care, had been the true ceremony.

Her story — of devotion, endurance and quiet strength — had given me the energy to finish my climb.

I had come to Fuji searching for the best bowl of noodles at the top. Instead, I found it halfway up.

When I remember my climb, I don't taste curry at the summit.

I taste her miso soup.

Turn over some new leaves

Washington Post staff

Did you resolve to read more this year? Below are some of the books we're most looking forward to in the first half of 2026. There are plenty expected to arrive in July or later that we're eagerly anticipating — including novels by Colson Whitehead, Ayad Akhtar and Emily St. John Mandel — but we have our eyes trained on the immediate future for now.

Fiction

'Vigil' by George Saunders (Jan. 27)

Very few authors become famous writing only short stories, but Saunders did. When he eventually produced a novel, "Lincoln in the Bardo" (2017), it won the Booker Prize. Like that book, his second go at the form, "Vigil," is concerned with the transition from life through death and on to whatever comes next. Where the earlier novel was centered on the 16th president, this one involves an unashamed CEO of an oil company. When the ghost of a woman arrives to help his earthly transition, high jinks and (possibly) some moral reckoning ensue.

'Kin' by Tayari Jones (Feb. 24)

Jones, winner of the Women's Prize for Fiction for "An American Marriage," here writes about two girls, Vernice and Annie, who are friends essentially from birth, starting in 1950s Louisiana. The novel follows them from equally sad childhoods as they grow into adults and their lives diverge, while their bond remains. "Writing it gave me a deeper understanding of my mother's generation," Jones told the Bookseller last year. "I think it can be difficult to walk in the shoes of the generation right over your head. Growing up, we work so hard to differentiate ourselves from them — that we can't see how they formed us. Or why they tried to form us in the way they did."

'A Far-Flung Life' by M.L. Stedman (March 3)

Stedman's debut, "The Light Between Oceans" (2012), sold a lot of copies and was adapted into a feature film in 2016. The Australian author returns 14 years later with this equally epic story. It begins on a large sheep ranch in a remote part of Australia in the late 1950s, when a terrible accident changes the fate of the family that has owned the ranch for generations. Publishers Weekly wrote: "It's impossible to look away from the grim series of events. Readers will be transported."

'Now I Surrender' by Álvaro Enrigue, translated by Natasha Wimmer (March 3)

The English-language translations of Enrigue's novels "Sudden Death" (2016) and "You Dreamed of Empires" (2024) were critical darlings and unlikely but well-deserved hits with readers. "Now I Surrender" continues Enrigue's inventive use of history, focusing on the resolve of the Apaches and their leader Geronimo in the face of military threats from Mexico and America.

'The Complex' by Karan Mahajan (March 10)

Mahajan's previous novel, "The Association of Small Bombs," was a finalist for the National Book Award in 2016. This long-awaited follow-up tells the sweeping story of the (fictional) Chopras, a politically influential family in Delhi. "I didn't anticipate that Laxman Chopra, who is kind of the villain figure, would take over the novel the way he does," Mahajan said in a recent interview. "It felt a little bit like what happens in a poem like 'Paradise Lost,' where the devil becomes the more interesting character in a way."

'The Keeper' by Tana French (March 31)

French became a widely acclaimed, best-selling author through her Dublin Murder Squad procedurals. In 2020, she began a new series featuring a quiet detective named Cal Hooper, who recently retired from his work in Chicago to find an even quieter life in western Ireland. Unsurprisingly, he found more work instead. Following "The Searcher" and "The Hunter," "The Keeper" finishes the Hooper trilogy with the story of a young woman's death and the deep divisions in a village.

'Go Gentle' by Maria Semple (April 14)

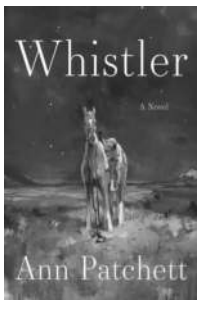


Semple began her career as a successful writer for television. Her career as a novelist took off in 2012, with the best-selling comic gem "Where'd You Go, Bernadette." In her fourth novel, a divorced woman named Adora Hazzard is enjoying life with her teenage daughter and a "coven" of friends on the same floor of her building on New York's Upper West Side. She is not looking for love, and so Semple gives it to her, sparking events that show off the author's trademark hilarious chaos.

'John of John' by Douglas Stuart (May 5)

In 2020, Stuart won the Booker Prize for his debut novel, "Shuggie Bain." In "John of John," a struggling young artist returns to his home on Scotland's Hebrides islands, where he spends time with his grandmother and his father, a preacher and sheep farmer. Like Stuart's previous novels, it's an emotionally potent story about a young man grappling with sexual identity and the push and pull of family.

'Whistler' by Ann Patchett (June 2)



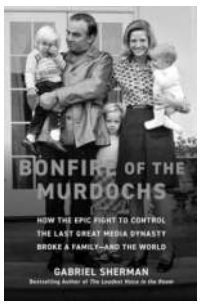
The latest from the acclaimed novelist ("Bel Canto," "Tom Lake") is about a 53-year-old woman who reunites with the man who had briefly but profoundly been her stepfather when she was 9. "I was missing a very close friend who had recently died, and in missing him, I imagined what life might have been like if we were two different people in a very different relationship," Patchett told People magazine last fall.

Nonfiction

'Fear and Fury: The Reagan Eighties, the Bernie Goetz Shootings, and the Rebirth of White Rage' by Heather Ann Thompson (Jan. 27)

Thompson won the Pulitzer Prize for history for her book "Blood in the Water," about the Attica prison uprising. Here, she writes about another pivotal public drama: the day in 1984 when Bernie Goetz shot four Black teenagers on a New York City subway car. The incident touched off a heated nationwide debate about public safety, racism and vigilante justice.

'Bonfire of the Murdochs: How the Epic Fight to Control the Last Great Media Dynasty Broke a Family - and the World' by Gabriel Sherman (Feb. 3)



Sherman's first book, "The Loudest Voice in the Room," was a biography of Roger Ailes that told the story of how he built Fox News. He wrote the screenplay for "The Apprentice," the well-reviewed biopic about Donald Trump and his relationship with Roy Cohn. Now he takes readers inside the palace intrigue that ended with Rupert Murdoch's son Lachlan as the heir to the family's media empire.

'Freedom Lost, Freedom Won: A Personal History of America' by Eugene Robinson (Feb. 3)

In his new book, Robinson, a Pulitzer Prize-winning former columnist for The Washington Post, recounts his family's history and how it reflects the larger story of the struggles and successes of Black Americans. It begins in Charleston, S.C., in 1829, when an enslaved boy named Harry was purchased by a plantation owner. Harry was Eugene Robinson's great-great-grandfather. Robinson writes about Reconstruction, the Great Migration and the civil rights era through the lens of his forebears' and his own experiences.

'The Last Kings of Hollywood: Coppola, Lucas, Spielberg - and the Battle for the Soul of American Cinema' by Paul Fischer (Feb. 10)



Fischer's previous book was about Louis Le Prince, arguably the creator of the first motion picture, and his disappearance in 1890. This time he focuses on three filmmakers who arguably perfected the commercial motion picture starting 80 years later. Fischer writes about their intertwined careers, the ways they changed the business of filmmaking and the stories behind their biggest hits, including "Jaws," "The Godfather" and "Star Wars."

'American Struggle: Democracy, Dissent, and the Pursuit of a More Perfect Union: An Anthology' by Jon Meacham (Feb. 17)

Historian and biographer Meacham meets our fractured moment with this anthology from primary-source documents. He lets historical voices speak at length about what they believe America means. These voices include the founders, Lincoln, Obama and Reagan, along with less-recognizable names, and Meacham offers his own analysis along the way.

'Judy Blume: A Life' by Mark Oppenheimer (March 10)

Blume, 87, continues to define childhood and adolescence for new generations of readers with her classics, including "Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret," "Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing" and "Superfudge." Oppenheimer interviewed Blume for this full-dress biography about her upbringing, her personal life and the groundbreaking work that has made her a household name.

'London Falling: A Mysterious Death in a Gilded City and a Family's Search for Truth' by Patrick Radden Keefe (April 7)

The longtime New Yorker staff writer and best-selling author ("Say Nothing," "Empire of Pain") expands on an article of his from 2024 to tell the story of Zac Brettler, a British teenager who killed himself in 2019 after posing as the son of a Russian oligarch. In writing about how Zac pulled off that ruse, and why, Keefe illuminates a complex web involving social media, the financial industry and a city that's become a "twenty-four-hour laundromat" for cash and reputations.

'Like, Follow, Subscribe: Influencer Kids and the Cost of a Childhood Online' by Fortesa Latifi (April 7)

There's plenty of discussion about the effects of social media's contents on young children and adolescents. But what about when the kids *are* the content? Journalist Latifi investigates the industry of child influencers. She talked to parents who monetize their children's lives, former child influencers, and psychologists and other experts.

'Vermeer: A Life Lost and Found' by Andrew Graham-Dixon (April 7)

British art historian and television personality Graham-Dixon offers a deeply researched account and some provocative theses about the Dutch painter and his beloved work. Art critic Laura Freeman wrote in the Times of London that Graham-Dixon's "reading of the paintings is revelatory. He trawls the archives, lays out new evidence, links pictures never linked before, and teases new meaning from signs, symbols and sitters."

WEEKEND: MUSIC

Revived Grammy category honors album cover art

This year's nominees: Wet Leg; Bad Bunny; Tyler, the Creator; Perfume Genius; and Djo

BY ELISE RYAN
Associated Press

When it came time to decide the cover image for Wet Leg's sophomore album, the British indie rock band packed items that might provide inspiration — velvet worms sewn by guitarist Hester Chambers, an oversized head of hair from a music video shoot, lizard-like gloves — and headed to an Airbnb.

"I wanted it to be something that was both super girly and feminine, but then at the same time, just totally repulsive," said lead singer Rhian Teasdale, who art-directed the "Moisturizer" cover with Iris Luz and Lava La Rue. "That juxtaposition, I don't know, it just creates something that's evocative."

The final image, inspired by a photo from that weekend, earned Teasdale, Luz and La Rue a Grammy nomination for best album cover — a category that will be awarded this year for the first time in more than 50 years.

The other evocative covers nominated are Bad Bunny's "Debí Tirar Más Fotos"; Tyler, the Creator's "Chromakopia"; Perfume Genius' "Glory"; and Djo's "The Crux." The award goes to the project's art directors: This year, the recording artists are included as nominees in all cases except for "Glory."

In recent years, covers had been assessed as part of the best recording package category, which considers all physical materials and images. The package for "Brat," with its pop culture-infiltrating green, earned Charli XCX, Brent David Freaney and Imogene Strauss a Grammy last year.

Recording Academy CEO Harvey Mason Jr. told Grammy.com the split is an effort to recognize the impact of cover art in the digital age. It also aligns with the academy's goal to recognize more of the artists that shape music, Mason said.

For the creative teams, the revived award amplifies what goes into building the visual worlds of music. "When a cover in a campaign hits right," said photographer Neil Krug, nominated for "The Crux," "it's part of the language and the fabric of what makes a great record a great record."

Capturing an energy

The defining portrait of "Chromakopia" — a monochrome close-up of Tyler, face concealed by a mask — was the last shot captured. Luis "Panch" Perez, the director of photography, said the expression in Tyler's eyes stood out.

Getting there, he said, required tapping into a shared "unspoken language," built by pulling references for the project's surrealist, old Hollywood aesthetic — and by years of collaboration. "Tyler knows exactly how to move his body; he's so well in control of that. I just have to be ready for whatever he's going to do in front of the lens," Perez said.

Perfume Genius worked with art directors Cody Critcheloe and Andrew J.S. on the cover for "Glory." He splays on a patchwork carpet inside a dark, homey interior, his stiletto boots extending toward a bright window. Colorful cords snake across the floor like microphone cords onstage.

He said the image reflects the push and pull he found himself exploring while writing the album: the comfort and avoidance of an introverted, private life, versus the confidence required of his "maximal" public-facing persona: "How do I have each of those things season my life?"

The goal wasn't to capture a specific scene, or choreography. "It was mostly about an energy," said Critcheloe, who photographed the cover.

"People have said to both of us that they can't figure out what the aesthetic of the album cover is," he added. "That's the best thing to hear."

The creature-like version of Teasdale that appears on Wet Leg's "Moisturizer" cover — squatting, hands outstretched, eerie grin trained toward the camera — is also meant to evoke friction. "The album explores themes of love and longing. But also, there are a couple moments on the album that are so, you know, just feral," she said.



ILLUSTRATION BY NOGA AMI-RAV/Stars and Stripes

Album covers, top row left to right: Djo, "The Crux"; Tyler, the Creator, "Chromakopia." Bottom row, left to right: Wet Leg, "Moisturizer"; Perfume Genius, "Glory"; Bad Bunny, "Debí Tirar Más Fotos."

Crafting, casting, styling

The pivotal setting of "The Crux" — the third album by Djo, the musical moniker for actor Joe Keery — was a fictional hotel on the Brooklyn-inspired section of the Paramount Studios backlot.

Krug, Djo and collaborator Jake Hirshland looked at dense scenes, like Alfred Hitchcock's 1954 film "Rear Window" (also shot on a Paramount Studios lot), for inspiration. They considered locations in (the real) New York and Atlanta, where the artist was filming "Stranger Things," before locking the lot in.

Next came casting the characters that make up the scene. "Anything that we could come up with, we were just like throwing it at the canvas," Krug said. A couple kiss in a window. A man fights a parking ticket in the foreground. Djo is seen only from the back, dangling from a window in a white suit.

Art director William Wesley II oversaw production details, including designing the neon sign that bears the album's name — an homage to iconic hotels like the Chateau Marmont. "Everything is intentional," he said. "It's really a sum of its parts and it's the sum of many people's contributions."

A pair of white plastic chairs are the only props on the cover of "Debí Tirar Más Fotos," which translates to "I should have taken more photos." Art directed by Bad Bunny himself, the image by Puerto Rican photographer Eric Rojas also features plantain trees — a symbol of the island, but also of the Caribbean and Latin America overall. There is a nostalgia to the simple combination — conjuring a day at the beach, or a backyard gathering — that also mirrors the album's diasporic, history-making, storytelling.

"Debí Tirar Más Fotos" and "Chromakopia" are also nominated for album of the year.

Eligibility factors

Official Grammy rules say albums do not need to exist physically to be considered in this category — a key point in differentiating the award from its package counterpart.

This year's nominees, however, are all available on vinyl or CD. Krug, who has worked on covers for Lana Del Rey and Tame Impala, said the vinyl presentation is often the first point discussed.

"When you have the physical vinyls in your home or your apartment, that stuff lives with you. It's out in your space, whether you're having a good day or a bad day, you're getting married or breaking up with whomever," Krug said. "There's this rediscovery of the art form."

Voters must consider the cover's creativity and design, alongside the illustration, photography or graphic elements. Trophies go to the winning art directors, and certificates to designers, illustrators or photographers, if applicable.

In a sign of the growing pains of a new category, this year's list of nominees saw edits ahead of the voting window's opening — a process not uncommon in other categories with multiple nominees. Djo, Krug, Hirshland and Taylor Vandergrift were added alongside Wesley for "The Crux"; Perez and photographer Shaun Llewellyn were removed for "Chromakopia," replaced by just Tyler. Luz and La Rue joined Teasdale for "Moisturizer," while several others — including the rest of the band — were removed.

"I was super surprised and really excited because I wasn't aware that it was a category," Critcheloe said of his nomination. "I love the idea of making things that are strange and subversive and irreverent, and having an audience that is bigger than it's supposed to be."

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

Warming up our winter screens

Start the new year with another 'GoT' spinoff, new seasons of 'Scrubs,' 'The Pitt,' 'Bridgerton'

BY NINA METZ
Chicago Tribune



Apple TV

Idris Elba stars in "Hijack," back for a second season on Jan. 14.



HBO Max

Peter Claffey stars in "A Knight of the Seven Kingdoms," a "Game of Thrones" prequel, which takes place 100 years before the events of "Game of Thrones." It comes out Jan. 18 on HBO Max.

The overriding theme defining television in recent years has been a fear of the new. Which is why reboots and spinoffs continue apace, with old titles brought back from the dead ("Scrubs") or from the not-so-distant past ("The Night Manager") and intellectual property milked within an inch of its life (somehow HBO has yet another "Game of Thrones" series coming our way).

It's as if everyone in Hollywood ran out of new ideas all at once. Don't blame writers, but executives who are rapidly shepherding their industry toward irrelevance with an over-reliance on reworked intellectual property, while original ideas are left unproduced.

In better news, the winter Olympic Games are this year, with the opening ceremony taking place Feb. 6 on NBC. (The Super Bowl is that Sunday, Feb. 8, as well.)

'The Pitt'

The Pittsburgh-set medical drama from "ER" showrunner John Wells is back for a second season, premiering almost exactly a year after it first debuted. Imagine, a streaming series returning on a reliable schedule! Dr. Robby ("ER" veteran Noah Wyle) is back once again, overseeing the managed chaos, student doctors and medical residents of his emergency department. One of the best examples of competency as comfort, something we could all use more of at the moment in real life. Now streaming on HBO Max.

'The Night Manager'

Stylish and prestige-y as hell, Season 1 of this Tom Hiddleston spy drama premiered (squints) eight years ago. Welp, this is how TV works today. Season 2 follows Hiddleston's character across the U.K., Spain, Colombia and France as he "races to expose a conspiracy designed to destabilize a nation." Available Jan. 11 on Prime Video.

'Hijack'

The first season of this "Die Hard" rip-off starring Idris Elba took place on a seven-hour flight from Dubai to London. For the entirely unnecessary second season, the setting is now a subway in Berlin that's been taken hostage. If Elba's character doesn't say "Why does this keep happening to me?!" at any point, then what are we even doing here? Available Jan. 14 on Apple TV.

