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DANIEL KIMMELMAN/U.S. Navy

U.S. Navy sailors prepare to taxi an EA-18G Growler on the flight deck of Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln on Wednesday. The Abraham Lincoln Carrier Strike Group is underway conducting routine operations in the U.S. 7th Fleet area of operations.

Fresh threats in the Mideast

2 Iranian-backed militias in Iraq, Yemen respond as US carrier heads toward Iran

By JON GAMBRELL
Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Two Iranian-backed militias in the Mideast are signaling their willingness to launch new attacks, likely trying to back Iran on Monday as it worried about an approaching U.S. aircraft carrier after President Donald Trump threatened military action over its crackdown on nationwide protests.

Yemen's Iranian-backed Houthi rebels signaled a willingness to resume attacks on shipping in the Red Sea. That came just after Iraq's Kataib Hezbollah paramilitary group, long supported by Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard, issued a direct threat late Sunday toward any attack targeting Iran, warning a "total war" in the region would be a result.

However, both the Houthis and

Kataib Hezbollah sat out from Israel's 12-day war on Iran in June that saw the United States bomb Iranian nuclear sites. The hesitancy to get involved shows the disarray still affecting Iran's self-described "Axis of Resistance" after facing attacks from Israel during its war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

A short video by the Houthis included images of a ship on fire, with the caption: "Soon." It later

aired footage Monday from its January 2024 attack in the Gulf of Aden on the Marshall Islands-flagged tanker Marlin Luanda, one of the over 100 ships attacked as part of a campaign the Houthis said pressured Israel over its war against Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

The Houthis halted their fire after a ceasefire in the conflict, though they've repeatedly warned

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Dems vow no DHS funding over shooting in Minnesota

By KEVIN FREKING
AND MARY CLARE JALONICK
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Democratic senators are vowing to oppose a funding bill for the Department of Homeland Security following the shooting death of a 37-year-old Minnesota man, a stand that increases the prospect of a partial government shutdown by the end of the week.

Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer, in a social media post hours after the Saturday shooting, said that what is happening in Minnesota is "appalling" and that Democrats "will not provide the votes to proceed to the appropriations bill if the DHS funding bill is included."

Six of the 12 annual spending bills for the current budget year have been signed into law by President Donald Trump. Six more are awaiting action in the Senate, despite a revolt from House Democrats and mounting calls for Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem's impeachment.

If senators fail to act by midnight Friday, funding for Homeland Security and the other agencies covered under the six bills will lapse.

"Democrats sought common sense reforms in the Department of Homeland Security spending bill, but because of Republicans'

SEE FUNDS ON PAGE 9

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BUSINESS/WEATHER

Meta pauses teen access to AI characters

Associated Press

Meta is halting teens' access to artificial intelligence characters, at least temporarily, the company said in a blog post Friday.

Meta Platforms Inc., which owns Instagram and WhatsApp, said that starting in the "coming weeks," teens will no longer be able to access AI characters "until the updated experience is ready"

This applies to anyone who gave Meta a birthday that makes them a minor, as well as "people who



claim to be adults but who we suspect are teens based on our age prediction technology."

The move comes the week before Meta — along with TikTok and Google's YouTube — is scheduled to stand trial in Los Angeles over its apps' harms to children.

Teens will still be able to access Meta's AI assistant, just not the

characters.

Other companies have also banned teens from AI chatbots amid growing concerns about the effects of artificial intelligence conversations on children.

Character.AI announced its ban last fall.

That company is facing several lawsuits over child safety, including by the mother of a teenager who says the company's chatbots pushed her teenage son to kill himself.

EXCHANGE RATES

Military rates			
Euro costs (Jan. 27)	0.83	Switzerland (Franc)	0.7755
British pound (Jan. 27)	\$1.32	Thailand (Baht)	31.058
Japanese yen (Jan. 27)	154.00	Turkey (NewLira)	43.3722
South Korean won (Jan. 27)	1408.00		
Commercial rates			
Bahrain (Dinar)	0.3744	(Military exchange rates are those available to customers at military banking facilities in the country of issuance for Japan, South Korea, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. For nonlocal currency exchange rates (i.e., purchasing British pounds in Germany), check with your local military banking facility. Commercial rates are interbank rates provided for reference when buying currency. All figures are foreign currencies to one dollar, except for the British pound, which is represented in dollars-to-pound, and the euro, which is dollars-to-euro.) INTEREST RATES	
Britain (Pound)	1.3689		
Canada (Dollar)	1.3687		
China (Yuan)	6.9726		
Denmark (Krone)	6.2870		
Egypt (Pound)	47.0599		
Euro	0.8418		
Hong Kong (Dollar)	7.7974		
Hungary (Forint)	320.963		
Israel (Shekel)	3.1196		
Japan (Yen)	153.727		
Kuwait (Dinar)	0.3062		
Norway (Krone)	9.7653	Prime rate	6.75
Philippines (Peso)	59.029	Interest Rates Discount rate	3.75
Poland (Zloty)	3.5373	Federal funds market rate	3.62
Saudi Arabia (Riyal)	3.7457	3-month bill	3.67
Singapore (Dollar)	1.2684	30-year bond	4.83
South Korea (Won)	1439.34		

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MILITARY

Agency established to deal with PCS moves

Personal Property Activity will report directly to Defense Secretary Hegseth

By MATTHEW ADAMS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon is turning the permanent change of station task force into a permanent, joint activity to reform how the department manages moves, the secretary of defense announced Friday.

“It will be a permanent solu-

tion for all service members who move,” Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said in a video posted on X. “We know moving is difficult for everyone involved. Our warfighters deserve the kind of predictability, accountability and respect during that process [that] brings the stress down and makes it something they can fo-

cus on their job.”

The Personal Property Activity, or PPA, will be based at Scott Air Force Base, Ill., and will report directly to Hegseth. The PPA will stand up officially on May 1. Before the formation of the task force, permanent change of station was managed through U.S. Transportation Command.

Hegseth in May 2025 ordered the formation of a Pentagon task force to improve the workflow behind permanent change of station moves under the Global

Household Goods Contract, or GHC.

Moves under the contract began with a slow rollout more than a year ago but ramped up in earnest in 2025.

GHC was created because of service member complaints over the performance of the legacy system. But GHC has been plagued by late pickups and deliveries, and several U.S. senators commenced inquiries last spring into its shortcomings.

Army Maj. Gen. Lance Curtis,

who has led the task force since June 2025, has been selected as the PPA’s first commander.

More than half of spouses are unhappy with military life, continuing a downward trend in recent years related to family frustrations over quality-of-life issues such as frequent moves and employment difficulties, according to a Defense Department survey released May 16 to Congress.

“Our warriors deserve the best, and that’s what this reform will deliver,” Hegseth said.

Music star Morgan continues his work on anti-suicide initiative

By ALEXANDER BANERJEE
Stars and Stripes

Country music star and Army Reserve soldier Craig Morgan, 61, is seeing his success in his effort to balance a successful civilian career with military service as he uses his years of experience to contribute to an anti-suicide program with the dozens of Army bands.

Morgan was promoted to the rank of Chief Warrant Officer 2 in a ceremony officiated by Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth at the Pentagon on Jan. 16, more than two years after the star resumed his military career.

usual in the Reserve, the musician said, or among the warrant officer community. Warrant officers, Morgan said, “are the experts in their field, regardless of the field.”

In his case, that field is music: Morgan serves with the 313th Army Band at Redstone Arsenal, Ala., and contributes to a suicide prevention program that uses music to speak to soldiers. The Prevention Music Initiative ensures soldiers’ well-being and also keeps them from being non-deployable, according to Morgan, who emphasized that everyone in the chain of command is committed to taking care of soldiers.

“It’s a soldier-led initiative,” Morgan said. “We’re recording all of the music with soldiers, with military or Army engineers, Army band members, Army vocalists.”

Morgan said he thinks the project “is one of the most critical things we’ve ever done in the music world, especially in the military.” He contributes by using his civilian contacts in the industry to help promote the music to a larger audience.

The musician was careful to note that he is not simply back in service because of his musical career but because he is physically fit.

“I hear a lot of people say, ‘Oh, this guy’s too old,’ ” Morgan acknowledged, adding, “Come work out with me. Come participate.



ALEXANDER KUBITZA/U.S. Navy

Country music star and Army Reserve soldier Craig Morgan, left, was promoted to the rank of Chief Warrant Officer 2 in a ceremony officiated by Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth at the Pentagon on Jan. 16.