'Ponies'

"Game of Thrones" alum Emilia Clarke stars in this 1977-set Cold War thriller about two women (the other is played by Haley Lu Richardson) who become CIA operatives after their husbands are killed under mysterious circumstances in Moscow. The pair become "ponies" in the parlance — persons of no interest — in order to uncover the truth of what really happened. Available Jan. 15 on Peacock.

'A Knight of the Seven Kingdoms'

Another "Game of Thrones" spinoff. A prequel, this one takes place a hundred years before the events of "GoT," as two unlikely heroes wander through Westeros: "a young, naïve but courageous knight, Ser Duncan the Tall, and his diminutive squire, Egg. Set in an age when the Targaryen line still holds the Iron Throne, and the memory of the last dragon has not yet passed from living memory, great destinies, powerful foes and dangerous exploits all await these improbable and incomparable friends." Available Jan. 18 on HBO Max.

'Steal'

Here I am typing "Game of Thrones" again because the show's alum Sophie Turner returns to TV in this thriller about a heist at a British pension fund investment company: "But who would steal billions of pounds of ordinary people's pensions and why? DCI Rhys (Jacob Fortune-Lloyd) is determined to find out, but as a recently relapsed gambling addict, Rhys must keep his own money problems at bay while dealing with the secret agendas and competing interests at the center of this far-reaching crime." Available Jan. 21 on Prime Video.



Prime Video

Nicole Kidman as Kay Scarpetta in "Scarpetta," based on Patricia Cornwell's forensic pathology book series. Watch it March 11.

'Drops of God'

I really liked the first season of this emotionally engrossing drama about two young wine experts who battle for a massive inheritance. The series was also criminally underseen, likely because: 1) Apple's approach to promotion leaves much to be desired; 2) there are no recognizable (American) stars; and 3) that title, which makes sense once you've seen the show, but otherwise ... nope. It's back for a second season and if you've been missing that frisson of discovery in your TV viewing, this one is worth seeking out. Available Jan. 21 on Apple TV.

'Bridgerton'

Not a fan of this show, but plenty are, so mark your calendars. The Shonda Rhimes historical romance returns for Season 4, with a focus on the family's second-eldest son, Benedict Bridgerton (Luke Thompson), who falls for a servant who sneaks into a masquerade ball. Netflix is chopping the season into two parts. Available Jan. 29 on Netflix; the second half premieres Feb. 26.

'Dark Winds'

This adaptation of Tony Hillerman's "Leaphorn & Chee" novels, with their stories of the Navajo Tribal Police in the 1970s, continues with a fourth season about a missing Navajo girl, which takes our investigators out of their usual setting and sends them to the underbelly of organized crime in Los Angeles. A tick or two better than your typical cop show, its star, Zahn McClarnon, is reason enough to watch. Available Feb. 15 on AMC.

'Scrubs'

The medical comedy from the early aughts is back, reuniting the old gang: J.D. (Zach Braff), Turk (Donald Faison), Elliot (Sarah Chalke), Carla (Judy Reyes) and John C. McGinley's memorably tangy Dr. Cox. New cast members include Vanessa Bayer and Joel Kim Booster. The premise appears to be the same as it was, picking up where the show left off. Available Feb. 25 on ABC.

'Scarpetta'

A crime thriller based on Patricia Cornwell's book series about the forensic pathologist Kay Scarpetta, played by Nicole Kidman. According to the marketing blurb: "With skilled hands and an unnerving eye, this unrelenting medical examiner is determined to serve as the voice of the victims, unmask a serial killer and prove that her career-making case from 28 years prior isn't also her undoing. Set against the backdrop of modern forensic investigation, the series delves beyond the crime scene to explore the psychological complexities of both perpetrators and investigators, creating a multilayered thriller that examines the toll of pursuing justice at all costs." Available March 11 on Prime Video.

WEEKEND: TELEVISION



HBO Max

From left: Shabana Azeez, Isa Briones, Gerran Howell and Noah Wyle return as emergency room doctors in the second season of "The Pitt."

Staying faithful to the characters

'The Pitt' actors and creators tell us what to expect in Season 2 of the HBO Max emergency department drama

By Samuel Long
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

It's been 10 months since our last shift at the fictional Pittsburgh Trauma Medical Center, and a few changes have taken place in the hospital's emergency department.

Some of the interns, including Dr. Dennis Whitaker (Gerran Howell) and Dr. Trinity Santos (Isa Briones), have changed how they approach situations and coworkers. There is a new attending physician, Dr. Baran Al-Hashimi (Sepideh Moafi), who is at odds with the traditions of the department.

Emergency room lead Dr. Michael "Robby" Robinavitch (Noah Wyle) is preparing for a monthslong sabbatical following the conclusion of his July Fourth shift.

They've had to look internally, too. After taking time to process treating more than 100 victims of a mass shooting (due to their efforts, only six of whom died), characters show their growth and change in the first episode of Season 2, which released Thursday on HBO Max.

In a December media event, Wyle and several other actors and creators talked about what to expect this season in the drama partially filmed in Pittsburgh.

Dr. Robby suffered from a panic attack when things came to a head at the climax of Season 1. As the show continues, Wyle said his approach to portraying the attending is evolving along with the character.

"The character last year was unaware of how broken he was," he said. "And then, over the course of that shift, was made painfully aware of how broken he was to the point where he can't go home and lie about it any longer to himself."

Dr. Robby's path to help hasn't been linear. He's going through the motions of seeking help, or, more accurately, pretending he's been seeking help — a common situation among physicians who are often forced to focus outside of themselves while treating medical problems.

"Especially if you're in a leadership position, especially if you're supposed to be modeling confidence and competence all the time, admitting that you're scared, admitting that you feel like you're phoning it in as an imposter is almost impossible," Wyle said.

Dr. Robby's difficulties make sense for "The Pitt" as it aims to accurately portray the daily struggles faced by emergency health care workers in the United States. That's a main focus in Season 2 after the show won several Emmys in September.

Series creator and showrunner R. Scott Gemmill and executive producer John Wells said they are grateful for the accolades but are "trying to forget" so it doesn't affect their approach to the next installment.

"You can get a little frozen worrying about 'How am I going to match that?' or 'Are we going to be able to top it?'" Wells said. "And those are the wrong questions."

The crew wants to maintain focus on telling the stories of medical professionals in emergency medicine through the characters of "The Pitt."

"It's just trying to be really truthful and authentic with those characters and letting them determine where their natural life would progress to," Gemmill said.

Viewers might notice some personality changes in the first episode in Dr. Whitaker and Dr. Santos, two of the interns introduced in Season 1. They are now roommates, and their actors, Howell and Briones, noted that both exhibit a different type of confidence.

Considering the life-and-death stakes of their jobs, inner confidence is a must for Dr. Whitaker, Howell said.

"You have to be confident as a doctor in that environment, so there was a long way for Whitaker to go from Season 1 to where I am now," Howell said. "Maybe I'm not confident. I'm just not what I was in Season 1, but you absolutely have to have confidence in your ability."

Though Dr. Santos has always been an assertive person, Briones said she no longer needs to prove herself.

"She came in really hot in Season 1, and I think now she is allowing herself to have the more quiet confidence of 'I know what I'm doing,'" Briones said.

The characters have clearly spent time together outside of work. Dr. Santos now lives with Dr. Whitaker, who was revealed to be posted up in a hospital room.

The two are much closer at the beginning of Season 2, but not in a "chummy way," Briones said.

"We know intimate things about each other that we didn't know before, and that's really scary. That's vulnerable for someone like Santos who keeps things very close to the vest and likes to be a lone wolf," Briones said. "All of a sudden there's someone who can tell if I'm having a bad day or if I'm not doing well, and suddenly you have to answer for that."

Others are facing their own challenges as "The Pitt" returns. Dr. Frank Langdon (Patrick Ball) returns to work after completing rehab, and nurse Dana Evans (Katherine LaNasa) now has a nursing intern to teach.

Dr. Victoria Javadi (Shabana Azeez) continues to navigate a difficult relationship with her mother, and Dr. Cassie McKay (Fiona Dourif) has more to face as a result of her turbulent past.

Wyle, who also serves as a writer for the show, said sophomore seasons can be tricky.

"I feel myself compelled to tell audiences that I can't make you feel what we made you feel last year," he said. "You can only fall in love once."

As "The Pitt" continues airing through April, Wyle believes viewers' relationship with the series will continue to evolve.

"We were very conscious of not trying to outdo ourselves — just trying to be faithful to the intention of what got us there in Season 1," he said.

WEEKEND: HEALTH & FITNESS

Simplicity the key to better health

Next year, take fads, claims with a grain of salt and stick with tried-and-true advice

BY DEVI SHASTRI
Associated Press

The new year is a time when many try to start new good habits and commit to improving health and wellness. But resolutions, lofty as they may be, can turn daunting quickly with all the advice and sometimes contradicting information coming at you from news reports, advertisers, influencers, friends and even politicians. But they don't have to be. This year, The Associated Press got the down-low on all manner of health and wellness claims and fads. The good news is that the experts mostly say to keep it simple. As 2026 arrives, here's what you can skip, what you should pay attention to and how to get credible information when you are inevitably faced with more confusing claims next year:



AP photos

A good workout doesn't require a gym. In fact, some doctors literally prescribe time in the outdoors to their patients. Research shows that walking (or jogging, as this man is doing in a Kansas City, Mo., park in 2022) are great for both physical and mental health.

Protein and fiber are important, but you probably don't need to pay more.

When it comes to your diet, experts say most people can skip the up-charge. If you're eating enough, you're probably getting enough protein and don't need products that promise some big boost. And it's true that most people could use more fiber in their diets. But, please, ditch the "fiber-maxxing" trend. Instead, eat whole foods such as fruits, vegetables, beans and whole grains.

A good skin care routine is not expensive or complicated.

That 20-step skin care routine and $200 serum some TikToker sold you on? Dermatologists say you really don't need it. Stay away from the beef tallow and slather on a good sunscreen instead (yes, even if you have darker skin), they say.

And the same rule for simplicity applies to that hourlong "everything shower." The best showers are simple and short, dermatologists say, no "double cleansing" required.

There are many simple ways to get that workout in.

If the gym and all its equipment feel intimidating, you can drop the illusion that a good workout requires either. This year, the comeback of calisthenics put the focus back on no-frills, bodyweight workouts you can do in the comfort of home. Research shows calisthenics helps with muscle strength and aerobic conditioning. You may eventually need weightlifting or other equipment, but it is a great place to start to build consistency and confidence.

Be wary of wellness fads and treatments — they are often too good to be true.

Even if you imbibed too much on New Year's Eve, doctors say you can do without "IV therapy," which have vitamins you can get more easily and cheaper in pill form — if you even need more, which is unlikely if you have a balanced diet.

You're pretty much just paying for "expensive urine," one doctor said.

Same for "wellness"-focused products like microbiome testing kits that generate information that doctors can't actually act on. And if you don't have diabetes, there's scant evidence that you need a continuous glucose monitor.

To improve your health, go back to the basics.

The idea of a panacea pill, product or routine can be enticing. But science already knows a lot about how to improve mental and physical health, and these methods are tried and true:

■ Whether you're in the city or the country — walk more. Research shows walking is great for physical and mental health. It's so good for you, doctors are literally prescribing time in the outdoors to their patients.

■ Take steps to get certain health metrics under control, like high blood pressure, which often goes undiagnosed and is known to cause a range of health problems down the road. Prioritize getting enough sleep, and make sure your family does too. Don't just eat right — eat slower.

■ Give your mind some care too. Set better boundaries with your technology and regain and retrain your attention span. Build out your social networks and invest in all forms of love for the people around you.

These lifestyle changes don't just make you feel better in the moment. Research shows they impact your life for years to come, by lowering the risk of dementia and many other health issues.



Another easy step to improve your physical health: Get certain health metrics like high blood pressure, which often goes undiagnosed and can cause a range of problems down the road, under control. Shown above, a person uses a free blood pressure machine at the public library in Kansas City, Mo., in 2024.

Don't know whom to trust? Start with your doctor.

It can be tough to know who to listen to about your health, faced with compelling personal stories on social media from people who swear something worked for them, or clever marketing and advertising from companies that scare you or promise an easy fix.

Doubts have been raised this year about established medicine, including the safety of food dyes, fluoride dental treatments, hepatitis B shot for newborns and hormone therapies for menopause.

While the medical system isn't perfect, your doctor remains the best person to talk to about prevention, health concerns and potential treatments.

If you can't get to a human doctor and turn to Dr. Google instead, never use it to diagnose yourself.

When you do get that doctor's appointment, you can make the most of it by bringing a list of written questions — and don't hesitate to ask for any clarifications you need.

WEEKEND: FAMILY



AP

Paying for help with menial tasks such as walking the dog could lead to greater relationship satisfaction.

The more help, the better

Why ordering takeout, calling dog walker might lead to a happier relationship

BY TRACEE M. HERBAUGH
Associated Press

It turns out, love may benefit from a little less labor.

Couples who spend money on time-saving services — like getting takeout, hiring a housecleaner or calling a dog walker — report greater relationship satisfaction, especially during stressful periods, says Ashley Whillans, a behavioral scientist and professor at Harvard Business School.

Whillans studies the "tradeoffs people make between time and money."

"When you spend money to save time — hiring an accountant, a babysitter, a cleaner — you feel more control over your life," she said. "That sense of autonomy boosts well-being."

Not everyone can afford to outsource bigger household chores. But Whillans says even a little bit can help. She advises couples to take a "time audit" — examining how they spend their hours and what small changes could reclaim even a few moments.

"People underestimate how much these choices matter," she said. "It's not about luxury — it's about freeing up time to connect."

Whillans' team tracked busy, dual-income couples — partners working full-time who often report feeling time-starved — and found consistent patterns. In one six-week diary study, couples who made "time-saving purchases" on a given day were happier and more satisfied with their relationships.

Use that saved time for connecting

Simply outsourcing chores isn't a magic fix, however.

"It's about being intentional with the time you get back — using it to spend quality time together, to reconnect," Whillans said.

"Think of that half hour not as an opportunity to send more emails, but as a chance to spend time with your partner."

Targol Hasankhani, a Chicago-based marriage and family therapist, stressed that while outsourcing domestic labor can ease daily stress, it doesn't replace communication. Juggling careers and kids takes a toll on families, and housework is often freighted with resentments over who is doing it.

"If conflict around chores is rooted in something deeper — like inequity or not feeling heard — hiring a cleaner won't solve that," she said.

Couples must dig deeper to address problems with many layers.

"It opens up time and space, but couples still have to know how to show up for each other in that space," Hasankhani said.

Casey Mulligan Walsh, a former speech pathologist and author in upstate New York, said the best part about hiring a weekly housecleaner was that it freed up time for her and her husband to spend together.

"My favorite day of the week was coming home to a clean house," she said. "We'd go get coffee together instead of arguing about who should vacuum."

A Valentine's Day gift that stuck

Getting started on delegating household tasks isn't easy for some couples, Whillans said. Besides the cost, "it takes time to find someone and coordinate — but the long-term payoff is real."

And making such decisions together can deepen trust and a sense of teamwork.

For one Colorado couple, outsourcing started as an act of love.

"When I started dating, my now-husband noticed how hard I was working — at my job, at home and as a single mom," said Melissa Jones, a teacher in Pueblo.

His Valentine's Day gift? A deep housecleaning.

"It was truly amazing," Jones said. "After that, I kept it up on my own for years. When my husband and I moved in together, we decided to continue."

"We're able to make memories with each other, our kids and our families instead of spending weekends scrubbing floors," she said.

Dinnertime can be a stress point

In Miami, Elizabeth Willard runs The Pickled Beet, a culinary service preparing customized meals.

"Most of the people I cook for are trying to invest in their health but don't have the time," she said, noting that families often juggle mixed dietary needs. "Sometimes the husband's a carnivore and the wife's vegetarian, one child's celiac. They're exhausted trying to make everyone happy."

Her clients, often families with children and two working parents, are "not fighting over what's for dinner. It's one less daily decision."

Whether ordering a pizza, paying a teenager to mow the lawn or calling a car service to save 20 minutes, the outcome can be the same: Buying back time can buy peace.

THE MEAT AND POTATOES OF LIFE

Lisa Smith Molinari



The health risks of improving my health

I'm overdue for a mammogram, I haven't had my cholesterol checked and I've been ignoring aches and pains for months. It's time to finally make my health a priority.

I add this resolution to my list, which includes quitting Spider Solitaire cold turkey and going to bed earlier. Making my health a priority won't happen easily. Online portals must be accessed. Records must be checked. Appointments will be scheduled. Authorizations will be requested.

I call my podiatrist, Dr. McCormick, who hasn't administered a cortisone shot for my arthritic left foot since March. I've become accustomed to gimping around like Quasimodo. Rather than deal with pains individually like I used to, I've accepted my status as a menopausal woman who experiences multiple pains on a daily basis.

Back when my hormones functioned properly, natural collagen cushioned my joints. If I felt pain, I'd say to myself, "Ouch! That shouldn't hurt! I'd better investigate."

Nowadays, when each pain du jour presents itself, I simply groan and add it to the long list.

However, making my heath a priority will require acknowledging and mitigating my various pains. The first step is getting that cortisone shot.

"Your authorization expired over the summer," Dr. McCormick's receptionist says. My blood pressure jumps, anticipating the colossal hassle ahead. Who is my Primary Care Manager anyway? I call the Naval Health Clinic to request a new referral.

"What's your DoD ID number?" the clinic scheduler asks. Since they started asking for DoD ID numbers a few years ago, I'm never prepared. It's a confusing series of tiny numbers stamped among others on my military ID.