Don’t sit on the bench and talk about me.”

Similarly, Morgan said he’s worked with older personnel who “have a lineage of expertise that they bring to the table that the Army should not get rid of,” as long as they remain physically and mentally fit. No one, regardless of age, should be able to stay in the military if they cannot meet fitness standards, he stressed.

Asked how often service members want to know how he transitioned into a music career, Mor-

gan responded, “every day.”

His advice to them is the same advice he gives to civilians: consult professionals, not simply the opinion of family and friends for validation.

Morgan also said he reminds those serving to appreciate the skills they learn in the military, such as good communication skills.

“I would put any soldier, E4 and below, with four years in service against any college graduate with four years of college, and I prom-

ise you they will communicate better. That soldier will,” he said.

As for how he manages his time — between his Army service, maintaining a successful music career, and more recently writing a memoir — Morgan said he put together a great team. Civilians may take the notion for granted or even dismiss it, but Morgan noted that in the military, teamwork is essential.

In both his revived military career and in his civilian career, he said, “I go to the experts.”

Navy commodore of First Naval Construction Regiment relieved of duties

Stars and Stripes

The Navy has relieved the commodore of the First Naval Construction Regiment of his duties, the service said Friday.

Capt. Douglas Whimpey, a Navy reservist, was relieved “due to loss of confidence in his ability to command.”

The U.S. military routinely cites only a vague “loss of confidence” when removing



Whimpey

commanders and other leaders from authority positions.

The regiment is headquartered in Port Huemene, Calif.

Whimpey was relieved of command by Capt. Angel Santiago, commander of

Naval Construction Group 1.

“Navy leaders are expected to uphold the highest standards of responsibility, reliability and leadership personally and professionally, and the Navy holds them accountable when they fall short of those standards,” the Navy said in a statement.

Capt. Steven Sherman has assumed the duties of commodore of the First Naval Con-

struction Regiment.

Whimpey, who took over command in February 2023, has been temporarily reassigned to the staff at NCG-1.

Naval Construction Regiments provide a wide range of military construction capabilities to include the building and repair of roads, bridges, bunkers, airfields, expeditionary medical facilities and logistics bases.

MILITARY

Military hospitals make quality care list

BY MARC CASTANEDA
Stars and Stripes

Twelve hospitals and one clinic on U.S. military bases worldwide have earned top designations from The Leapfrog Group, a non-profit organization that evaluates health care quality on behalf of consumers and businesses.

All told, 156 medical facilities were named Top Hospitals in 2025, Leapfrog announced last month. The 13 military facilities recognized represent a record number for the annual list, according to a Dec. 18 news release from the Defense Health Agency.

A Leapfrog designation “says to other facilities that we worked hard to meet standards to prevent errors, infections or accidents to our patients,” said Air Force Maj. Katerina Loeffler, officer in charge of the 51st Medical Group’s operating room at Osan Air Base, South Korea.



MARC CASTANEDA/Stars and Stripes

The 374th Medical Group at Yokota Air Base, Japan, is one of 13 military medical facilities recently named top health providers by The Leapfrog Group.

“So, we’re meeting a higher level of patient care by putting in effort to attain” Leapfrog status, Loeffler said in a video posted Wednesday on the base’s Face-

book page. Of the 12 military hospitals recognized, two are in South Korea, two are in Italy and one is in Japan. The remaining hospitals are

across the United States, from Alaska to California to South Carolina. Naval Health Clinic Cherry Point in North Carolina was named a Top Ambulatory Surgery Center.

All but two military hospitals earned recognition in the general category. Bayne-Jones Army Community Hospital at Fort Polk, La., and Gen. Leonard Wood Army Community Hospital at Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., were designated Rural Top Hospitals.

Fewer than 6% of hospitals nationwide receive Top Hospital status each year, according to DHA’s release.

In Europe, U.S. Naval Hospital Naples, Italy, and U.S. Naval Hospital Sigonella, Sicily, earned Top Hospital designations. In the Indo-Pacific, the 374th Medical Group at Yokota Air Base, Japan, and Brian D. Allgood Army Community Hospital at Camp Hum-

phreys, South Korea, also made the list.

“What really sets our hospital apart is that quality care comes first and the Leapfrog score follows,” said U.S. Army Col. Chad Black, director of the Allgood hospital and commander of the 549th Hospital Center and Medical Department Activity — Korea.

“From double checking medications to careful prep for surgery and childbirth, our teams focus on doing the right thing for patients every time — and Leapfrog simply reflects that,” Black said Friday in an email from hospital spokeswoman Jean Han.

Leapfrog evaluates hospitals using safety and quality measures that include medication safety, maternity care and infection prevention. Hospitals must earn “A” grades on the Leapfrog Hospital Safety Grade to qualify for Top Hospital status.

Study urges offense to counter Russia, China in Arctic

BY JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

The United States and its allies in Europe and the Pacific should join forces to build a joint Arctic fighting concept aimed at countering the growing Russia-China alliance in the High North, a new think tank report contends.

Russia has spent the past decade adding firepower in the Arctic with assistance from China, but allies aren’t keeping pace, the Hudson Institute said in a study released this week that calls for a new approach to close security gaps.

“As strategic competition heats up, the US alliance system may be unprepared to credibly counter military challenges from Moscow and Beijing,” the report said. “One concern is that Russia is seeking to expand its submarine operations to maintain credible targeting of the US homeland with submarine-launched nuclear weapons.”

Over the past several years, the region has steadily become more of a focal point for the United States and its two main rivals, Russia and China. As sea ice melts, new sea lanes are opening in the area, which also is home to vast amounts of valuable natural resources.

While the United States is the only NATO country with strategic interests that span the entire Arctic, from the Barents Sea to the Bering Sea, Washington needs allies to help secure those interests, the report said.

The strategy calls for integration of U.S. and allied naval warfare operations across the Arctic and into the Baltics and northern Pacific Ocean.



JUSTIN MORELLI/U.S. Army

U.S. soldiers participate in a 2025 exercise at Donnelly Training Area, Alaska. The U.S. and its allies should join forces to counter Russian and Chinese activity in the Arctic region, according to a new Hudson Institute report.

“This effort would counter Russian and Russian-Chinese operational plans by coupling the Arctic with the two theaters,” according to the report, which noted that northern European allies along with Canada, Japan and South Korea would need to coordinate their efforts.

The concept, which calls for allies to invest in a wide range of new manned and unmanned systems to increase the alliance’s

reach, comes at a tense time in the High North and in NATO itself.

In recent weeks, the United States has been at odds with several allies over President Donald Trump’s push to take control of Greenland, a semiautonomous territory of fellow NATO member Denmark.

Leaders in Denmark and other key NATO countries — such as France, the U.K. and Germany — have opposed Trump’s insistence

that Greenland be transferred to American control.

Others have criticized the White House for not ruling out the use of force as an option for taking the territory.

But at the World Economic Forum annual gathering in Davos, Switzerland, last week, the strain on relations started to show signs of easing, as Trump ruled out the use of military force to annex the strategic island.

Trump also announced that he and NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte were working on an agreement related to Greenland that would be supported across the alliance.

While the details remain unknown, the new developments could eventually provide an opportunity for the U.S. and other allies to step up more in the Arctic. For Russia, the High North has been a major factor in its military planning over the past decade. Moscow and Beijing also are building an extensive seabed-to-space sensor network that will challenge the ability of U.S. and allied submarines to remain undetected in the area, the report said.

“Instead of reacting to Russian and Chinese challenges, NATO allies and their partners need a concept of operations that creates security dilemmas for Moscow and Beijing and makes the costs of undertaking military operations too high,” the report said. “Such a concept should force Russia and China to go on the defensive.”

One way to accomplish that is to have a forward-based posture closer to Russian bases of operation with assets capable of carrying out strikes, the report said, arguing that the current defensive approach hasn’t worked.

More thorough integration with allies will help deter Russia and China from trying to expand their military operations in the High North, according to the report.

In addition, doing so will “demonstrate that the US and its allies can operate across the Arctic in the event of a two-front war encompassing several theaters,” the report said.

MILITARY



WYATT OLSON/Stars and Stripes

The parking lot for Favreau Hall enlisted barracks on Fort Shafter, Hawaii, is filled to capacity Thursday.

Soldiers asked to share rooms as Army division grows in Hawaii

By Wyatt Olson
Stars and Stripes

FORT SHAFTER, Hawaii — Army Garrison Hawaii is doubling up soldiers in barracks rooms on Oahu to deal with the influx of personnel transferring to the 25th Infantry Division as part of an Army transformation.