"Oh, geez, let me grab that," I fumble, feeling my blood pressure elevate again. I read off the numbers, pausing at the blurry "65" in the middle to be sure it isn't 56. Thankfully, I won't need an appointment with my unknown PCM.

"Just check Tricare online to make sure the authorization comes through," the clinic scheduler adds, and my blood surges with traumatic memories of accessing the DoD's Self-Service Logon System (DS Logon) to get access to Tricare. A few days later, I type my password into the system.

"Your current password has expired and should be updated," appears on my screen, explaining that passwords expire every 60 days. The vein in the middle of my forehead bulges. I tap a new combination of words, numbers and characters into the little box, but each one is rejected. I focus on the long list of password requirements listed on the page:

- Passwords must be at least 15 characters;
- At least one lowercase letter;
- At least 1 uppercase letter;
- At least 1 number;
- At least 1 special character, no spaces allowed;
- You cannot use your birthdate, SSN, name, phone number or ZIP code;
- When changing a password, your new password must have at least 8 characters be different;
- When changing a password, your new password must be different than the current and 5 previous passwords;
- You cannot change your password more than once every 24 hours.

By the time one of my cuss word-laden attempts is finally accepted as my new password, I'm willing to undergo a gynecological exam on a crowded subway platform rather than make one more password attempt.

"Security be damned!" I seethe, my veins about to burst.

"You are confirmed for your appointment on Tuesday," the podiatrist's receptionist says.

"Great, but will Dr. McCormick also check my blood pressure?"

Read more at themeatandpotatoesoflife.com and in Lisa's book, "The Meat and Potatoes of Life: My True Lit Com." Email: meatandpotatoesoflife@gmail.com

WEEKEND: CROSSWORD AND COMICS

NEW YORK TIMES CROSSWORD

OFF BROADWAY MUSICALS

BY ALEX EATON-SALNERS / EDITED BY WILL SHORTZ

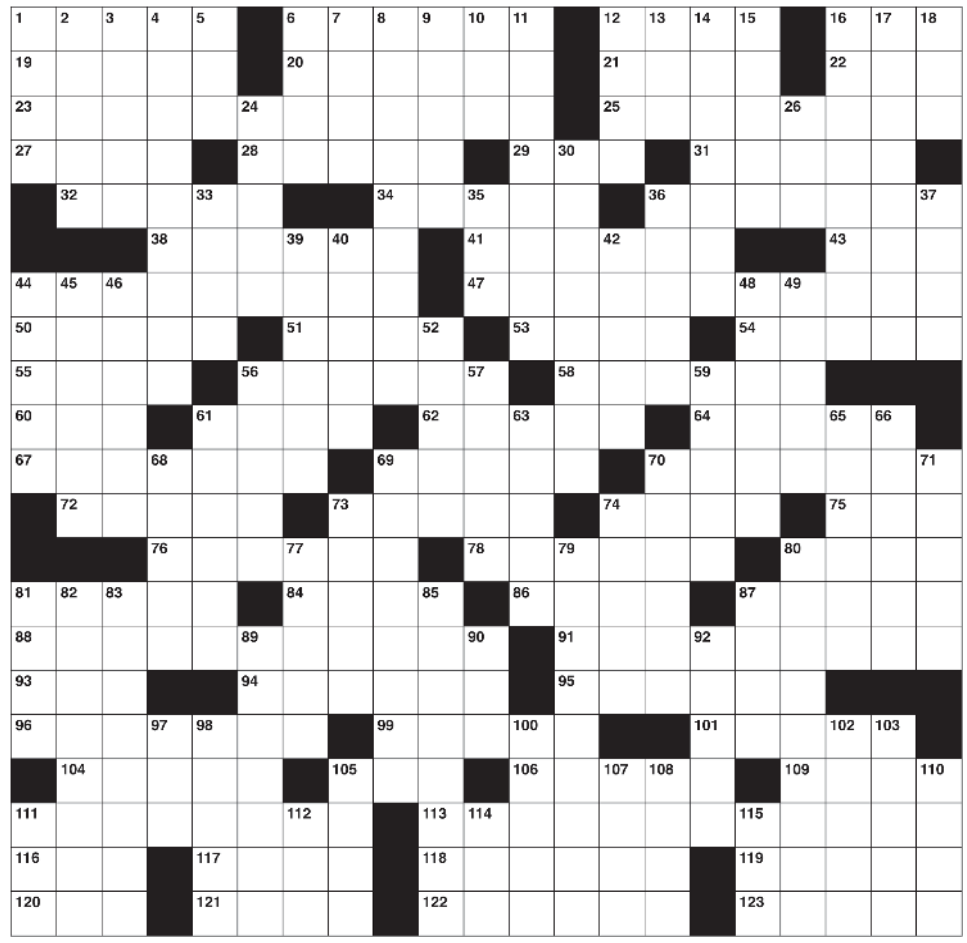
Alex Eaton-Salners is an in-house attorney for Sandisk, a technology company in Milpitas, Calif. This is his 54th crossword for The Times. When he's not making puzzles, Alex has been spending a lot of time lately at Activate, a sort of "hybrid puzzle room/sports simulator" that offers a mix of co-operative and competitive games at about 100 locations around the world. — W.S.

ACROSS

1 Poet with a 1982 posthumous Pulitzer
6 S.L.R. insert since the early 2000s
12 Baths in Bath
16 Comedian Notaro
19 Host Tyler of "Whose Line Is It Anyway?"
20 One sporting an article of apparel
21 Sign in a theater
22 Droll
23 Rock of Ages
25 How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying
27 Prop for a proposal
28 College credit hours
29 Far from fore
31 Starting section
32 Fab Four drummer
34 "I can handle that for you"
36 Swallow something hook, line and sinker
38 Subject of some modern maps
41 Boots out
43 Ending with Butler or Bard
44 A Class Act
47 A Strange Loop
50 Played a part
51 Baldwin of "30 Rock"
53 Ran in the rain, perhaps
54 Brig pair
55 New Mexico skiing locale
56 Full legislative assembly
58 Personification of darkness, in Greek myth
60 Shapiro of public radio
61 Buds
62 Chips go-with
64 Straight up
67 A Little Night Music
69 Rent
70 A Chorus Line
72 Creatures formed from the fingers of the sea goddess Sedna, in Inuit myth
73 Personal histories
74 Automatons, informally
75 Cell letters
76 "____ down the hatches!"
78 Nursery rhyme couple
80 Cribbage markers
81 Sine's reciprocal, in trig
84 Bit of power
86 Japanese noodle
87 Wave to, say
88 The Producers
91 Into the Woods
93 ____ Lingus
94 Intertwine
95 Halloween haul
96 In tears
99 Eschew the high road, say
101 ____ Dame
104 Repeatedly hit hard
105 Dollop
106 Pop group
109 Sitar great Shankar
111 The Wiz
113 Mean Girls
116 Chess pieces
117 Bombeck who wrote "At Wit's End"
118 File often installed with computer programs
119 Do penance
120 Apply
121 Hurdle for a J.D.-to-be
122 Became aware of
123 "Fiddler on the Roof" matchmaker

DOWN

1 Playground area, often
2 Fearsome felines
3 Plus
4 "One of These Nights" band
5 Makeshift tip collector
6 Epitome of graceful beauty
7 Arnaz of "I Love Lucy"
8 Certain stock holder
9 Came about
10 Kylo ____ of "Star Wars"
11 Gig of a lifetime
12 Advanced
13 Guitar, slangily
14 Front-of-the-line credential
15 Cousin of a mink
16 Cheep trills?
17 Dodger's comeuppance
18 Indoor recess locale
24 Super-excited, in slang
26 One "T" of TNT
30 Least hale
33 Foxx of 1970s TV
35 Judge pro ____
36 Piano pupil's practice piece
37 Short boxers, e.g.
39 How some medicines are taken
40 Apt name for a distance runner?
42 Oldsmobile Cutlass model
44 Like 45-Down's flaw
45 Mythical figure undone by hubris
46 Prima ballerina
48 Uses an alternate account to play against easier opponents, in gamer-speak
49 Police weapon
52 Transition points
56 Blue Ribbon brand
57 Ice cream parlor offerings
59 Borscht base
61 Classic theater name
63 Struggles with sibilant sounds
65 Law, but not order
66 Hints
68 Word with record or union
69 World capital near the Andean foothills
70 Give a twist
71 Downright mean
73 Bit of wisdom
74 Founder of the Mughal Empire
77 String-plucking sound
79 Sources in etymology
80 Prone
81 Some summers, in brief
82 Black-and-white desserts
83 Université with a Pierre and Marie Curie campus
85 Shell filling stations
87 Basic programming command
89 Chicken pieces
90 Part of AT&T: Abbr.
92 Ballet or bourrée, in Bourgogne
97 Do a diner job
98 Gathering of moles
100 Setting for Cole Porter's "Anything Goes"
102 Continued interminably
103 Discus throw at the Olympics, e.g.
105 Buzzing nuisance
107 Glitzy fabric
108 Like some cheese
110 "Gotcha"
111 Blue-necked bird
112 "____ Believer"
114 Flock formation
115 Blue-winged bird



GUNSTON STREET



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

RESULTS FOR ABOVE PUZZLE





AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Coast Guard rescues 9 from grounded boat

AK ANCHORAGE — Nine crew members were hoisted to a helicopter off a commercial crab boat amid near gale force winds, strong downward drafts from a nearby cliff and rough seas after the fishing vessel grounded on an Alaska island in the Bering Sea.

The Coast Guard said there were no injuries to the crew members of the Arctic Sea, a 134-foot boat owned by the Coastal Villages Region Fund and fishing for tanner crab.

The ship grounded Monday on the northern shore of Saint George Island, the southernmost of the small Pribilofs islands group with fewer than 100 residents, predominantly Aleuts. The group of islands is located about 750 miles west of Anchorage.

"I'm on the fog, I'm on the beach, we lost our steering," someone from the Arctic Sea reports to the Coast Guard when calling in a mayday, according to audio provided by the Coast Guard. "We're taking on water."

The vessel came to a stop near a cliff face that rose hundreds of feet above the water, Lt. Cmdr. Conor Regan and Lt. Cmd. Josh Womboldt, the pilots of the rescue helicopter, said in a joint statement to The Associated Press. The pilots positioned the MH-60 Jayhawk helicopter about 50 feet above the Arctic Sea and hovered in the rough conditions to conduct the rescue.

A private company has been contracted to oversee salvage operations of the Arctic Sea, the Coast Guard said.



DAVID GRUNFELD, THE TIMES-PICAYUNE/THE NEW ORLEANS ADVOCATE/AP

Crescent City cheers

Peggy Scott Laborde, center, and other members of the Krewe of Phunny Phorty Phellows toast Leroy "Whistle Monsta" Mitchell, left, and other members of the Krewe of Oak, to celebrate the arrival of Carnival Season at the streetcar barn in New Orleans, on Tuesday.

Hotel apologizes for canceling agents' rooms

MN LAKEVILLE — A Minnesota hotel that wouldn't allow federal immigration agents to stay there this month is apologizing and saying the refusal violated its own policies. The Department of Homeland Security had accused the global Hilton hotel chain of a "coordinated" effort to refuse service to its employees.

Hilton and local operators of the Hampton Inn Lakeville property released statements within hours apologizing and said the messages refusing to serve agents who were focused on immigration enforcement didn't reflect their policies.

In a social media post, DHS posted screenshots of a message sent last Friday from a Hilton email address saying that immigration agents would not be allowed to stay at the hotel about 20 miles south of Minneapolis, and that their reservation was canceled.

Hampton Inn locations are under the Hilton brand, but a Hilton representative said the property is independently operated. The majority of Hampton Inns are owned and operated by franchisees.

"We have been in direct contact with the hotel, and they have apologized for the actions of their team, which was not in keeping with their policies," the statement said.

Everpeak Hospitality, the hotel operators, said in a statement that the cancellation was inconsistent with their policy.

'To Die For' conviction overturn sought by Smart

MA BOSTON — Pamela Smart, who is serving life in prison for orchestrating the murder of her husband by her teenage student in 1990, is seeking to overturn her conviction over what her lawyers claim were several constitutional violations.

The petition for habeas corpus relief was filed Monday in New York, where she is being held at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for Women, and, in New Hampshire, where the murder happened.

In their petition, lawyers for the 57-year-old Smart argue that prosecutors misled the jury by providing them with inaccurate transcripts of surreptitiously recorded conversations of Ms. Smart that included words that were not audible on the recordings.

Smart was a 22-year-old high school media coordinator when she began an affair with a 15-year-old boy who later fatally shot her husband, Gregory Smart, in Derry. The shooter was freed in 2015 after serving a 25-year sentence. Although Smart denied knowledge of the plot, she was convicted of being an accomplice to first-degree murder and other crimes and sentenced to life without parole.

It took until 2024 for Smart to take full responsibility for her husband's death. In a video released in June, she said she spent years deflecting blame "almost as if it was a coping mechanism."

The case inspired Joyce Maynard's 1992 book "To Die For" and the 1995 film of the same name, starring Nicole Kidman and Joaquin Phoenix.

Ex-bus aide pleads guilty in assault of 3 students

CO DENVER — A former school bus aide pleaded guilty Monday to assaulting three nonverbal students with autism who were unable to report the abuse.

Kiarra Jones, 30, entered guilty pleas to 12 charges under a plea agreement as she was about to go on trial in suburban Denver for abuse that was revealed in 2024 by bus surveillance video, according to prosecutors and court documents.

Jones is represented by lawyers from the public defender's office, which does not comment to the media on its cases.

The abuse was discovered after Jessica Vestal, the mother of one of the nonverbal students, asked school officials to review the surveillance video to try to explain a series of injuries her son, then 10, suffered after going to school early last year, including bruises all over his body and a black eye.

Jones pleaded guilty to 10 felony counts of third-degree assault of an at-risk child and two misdemeanor counts of child abuse, the office of 18th Judicial District Attorney Amy Padden said. She faces up to 15 years in prison for the felony counts at sentencing set for March 18.

Ruling means abortion stays legal in Wyoming

WY CHEYENNE — Abortion will remain legal in Wyoming after the state Supreme Court struck down laws that include the country's first explicit ban on abortion pills, ruling Tuesday that they violate the state constitution.

The justices sided with the state's only abortion clinic and others who had sued over the bans passed since 2022, the year that the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the landmark Roe v. Wade decision.

Wellspring Health Access in Casper, the abortion access advocacy group Chelsea's Fund and four women, including two obstetricians, argued that the laws violated a state constitutional amendment ensuring that competent adults have the right to make their own health care decisions.

Attorneys for the state, however, argued that abortion can't violate the Wyoming constitution because it is not health care.

Voters approved the constitutional amendment in 2012 in response to the federal Affordable Care Act. The justices recognized that the amendment wasn't written to apply to abortion but said it's not their job to "add words" to the state constitution.

Trump-themed store set to close after 6 years

PA BENSALEM — A suburban Philadelphia shop selling President Donald Trump-themed merchandise that became a magnet for die-hard supporters announced it's closing its doors, six years after opening.

The Trump Store, which sells hats, flags, T-shirts and other items in hotly politically contested Bucks County, posted on social media that its storefront will be closing at the end of the month.

Owner Mike Domanico said in a phone interview Tuesday that he's closing the store because he's focusing on another business, selling firearm targets and other items at gun shows, and he's semi-retired. But the closure is also an acknowledgment that business has slowed down.

"The store has kind of run its course," he said. "You know, it's been six years and the elections are over. Trump's not gonna be in another election, even though he'll be part of it."

The store sells Trump 2028 gear despite the president being constitutionally prohibited from running in 2028. Trump has handed out Trump 2028 souvenirs at the White House.

"That's just to get people riled up," Domanico said.

City settles case of woman found alive in body bag

MI SOUTHFIELD — A Detroit suburb has agreed to a $3.25 million settlement with the family of a young woman who had been declared dead at home but then gasped for air and opened her eyes when her body bag was unzipped at a funeral home.

Southfield paramedics were accused of gross negligence in how they responded to Timesha Beauchamp after a 911 call in 2020. The 20-year-old, who had cerebral palsy, was eventually rushed to a hospital and died two months later.

"We recognize that no resolution can undo the profound tragedy that occurred on August 23, 2020, or ease the pain experienced by Ms. Beauchamp's family," Southfield said in a statement. "This case involved extraordinarily difficult circumstances that arose in the complex world of a global pandemic."

Beauchamp was struggling to breathe when her family called 911. A medical crew tried to resuscitate her and also consulted a doctor, who declared her dead over the phone without going to the home. Later that day, a funeral home opened the body bag and found Beauchamp gasping for air. She was swiftly taken to a hospital but never recovered.

From The Associated Press



WHERE HEROES SHOP

All honorably discharged Veterans and Department of War civilians with CAC can shop tax free at **ShopMyExchange.com**.
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The Exchange is a Department of War Organization

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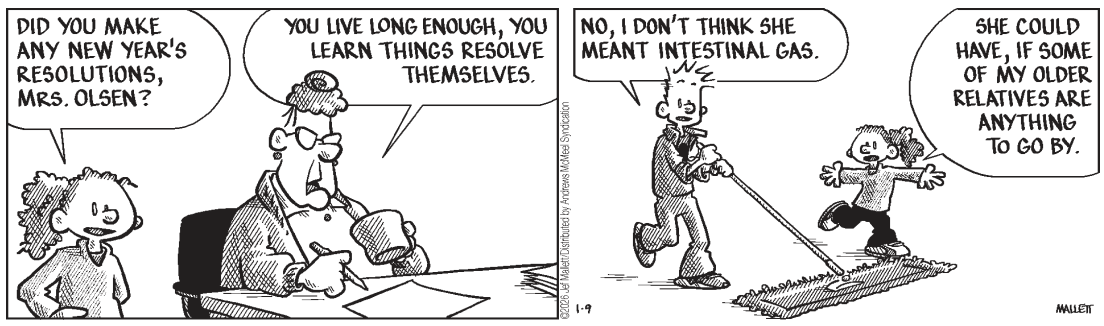
Bizarro



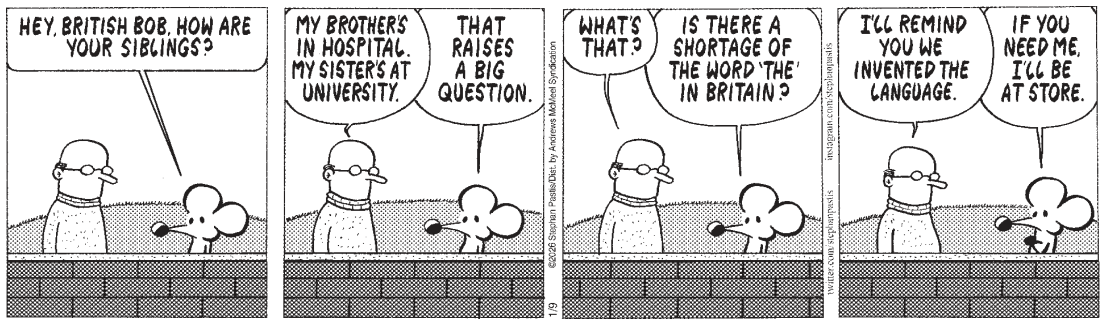
Loose Parts



Frazz



Pearls Before Swine



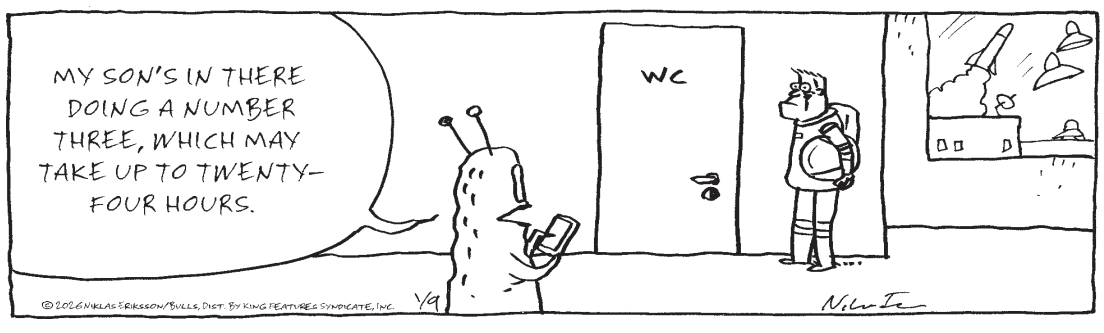
Non Sequitur



Wumo



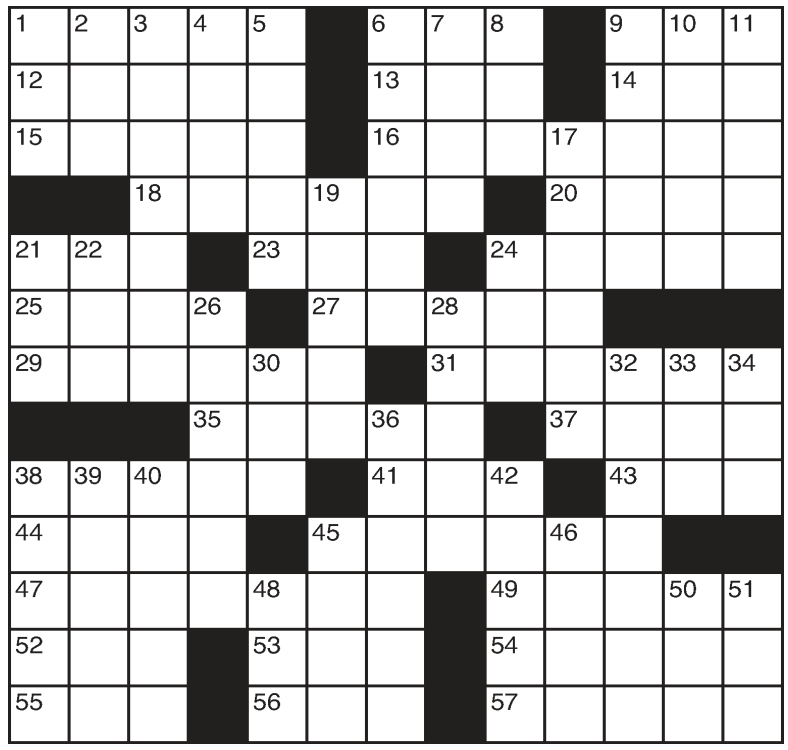
Carpe Diem



Beetle Bailey



Eugene Sheffer Crossword



ACROSS

1 Child's play
6 Calendar abbr.
9 USN bigwig
12 Hirsute
13 Hasten
14 Martini request
15 Open a toothpaste tube
16 Capital of Puerto Rico
18 Has because of
20 "Fernando" group
21 More, to Manuel
23 — -mo (replay speed)
24 Big hit
25 In — (even)
27 Poppy drug
29 Fee
31 Kind of garage
35 Stopwatch button
37 Challenge
38 Jewish holiday
41 Cistern
43 Zodiac animal
44 Spelling-out phrase
45 Pushed (around)
47 Capital of Thailand
49 Wanted-poster info
52 Cover
53 — -de-France
54 Rummage (through)
55 Switch positions
56 Auction signal
57 Less risky

DOWN

1 "Wicked" director Jon M. —
2 Author Fleming
3 Capital of Cyprus
4 Gullet
5 Promotes
6 "Enough already!"
7 "Arrivederci!"
8 X, at times
9 "In Treatment" actress Uzo
10 Olive — (military uniforms)
11 Talking bird
17 Stuck
19 Plum relatives
21 Buddy
22 Sports fig.
24 Heat source
26 Wrong
28 Smidgens
30 Tiara jewel
32 Capital of Wales
33 Football's Parseghian
34 Sleep acronym
36 Called forth
38 Cellist Casals
39 Olympic track star Bolt
40 Orange peels
42 Despots
45 Cowboy's neckwear
46 Director Kazan
48 Family
50 Pub serving
51 Sun. talk

Answer to Previous Puzzle

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

1-9

CRYPTOQUIP

NSYTYUYB LYYQPYB YPUYE CW ZW QYX YKDS TOCSZ, O'X ZSOTL ZSYI ABWQKQPI EPYYA WT DWWLOY ESYYZE.

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: WHAT PLACE IN THE UNITED STATES IS BY FAR THE BIGGEST PRODUCER OF CHICKEN EGGS? NEW YOLK CITY.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: S equals H

Bizarro



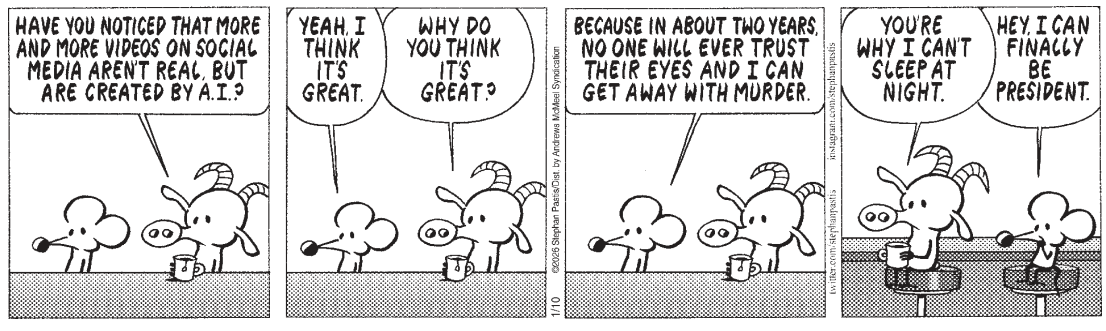
Loose Parts



Frazz



Pearls Before Swine



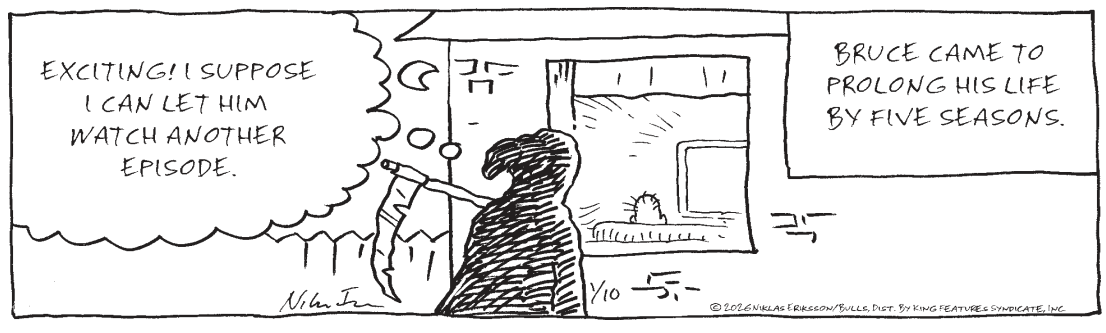
Non Sequitur



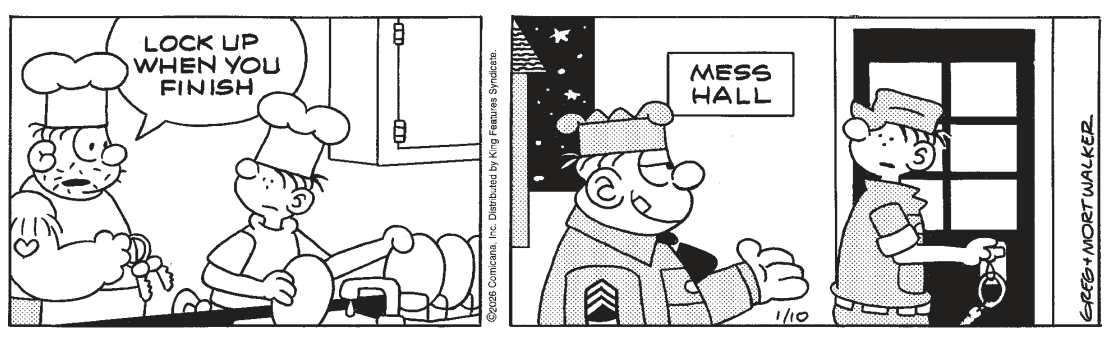
Wumo



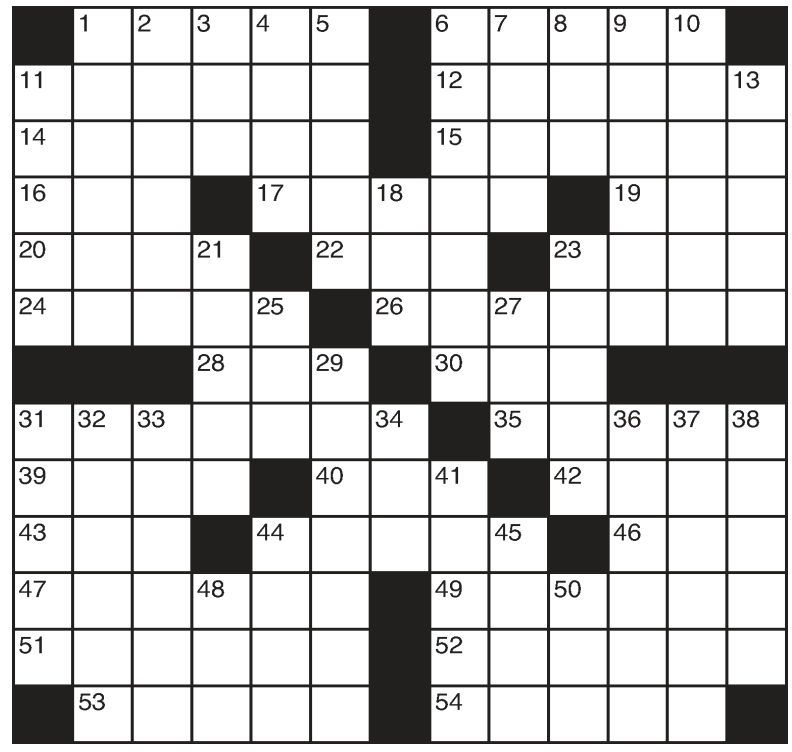
Carpe Diem



Beetle Bailey



Eugene Sheffer Crossword



ACROSS

1 Pilgrimage site
6 Director Welles
11 Endured
12 Portugal's place
14 End of a threat
15 Fragrant flowers
16 Moment
17 Gets ready, briefly
19 Gen.'s underling
20 Aware of
22 Dallas sch.
23 Scat expert Fitzgerald
24 City in Iraq
26 Gazillions
28 Debtor's note
30 Little, in Lille
31 Winter Olympics event
35 Photographer Ansel
39 "In the Woods" author French
40 Nonstick spray
42 Writer Wiesel
43 Mornings (Abbr.)
44 Pocket breads
46 Prefix with athlete
47 More adipose
49 Tribal healer
51 Sheep's coat
52 Tribute
53 Bridge call
54 Expiate

DOWN

1 "West Side Story" star
2 Builds
3 Cartoon frame
4 Point
5 Mimics
6 Auto part
7 Baseball stats
8 French salt
9 Delphi figure
10 Kidman of "The Hours"
11 — buddy
13 "Narnia" lion
18 Ostrich's kin
21 Mystical board
23 Chopin piece
25 Singer Rawls
27 Soup legume
29 Ballpark figures
31 Personnel
32 Designer Norma
33 Foot part
34 Bit of butter
36 "Gosford Park" director Robert
37 Desert illusion
38 Parisian river
41 "Three Sisters" sister
44 Chest muscles, briefly
45 Attempt
48 Earl Grey, e.g.
50 I love (Lat.)

Answer to Previous Puzzle

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

1-10

CRYPTOQUIP

HDRQC RUQ OWHVDSW RQHGUQC RKQE HWW ZD UQC OSOKWT' TUZQWHGQT RZXQRUQC, RUQV UHE H GWHTT RCKO.

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: WHENEVER KEEBLER ELVES GO TO BED EACH NIGHT, I'D THINK THEY PROBABLY SLEEP ON COOKIE SHEETS.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: O equals P

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Jacqueline Smith

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OPINION

This shouldn't be part of life in military uniform

BY THEODORE R. JOHNSON
Special to The Washington Post

Nearly 25 years ago, on a drizzly morning in the South China Sea, the ship I was serving on received word of a midair collision between a Navy spy plane and a Chinese fighter jet. We'd left Hong Kong just hours earlier, wrapping up a port visit and embarking on the last leg of a six-month deployment. The plane, packed with highly classified information and surveillance equipment, made an emergency landing on an island a few hundred miles south of us — its crew of 24 held captive and many interrogated by the Chinese government. The crew on my ship knew two things immediately: We were not going home, and wherever we were going, we had support back home.

That made steaming toward danger and uncertainty more bearable. Visions of families and friends excitedly waving on the pier — holding "welcome home" signs and newborns in sailor hats — sustained us in foreign waters on the other side of the world. The thought of our fellow shipmates' uncertain fate steeled our will to do whatever was required to ensure their safe return. And the resolve of the U.S. government and support from the public confirmed for us that our mission was legal, ethical and honorable. When the order came for our ship to head toward the downed plane, we entered the world stage on sure footing.

Things aren't always this straightforward; not every mission is as clear-cut. Sometimes service requires acting in gray areas — moral ones, certainly, but democratic ones, too. By design, the decisions to deploy forces, gather intelligence, or conduct operations ranging from rescue missions to strike packages emerge from partisan politics and public debate. National security issues are among the most contentious decisions and routinely stress test our government, something democratic republics are built to absorb. Increasingly, though, the military is asked to conduct operations without clear congressional authorization or adequate public awareness or debate. The democratic costs of that arrangement are real, as are the human costs.

The military operations in Venezuela — boat strikes at sea, the capture of Nicolas Maduro — were executed as planned, but the message from home questions their success. News of firing on stranded mariners and skipping congressional authorization for Saturday's raid raised moral and legal questions. The Pentagon has censured and threatened to demote Arizona Democratic Sen. Mark Kelly, a retired Navy pilot, for a video reminding service members that unlawful orders should not be followed. Polls show the public doesn't approve of the strikes on suspected drug boats but is evenly divided about the operation to remove Maduro.

Grappling with the morality of a mission is part of life in uniform. Questioning the legality of operations shouldn't be. Service members presume that the orders they're given are lawful. If they are not, then everyone will know it. If they don't, then the message from home — from the public and Congress, from the courts and experts — will tell them which is which. But when that signal goes quiet or gets muddled, and when institutions are shielded from accountability, responsibility shifts to those with the least influence and asks that they bear the most consequences.

Once our ship arrived at the designated position far off the coast of the island where our shipmates were, conversations turned to exploring the moral dilemmas. Given the historic intelligence loss that came with the plane's compromise, a couple of folks wondered if the crew should have ditched the plane in the ocean. Others posed a different hypothetical: If, for that same reason, we were asked to blow the plane up on the runway where the Chinese were holding it, would we go through with it? Or maybe our ship would be part of a covert rescue attempt. We lingered a few days — at first feeling like we'd sailed into a tinderbox, but soon recognizing our presence was as much a demonstration of force as it was a show of national resolve and solidarity with the 24 sailors being held, one of whom was a friend of mine.

The geopolitics were tense. The Chinese fighter pilot died in the collision. The emergency landing was labeled a violation of sovereign airspace and the extent of U.S. spying was made more public. Just months earlier, the Supreme Court's controversial intervention in the disputed 2000 presidential election led to George W. Bush winning the presidency, and Congress was split nearly down the middle. But we didn't wonder where the nation stood. There were bipartisan condemnations of the crew's detention, the legality of its operations was defended, and the rush to find a diplomatic solution assured us that whatever order came next would be legitimate. That helped us all breathe a little easier — after some missions, you can't go home again.