With a growing number of complaints and queries by soldiers affected by the living-space crunch, leaders of the garrison and the division hosted a town hall meeting Tuesday afternoon at Schofield Barracks to detail steps being taken to ease the problem.

The doubling up has led to a dearth of barracks parking, overflowing dumpsters and insufficient laundry facilities, as well as privacy and security concerns.

Army regulations dictate the minimum square footage single soldiers must have in barracks, but the garrison obtained a 15-month exception to that policy to temporarily house more soldiers together in barracks on Schofield, Wheeler Army Airfield and Fort Shafter, garrison commander Col. Rachel Sullivan said.

“I would love to be able to tell you that 15 months from now we won’t have to have any soldiers doubled up in our barracks, but the reality of the situation is we

likely will,” she said.

“We have a growing mission,” Sullivan said. “Right now, we are tracking more than 690 soldiers that are inbound over and above our outbounds in the next 120 days. We’ll still have many of those soldiers over and above our number of barracks rooms even 15 months from now.”

The 25th ID’s assigned strength has grown over the past six months in part because of the Army’s modernization effort, Transformation in Contact, division commander Maj. Gen. James Bartholomees told the town hall audience.

The initiative is designed to shorten the gap between weapons and tech innovation and their ultimate use on the battlefield.

“We are leading the Army in a lot of transformation, particularly in our artillery, our sustainment and our aviation, upcoming,” Bartholomees said.

Other enabling units have grown in tandem, he added.

“We’ve gone beyond our inventory of single-soldier housing,” Bartholomees said.

The division is also at “max capacity” in authorizing those soldiers to seek housing outside military installations, he said.

More than 1,000 soldiers have

been given so-called statements of non-availability that authorize them to live on the local economy, Sullivan said. But off-base housing is complicated by both the high cost and shortage of housing on Oahu, she said.

A specialist’s \$2,600 monthly basic housing allowance is not, on average, sufficient to cover the cost of rent and utilities on Oahu, Sullivan said.

“Affordable housing is one of the greatest concerns of the entire state of Hawaii,” she said. “We are under immense pressure from the local leaders here, the local community leaders across the state, [and] state, city and federal government here, to house as many of our soldiers and families on the installation as possible.”

The garrison is hoping to ease some of the near-term pain by providing beds and furniture that are “more conducive for those of you who are having to share rooms,” Sullivan said.

Some of the beds for newly arriving roommates now are little more than cots used for field exercises, she said.

The garrison is also pressing for early completion of ongoing renovations of two barracks, one on Schofield and a second on the adjoining Wheeler.

Navy probes death of officer in Djibouti

By John Vandiver
Stars and Stripes

An investigation is being conducted into the weekend death of a Navy officer deployed to the U.S. military’s hub in the east African country of Djibouti, service officials said Friday.

Lt. Erin W. Crider was assigned

to Camp Lemonnier, Navy spokesperson Lt. Cmdr. Jason Tross said in a statement. No further information was provided.

A Navy officer deployed to the U.S. military’s hub in the east African country of Djibouti died Sunday in an incident not related to combat, officials said Friday.

Crider’s remains arrived Thursday at Dover Air Force Base, Del.

“Our thoughts and prayers are with the service member’s loved ones,” Tross said. “Grief counseling service and support are available through the chain of command, mental health providers and chaplains,”

Inmate sentence extended for escape attempt

By Rose L. Thayer
Stars and Stripes

A soldier confined at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., added nine months to his prison time after he and another inmate attempted to escape the facility and ended up tangled in the barbed wire fencing.

Zachary Harader and Mason Wollersheim made their escape attempt April 29 from the Midwest Joint Regional Correctional Facility, and both were apprehended by corrections personnel, said Army spokeswoman Heather J. Hagan.

Harader, who was about one year into a 33-month sentence for domestic violence at the time of the escape attempt, pleaded guilty Jan. 12 to the charge of attempted escape from post-trial confinement. Military Judge Col. Frederic Gallun accepted the plea.

Harader was not convicted of a second charge of conspiracy to escape confinement, according to the Army’s court docket.

When he was originally convicted in April 2024, Harader was a

specialist assigned to Vilseck, Germany. He pleaded guilty to assaulting his spouse two years prior, according to court records.

Wollersheim sustained injuries from the concertina wire at the top of the perimeter fence and charges have not yet been referred to a court-martial, Hagan said. A preliminary hearing was held in his case in November for charges of attempted escapes, conspiracy, escape from custody and assault, the docket said.

Wollersheim, then a staff sergeant assigned to 10th Special Forces Group, was convicted by a jury at Fort Carson, Colo., roughly three months before the attempted escape, according to Army court records. The jury found him guilty of broadcasting an indecent recording, attempted larceny, wire fraud and larceny, and he was sentenced to 28 months in prison.

His theft involved stealing from UPS and attempting to steal from Pinnacle Assurance, State Farm and USAA.

S. Korea eyes technology to reduce firearms accidents

By Yoojin Lee
Stars and Stripes

To reduce accidents and suicides in the ranks, a special civil-military advisory committee has recommended South Korea’s military adopt wireless technology to tag and track its firearms.

A civil-military joint special advisory committee recommended the rapid introduction of a radio frequency identification system, or RFID, to reduce gun-related accidents in the armed forces, according to a Ministry of National Defense release Wednesday.

The RFID system would record who checks out a firearm and track its location while in use or storage, the release said.

The committee focused its discussions on preventing suicides and accidents — the leading cause of death in South Korea’s military — by strengthening resilience and applying science and technology, according to the release.

In 2023, 68 of the 79 deaths in South Korea’s military were attributed to suicide, according to data published by the Ministry of Data and Statistics and attributed to the defense ministry.

Over the 10-year period beginning in 2014, suicides accounted for 611 of the 853 deaths recorded in the South Korean military, the data show. That represents nearly 72% of all accidental other non-combat deaths during that period.

RFID technology uses a digital tag that emits a wireless signal to identify and track objects, according to the Central Radio Management Service’s website. The technology is widely used in retail, logistics and supply chain management to track inventory.

RFID readers can detect signals ranging from a few inches to about 200 feet, according to a manufacturer of RFID devices.

The defense ministry said rapid adoption of RFID technology could help reduce firearm-related accidents by improving accountability and oversight.

The committee also recommended additional suicide prevention measures, including establishing an emergency medical support system, strengthening accident response protocols and ensuring respectful treatment of service members who die while on duty, the release said.

MILITARY

China goes retro with its submarine design

BY GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

China has rapidly built up its submarine fleet by making a technological U-turn to produce boats the U.S. hasn't built in more than 65 years.

More than half of the estimated 66 submarines operated by the Chinese navy are conventionally powered. The fleet includes more than 20 newer Yuan-class diesel-electric boats.

The U.S. Navy's last diesel-powered submarine was the USS Blueback, a Barbel-class submarine commissioned in 1959 and retired in 1990.

The Pentagon forecasts that China will have more than 75 submarines by 2030. The United States currently has 69 submarines, all nuclear-powered, according to the Naval Vessel Register.

The shorter construction time of the conventional submarines has allowed China to pull close to U.S. numbers and cover its strategic goals in Asia, according to a 2025 report by the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service.

"The force will likely continue for some time to consist mostly of SSs," the report said, using the abbreviation for non-nuclear-powered submarines.

China's Yuan-class submarines are 254-foot-long boats with a displacement of 3,600 tons that can move at 20 knots submerged. They carry up to 65 crew members. The boat has six torpedo tubes and can launch anti-ship missiles. In comparison, the main variant of the U.S. Navy's latest Virginia-class submarine is 377 feet long, with a 7,900-ton displacement and a speed of more than 25 knots. It's armed with four torpedo tubes and vertical missile launch capability. It has a crew of up to 135.

Bryan Clark, a defense analyst with the Hudson Institute think tank, said that though the Chinese submarines are not nuclear-powered, they are built to modern standards in acoustic sound suppression.

"The Chinese Yuan-class conventional submarines use an air-independent propulsion system to recharge their batteries, which can give them a few weeks of submerged endurance," Clark said. "They are very quiet, and the PLA Navy has about two dozen now."

Nuclear-powered submarines are complex designs — the U.S. plans on building only two Virginia-class attack submarines in 2026. Meanwhile, two aging Los Angeles-class submarines are scheduled for decommissioning this year. The Navy is still waiting for its first of the new Columbia-class ballistic missile submarines, which the CRS says is 18 months behind schedule and not expected



Then-U.S. Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus departs on a visit to the Chinese navy's Yuan-class submarine Hai Jun Chang in 2012.