In the end, back in the United States, the aircrew returned to a deserving hero's welcome. And for us on the ship, the smiling families and frantic waving on the pier made us feel like heroes, too. When missions are lawful, properly authorized and publicly supported, that not only encourages success, it gives the work meaning and purpose. And it makes military service in gray areas easier to defend once safely back home.

Theodore R. Johnson, a contributing columnist for The Washington Post and retired naval officer, writes on issues of race, democracy, and American identity. He's the author of the book "If We Are Brave."

The ICE victim in Minneapolis did not deserve to die

The Washington Post Editorial Board

The shooting of a 37-year-old woman by a federal immigration agent in Minneapolis is a tragedy, no matter what narrative emerges as more information becomes available. It's important to ascertain all the facts about the deadly encounter and not rush to judgment. Yet videos of the scene, and an already overheated political environment, risk more violence.

A Department of Homeland Security spokeswoman said the driver, identified as U.S. citizen Renee Nicole Macklin Good, attempted to "run over" law enforcement officers in an act of "domestic terrorism" that required an Immigration and Customs Enforcement officer to fire three shots. President Donald Trump posted on social media that the driver "violently, willfully, and viciously ran over the ICE Officer, who seems to have shot her in self defense."

Yet, while additional information can always emerge, so far social media clips do not show a situation that would justify using deadly force. Disregarding instructions from police is unacceptable, and any violence against law enforcement ought to be prosecuted, but it's unclear if the woman intended to hit anyone with her vehicle.

Minnesota Democratic Gov. Tim Walz said the National Guard is ready to deploy if riots break out, something he was too slow to do after George Floyd's murder in 2020. But he pleaded with protesters to remain peaceful. "They want a show," he said. "We can't give it to them."

Walz is right that Trump could use unrest to invoke the Insurrection Act and deploy U.S. troops to Minnesota. (A recent defeat at the Supreme Court otherwise limited his authority to commandeer the National Guard.) The president posted on social media: "We need to stand by and protect our Law Enforcement Officers from this Radical Left Movement of Violence and Hate!"

Americans have the right to voice their frustration, but they should remember that violence undermines their message and distracts from potential accountability for the shooting. The uglier protests get, the easier it will be for the Trump administration to distract from scrutiny of the shooting.

Americans have seen violent clashes play out for months as ICE takes a maximalist approach to its deportation campaign in predominantly liberal cities. Immigration officers have been involved in more than a dozen shootings during Trump's second term. Just a day before the shooting, the administration announced it would send 2,000 federal agents to the Minneapolis metro area to conduct the "largest immigration operation ever." DHS reported arresting 150 illegal immigrants on Monday alone.

The Trump administration cited the ongoing Somalia fraud saga in Minneapolis as a reason for mass deportations. If an illegal immigrant is found guilty of a criminal offense, of course they should be deported. At the same time, welfare fraud is not uniquely an immigration problem. Most Somalis in Minnesota are U.S. citizens.

Before the shooting, Walz described the federal enforcement surge as "a war that's being waged against Minnesota." After the incident, MAGA allies quickly sought to blame Walz's rhetoric, including his previous comparison of ICE to the Gestapo, for raising tensions. But even Trump's biggest fans should be able to admit he isn't exactly known for his calming political presence. And the messaging of his deportation campaign has been consistently inflammatory by design.

Americans fed up with the wave of illegal immigration propelled Trump to the presidency, and shutting down the border is popular. The tragedy in Minnesota only underscores that the mass deportation campaign, on the other hand, is a moral and political failure.

SCOREBOARD/FIGURE SKATING

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Wednesday's men's scores

EAST

Boston University 83, Lafayette 67
Colgate 64, American 62
Creighton 76, Villanova 72
George Mason 67, Fordham 58
Indiana 84, Maryland 66
La Salle 79, Rhode Island 72
Lehigh 66, Holy Cross 58
Loyola (Md) 84, Army 76, OT
Navy 76, Bucknell 55
Richmond 89, St. Bonaventure 80
Saint Joseph's 97, Duquesne 90, OT
Temple 75, East Carolina 67
UConn 103, Providence 98, OT

SOUTH

Arkansas 94, Ole Miss 87
Clemson 74, SMU 70
East Tennessee State 81, VMI 67
Florida Atlantic 76, UAB 71
Furman 78, Chattanooga 67
High Point 104, Gardner-Webb 49
Jacksonville State 71, Florida International 64
Kennesaw State 90, Missouri State 80
Marshall 66, James Madison 64
Mercer 101, The Citadel 63
Miami (FL) 81, Wake Forest 77
Mississippi State 72, Oklahoma 53
Missouri 73, Kentucky 68
Radford 80, Presbyterian 61
Saint Louis 71, VCU 62
Samford 82, Western Carolina 77
Stanford 69, Virginia Tech 68
UNC Asheville 72, Longwood 61
Vanderbilt 96, Alabama 90
Virginia 84, California 60
Winthrop 81, Charleston Southern 77
Wofford 97, UNC Greensboro 85

MIDWEST

Belmont 78, Northern Iowa 65
Bradley 93, Drake 66
Davidson 79, Loyola Chicago 64
Marquette 66, Xavier 65
Murray State 79, Evansville 69
Purdue 81, Washington 73
Purdue Fort Wayne 71, Youngstown State 69
Rice 66, Wichita State 64
St. Thomas 99, South Dakota 86
UIC 70, Southern Illinois 57
Valparaiso 77, Illinois State 71

SOUTHWEST

Arkansas State 86, Troy 74
Charlotte 74, UTSA 58
Iowa State 70, Baylor 60
South Florida 74, North Texas 70

FAR WEST

Arizona 101, Kansas State 76
BYU 104, Arizona State 76
Colorado 85, Utah 73
Grand Canyon 75, Boise State 58

Men's Top 25 schedule

Saturday's games

No. 1 Arizona (15-0) at TCU (11-4)
No. 2 Michigan (14-0) vs. Wisconsin (10-5)
No. 3 Iowa State (15-0) vs. Oklahoma State (13-2)
No. 4 UConn (15-1) vs. DePaul (10-6)
No. 5 Purdue (14-1) vs. Penn State (9-6)
No. 6 Duke (14-1) vs. No. 24 SMU (12-2)
No. 7 Houston (14-1) at Baylor (10-3)
No. 9 BYU (14-1) at Utah (8-6)
No. 10 Nebraska (15-0) at Indiana (11-3)
No. 11 Vanderbilt (15-0) vs. LSU (12-3)
No. 13 Alabama (11-4) vs. Texas (9-6)
No. 14 Texas Tech (11-4) at Colorado (11-3)
No. 15 Arkansas (12-3) at Auburn (9-6)
No. 17 North Carolina (13-2) vs. Wake Forest (10-5)
No. 18 Georgia (13-2) at South Carolina (10-5)
No. 20 Louisville (11-4) vs. Boston College (7-8)
No. 21 Tennessee (11-4) at Florida (10-5)
No. 22 Kansas (11-4) at West Virginia (10-5)
No. 23 Virginia (13-2) vs. Stanford (12-3)

Wednesday's women's scores

EAST

American 59, Colgate 56, OT
Army 71, Loyola (MD) 66
Lafayette 65, Boston University 64
Lehigh 60, Holy Cross 57
Marshall 77, Old Dominion 70
Navy 77, Bucknell 51
Northern Illinois 64, Buffalo 58
Rhode Island 79, George Washington 70
St. Bonaventure 46, Duquesne 38
Texas Tech 71, West Virginia 66
UConn 88, St. John's 43

SOUTH

Coastal Carolina 69, Appalachian State 53
Davidson 48, Saint Joseph's 36
George Mason 62, La Salle 47
Georgia Southern 78, James Madison 70
High Point 76, Presbyterian 43
Longwood 83, Charleston Southern 63
Memphis 74, Florida Atlantic 66
Richmond 84, Fordham 65
Troy 84, Texas State 49
UNC Asheville 62, Gardner-Webb 51
Winthrop 66, USC Upstate 64

MIDWEST

Ball State 72, Toledo 68
Central Michigan 66, Kent State 57
Cincinnati 71, Iowa State 63
Cleveland State 87, Wright State 75
Georgetown 63, Butler 46
Loyola Chicago 71, Dayton 68
Miami (OH) 72, UMass 60
Ohio 96, Eastern Michigan 87
Ohio State 78, Illinois 69
Utah 62, Kansas 59
VCU 50, Saint Louis 39
Western Michigan 55, Akron 48

SOUTHWEST

Kansas State 71, Houston 62
Rice 84, Charlotte 59
TCU 69, Oklahoma State 61

FAR WEST

Arizona State 68, UCF 45
Boise State 70, Air Force 59
Fresno State 67, San Jose State 52
Nevada 70, Wyoming 60, OT
New Mexico 66, Colorado State 59
San Diego State 87, Grand Canyon 69
UNLV 69, Utah State 58

AP SPORTLIGHT

Jan. 9

1942 — Joe Louis knocks out Buddy Baer with four seconds left in the first round at Madison Square Garden in New York to retain the world heavyweight title.

1977 — Oakland wins its first NFL Championship and the Minnesota Vikings drop their fourth Super Bowl as the Raiders win 32-14.

1988 — Anthony Carter catches 10 passes for an NFL postseason-record 227 yards to lead the Minnesota Vikings to a 36-24 victory over the San Francisco 49ers and advance to the NFC title game.

1991 — Dean Smith collects his 700th career coaching victory as North Carolina routs Maryland 105-73. Smith is the sixth Division I basketball coach to reach the 700-win plateau and does so in the shortest time.

1996 — Toronto sets an NBA record by not making a single free throw in a 92-91 loss to the Charlotte Hornets. The expansion Raptors shoot 0-for-3 from the foul line.

2004 — Brian Boucher of the Phoenix Suns posts his fifth consecutive shutout in a 2-0 win over the Minnesota Timberwolves. He stops 21 shots and passes Bill Durnan's NHL mark of 309:21, early in the third period.

2006 — Kobe Bryant of the Los Angeles Lakers scores 45 points against the Indiana Pacers, making him the first player since Wilt Chamberlain — in November of 1964 — to score at least that many in four straight games.

2007 — Cal Ripken Jr. and Tony Gwynn are elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame. Mark McGwire, whose 583 home runs ranked seventh on the career list, does not make it on his first ballot.

2008 — Golf Channel suspends anchor Kelly Tilghman for two weeks for saying a week earlier that young players who wanted to challenge Tiger Woods should "lynch him in a back alley."

2010 — Peyton Manning becomes the first player to win The AP NFL Most Valuable Player honor four times.

2013 — No one is elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame. For the second time in four decades, baseball writers fail to give any player the 75% required for induction to Cooperstown. Craig Biggio, 20th on the career list with 3,060 hits, appears on 68.2% of the 569 ballots, the highest total but 39 votes shy.

TENNIS

Brisbane International

Thursday
At Brisbane, Australia
Purse: $1,691,602
Surface: Hardcourt outdoor
Seedings in parentheses
Women's Singles
Round of 16

Aryna Sabalenka (1), Belarus, def. Sorana Cirstea, Romania, 6-3, 6-3
Elena Rybakina (3), Kazakhstan, def. Paula Badosa (15), Spain, 6-3, 6-2
Karolina Muchova (11), Czechia, def. Ekaterina Alexandrova (7), Russia, 6-4, 7-5
Liudmila Samsonova (10), Russia, def. Aliaksandra Sasnovich, Belarus, 6-4, 6-4
Madison Keys (5), United States, def. Diana Shnaider (12), Russia, 6-7 (5), 7-6 (5), 7-6 (4)
Jessica Pegula (4), United States, def. Dayana Yastremska, Ukraine, 5-7, 6-2, 6-3
Marta Kostyuk (16), Ukraine, def. Amanda Anisimova (2), United States, 6-4, 6-3
Mirra Andreeva (6), Russia, def. Linda Noskova (9), Czechia, 5-7, 6-4, 7-5

Men's Singles
Round of 16

Aleksandar Kovacevic, United States, def. Cameron Norrie (7), Britain, 7-6 (4), 4-6, 6-4
Brandon Nakashima, United States, def. Quentin Halys, France, 6-2, 6-4
Giovanni Mpetshi Perricard, France, def. Rinky Hijikata, Australia, 4-6, 7-6 (5), 7-6 (4)
Raphael Collignon, Belgium, def. Grigor Dimitrov, Bulgaria, 7-6 (1), 6-3

ATP Hong Kong Open

Thursday
At Hong Kong, China
Purse: $700,045
Surface: Hardcourt outdoor
Seedings in parentheses
Men's Singles
Round of 16

Juncheng Shang, China, def. Lorenzo Sonego (5), Italy, 6-3, 6-4
Marcos Giron, United States, def. Alexandre Muller (7), France, 6-4, 7-6 (4)
Michael Mmoh, United States, def. Karen Khachanov (4), Russia, 7-6 (2), 7-6 (4)
Alexander Bublik (2), Kazakhstan, def. Botic Van de Zandschulp, Netherlands, 6-3, 6-3

DEALS

Wednesday's transactions

BASEBALL
Major League Baseball
American League

BALTIMORE ORIOLES — Claimed OF Marco Luciano off waivers from Pittsburgh. Designated OF Jhonkensy Noel for assignment. Sent LHP Josh Walker outright to Norfolk (IL).

LOS ANGELES ANGELS — Claimed OF Wade Meckler off waivers from San Francisco.

TAMPA BAY RAYS — Claimed SS Tsung-Che Cheng off waivers from Pittsburgh.

National League

CHICAGO CUBS — Claimed LHP Ryan Rolison off waivers from the Chicago White Sox. Acquired RHP Edward Cabrera from Miami in exchange for OF Owen Caissie and INFs Cristian Hernandez and Edgardo De Leon.

CINCINNATI REDS — Sent RHP Lyon Richardson outright to Louisville (IL).

COLORADO ROCKIES — Claimed RHP Keegan Thompson off waivers from Cincinnati.

BASKETBALL
National Basketball Association

ATLANTA HAWKS — Waived C Malik Williams.

MILWAUKEE BUCKS — Waived G Mark Sears.

NEW YORK KNICKS — Waived F Tosan Evbuomwan.

FOOTBALL
National Football League

BUFFALO BILLS — Signed CB Dane Jackson to the active roster. Placed DT Jordan Phillips on injured reserve. Signed QB Shane Buechele and CB Daryl Porter Jr. to the practice squad. Designated S Damar Hamlin to return from injured reserve.

DENVER BRONCOS — Released Gs Nash Jones and Joe Michalski from the practice squad. Signed T Geron Christian, C Michael Deiter and TE Marcedes Lewis to the practice squad.

GREEN BAY PACKERS — Reinstated LB Nick Niemann from injured reserve. Placed WR Bo Melton on injured reserve. Signed DL Anthony Campbell to the practice squad. Placed WR Will Sheppard on the practice squad injured list.

LOS ANGELES CHARGERS — Signed S Marcus Maye to the practice squad. Released C Josh Kaltenberger.

MINNESOTA VIKINGS — Signed DT Jaylon Hutchings and LB Jacob Roberts to reserve/futures contracts.

NEW ORLEANS SAINTS — Signed WR Damien Alford to a reserve/futures contract.

NEW YORK GIANTS — Signed G Jake Kubas to a reserve/futures contract.

PHILADELPHIA EAGLES — Designated LB Azeez Ojulari to return from injured reserve.

PITTSBURGH STEELERS — Signed CB Tre Flowers to the practice squad.

SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS — Promoted LB Eric Kendricks to the active roster. Placed LB Tatum Bethune on injured reserve. Signed LB Kyzir White to the practice squad. Designated WR Jacob Cowing to return from injured reserve. Signed LB Milo Eifler to a reserve/futures contract.

SEATTLE SEAHAWKS — Designated TE Elijah Arroyo to return from injured reserve.

WASHINGTON COMMANDERS — Signed TE Lawrence Cager to a reserve/futures contract.

HOCKEY
National Hockey League

ANAHEIM DUCKS — Recalled F Tim Washe from San Diego (AHL).

COLUMBUS BLUE JACKETS — Placed F Mason Marchment on injured reserve. Designated F Dysin Mayo for waivers. Recalled F Mikael Pyyhtiä from Cleveland (AHL).

DETROIT RED WINGS — Reinstated D Shai Buium from injured non-roster and sent him to Grand Rapids (AHL).

EDMONTON OILERS — Placed F Adam Henrique on injured reserve.

LOS ANGELES KINGS — Recalled Fs Andre Lee and Taylor Ward from Ontario (AHL). Placed F Corey Perry on the non-roster list.

PITTSBURGH PENGUINS — Placed F Rutger McGroarty on injured reserve.

ST. LOUIS BLUES — Reinstated F Nathan Walker from injured reserve.

WASHINGTON CAPITALS — Recalled F Brett Leason from Hershey (AHL). Placed F Aliaksei Protas on injured reserve.

WINNIPEG JETS — Promoted F Danny Zhilkin from Manitoba (AHL). Placed D Haydn Fleury on injured reserve.

SOCCER
Major League Soccer

ATLANTA UNITED — Loaned F Ashton Gordon to Chattanooga FC (MLS NEXT Pro).

COLUMBUS CREW — Signed Ds Quinton Elliot and Owen Presthus and F Chase Adams to contracts.

INTER MIAMI CF — Signed D Micael dos Santos to a contract.

NASHVILLE SC — Acquired the rights to M Shakur Mohammed from Orlando City SC and D Isaiah LeFlore from the Philadelphia Union and signed both to one-year contracts. In exchange, Orlando receives Nashville's natural third-round pick in the 2027 MLS SuperDraft and Philadelphia receives NSC's waiver position in MLS' waiver order.

PHILADELPHIA UNION — Signed M Ben Bender to a two-year contract.

PORTLAND TIMBERS — Signed D Alex Bonetig to a two-year contract.

REAL SALT LAKE — Acquired M Zach Booth on loan from Excelsior Rotterdam.

SAN DIEGO FC — Transferred M Heine Gikling Bruseth to Kristiansund BK.

National Women's Soccer League

WASHINGTON SPIRIT — Signed G Kaylie Collins to a one-year contract.

PRO HOCKEY

NHL

EASTERN CONFERENCE
Atlantic Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Tampa Bay	42	26	13	3	55	146	112
Montreal	43	24	13	6	54	145	142
Detroit	44	25	15	4	54	136	141
Buffalo	41	22	15	4	48	130	129
Florida	42	22	17	3	47	130	134
Toronto	42	20	15	7	47	141	139
Boston	43	22	19	2	46	137	143
Ottawa	42	20	17	5	45	137	137

Metropolitan Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Carolina	43	26	14	3	55	147	131
N.Y. Islanders	43	24	15	4	52	129	120
Philadelphia	41	22	12	7	51	129	118
Washington	44	22	16	6	50	143	129
Pittsburgh	41	20	12	9	49	135	131
New Jersey	43	22	19	2	46	114	133
N.Y. Rangers	44	20	18	6	46	116	120
Columbus	42	18	17	7	43	129	142

WESTERN CONFERENCE
Central Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Colorado	42	31	4	7	69	167	97
Dallas	44	26	10	8	60	153	124
Minnesota	44	25	11	8	58	140	119
Utah	44	21	20	3	45	133	125
Chicago	43	18	18	7	43	125	137
Nashville	42	19	19	4	42	120	142
St. Louis	44	17	19	8	42	110	153
Winnipeg	41	15	21	5	35	118	130

Pacific Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Vegas	41	18	11	12	48	128	129
Edmonton	43	21	16	6	48	145	145
Seattle	41	20	14	7	47	115	120
San Jose	43	22	18	3	47	136	151
Los Angeles	42	18	14	10	46	114	117
Anaheim	43	21	19	3	45	145	158
Calgary	43	18	21	4	40	113	130
Vancouver	42	16	21	5	37	120	148

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

Tuesday's games

Buffalo 5, Vancouver 3
Carolina 6, Dallas 3
Tampa Bay 4, Colorado 2
Philadelphia 5, Anaheim 2
N.Y. Islanders 9, New Jersey 0
Toronto 4, Florida 1
Vegas 4, Winnipeg 3, OT
Edmonton 6, Nashville 2
San Jose 5, Columbus 2
Seattle 7, Boston 4

Wednesday's games

Dallas 4, Washington 1
Montreal 4, Calgary 1
Utah 3, Ottawa 1
Chicago 7, St. Louis 3
San Jose 4, Los Angeles 3, OT

Thursday's games

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

Friday's games

Los Angeles at Winnipeg
Washington at Chicago
St. Louis at Utah

Saturday's games

N.Y. Rangers at Boston
Calgary at Pittsburgh
Columbus at Colorado
Dallas at San Jose
Anaheim at Buffalo
Detroit at Montreal
Florida at Ottawa
Seattle at Carolina
Tampa Bay at Philadelphia
Vancouver at Toronto
Chicago at Nashville
N.Y. Islanders at Minnesota
Los Angeles at Edmonton
St. Louis at Vegas

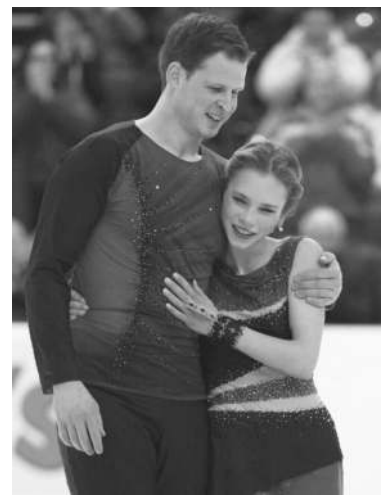
Sunday's games

New Jersey at Winnipeg
Pittsburgh at Boston
Washington at Nashville
Columbus at Utah
Vegas at San Jose

Goalie leaders

Through Wednesday

	GPI	MIN	GA	AVG
Blackwood, Colorado	16	870	30	2.07
Wedgewood, Colorado	27	1553	57	2.20
Grubauer, Seattle	14	758	28	2.22
Murray, Seattle	5	216	8	2.22
Quick, N.Y. Rangers	11	644	24	2.24



STEPHANIE SCARBROUGH/AP

Alisa Efimova and Misha Mitrofanov celebrate after their pairs short program at the U.S. championships on Wednesday.

Efimova's citizenship in way of Olympics

BY DAVE SKRETTA
Associated Press

ST. LOUIS — Alisa Efimova stepped off the ice and slipped into a jacket, an American flag patch on her left sleeve impossible to miss, after a brilliant performance with pairs partner Misha Mitrofanov at the U.S. Figure Skating Championships on Wednesday night.

Efimova hopes to be representing the stars and stripes at the Milan Cortina Olympics next month.

But time is running out.

The Olympics require that competitors are citizens of the nations they represent. And while the 28-year-old Mitrofanov was born in the United States, the 26-year-old Efimova was born in Finland — she didn't come to the States on a full-time basis until 2023, when they became partners — leaving her in bureaucratic limbo while the American government decides her fate.

Efimova and Mitrofanov were married in February 2024. She had a green card approved in July of that year and has been seeking a waiver of the required three-year waiting period for citizenship.

The finalized U.S. squad for the Winter Games will be announced Sunday.

"We're hoping maybe a last-minute miracle might happen," Mitrofanov said.

The Skating Club of Boston, where Efimova and Mitrofanov train, has done most of the legwork in pursuit of her passport. U.S. Figure Skating also would love to have arguably its best pairs team on an Olympic team carrying massive expectations.

NBA

Celtics among teams surprising so far

BY TIM REYNOLDS
Associated Press

A year ago at this time, the Boston Celtics had a starting lineup of Jaylen Brown, Jayson Tatum, Kristaps Porzingis, Al Horford and Jrue Holiday.

Boston in second place in the Eastern Conference.

Brown is still starting for the Celtics. Every other name in that first unit has since changed. Tatum hasn't played this season because of an Achilles injury, Porzingis is with Atlanta, Horford is with Golden State and Holiday is with Portland.

Boston is in second place in the Eastern Conference.

The NBA regular season is nearing the midway point — some teams will start hitting the 41-game mark, the halfway mark of the 82-game slate, this weekend — and surprise stories have emerged in many cases, some good, some bad. The Celtics are surely on the good side of that list.

Consider what the expectations were a few months ago: Tatum was dealing with the Achilles tear, Porzingis and Holiday were traded and Horford chose to join the Warriors. Many of the decisions Boston made were to get out from under a potential luxury tax bill that was going to be bigger than the gross domestic product of Micronesia. But while the perception that the Celtics were entering a rebuild, reset or reload year, they insisted that wasn't the reality.

At 23-13, it sure looks like they were right.

"Guys have an understanding of what they're supposed to do, and that's top to bottom," Boston coach Joe Mazzulla said Monday night. "I think when you have that, you just have a better level of connectivity and then you're just able to do your job and execute what needs to be executed. ... Have an understanding of who we are as a team, have an understanding of what the game plan is, execute that regardless of who you're out there on the floor with and make sure you play hard."

It sounds so easy.

The Celtics are far from the only story that could be considered a surprise to some this season. Detroit, at 27-9 and leading the East over Boston, is off to the second-best 36-game start in its history — topped only by a 31-5 mark in 2005-06. (The Pistons were also 27-9 in 2007-08.)

New York coach Mike Brown has known Pistons coach J.B. Bickerstaff forever; he revealed at the NBA Cup in Las Vegas last month that he actually used to babysit Bickerstaff. He gets why people may think Detroit being 27-9 is a surprise, but he's not surprised to see Bickerstaff having success.



CHARLES KRUPA/AP

Celtics guard Jaylen Brown, left, attempts to shoot a basket past Chicago Bulls forward Matas Buzelis Monday in Boston. The Celtics are currently ranked third in the Eastern Conference.



RICK SCUTERI/AP

Suns guard Devin Booker, left, celebrates with forward Dillon Brooks after hitting the winning shot against the Oklahoma City Thunder during the second half Jan. 4 in Phoenix. The Suns are now 22-15.

"It helps to have some good players, too. None of us can do this by ourselves without players and a good staff," Brown said. "But when you're a leader in an organization like that ... over time you can see how they've just propelled upwards every day. A lot of credit is deserving of him and the job that he's done in Detroit."

The Pistons and Celtics would be 'good' surprises. So would Phoenix, a team that is squarely in the mix in the Western Conference despite many thinking that the loss of Kevin Durant to Houston would doom the Suns.

"We're going to go in there and play hard every day," Phoenix's Jordan Goodwin said.

Milwaukee, at 16-20 largely due to injuries, is not a good surprise. Neither is the slow start for the Los Angeles Clippers, who are beginning to make up ground but still far from looking like a contender. And Atlanta, a team that was supposed to be in the hunt for East supremacy, is now reportedly trading away point guard Trae Young.

It's an interesting situation for the Hawks. Young has been their franchise player, but they have clearly been better this season without him in the lineup.

So halftime nears on this season. There's a lot for some teams to like, and a lot for other teams not to be happy about.

The good news for those teams that aren't liking where they are right now is this: There's still a long way to go. In the NBA, little is decided until the second half anyway.

Leaders

Through Wednesday

Scoring

	G	FG	FT	PTS	AVG
Doncic, LAL	28	291	269	943	33.7
Gil.-Alex., OKC	37	403	302	1182	31.9
Maxey, PHI	33	354	182	1014	30.7
Mitchell, CLE	34	355	170	1013	29.8
Brown, BOS	34	374	189	1010	29.7
Jokic, DEN	32	339	203	948	29.6
Edwards, MIN	30	299	181	880	29.3
Brunson, NY	34	351	183	988	29.1
Curry, GS	28	262	150	806	28.8
Leonard, LAC	26	255	150	727	28.0

Assists

	G	FG	FT
Jokic, DEN	32	351	11.0
Cunningham, DET	33	321	9.7
Giddey, CHI	30	270	9.0
Doncic, LAL	28	245	8.8
Johnson, ATL	35	291	8.3
Harden, LAC	33	265	8.0
Ball, CHA	27	213	7.9
Murray, DEN	35	262	7.5
Mitchell, MIA	35	262	7.5
Maxey, PHI	33	233	7.1

Rebounding

	G	OFF	DEF	TOT	AVG
Jokic, DEN	32	97	292	389	12.2
Towns, NY	34	100	289	389	11.4
Gobert, MIN	37	145	270	415	11.2
Zubac, LAC	31	111	230	341	11.0
Clingan, POR	34	153	210	363	10.7
Duren, DET	31	127	203	330	10.6
Ware, MIA	37	128	265	393	10.6
Johnson, ATL	35	52	308	360	10.3
Nurkic, UTA	31	85	218	303	9.8
Adebayo, MIA	29	48	230	278	9.6

Scoreboard

Eastern Conference

Atlantic Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
New York	24	13	.649	—
Boston	23	13	.639	½
Toronto	23	15	.605	1½
Philadelphia	20	15	.571	3
Brooklyn	11	23	.324	11½

Southeast Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Orlando	21	17	.553	—
Miami	20	17	.541	½
Atlanta	18	21	.462	3½
Charlotte	13	24	.351	7½
Washington	10	26	.278	10

Central Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Detroit	28	9	.757	—
Cleveland	21	17	.553	7½
Chicago	17	20	.459	11
Milwaukee	16	21	.432	12
Indiana	6	31	.162	22

Western Conference

Southwest Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
San Antonio	26	11	.703	—
Houston	22	12	.647	2½
Memphis	16	21	.432	10
Dallas	14	23	.378	12
New Orleans	8	31	.205	19

Northwest Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Oklahoma City	31	7	.816	—
Denver	25	12	.676	5½
Minnesota	24	13	.649	6½
Portland	18	20	.474	13
Utah	12	24	.333	18

Pacific Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
L.A. Lakers	23	12	.657	—
Phoenix	22	15	.595	2
Golden State	20	18	.526	4½
L.A. Clippers	13	23	.361	10½
Sacramento	8	29	.216	16

Tuesday's games

Washington 120, Orlando 112
Cleveland 120, Indiana 116
Memphis 106, San Antonio 105
Minnesota 122, Miami 94
L.A. Lakers 111, New Orleans 103
Dallas 100, Sacramento 98

Wednesday's games

Detroit 108, Chicago 93
Philadelphia 131, Washington 110
Toronto 97, Charlotte 96
Denver 114, Boston 110
New York 123, L.A. Clippers 111
Atlanta 117, New Orleans 100
Orlando 104, Brooklyn 103, OT
Phoenix 117, Memphis 98
Oklahoma City 129, Utah 125, OT
San Antonio 107, L.A. Lakers 91
Golden State 120, Milwaukee 113
Portland 103, Houston 102

Thursday's games

Indiana at Charlotte
Cleveland at Minnesota
Miami at Chicago
Dallas at Utah

Friday's games

New Orleans at Washington
Philadelphia at Orlando
Toronto at Boston
L.A. Clippers at Brooklyn
Oklahoma City at Memphis
Atlanta at Denver
New York at Phoenix
Houston at Portland
Sacramento at Golden State
Milwaukee at L.A. Lakers

Saturday's games

Minnesota at Cleveland
Miami at Indiana
L.A. Clippers at Detroit
Dallas at Chicago
San Antonio at Boston
Charlotte at Utah

Sunday's games

New Orleans at Orlando
Brooklyn at Memphis
New York at Portland
Philadelphia at Toronto
San Antonio at Minnesota
Miami at Oklahoma City
Milwaukee at Denver
Washington at Phoenix
Atlanta at Golden St.
Houston at Sacramento

NBA/COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Source: Hawks will trade All-Star Young to Wizards

By Tim Reynolds
Associated Press

Trae Young's tenure in Atlanta is over, with the Hawks agreeing to trade the high-scoring and frequently criticized guard to the Washington Wizards for a package including veteran CJ McCollum, a person with knowledge of the move said Wednesday night.

Corey Kispert is also headed from Washington to Atlanta, said the person, who spoke to The Associated Press on the condition of anonymity because the trade had not received the required league approval. Typically, teams cannot discuss pending trades until they are approved by the league, and the league's trade call had not taken place, the person said.

"I know you all have questions for me that right now I'm not at liberty to talk about or answer," Hawks coach Quin Snyder said, unprompted, at the start of his postgame news conference Wednesday night after Atlanta's win over New Orleans.

NBA reporter Marc Stein was first to disclose that the sides were closing in on a deal, and ESPN first reported that the agreement was in place.

The Wizards held McCollum and Kispert out of their loss at Philadelphia on Wednesday night, and Young was on the bench in street clothes for the Hawks.

Young leaves Atlanta as the Hawks' career leader in assists and 3-pointers. He's sixth on Atlanta's scoring list.

Hawks power forward Mouhamed Gueye said he didn't know during Wednesday's game that the trade news had gone public. He had nothing but high praise afterward for his time with Young.

"That's T.Y. That's Trae Young," Gueye said. "When I first got here, he was one of the first guys that texted me, welcoming me to the city, gave me a lot of advice. Obviously, playing with Trae, as a big, is like a dream come true. I love him as a guy, I love him as a teammate. ... An Atlanta legend."

Young is 10th in points, 12th in points per game, first in assists and first in assists per game since entering the NBA as the No. 5 pick in the 2018 draft.

He is one of five players to rank in the top 10 in both points and assists since he entered the league; the others are Denver's Nikola Jokic, the Los Angeles Lakers' Luka Doncic, the Los Angeles Clippers' James Harden and Phoenix's Devin Booker.

Jokic has won a championship and is a three-time MVP. Doncic is considered an MVP candidate, Harden is a member of the 75th anniversary team and Booker is a two-time Olympic gold medalist.

Young doesn't get the level of respect as those players. He's a four-time All-Star — two of those nods coming through voting, two of them coming when he was added as an injury replacement.

But the Hawks, this season anyway, have been better without Young.

Atlanta was 2-8 this season when Young played, but is 16-13 without him. Over his career, the Hawks won 49% of their games when Young wasn't in the lineup — as opposed to 45% when he played.

He has a player option for about $49 million for next season and is eligible for a three-year extension with Washington.

McCollum averaged 18.8 points in 35 games with the Wizards this season and is a 19.6-point scorer for his career. Atlanta will become his fourth team; he also played for Portland and New Orleans.

Kispert has been a backup for the bulk of his five NBA seasons, all with Washington. He's averaged 10.9 points for his career while shooting 38% from 3-point range.



David Banks/AP

Atlanta Hawks guard Trae Young, right, drives against Bulls guard Tre Jones on Oct. 27 in Chicago. Young is 10th in points and first in assists since entering the NBA as the No. 5 pick in the 2018 draft.



Julio Cortez/AP

Point guard Tamin Lipsey grew up near the Iowa State campus and has started all 115 of his games in four seasons with the Cyclones.

Ames native Lipsey helps No. 3 Iowa State reach 15-0 for 1st time

By Stephen Hawkins
Associated Press

WACO, Texas — Iowa State point guard Tamin Lipsey, the senior who grew up near campus in Ames, is now part of something that had never been done by the Cyclones. They have a 15-game winning streak to start the season.

"I've been a Cyclone all my life. Just got on the court four years ago, though," Lipsey said Wednesday night following a 70-60 victory at Baylor. "Watching all those teams growing up and just realizing that I have a chance right now to make a footprint for Iowa State, and just the community of Ames and all of that, I never take for granted."

Lipsey scored 24 points, overcoming some early foul trouble that kept him on the bench for nearly eight minutes in the first half. Joshua Jefferson had 19 points and 17 rebounds for the Cyclones (15-0, 2-0 Big 12).