The Virginia-class attack submarine USS Minnesota transits in Apra Harbor, Naval Base Guam, last year.

to be delivered prior to 2030.

The Chinese see Taiwan as a renegade province, a part of the country that split away after World War II, when Nationalist Leader Chiang Kai-shek and his supporters fled there in 1949 as Mao Tse-tung and the communists took Beijing and the rest of the country.

Then-CIA director William Burns said in 2023 that U.S. analysts believed Chinese President Xi Jinping has called on his country's armed forces to have the capability to invade Taiwan by 2027, the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People's Liberation Army.

The CIA did not say China would invade at that time but that the country's political and military leaders wanted the armed forces prepared to execute a plan by then. The Taiwan Strait Risk Report, issued in 2025 by an Australian risk assessment firm, says that 50% of world container ship traffic passes through the Taiwan Strait and forecast a 30% chance of an invasion of Taiwan by China in the next five years and a 60% chance of an air and naval blockade.

Clark and other analysts say the diesel-powered submarines are a practical solution for the Chinese because any fight with the United States and its allies is likely to come close to home ports.

The potential battleground is the Taiwan Strait, in the South China Sea, which is 78 miles across from the mainland. The South China Sea is busy with ships transiting the strategically tense area, with what the Center for Strategic and International Studies has estimated is \$3.4 trillion in oil, manufactured goods, and other products each year.

The Chinese have spent \$50 billion to build a constellation of installations in the First Island Chain, which curves from Japan past Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia and Borneo, to Vietnam. It's centered on two deepwater bays on the Chinese island of Hainan, China's southernmost province, which is home to the Greater Yulin Naval Base and East Yulin Naval Base.

Yuan-class ships are built to operate in the relatively shallow South China Sea, with some coastal shelves just 250 feet below the

surface, and many reefs — some of which China has fortified as missile-launching centers or airfields meant to give cover to Chinese ships and submarines if the U.S. and its allies intervene in the region.

The nearest American submarines are based at Guam, just over 1,700 miles from Taiwan. The next closest are 5,000 miles away at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Hawaii; 6,000 miles away at Naval Base Kitsap, near Seattle; or 6,800 miles away at Naval Base Point Loma in San Diego.

Nuclear power is how the Navy addresses what analysts call "the tyranny of distance" in U.S. efforts to field forces in the Indo-Pacific region. It allows the U.S. to send submarines extreme distances for long periods of time and "loiter" in and around hot spots without worrying about when or where it will have to refuel.

Lyle Goldstein, an expert on China's military at the Asia Center at Brown University, said China has used diesel submarines to spread out its "A2/AD line" — standing for "Anti-Access/Area-Denial" designed to keep an oppo-

nent outside an area and limit their movements within it.

Submarines are one of the few weapons that can get into and around A2/AD areas, Goldstein said. But in a combat scenario, they would be called on to carry a disproportionately large share of the fighting if other Navy ships are kept outside the zone.

"While these submarines could do damage to the Chinese Navy, they probably lack sufficient firepower to affect the overall outcome of a war," Goldstein wrote for Defense Priorities, a think tank that touts its focus on "reality and restraint."

Clark, the Hudson Institute analyst, said that now that China has nearly achieved parity in submarine numbers with the United States, it will shift back to building more nuclear submarines with a more extended "blue sea" reach as China expands its areas of interest beyond Northern Asia.

"The Chinese are getting better at building nuclear submarines and making them quieter thanks to technology sharing with Russia, which comes as part of their 'no limits' friendship," Clark said. "I think China will shift more of its submarine production to nuclear-powered and only build enough conventional boats to recapitalize the current fleet."

Naval News' annual report on the Chinese navy, published Jan. 17, states "construction of conventionally powered types appears to have slowed significantly."

The Congressional Research Service report agrees the Chinese are shifting back to developing nuclear-powered submarines — with the help of Moscow.

"Closer ties with Russia could provide opportunities for China to overcome these enduring technological limitations by exploiting political and economic levers to gain access to Russia's remaining undersea technology secrets," the report said.

China's nuclear-powered attack submarine fleet consists of the larger, quieter Shang-class boats, which can fire torpedoes or TJ-18 anti-ship cruise missiles with a range of over 240 miles.

A 2025 report from the Australian Naval Institute warns that the rapidly modernizing Chinese Navy is taking "bold steps to field a first-rate submarine force" that "may be on the cusp of significant expansion."

The CRS notes that China's navy is expected to grow to 435 ships by 2030. While focusing on major surface combatant ships, submarines are part of the construction mix at the three shipyards that specialize in building the boats.

"China is finally on the verge of producing world-class nuclear-powered submarines," the report said.

PACIFIC

Top Chinese general focus of probe

Recent military leadership purges could impact army, future of Taiwan

By E. EDUARDO CASTILLO
Associated Press

BEIJING — China made a major announcement over the weekend, saying it was investigating the army’s top general for suspected serious violations of discipline and law.

Gen. Zhang Youxia was the highest military member just below President Xi Jinping.

The Defense Ministry said Saturday that authorities were investigating Zhang, the senior of the two vice chairs of the powerful Central Military Commission, China’s top military body, and Gen. Liu Zhenli, a lower member of the commission who was in charge of the military’s Joint Staff Department.

The move shakes up virtually the entire commission, chaired by Xi, leaving only one of its six members intact.

“Xi Jinping has completed one of the biggest purges of China’s military leadership in the history of the People’s Republic,” said Neil Thomas, a fellow at the Asia Society Policy Institute’s Center for China Analysis.

For the army and China in general, the full impact of the changes is still unknown.

But some experts say the moves also might have repercussions on

Beijing’s next move on Taiwan, the self-ruled island that Beijing claims as its own territory.

Here are some elements to understand why Zhang’s removal is important.

What was behind purge?

The Defense Ministry announced the measures Saturday but provided no details on the alleged wrongdoing. The next day, the People’s Liberation Army Daily published an editorial that fell short of explaining the specific reasons, saying only that it was “for suspected serious violations of discipline and law” and showed China’s commitment to punish corruption. That is something Xi has pursued since the early days of his presidency.

Rumors have circulated on social media and there have been some media reports about the changes, but nothing official.

“I do not believe any evidence publicly released or selectively leaked by Chinese authorities would necessarily reflect the core reason for Zhang’s removal,” said K. Tristan Tang, nonresident Visiting Fellow at Pacific Forum. “The critical point is that Xi Jinping decided to move against Zhang; once an investigation is launched, problems are almost inevitably

uncovered.”

Analysts have said the purges are designed to reform the military and ensure loyalty to Xi.

They are part of a broader anti-corruption drive that has resulted in punishment for more than 200,000 officials since the Chinese leader came to power in 2012.

Before Zhang and Liu’s dismissal, the Communist Party expelled the other vice chair of the commission, He Weidong, in October. He was replaced with Zhang Shengmin, who is now the only commission member.

Since 2012, at least 17 generals from the People’s Liberation Army, or PLA, have been removed from their military positions, among them eight who were former top commission members, according to a review of military statements and state media reports made by The Associated Press.

Impact on Taiwan

Some think the removals could have repercussions for China’s decisions on Taiwan, but it is far from clear.

China considers Taiwan its own territory and has threatened to take control of the island by force if necessary. China also has in-

creased military pressure and, last month, launched large-scale military drills around Taiwan for two days after the U.S. government announced a major arms sales to Taiwan.

Thomas said the latest purge “makes China’s threat toward Taiwan weaker in the short term but stronger in the long term.”

It would make a military escalation against the island riskier in the immediate term because of “a high command in disarray,” but in the long term would mean the army has a more loyal and less corrupt leadership with more military capabilities, he said.

Asked if this might reinforce the idea that removing top military brass might show China is not ready for war, Tang said it “does not fundamentally change that assessment.”

“That said,” he added, “I also do not believe the PLA’s combat readiness has been severely disrupted.”

Future unclear

With the recent changes, the military commission will operate with only one of six members active and Xi at the top as the chair.

The PLA’s Daily editorial said that after the actions against Zhang and Liu, the party is mov-



NG HAN GUAN / AP

Gen. Zhang Youxia

ing to “promote the rejuvenation of the People’s Liberation Army, and inject powerful momentum into building a strong military force.”

But it’s not clear if the five vacant positions will be replaced soon or if Xi will wait until 2027, when there will be a selection of a new Communist Party Central Committee, the body in charge of also appointing the new military commission members.