Iowa State's 15-0 start and 15-game winning streak are both school records, surpassing a 14-0 start by the 2013-14 team that reached the Sweet 16 of the NCAA Tournament. They are one of six undefeated Division I teams, along with No. 1 Arizona, No. 2 Michigan, No. 10 Nebraska, No. 11 Vanderbilt and unranked Miami, Ohio.

"I think these guys do such a great job at honoring all those who have come before us with the effort and the execution that they play with," fifth-year Cyclones coach T.J. Otzelberger said. "So it's a great accomplishment. It's a credit to the young men and how they work. And hopefully something that the past Cyclones who have been in this program and those that have invested can take tremendous pride in."

Jefferson, a senior forward and second-year transfer from Saint Mary's, already had his sixth double-double of the season by halftime.

His long-3-pointer with 5 seconds left in the first half gave Iowa State its first lead at 25-24. The Cyclones never gave that up, starting the second half with a 14-1 run when six players scored and Jefferson capped it with a fast-break dunk.

"A huge shot Joshua made just before the half," Otzelberger said. "A huge momentum play that carried into that second half."

Lipsey has started all 115 of his games in four seasons with Iowa State, including three NCAA Tournament appearances and a Sweet 16 in that time. He came out after his second foul with 17:12 left in the first half and didn't return until the 9:19 mark. He finally scored with 6:11 left in the first half, then had 20 points after halftime.

"I'd take him over any point guard in America," Otzelberger said. "Obviously, not having Tamin out there quite as much in the first half impacted where the game was at. But man, in that second half, the plays he made, the shots he made, it was amazing — especially when you have to bounce back when your normal routine and rhythm of a game is disrupted because of the fouls."

After the Cyclones shot 27.8% from the field (10-for-36) in the first half, they were at 57.1% (16-for- 28) after halftime.

On the defensive side, they held Baylor to 18.8% (6-for-32) before halftime and 30.6% (19-for-62) overall.

"Iowa State is a really good team. If you ask me, right now, today, them and Michigan are the two best in college basketball," Baylor coach Scott Drew said. "They're not going to beat themselves. They know exactly where they're going to be, how they're going to do things. T.J. has done a great job with them."

COLLEGE FOOTBALL PLAYOFF

Lanning, Cignetti reach same place despite opposite styles

By Michael Marot and Anne M. Peterson
Associated Press

Oregon coach Dan Lanning and Indiana coach Curt Cignetti look like opposites.

Lanning is the flashy budding star who wins by defying conventional wisdom. The blunt-spoken Cignetti takes a decidedly old-school approach.

The two former Alabama assistants will soon find themselves back in SEC country, sharing mutual admiration for their very different styles, as they chase one goal — reaching the national championship game.

"(He's) one of the young superstars in the coaching profession," Cignetti said of his Peach Bowl opponent in the College Football Playoff semifinals on Friday night.

When he was introduced as Oregon's new coach in December 2021, Lanning was asked about his lack of head coaching experience. The former defensive coordinator at Georgia responded with a wisecrack.

"Well, I hate to cut you off, but I've been a head coach before," Lanning said. "When I was in high school, I coached the third-grade basketball team, and we were damn good. I mean, we were good."

Lanning pledged the Ducks would be relentless in their pursuit of excellence. He hasn't disappointed.

In four seasons with Oregon, Lanning has lost only seven games. The Ducks won the 2024 Big Ten title during their first year in the conference and were unbeaten until losing to Ohio State in the CFP quarterfinals.

This season, there's just one blemish — the 30-20 home loss to Indiana in October.

Like Lanning, Cignetti has also been relentless. In two years, he did what few thought possible by turning the Football Bowl Subdivision's losingest program into the undefeated Big Ten champ, the CFP's top seed and the nation's No. 1 team.

The 64-year-old Cignetti leaned heavily into his head coaching experience at Indiana-Pennsylvania, Elon and James Madison to quickly establish a new mindset inside a program where mediocrity and near-misses had become the norm.

Known for soundbite-perfect quotes, Cignetti left no doubt he was the right hire.

"It's pretty simple. I win. Google me," he said.

Saban disciples

Both coaches perfected their craft while working under coach Nick Saban, although not at the same time.

Cignetti joined Saban in his first year with Alabama, spent three more years there as the receivers coach and recruiting coordinator before leaving to coach IUP, the same school where his Hall of Famer father, Frank Sr., coached.

By then, Cignetti had already developed a reputation as a quarterback guru in stops at Pittsburgh, Rice and Temple before producing his prize pupil, Philip Rivers, at North Carolina State.

"Obviously, it was, shoot, 20 years ago-plus, but really smart, had a mind for the game and a great way of teaching," Rivers said.

Cignetti's latest win was very Saban-esque, a 38-3 CFP quarterfinal victory over Alabama at the Rose Bowl that extended Indiana's perfect record to 14-0.

"If you were serious about your career and wanted to be a head coach one day, you took great notes or great mental notes," Cignetti said.

Lanning, 39, served as a graduate assistant under Saban in 2015, when the Crimson Tide won a national championship. He had been working at Sam Houston, but took a pay cut to work with Saban.

"When anybody asked me why, I said, I'm going to get my doctorate in football. That's what it felt like working for coach Saban," Lanning said. "Just like coach (Cignetti) said, you learn so much — things I thought I knew, I realized I didn't know anything."

Old school

Cignetti has often said he's a more traditional coach, following in the footsteps of his father. He emphasizes preparation and accountability, while also preaching unrelenting aggressiveness on the field.

He summed up his philosophy following the win over Alabama.

"It's a great vehicle that helps people, used properly, become more successful in their life's work later on and raising a family. A lot of great lessons there about teamwork, leadership, overcoming adversity, meeting challenges, preparation, commitment, discipline, work ethic, toughness," he said. "We've got a lot of the guys that have the right stuff."

Lanning is more showy, much like the array of uniforms the Ducks wear. He showed his willingness to take chances with a successful fake punt on fourth-and-3 in the second quarter of the team's 23-0 CFP quarterfinal victory over Texas Tech in the Orange Bowl.



Lydia Ely/AP

Oregon head coach Dan Lanning, left, and Indiana head coach Curt Cignetti shake hands after the Hoosiers' 30-20 win over the Ducks on Oct. 11 in Eugene, Ore.



Mark J. Terrill/AP

Indiana running back Roman Hemby, left, runs past Alabama defensive lineman London Simmons on his way to a rushing touchdown during the second half of the Rose Bowl on Jan. 1 in Pasadena, Calif.

Big: Oregon looking for revenge after sole loss to Indiana this season

FROM PAGE 48

Added Cignetti: "Oregon is a great football team. But the Big Ten is a great conference, a lot of good teams top to bottom. And that's a great thing about the playoffs. You give 12 teams a chance to win it all, and at the end of the day there's one standing."

No. 5 Oregon (13-1)
vs. No. 1 Indiana (14-0)
Peach Bowl
AFN-Sports
1:40 a.m. Saturday CET
9:40 a.m. Saturday JKT

Rematch

The Hoosiers took a 30-20 win at the Ducks on Oct. 11 to hand Oregon its only loss. Ducks quarterback Dante Moore threw two interceptions and was sacked six times.

"We just didn't play up to our standard," Oregon running back Noah Whittington said. "It's simple as that. We just got to come out, play our brand of football, and we'll take care of business."

Indiana wins with balance

Cignetti guided the Hoosiers' surprising climb to the top of the AP Top 25 with the impressive combination of a powerful defense, strong running game and the leadership of quarterback Fernando Mendoza, the Heisman Trophy winner who led the nation with 36 touchdown passes.

Indiana ranks 10th in the nation with 220.7 rushing yards per game. The Hoosiers rank third in scoring with 41.6 points per game. The defense ranks second with its averages of 10.3 points, 242.6 yards and 73.7 rushing yards allowed.

CFP momentum

Each team is coming off dominant wins in the CFP quarterfinal round.

Indiana overwhelmed Alabama 38-3 in the Rose Bowl as Mendoza passed for 192 yards and three touchdowns. Oregon shut out Texas Tech 23-0 in the Orange Bowl as freshman Brandon Finney Jr. had two interceptions and a fumble recovery.

Going for it

Lanning has become known for his sometimes bold play-calling, including a proclivity to go for it on fourth down.

The Ducks converted on four of eight fourth-down attempts in the win over Texas Tech. Oregon successfully faked a punt on fourth down in the first half. Late in the game, Jordan Davison scored on a 1-yard touchdown run on fourth down to pad the final margin.

Earlier this year, the Ducks converted on five of seven fourth-down attempts in a double-overtime victory over Penn State. Through 14 games, Oregon has been successful 14 times on 30 fourth-down attempts. In contrast, Indiana has converted eight of 16 attempts through 14 games.

Lanning solidified his reputation for unconventional plays last year in the Ducks' 32-31 regular-season victory over Ohio State, when the young coach exploited an illegal substitution penalty late in the game to take time off the clock. Soon thereafter, the NCAA issued guidance to close the loophole.

NFL



REBECCA BLACKWELL/AP

Dolphins head coach Mike McDaniel, left, talks with linebacker K.J. Britt before a game Oct. 30 in Miami Gardens, Fla. McDaniel was fired Thursday after a 35-33 record and two playoff appearances in four seasons.

Dolphins fire coach McDaniel after missing playoffs again

BY ALANIS THAMES
Associated Press

MIAMI GARDENS, Fla. — The Miami Dolphins fired coach Mike McDaniel on Thursday following a 7-10 season in which they missed the playoffs for the second straight year.

The decision ends McDaniel's four-year tenure in Miami, a period defined by soaring expectations that ultimately went unfulfilled.

"After careful evaluation and extensive discussions since the season ended, I have made the decision that our organization is in need of comprehensive change," Dolphins owner Stephen Ross said in a statement Thursday morning. "I informed Mike McDaniel this morning that he has been relieved of his duties as head coach."

Miami went 35-33 under McDaniel, reaching the playoffs in his first two seasons but losing in the first round each time. The Dolphins missed the postseason in 2024 after being eliminated by the Jets in the regular-season finale. This year, their postseason hopes ended with a loss to Pittsburgh in Week 15, ensuring that their 25-year playoff-win drought — the longest streak in the NFL — would continue.

Miami parted ways with longtime general manager Chris Grier on Oct. 31 and began its search for a new general manager this week. But a disjointed finish to the season that saw former first-round pick Tua Tagovailoa get benched proved the final straw for Ross, who decided to move on from McDaniel, the quirky, dry-witted wunderkind head coach once viewed as the franchise's future.

"I love Mike and want to thank him for his hard work, commitment and the energy he brought to our organization," Ross said in Thursday's statement. "Mike is an incredibly creative football mind whose passion for the game and his players was evident every day. I wish him and his family the best moving forward."

McDaniel, 42, won 20 of his first 33 games, including a 3-0 start during his first year with wins over Baltimore, Buffalo and New England. He took the Dolphins to the playoffs that season and nearly beat the Bills with rookie Skylar Thompson starting in place of the concussed Tagovailoa.

His off-the-cuff jokes, idiosyncratic sayings and flashy style were a refreshing deviation from the approach of many other head coaches — but they were also initially met with needed results on the field.

Tagovailoa had credited McDaniel with rebuilding his confidence after former Miami coach Brian Flores tore it down as a young quarterback. Tagovailoa said last year that the constant criticism early in his career left him doubting himself. He was the fifth pick in the 2020 draft and won the starting job, but was benched twice as a rookie and faced uncertainty his second year amid speculation the Dolphins were seeking a trade for Deshaun Watson.

"To put it in simplest terms," Tagovailoa said in a 2024 interview on "The Dan LeBatard Show," "If you woke up every morning and I told you you suck at what you did, that you don't belong doing what you do, that you shouldn't be here, that this guy should be here, that you haven't earned this right. ... And then you have somebody else come in and tell you, 'Dude, you are the best fit for us, you are accurate, you are the best.' How would it make you feel listening to one or the other?"

With McDaniel tailoring Miami's offense to his strengths, Tagovailoa led the NFL's top offense in 2023, throwing for a league-best 4,624 yards and 29 touchdowns. He led the league in 2024 with a 72.9 completion rate.

Since that season, which ended in a 26-7 loss in a frigid wild-card game at Kansas City, the Dolphins have gone 15-19, and appear far from the franchise that just a couple of years ago spoke of contending for a Super Bowl.

Miami opened this season with a 33-8 drubbing by Indianapolis and ended it with another blowout loss to the Patriots.

"Eventually, like everybody else in this league, you're not entitled to this position," McDaniel said Monday. "If I'm not able to win regular-season games, playoff games and Super Bowls, eventually the job won't be mine."

Herbert, broken hand set to lead Chargers

BY BETH HARRIS
Associated Press

EL SEGUNDO, Calif. — Justin Herbert and his broken left hand are rested and ready to lead the Los Angeles Chargers into the playoffs, where they haven't won a game since the 2018 season.

Herbert and several other regulars sat out the Chargers' 19-3 loss to the Broncos on Sunday. In Herbert's case, it was to protect his non-throwing hand for the playoffs after getting beat up all season long.

Los Angeles (11-6) earned the No. 7 seed in the AFC and will be on the road throughout the playoffs. The Bolts will open Sunday night at the AFC East champion Patriots (14-3).

"That's the kind of game that does define your season," second-year coach Jim Harbaugh said.

Herbert has yet to win a playoff game in six years. LA's most recent playoff victory was in the 2018 wild-card round against the Ravens. The Chargers went on to lose to New England 41-28 in the division round.

"Our best football is at stake," wide receiver Keenan Allen said. "We have to bring it. We'll be ready, and he'll be ready."

Going into the playoffs, Los Angeles' defense has continued to come up big, showing marked improvement during the team's four-game winning streak late in the regular season. It ranks in the top five in third-down percentage allowed, while Khalil Mack and rookie Tuli Tuipulotu have led a solid pass rush.

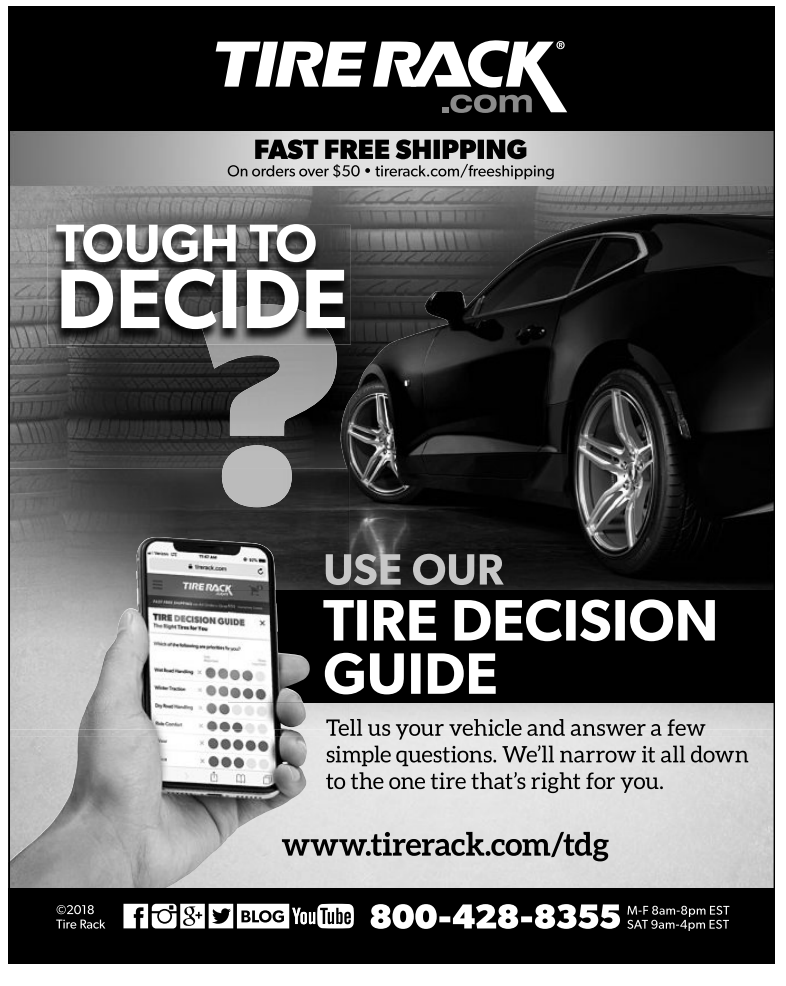
Los Angeles Chargers (11-6)
at New England Patriots (14-3)
Wild-Card round
AFN-Sports
2 a.m. Monday CET
10 a.m. Monday JKT

Defensive lineman Justin Eboigbe had two sacks against Denver and finished with six in the regular season. The second-year player was limited to 26 defensive snaps as a rookie after being a fourth-round pick in 2024.

On the other side, however, the offensive line suffered its biggest issues early on, losing tackles Joe Alt and Rashawn Slater both to season-ending injuries.

There have been other key injuries that created inconsistency at times and put pressure on Herbert, who was sacked a career-high 54 times in 16 games this season.

Running back Omarion Hampton sat out Week 18 with an ankle injury. "He's doing everything and anything he can to get back as fast as he can," Harbaugh said Monday. Hampton had already spent several weeks on injured reserve with an injured ankle. Losing his explosive playmaking ability against the Patriots defense would be a big loss.



NFL PLAYOFFS



CHRIS O'MEARA/AP

Panthers running back Chuba Hubbard runs around the tackle attempt from Buccaneers cornerback Benjamin Morrison during the first half Jan. 3 in Tampa, Fla. Carolina had just 19 yards rushing in the game.

Panthers eager to revive slumping running game

BY STEVE REED
Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Rico Dowdle and the NFC South champion Carolina Panthers are aiming to revive a slumping running game Saturday when they host the Los Angeles Rams in the franchise's first home playoff game in a decade.