Tang doesn’t see any pressure on Xi to fill the positions in the short term.

“Unless the objective is to create an internal counterweight to Zhang Shengmin,” the only current member in the commission, he said.

Marine’s quick repair to critical radar earns honor

By RYAN M. BREEDEN
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — The chief of naval operations has recognized a Marine staff sergeant for repairing a sophisticated radar system used to defend troops against aerial threats.

Brenden Kuhlmann of the 12th Marine Littoral Regiment received the Gold Disk award after fixing a key component of the regiment’s AN/TPS-80 Ground/Air Task Oriented Radar, according to a Navy administrative message in September.

“It’s a good feeling to allow a lot of Marines to actually do the repairs that they’re capable of, then see them get recognized for it and come together to do all kinds of stuff,” Kuhlmann said Thursday. “The entire program that we’re running here is really beneficial.”

The radar made its operational debut during the July 2024 Resolute Dragon exercise on Yonaguni Island, about 67 miles east of Taiwan.

The system can detect, identify and track airborne threats in 360 degrees, according to its manufacturer, Northrop Grumman.

The system plays a central role in the regiment’s mission as a stand-in force, part of the Marine Corps’ island-fighting doctrine. Marine littoral regiments are small, mobile units that operate within an adversary’s missile range to seize and hold key terrain and restrict enemy naval movement.

The radar malfunctioned in an unexpect-



ROBERT BLANKS/U.S. Marine Corps

Staff Sgt. Brenden Kuhlmann, an artillery electronics technician, repaired a vital component of a radar after it malfunctioned in a way that was not in the technical manual, earning him the Gold Disk award.

ed way, said Chief Warrant Officer 3 Jared Hohmeier, the regiment’s electronics maintenance officer.

“It wasn’t in our technical manual,” he said during the phone interview.

The repair involved restoring a connec-

tion between a major subassembly and a smaller one — “one of the important vital components of the radar,” Kuhlmann said.

Fixing the issue allowed the regiment “to get the radar back up and healthy,” he said.

Kuhlmann is not the first Marine in the

regiment to earn the award.

Sgt. Dylan Yates was recognized last year for repairing four electric modules and circuit card assemblies, and Cpl. Daniel Mullins received the award in 2024 for repairing nine modules and assemblies on other equipment.

A Gold Disk in the Defense Department refers to a diagnostic test routine used by electronics technicians to diagnose circuit card assemblies and electronic modules.

“The recognition, also from the Navy side, [is] definitely very cool,” Yates said. “We get to have all the people that we work with who are all supporting us.”

The award program was established in 1997 by then-Vice Adm. William Hancock, deputy chief of naval operations for logistics, to encourage fleet personnel to develop advanced repair techniques that improve readiness.

In their free time, Kuhlmann and Yates work on automobiles as hobbyists and had little electronics repairs experience before entering the Marine Corps, they said.

Kuhlmann said he felt confident when he made the repair.

“It was kind of one of those things where it was in front of us, had to get done,” Kuhlmann said.

Repairs by the regiment’s members have saved the Marine Corps an estimated \$2 million and prevented more than 2,000 days of operational downtime, according to a 3rd Marine Division news release Jan. 11.

MILITARY

In Seoul, DOD official praises South on spending

By Soo-Hyang Choi
Bloomberg News

A top Pentagon official praised South Korea as a model ally ready to take greater responsibility for its own security after a new U.S. defense strategy signaled a reduction in American military support to deter North Korea from aggression.

After arriving in Seoul on Monday, Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Elbridge Colby held talks with South Korea's foreign and defense ministers that he said were about advancing an alliance forged in the wake of the Korean War of the 1950s.

"The ROK is a model ally that has committed to meet the global standard of spending 3.5% of GDP on defense and take greater responsibility for its own defense in

the context of our alliance," Colby wrote on X, using the acronym for South Korea's official name, the Republic of Korea.

Defense Minister Ahn Gyu-back stressed during his meeting with Colby the importance of combined readiness posture to maintain peace and stability on the peninsula, Ahn's office said. Foreign Minister Cho Hyun emphasized the need for continued close communication and cooperation with the U.S. during an earlier meeting with Colby, according to the foreign ministry.

Colby's visit comes after the U.S. National Defense Strategy, released Friday, urged South Korea to take the primary role in deterring North Korea as the Trump administration shifts focus to prioritize protecting the U.S. home-

land. Colby has a leading role in writing the strategy.

"South Korea is capable of taking primary responsibility for deterring North Korea with critical but more limited US support," the document said. "This shift in the balance of responsibility is consistent with America's interest in updating US force posture on the Korean Peninsula."

Details of how the U.S. might change its force posture aren't yet clear. The Pentagon is expected to release an assessment soon of where and how the U.S. stations its military forces around the world, known as the Global Posture Review.

In a statement on Saturday, South Korea's Defense Ministry said Seoul will work closely with the U.S. to make sure U.S. Forces

Korea can continue contributing to the peace and stability in the region, calling it a "core component" of their bilateral alliance.

Colby, a China hawk who also served in the Pentagon during Trump's first term, has long demanded U.S. allies do more to share the defense burden.

South Korea has said it would raise annual defense spending to 3.5% of gross domestic product from 2.3% "as soon as possible." President Lee Jae Myung is also pushing to bring back wartime operational control of South Korea's military from the U.S. by the end of his five-year term. Under current arrangements, if war breaks out on the Korean Peninsula, the U.S. would take control of both nations' militaries.

South Korea also sealed an

agreement late last year with the U.S. to build nuclear-powered submarines for the South Korean navy, although the details of the plan have yet to be worked out. In his meeting with Colby, Cho said that cooperation on nuclear-powered submarines will boost Seoul's deterrence capabilities and contribute to the alliance, according to the ministry statement.

On North Korea, the new U.S. defense strategy says the regime "poses a direct military threat to South Korea and Japan," and warns that its nuclear ambitions could endanger the U.S. Lee said last week that North Korea is continuing to produce nuclear materials at a pace that could allow it to add up to 20 nuclear weapons a year, calling for efforts to reopen talks with Pyongyang.

DOD offers cash to designers of drones to haul heavy loads

By Jennifer H. Svan
Stars and Stripes

KAISERSLAUTERN, Germany — The Pentagon's research arm is tapping into American innovation to design a drone that can carry more than four times its weight, a breakthrough capability that could be applied to both the military and civilian sectors.

Up for grabs in the Lift Challenge is \$6.5 million in prize money. The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency's tactical technology office is sponsoring the contest, which kicked off earlier this month and closes May 1.

The competition "aims to shatter the heavy lift bottleneck" and "revolutionize the way we use drones across all sectors," DARPA said in a statement on its website.

From reconnaissance to package delivery, small unmanned

systems are proliferating on the modern battlefield and in the commercial industry, driven by simplicity, affordability and ease of operation.

But the challenges posed by heavy cargo are reflected in the DOD solicitation.

Multirotor, vertical-lift drones typically can maintain a payload-to-weight ratio of 1-to-1 or less, the agency said in a notice last fall announcing the contest.

"This restriction significantly limits their ability to carry heavy payloads or operate for extended durations," the document said.

DARPA experts believe the 4-to-1 payload-to-weight ratio is plausible and are hoping to tap into the American "garage inventor" spirit to come up with a crewless aircraft that is both lightweight and powerful.

"DARPA recognizes the best

solutions often come from unexpected places," Phillip Smith, the Lift Challenge program manager, said in a statement in November.

To compete, designs must weigh no more than 55 pounds, including fuel or power source, and be capable of lifting a minimum payload of 110 pounds across a circuit course of 5 nautical miles, according to contest rules.

Participants must adhere to Federal Aviation Administration regulations and can expect to go head to head in live, unclassified performance trials this summer, DARPA said.

The contest is open to teams or individuals who are U.S. citizens or green card holders and who represent only U.S. companies or institutions. Foreign teammates are allowed with a U.S. sponsor, but they cannot reside in any countries included on the State



Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency

In a screenshot from a Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency video, a heavy-lift drone takes off from a base. DARPA's Lift Challenge asks competition entrants to design a drone that can carry more than four times its weight; \$6.5 million in prize money is being offered.

Department's list of international arms trafficking regulation violators.

U.S. government and military organizations may apply to compete if their design has not previously received federal funds, according to the contest rules.

Prizes include \$2.5 million for

first place, \$1.5 million for second and \$1 million for third. DARPA also plans to hand out three \$500,000 prizes for "subjective categories" like most revolutionary aerodynamic design.

For more information on the contest, go to: www.darpa.mil/research/challenges/lift.

New microgrid strengthens energy security at NAS Sigonella

By Alison Bath
Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — One of the Navy's most strategic bases in Europe now can be assured of having enough power to supply critical functions if its electrical supply is disrupted.

Two new solar arrays and battery energy storage systems were activated this month at Naval Air Station Sigonella on Sicily, the base said in a statement Friday.

NAS Sigonella's microgrid uses sodium nickel chloride batteries to store excess solar energy for use during nighttime operations and periods of reduced sunlight.

Each battery energy storage sys-



MEGAN GULLY/U.S. Army

Solar arrays like these at Redstone Arsenal, Ala., were recently installed at Naval Air Station Sigonella on Sicily.

tem can supply up to 400 kilowatt-hours of power, according to the statement. By way of comparison,

the average U.S. household uses about 29 kilowatt-hours of electricity each day, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration.

During a power outage, the microgrid automatically transitions to an isolated operating mode, combining stored energy, solar generation and generator support to sustain continuous operations for up to 14 days on a single fuel load, the base said. The project "enhances the command's ability to maintain uninterrupted logistics operations during commercial power outages," according to the statement.

Designed to support Defense Logistics Agency Distribution Sigo-

nella's operations, the microgrid also provides installation-wide benefits. By reducing reliance on generators and decreasing fuel consumption during outages, the system also helps ease demand on base infrastructure, NAS Sigonella said.

The system is the first of its kind in the Navy Region Europe, Africa, Central area of command, the statement said. It's part of a broader Pentagon push to strengthen energy security at critical military installations worldwide.

"By investing in renewable energy and modern microgrid technology, we are ensuring our tenant commands and supported forces can

continue their missions without interruption," Cmdr. Seth Cochran, a public works officer at Naval Facilities Engineering Systems Command Sigonella, said in the statement.

It was unclear on Monday whether NAS Sigonella had used its new microgrid during a fierce storm that pounded eastern Sicily last week, leaving widespread flooding and other damage.

The base is home to more than 39 tenant commands, among them Space Force, Army, Marines and Air Force detachments.

Microgrids are localized electrical systems able to manage multiple energy sources and loads.

NATION

GOP calls growing for deeper probe into Minn. killing

BY STEVEN SLOAN
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A growing number of Republicans are pressing for a deeper investigation into federal immigration tactics in Minnesota after a U.S. Border Patrol agent fatally shot a man in Minneapolis, a sign that the Trump administration's accounting of events may face bipartisan scrutiny.

House Homeland Security Committee Chairman Andrew Garbarino sought testimony from leaders at Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Customs and Border Protection and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, saying "my top priority remains keeping Americans safe."

A host of other congressional Republicans, including Rep. Michael McCaul of Texas and Sens. Thom Tillis of North Carolina, Bill Cassidy of Louisiana, Susan Collins of Maine and Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, pressed for more information. Their statements, in addition to concern expressed from several GOP governors, reflected a party struggling with how to respond to Saturday's fatal shooting of Alex Pretti, 37, an intensive care nurse at a Department of Veterans Affairs hospital.

Trump administration officials were quick to cast Pretti as the instigator. Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem was among those who said Pretti "approached" immigration officers with a gun and acted violently. Videos from the scene show Pretti being pushed by an officer and then a half-dozen agents descend on him. During the scuffle, he is holding a phone but is never seen brandishing the 9 mm semiautomatic handgun police say he was licensed to carry.

The killing has raised uncomfortable questions about the GOP's core positions on issues ranging



GIAN EHRENZELLER, KEYSTONE/AP
Sen. Thom Tillis, R-N.C., speaks during a panel session at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, on Jan. 20.

from gun ownership to states' rights and trust in the federal government.

Cassidy, who is facing a Trump-backed challenger in his reelection bid, said on social media that the shooting was "incredibly disturbing" and that the "credibility of ICE and DHS are at stake." He pushed for "a full joint federal and state investigation." Tillis, who is not seeking reelection, urged a "thorough and impartial investigation" and said "any administration official who rushes to judgment and tries to shut down an investigation before it begins are doing an incredible disservice to the nation and to President Trump's legacy."

Trump and other administration officials remained firm in their defense of the hard-line immigration enforcement tactics in Minneapolis, blaming Democrats in the state along with local law enforcement for not working with them. Many Republicans either echoed that sentiment or stayed silent.

In a lengthy social media post on Sunday evening, Trump called on Minnesota's Democratic leadership to "formally cooperate" with his administration and pressed Congress to ban so-called sanctuary cities.

Funds: House would have to return this week to vote again if bill changes

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refusal to stand up to President Trump, the DHS bill is woefully inadequate to rein in the abuses of ICE," said Schumer, D-N.Y. "I will vote no."

The White House reached out to Senate Democrats late Sunday, as have Republicans, according to a Senate Democratic leadership aide who insisted on anonymity to discuss the private talks.

But they have not yet raised any realistic solutions, the aide said.

Republicans will need some Democratic support to pass the remaining spending bills in time to avoid a partial shutdown. That support was already in question after Renee Good, a mother of three, was fatally shot and killed earlier this month by an Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent in Minneapolis. But the fatal shooting Saturday of Alex Pretti, an intensive care unit nurse, quickly prompted Democrats to take a more forceful stand.

On Sunday, House and Senate Democrats convened separate conference calls as they privately assess next steps and press to restrain the Trump administration's immigration enforcement operations.

Washington Sen. Patty Murray, the top Democrat on the Senate Appropriations Committee and key negotiator on the funding package, had been pushing her colleagues to vote for the homeland security bill, arguing that Democrats had successfully fought off major increases to the ICE budget. But in the wake of the shooting, Murray said Sunday on X that "I will NOT support the DHS bill as it stands."

"Federal agents cannot murder people in broad daylight and face zero consequences," Murray wrote.

Federal officials have defended the actions of the agents involved in the Good and Pretti shootings as justified. Democrats said video showed otherwise. Republicans are increasingly challenged, with

some calling for thorough investigations while others stand with federal officials.

The growing backlash from Democrats puts Republican leaders in the Senate in a difficult position.

Much of the government, including the Department of Defense, continues to operate on a short-term bill that provides funding only through Friday. Republican leaders had hoped to avoid another shutdown after last fall's 43-day closure that revolved around Democrats' insistence on extending federal subsidies that make



J. SCOTT APPLEWHITE/AP

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., left, is vowing to oppose a funding bill for the Department of Homeland Security.

health coverage more affordable for those enrolled in the Affordable Care Act marketplace.

Before Pretti's death, many Democrats felt the same way about a potential shutdown, lending support in the House to most of the remaining appropriations bills — with DHS the exception.

House Democrats largely rejected the homeland security portion last week with just a handful joining Republicans to ensure its passage. More than 100 House Democrats called for Noem's impeachment.

The House sent the six funding bills to the Senate as a package, and that makes it exceedingly difficult to strip out the homeland security portion which Democrats

are demanding.

Despite the procedural hurdles, Schumer said Sunday that Republicans should work with Democrats to advance the other five bills and rewrite the DHS bill.

The path ahead is uncertain. The Senate is not scheduled to return to session until Tuesday, due to a snowstorm. The House plans to be out of session this week and would have to pass the funding package again if it is changed.

Democrats are pushing for policy changes to be added to the homeland security spending bill that would force ICE agents to use warrants for immigration arrests, mandate strengthened training, require agents to identify themselves and have Border Patrol agents stay on the border rather than assisting ICE with immigration raids in the interior of the country.

Connecticut Sen. Chris Murphy, the top Democrat on the subcommittee that oversees homeland security funding, told CNN's "State of the Union" on Sunday that Congress cannot fund a department "that is murdering American citizens, that is traumatizing little boys and girls across the country in violation of the law."

Democratic senators discussed the options on Sunday evening's call but without changes from Republicans, they appeared headed toward a shutdown. On the morning call with House Democrats, they heard from Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz and the state's attorney general, Keith Ellison, both former congressmen.

Several other Democratic senators announced they would vote "no" on homeland security money, including some who had helped Republicans end the record shutdown last year.

"The abuses of power we are seeing from ICE in Minneapolis and across the country are un-American and cannot be normalized," Sen. Jacky Rosen, D-Nev., said in a post on X.