Failure to do so will almost certainly result in an early exit from the postseason for the double-digit underdog Panthers.

Carolina climbed into playoff contention midseason largely behind Dowdle, who put up record numbers over a four-game span. But since the Panthers ran it a season-high 40 times for 164 yards in a 31-28 upset win over the Rams on Nov. 30, the run game has been on a steady decline. That correlates with three losses in their last four games.

Dowdle hasn't eclipsed 60 yards rushing in the last eight games, and backup Chuba Hubbard has struggled to find his mojo as well after running for nearly 1,200 yards and 10 touchdowns a year ago.

Since his arrival in 2024, Carolina coach Dave Canales has stressed the importance of being able to run the ball late in the season.

Yet when the Panthers needed to do it the most against Tampa Bay in Week 18 — a game which would've allowed them to clinch the outright division title with a win — they managed a season-low 19 yards on 10 carries on a soggy track at Raymond James Stadium.

Los Angeles Rams (12-5)
at Carolina Panthers (8-9)
Wild-Card round
AFN-Sports
10:30 p.m. Saturday CET
6:30 a.m. Sunday JKT

Canales said it will take a "full group effort" to turn things around this week.

"Starts with me and the coaching staff, making sure that we have the right plan together for our guys," Canales said. "And then it starts up front with the O-line, the blocking, the combos, making sure we're moving guys off the spot to get the play started.

"And then once the backs have the ball, just looking for that violent style of play that we saw that we know they can, and return to that and make sure we're getting efficient runs on a consistent basis," he added.

In recent weeks, opposing defenses have been able to blow up some plays with run blitzes, getting hands on Dowdle and Hubbard before they've had a chance to pick up a head of steam.

"We cannot let people run through the line of scrimmage. Safeties, linebackers cannot run through the line of scrimmage," Canales said. "Our combination blocks have to be excellent. We've got to make sure it's covered up so that the backs can press the line of scrimmage and make decisions from there."

Carolina guard Austin Corbett hinted that teams have been playing the Panthers differently since that Los Angeles win, but did not elaborate.

"Defenses do a great job of looking at film and changing what they do," Corbett said. "At the same time (during the last half of the season), Bryce has been able to sling it and is throwing touchdowns. So it's just a matter of taking what is given to you."

With the run game flowing, Young had his most productive game of the year against the Rams.

The No. 1 pick in the 2023 draft completed 15 of 20 passes for 206 yards and three touchdowns to finish with a 147.1 QB rating, the second highest in the franchise's 31-year history. So Carolina was able to strike a solid balance of run and pass in what amounted to its best offensive game.

The Panthers may get some help on the O-line this week against the league's 12th-ranked run defense.

Robert Hunt, who inked a five-year, $100 million contract last season, could return to action this week if he's cleared by the medical staff. Hunt hasn't played since tearing his triceps in Week 2, but when healthy is considered the team's best run blocker.

Bears seek better start in opener vs. Packers

BY JAY COHEN
Associated Press

LAKE FOREST, Ill. — The Chicago Bears trailed at halftime in four of their last five regular-season games. They haven't scored on their first offensive drive since Week 9 at Cincinnati.

That's a big concern for the NFC North champions going into the franchise's first playoff appearance since the 2020 season.

"There's a process I believe in in terms of how we prepare these guys," Chicago coach Ben Johnson said Tuesday. "I think we've got a lot of great professionals, and I think any time that you bring attention to something, that they look to fix it. That's what we're doing here this week."

Time is of the essence, too, with the Green Bay Packers coming to Soldier Field on Saturday night for the opening weekend of the NFL playoffs.

The Bears scored a total of three points in the first half against Green Bay this season. The Packers closed out a 28-21 win Dec. 7, but Caleb Williams rallied Chicago to a dramatic 22-16 victory in the second meeting Dec. 20.

The Bears have six wins this season when trailing in the final two minutes, but they know that isn't exactly a reliable formula — especially this time of year.

"We certainly don't want to have to lean into that each and every week," Johnson said. "We'd like to start off a little bit faster and make it more of a complete game for 60 minutes."

Chicago (11-6) fell way short of a complete game Sunday. Playing for postseason positioning, the Bears flopped against a Detroit Lions team that had dropped out of contention with a three-game slide.

Chicago managed only four first downs and 69 yards in the first half. The Bears trailed 16-0 before Williams threw two touchdown passes in the fourth quarter. But Detroit escaped with a 19-16 win on Jake Bates' 42-yard field goal as time expired.

"We just came out flat. We don't have time for that anymore," Williams said. "We'll make sure we don't. If that starts with me, that starts with me. We'll make sure that doesn't happen. ... That's the mindset: Go out there, start fast. We'll make sure of it."

Green Bay Packers (9-7-1)
at Chicago Bears (11-6)
Wild-Card round
AFN-Sports
2 a.m. Sunday CET
10 a.m. Sunday JKT

In Week 17, Williams passed for two touchdowns in the first half at San Francisco. But the defense struggled against Brock Purdy and Chicago trailed 28-21 at halftime of a wild 42-38 loss to the 49ers.

Another shaky start on Saturday night, and the Bears will be in a tough spot in the NFL's longest-running rivalry.

"It's going to be about who executes and who is on their details, who's on their fundamentals," tight end Cole Kmet said. "That is what is going to win out at the end of the day. We have to be on top of that stuff. Obviously it's going to be an electric atmosphere and we'll use that to our advantage. But we have to be on those details."

Chicago could get some reinforcements for its postseason opener. Cornerback Kyler Gordon has been cleared for practice after being sidelined by a groin injury. Wide receiver Rome Odunze could also return after missing the final five regular-season games with a foot injury.

"We have a great opportunity to go on a run," safety Kevin Byard said, "and it's all about putting the best things we can do as far as film study, recovery, everything and just come in with a great attitude because at the end of the day, we have a special opportunity in front of us and it starts with the Green Bay game."



NAM Y. HUH/AP

Bears tight end Colston Loveland, right, is tackled by Detroit Lions safety Jalen Mills during the first half in Chicago on Jan. 4.

NFL PLAYOFFS

Shanahan faces Eagles DC Fangio after trying to hire him for years

By Josh Dubow
Associated Press

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — When Kyle Shanahan took over as coach of the San Francisco 49ers in 2017, one of his first targets for defensive coordinator was Vic Fangio, only to be turned down when he made the request to the Chicago Bears.

When Shanahan was preparing for DeMeco Ryans to leave for a head coaching job after the 2022 season, he once again hoped to get Fangio as a replacement only to miss out when he signed with Miami before the job became open.

When the defensive coordinator job opened again the next year, Fangio opted to stay closer to home and take the same job with the Philadelphia Eagles.

Now instead of having Fangio on his side, Shanahan will have to figure out how to beat his defense when the 49ers (12-5) visit the Eagles (11-6) in a wild-card game on Sunday.


Fangio

"I've tried all the times that there's been an opportunity," Shanahan said Wednesday. "He's always been with someone else when that's happened. I mean, I tried really hard in '17 when we first came here and I tried like two other times on separate occasions. So Vic's a guy that I've always respected, gone against a number of times before I became a head coach, so that's why I respect him so much and through the process been able to become friends with him."

The matchup between Shanahan's offense and Fangio's defense will be one of the most intriguing of wild-card weekend as the two have been among the most influential coaches in the NFL.

Several teams throughout the league have searched for disciples of the Shanahan scheme to run their offenses, while several are running versions of a defense that Fangio has perfected.

San Francisco 49ers (12-5)
at Philadelphia Eagles (11-6)
Wild-Card round
AFN-Sports
10:30 p.m. Sunday CET
6:30 a.m. Monday JKT

The Shanahan offense has evolved from the one Kyle's father, Mike, used to win back-to-back Super Bowls with Denver in the 1997-98 seasons, relying heavily on the outside running game with a heavy use of motion and play-action.

Fangio has been one of the top defensive minds in the NFL since returning to the pros as Jim Harbaugh's defensive coordinator in 2011. He relies heavily on schemes with two deep safeties and thrives by disguising coverages and limiting explosive plays.

Fangio helped Philadelphia win the Super Bowl last year in his first season with the Eagles and has them in position for another possible playoff run.

"Vic schematically, he has always been the best to me," Shanahan said. "As good as anyone there is. Has a very sound scheme that he doesn't need to change up very much. It just naturally changes with how he does his coverages, how he does his fronts, the personnel groupings he does. He's very good at getting a beat on what you're trying to do and making you adjust."


Godofredo A. Vásquez/AP

San Francisco 49ers head coach Kyle Shanahan answers questions after a loss to the Seattle Seahawks in Santa Clara, Calif., on Jan. 3.


Gene J. Puskar/AP

Bills quarterback Josh Allen scores a touchdown during the second half against the Philadelphia Eagles on Dec. 28 in Buffalo, N.Y. The Bills are currently 0-5 on the road and go to Jacksonville to start the playoffs.

Allen tackles footwork as Bills prepare to face Jags

By John Wawrow
Associated Press

ORCHARD PARK, N.Y. — Josh Allen's sore right foot feels better, and the Bills quarterback's mind is refreshed as Buffalo prepares to open the playoffs on the road for the first time in six years.

With the exception of a game-opening handoff in a regular season-ending 35-8 win over the Jets on Sunday to extend his starting streak to 135 games, Allen got the weekend off to rest and spend time poring over video to assess his season.

What stood out most, Allen said upon returning to practice Wednesday, were the plays he missed.

"You're sitting there like, 'God, I stink.' It's like, 'What am I thinking here? What am I doing?'" he said with a laugh.

Allen was hardly that bad.

The eighth-year starter and reigning MVP finished second among quarterbacks with 39 touchdowns (25 passing, 14 rushing) and led five fourth-quarter comebacks — two when trailing by double digits. At 29, he became the NFL's first player to have a hand in 300 touchdowns before turning 30.

Nevertheless, Allen's self-scouting was beneficial in showing areas where the perfectionist QB can improve ahead of the playoffs. The Bills (12-5) visit the AFC South champion Jaguars (13-4) in a wild-card game Sunday.

Buffalo Bills (12-5)
at Jacksonville Jaguars (13-4)
Wild-Card round
AFN-Sports
7 p.m. Sunday CET
3 a.m. Monday JKT

For Allen, there's footwork to address. He saw times where he forced passes instead of checking it down to an open receiver. And he took a career-high 40 sacks, reminding him of the benefits of throwing the ball away.

Allen practiced fully for the first time since hurting his right foot in a 23-20 win at Cleveland on Dec. 21. He'll be facing a Jacksonville defense that ranked first against the run and finished second in the NFL with 22 interceptions.

"Every team that we're playing here on out is a good team and it's no different this week," Allen said. "I have this extra emphasis on points are at a premium in the playoffs and just trying to do everything I can to give us points."

There's plenty on the line for Allen and a Buffalo team has fallen short in the playoffs over the past six years.

Allen has a 7-6 postseason record and has advanced to the AFC championship game twice, both losses to the Chiefs. The Bills are also 0-5 on the road in seven playoff appearances since coach Sean McDermott took over, starting with a 10-3 loss at Jacksonville in the 2017 wild-card round, a year before Allen's arrival.

Not including two neutral-site Super Bowl losses, Buffalo has lost eight straight road playoff games since winning at the Dolphins in the 1992 AFC championship game. That skid is the NFL's second-longest behind the Lions, who have dropped 12 straight postseason road games.

"We're not focused on what's happened in the past," Allen said. "Our job is to play the Jacksonville Jaguars at 1 o'clock on Sunday, and that's what we're going to do."

In 13 playoff games, Allen has averaged 258 yards passing, combined for 33 touchdowns (25 passing, seven rushing and one receiving) and turned the ball over six times, with four interceptions and two lost fumbles.

"This is how he is every year at this time of year. He's very dialed in, very focused," McDermott said.

It was coordinator Joe Brady's idea to have Allen spend last week studying video.

"I thought it was something to put on his radar, just to refresh some things," Brady said.

"I thought he did an outstanding job of being honest and truthful," he added. "I think it helped both physically and mentally."

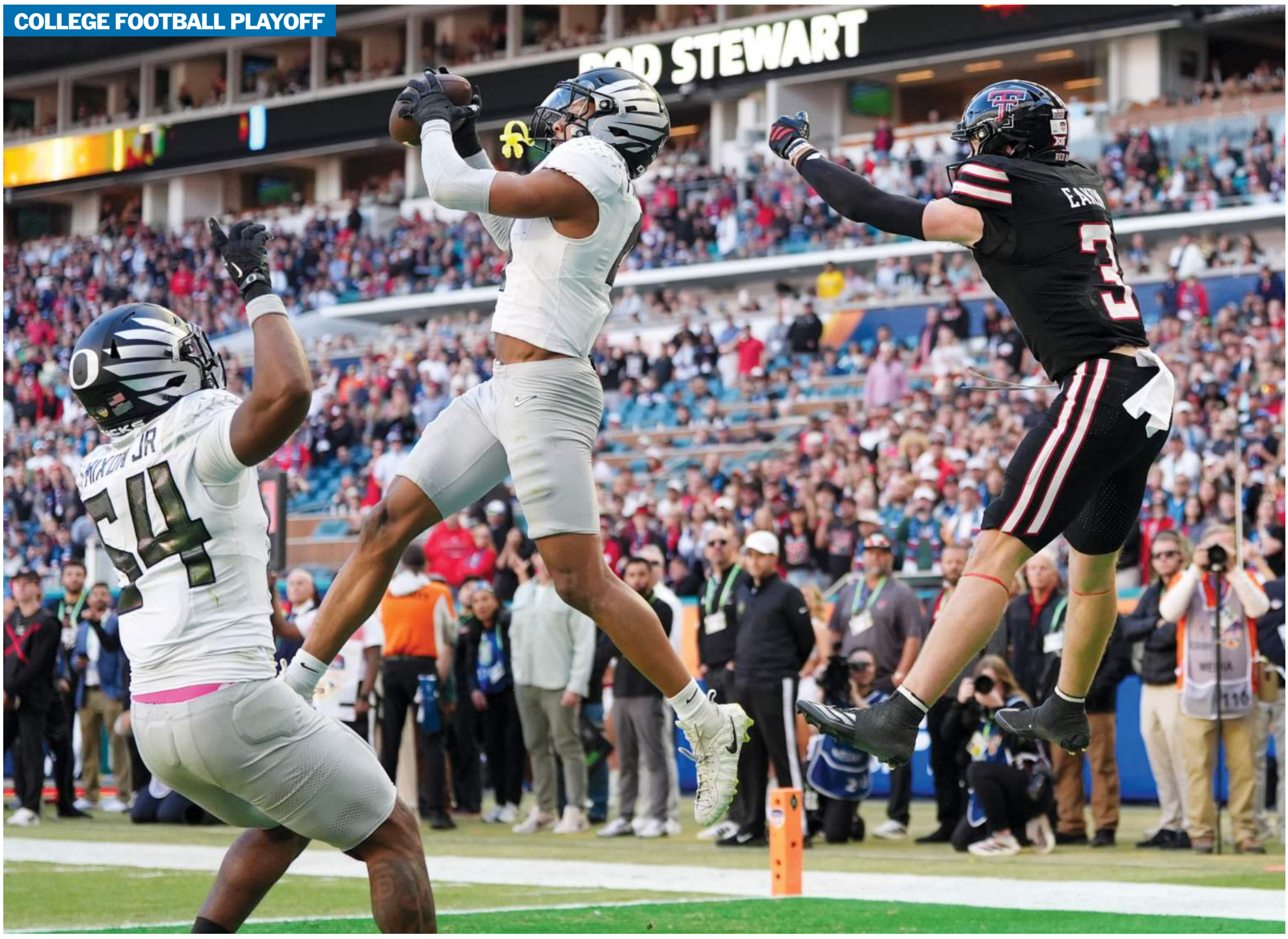
SPORTS



Hawks trade Young

All-Star guard reportedly going to Wizards ›› NBA, Page 43

COLLEGE FOOTBALL PLAYOFF



REBECCA BLACKWELL/AP

Oregon defensive back Brandon Finney Jr. intercepts a pass intended for Texas Tech wide receiver Coy Eakin during the second half of the Orange Bowl in Miami Gardens, Fla.

Big swagger from Big Ten

Indiana, Oregon turn Peach Bowl into celebration of conference's dominance

BY CHARLES ODUM
Associated Press

ATLANTA — The Big Ten is marching into the heart of Southern football with a proud swagger, daring any conference to challenge its claim as the power to beat in the College Football Playoff.

Undefeated No. 1 Indiana (14-0, CFP No. 1 seed) and No. 5 Oregon (13-1, CFP No. 5) have turned the CFP semifinal at Friday night's Peach Bowl into a Big Ten celebration.

Atlanta is home to the Atlantic Coast Conference's Georgia Tech, and Mercedes-Benz Stadium is the annual site of the Southeastern Conference championship game. Those leagues were represented in Thursday night's first CFP semifinal between Miami and Mississippi in the Fiesta Bowl.

The Peach Bowl winner might be favored in the national championship game Jan. 19 as the Big Ten looks for its third straight title, following Ohio State and Michigan the last two seasons.

Oregon coach Dan Lanning, the former Georgia defensive coordinator who also coached at Alabama and Arizona State, among other schools, said the Big Ten has made a strong claim to national supremacy that will be on display in the semifinal game. One of the Peach Bowl teams will have an opportunity to give the conference its third different national champion in three years.

"I've been a part of the SEC, just like coach (Curt) Cignetti has," Lanning said of the Indiana coach, who is also a former Crimson Tide assistant. "I've been a part of the old Pac-12. I've been a part of a bunch of different conferences, and it's hard to argue that anybody is doing it better right now than the Big Ten. There's some quality from top to bottom."

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McDaniel out after 4 seasons with Dolphins ›› NFL, Page 45

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