Federal judge hears arguments on Minn. crackdown after fatal shootings

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — A federal judge heard arguments Monday over Minnesota's challenge to the Trump administration's immigration enforcement crackdown, posing skeptical questions to both sides about the effort that has led to two fatal shootings by federal officers.

U.S. District Judge Katherine Menendez is considering whether to grant requests by the state and the cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul to temporarily halt the immigration operation. She said the case was a

priority, though she issued no immediate ruling.

Menendez questioned the government's motivation behind the crackdown and expressed skepticism about a letter recently sent by Attorney General Pam Bondi to Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz. The letter asked the state to give the federal government access to voter rolls, to turn over state Medicaid and food assistance records, and to repeal sanctuary policies.

"I mean, is there no limit to what the executive can do under the guise

of enforcing immigration law?" Menendez asked. She noted that the federal requests are the subject of litigation.

Lawyers for the state and the Twin Cities argued that the situation on the street is so dire as to require the court to halt the federal government's enforcement actions.

"If this is not stopped right here, right now, I don't think anybody who is seriously looking at this problem can have much faith in how our republic is going to go in the future," Minnesota Assistant Attorney Gen-

eral Brian Carter said.

Brantley Mayers, counsel to the Justice Department's assistant attorney general, said the government's goal is to enforce federal law. Mayers said one lawful action should not be used to discredit another lawful action.

"I don't see how the fact that we're also doing additional things that we are allowed to do, that the Constitution has vested us with doing, would in any way negate another piece of the same operation, the same surge," Mayers said.

Menendez questioned where the line was between violating the Constitution and the executive's power to enforce the law. She also asked whether she was being asked to decide between state and federal policies.

The state of Minnesota and the cities sued the Department of Homeland Security earlier this month, five days after Renee Good was shot by an Immigration and Customs officer. The shooting of Alex Pretti by a Border Patrol officer on Saturday added urgency to the case.

NATION

Northeast sees more snow from winter storm

BY JEFF AMY
AND RUSS BYNUM
Associated Press

The U.S. workweek opened with yet more snow dumping on the Northeast under the tail end of a colossal winter storm that brought lingering misery to parts of the South, where freezing rain left hundreds of thousands shivering without electricity Monday. Authorities reported at least 18 weather-related deaths.

Deep snow — over a foot extending in a 1,300-mile swath from Arkansas to New England — halted traffic, canceled flights and triggered wide school closings Monday. Up to two feet were forecast in some places.

There were more than 800,000 power outages in the nation on Monday morning, most of them in the South, according to poweroutage.com. The region got its share of sleet and freezing rain during the storm.

There also were more than 6,400 flight delays and cancellations nationwide, according to flight tracker flightaware.com.

More light to moderate snow was forecast in New England through Monday evening.

In Falmouth, Mass., about an hour's drive south of Boston, snow came down in sheets and closed down the town.

Nell Fields said she had to shovel just to be able to let her dog outside Sunday. Seven inches had fallen, with more still on the way.

"I feel that the universe just put a big, huge pause on us with all the snow," Fields said.



OBER LAMY/AP

A worker throws salt onto the pavement to melt ice in downtown Indianapolis, on Sunday.

On Manhattan's Upper East Side, January Cotrel enjoyed the fresh snow on a block that always closes during snowstorms for residents to sled, throw snowballs and make snowmen.

"I pray for two feet every time we get a snowstorm. I want as much as we can get," she said. "Let the city just shut down for a day and it's beautiful, and then we can get back to life."

Meanwhile, bitter cold followed in the storm's wake. It got down to minus 40 degrees in parts of Minnesota on Sunday. Many communities across the Midwest, South

and Northeast awakened Monday to subzero weather. The entire Lower 48 states were forecast to have their coldest average low temperature since January 2014.

Record warmth in Florida was the only thing keeping that average from going even colder, said former National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration chief scientist Ryan Maue, who calculates national averages based on National Weather Service data.

From Montana to the Florida Panhandle, the weather service posted cold weather advisories and extreme cold warnings as

temperatures in many places dipped to zero and even colder. Wind made conditions even chillier and the overnight cold made roads freeze over anew early Monday in a cruel reprise of the weekend's lousy travel weather.

Even with precipitation ending in Mississippi, "that doesn't mean the danger is behind us," Gov. Tate Reeves said Sunday.

Freezing rain that slickened roads and brought trees and branches down on roads and power lines were the main peril in the South over the weekend. In Corinth, Miss., heavy machinery

manufacturer Caterpillar told employees at its remanufacturing site to stay home Monday and Tuesday.

It already was Mississippi's worst ice storm since 1994 with its biggest-ever deployment of ice-melting chemicals — 200,000 gallons — plus salt and sand to treat icy roads, Reeves said. He urged people not to drive anywhere unless absolutely necessary.

At one point Sunday morning, about 213 million people were under some sort of winter weather warning, authorities said.

Some 12,000 flights also were canceled Sunday and nearly 20,000 were delayed.

In New York City, Mayor Zohran Mamdani said at least five people who died were found outside as temperatures plunged Saturday, though the cause of their deaths remained under investigation. Two men died of hypothermia related to the storm in Caddo Parish in Louisiana, according to the state health department.

In Massachusetts, police said a snowplow backed into a couple walking in a Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority parking lot in Norwood on Sunday. A 51-year-old woman was killed and her 47-year-old husband was hospitalized.

Two teenagers died in sledding accidents, a 17-year-old boy in Arkansas and a 16-year-old girl in Texas, authorities said.

Three weather-related deaths were announced in Tennessee, authorities said. Further details were not immediately available.

Jet fatally crashes on take off in Maine

Associated Press

The Federal Aviation Administration says seven people were killed and a crew member survived with serious injuries when a private business jet crashed in a snowstorm at Maine's Bangor International Airport.

The Bombardier Challenger 600 carrying eight people crashed on takeoff Sunday night as New England and much of the country grappled with a massive winter storm.

The airport, about 200 miles north of Boston, shut down after the crash.

The Federal Aviation Administration and the National Transportation Safety Board are investigating.

The NTSB said preliminary information shows the plane crashed upon departure and experienced a post-crash fire, but that it would have no further statement

until after investigators arrive in a day or two.

The NTSB said it has no role in the release of information about victims and that such information is handled by local authorities.

But airport director Jose Saavedra refused to comment, saying at a news conference Monday that he was "awaiting guidance and support from federal partners."

An audio recording of air traffic controllers includes someone saying "Aircraft upside down. We have a passenger aircraft upside down," about 45 seconds after a plane was cleared for takeoff.

The Bombardier Challenger 600 is a wide-bodied business jet configured for nine to 11 passengers.

It was launched in 1980 as the first private jet with a "walk-about cabin" and remains a popular charter option, according to aircharterservice.com.

Man arrested in assault on US lawmaker attending party during Sundance festival

Associated Press

PARK CITY, Utah — A man was arrested Friday night at a party during the Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah, for allegedly assaulting a Florida congressman.

Democratic U.S. Rep. Maxwell Frost wrote on X on Saturday that he was punched in the face by a man who told Frost that President Donald Trump was going to deport him.

The altercation occurred at a private party hosted by talent agency CAA at the High West Distillery, a popular venue for festival-adjacent events.

"He was heard screaming racist remarks as he drunkenly ran off," Frost wrote. "The individual was arrested and I am okay."

Frost, the first Gen Z member of Congress, thanked the venue security and the Park City Police Department for their help.

A Park City Police Department representative said officers ar-

rived on the scene just after midnight.

Christian Joel Young, 28, was arrested on charges of aggravated burglary, assaulting an elected official and assault and transported to Summit County Jail, according to court records.

Young appeared to have crashed the party by jumping a fence and had a Sundance Film Festival pass that was not issued in his name, according to the police affidavit.

It was unclear if Young had an attorney who could speak on his behalf.

The Sundance Film Festival representatives released a statement saying that they "strongly condemn" the incident, noting that while it occurred at a non-affiliated event that the behavior is

"against our values of upholding a welcoming and inspiring environment for all our attendees."

County Judge Richard Mrazik ordered Young held without bail, on the grounds that he would constitute, "a substantial danger to any other individual or to the community, or is likely to flee the jurisdiction of the court if released on bail."

Young has a prior misdemeanor conviction, according to court records.

Utah Gov. Spencer Cox, a Republican, denounced the alleged attack and said he won't let tensions over immigration enforcement happening in places like Minneapolis spill into Utah.

"Political or racially charged violence of any kind is unacceptable in Utah," Cox said in a statement. "I'm grateful to local law enforcement for swiftly apprehending the assailant and pursuing justice for Rep. Maxwell Frost."



Frost

NATION

Investigators to detail causes of DC collision

By JOSH FUNK
Associated Press

So many things went wrong last Jan. 29 to contribute to the deadliest plane crash on American soil since 2001 that the National Transportation Safety Board isn't likely to identify a single cause of the collision between an airliner and an Army helicopter near Washington, D.C., that killed 67 people at its hearing Tuesday.

Instead, their investigators will detail what they found that played a role in the crash, and the board will recommend changes to help prevent a similar tragedy. Last week, the Federal Aviation Administration already took the temporary restrictions it imposed after the crash and made them permanent to ensure planes and helicopters won't share the same airspace again around Reagan National Airport.

Family members of victims hope those suggestions won't be ignored the same way many past NTSB recommendations have been. Tim Lilley, whose son Sam was the first officer on the American Airlines plane, said he hopes officials in Congress and the administration will make changes now instead of waiting until for another disaster.

"Instead of writing aviation regulation in blood, let's start writing it in data," said Lilley, who is a pilot himself and earlier in his career flew Black Hawk helicopters in the Washington area. "Because all the data was there to show this accident was going to happen. This accident was completely preventable."

Over the past year, the NTSB has already highlighted a number



BEN CURTIS/AP

A piece of wreckage is lifted from the water onto a salvage vessel near the site in the Potomac River of a midair collision between an American Airlines jet and a Black Hawk helicopter, at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport, Feb. 4, 2025, in Arlington, Va.

of the factors that contributed to the crash including a poorly designed helicopter route past Reagan Airport, the fact that the Black Hawk was flying 78 feet higher than it should have been, the warnings that the FAA ignored in the years beforehand and the Army's move to turn off a key system that would have broadcast the helicopter's location more clearly.

The D.C. plane crash was the first in a number of high-profile crashes and close calls throughout 2025 that alarmed the public, but the total number of crashes last

year was actually the lowest since the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020 with 1,405 crashes nationwide.

Experts say flying remains the safest way to travel because of all the overlapping layers of precautions built into the system, but too many of those safety measures failed at the same time last Jan. 29.

The route along the Potomac River the Black Hawk was following that night allowed for helicopters and planes to come within 75 feet of each other when a plane was landing on the airport's sec-

ondary runway that typically handles less than 5% of the flights landing at Reagan. And that distance was only ensured when the helicopter stuck to flying along the bank of the river, but the official route didn't require that.

Normally, air traffic controllers work to keep aircraft at least 500 feet apart to keep them safe, so the scant separation on Route 4 posed what NTSB Chairwoman Jennifer Homendy called "an intolerable risk to flight safety."

The controllers at Reagan also had been in the habit of asking pi-

lots to watch out for other aircraft themselves and maintain visual separation as they tried to squeeze in more planes to land on what the Metropolitan Washington Airport Authority has called the busiest runway in the country. The FAA halted that practice after the crash.

That night a controller twice asked the helicopter pilots whether they had the jet in sight, and the pilots said they did and asked for visual separation approval so they could use their own eyes to maintain distance. But at the investigative hearings last summer, board members questioned how well the crew could spot the plane while wearing night vision goggles and whether the pilots were even looking in the right spot.

The American Airlines plane flying from Wichita, Kan., collided with the helicopter 278 feet above the river, but the Black Hawk was never supposed to fly above 200 feet as it passed by the airport, according to the official route.

Before investigators revealed how high the helicopter was flying, Tim Lilley was asking tough questions about it at some of the first meetings NTSB officials had with the families. His background as a pilot gave him detailed knowledge of the issues.

"We had a moral mandate because we had such an in-depth insight into what happened. We didn't want to become advocates, but we could not shirk the responsibility," said Lilley, who started meeting with top lawmakers in Congress, Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy and Army officials not long after the crash to push for changes.

Administration invests in US rare earth miner to counter China

Associated Press

The U.S. is taking a minority stake in an Oklahoma rare earth miner, the latest government investment in the sector as it seeks to minimize its reliance on imports of a material used prevalently in smartphones, robotics, electric vehicles and many other high-tech products.

China processes more than 90% of the world's critical minerals and has used its dominance in the market to gain significant leverage in the trade war with Washington.

USA Rare Earth said Monday that the U.S. Commerce Department is investing \$1.6 billion in the company to advance work on a mine in Texas and to build a magnet manufacturing facility in Oklahoma.

Shares of USA Rare Earth

jumped more than 13% before U.S. markets opened.

The agreement with the Commerce Department's CHIPS program includes \$277 million in proposed federal funding and a \$1.3 billion senior secured loan.

The Commerce Department will get 16.1 million shares of common stock in return, as well as rights to buy 17.6 million more.

"USA Rare Earth's heavy critical minerals project is essential to restoring U.S. critical mineral independence," Secretary of Commerce Howard Lutnick said in an official statement about the investment. "This investment ensures our supply chains are resilient and no longer reliant on foreign nations."

The Trump administration is intensifying efforts to build up the critical mineral industry in the

United States to work to break the chokehold that China has on the global supply chain.

Industry insiders, analysts and lawmakers have warned for years that America's dependence on China for critical minerals — a list of 50 minerals that includes 17 sought-after rare-earth elements — is a national security vulnerability.

Attempts by President Donald Trump to acquire Greenland is part of that push.

USA Rare Earth, based in Stillwater, Okla., is the third U.S. operator in which the Trump administration has invested in recent months.

The Pentagon invested \$400 million in rare-earth producer MP Materials.

It gave the U.S. company a \$150 million loan in August.

Longtime DC delegate ending her reelection campaign for Congress

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Eleanor Holmes Norton, the 18-term delegate for the District of Columbia in Congress and a veteran of the Civil Rights Movement, has filed paperwork to end her campaign for reelection, likely closing out a decades-long career in public service.

Norton, 88, has been the sole representative of the residents of the nation's capital in Congress since 1991, but she faced increasing questions about her effectiveness after the Trump administration began its sweeping intervention into



Norton

the city last year.

Mayor Muriel Bowser congratulated Norton on her retirement.

"For 35 years, Congresswoman Norton has been our Warrior on the Hill," Bowser wrote on social media. "Her work embodies the unwavering resolve of a city that refuses to yield in its fight for equal representation."

Norton's campaign filed a termination report with the Federal Election Commission on Sunday. Her office has not released an official statement.

Her retirement opens up a likely competitive primary to succeed her in an overwhelmingly Democratic city. Several local lawmakers had already announced their intentions to run in the Democratic primary.

WORLD

Israel: Remains of final hostage in Gaza have been recovered

By JULIA FRANKEL
AND SAMY MAGDY
Associated Press

JERUSALEM — The remains of the final hostage in Gaza have been recovered, Israel's military said Monday, clearing the way for the next phase of the ceasefire that paused the Israel-Hamas war.

The announcement that the remains of Ran Gvili had been found and identified came a day after Israel's government said the military was conducting a "large-scale operation" in a cemetery in northern Gaza to locate them.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called it "an incredible achievement" for Israel and its soldiers, telling Israeli media that "I promised we would bring everyone home and we have brought everyone home." He said Gvili, who was killed during the Hamas-led attack on Oct. 7, 2023, that sparked the war, was among the first to be taken into Gaza.

The return of all remaining hostages, living or dead, has been a key part of the Gaza ceasefire's first phase, and Gvili's family had urged Israel's government not to enter the second phase until his remains were recovered and returned.

Netanyahu's office said Sunday that Israel would open the Rafah crossing between Gaza and Egypt, which Palestinians see as their lifeline to the world, once the search for Gvili was finished. It has been largely shut since May 2024, except for a small period in early 2025.

Israel and Hamas had been under pressure from ceasefire mediators



LEO CORREA/AP

People hold signs with a photo of Ran Gvili, who was killed while fighting Hamas militants during the Oct. 7, 2023, attack, during a rally calling for his return in Tel Aviv, Israel, on Friday. Gvili's body has been found, identified and recovered, Israel's military said Monday.

including Washington to move into the second phase of the U.S.-brokered truce, which took effect on Oct. 10.

Israel had repeatedly accused Hamas of dragging its feet in the recovery of the final hostage. Hamas said it had provided all the information it had about Gvili's remains, and accused Israel of obstructing efforts to search for them in areas of Gaza under Israeli military control.

Israel's military had said the operation to locate Gvili's remains was "in the area of the Yellow Line" that divides the territory.

The Oct. 7, 2023, attack killed about 1,200 people and saw 251 taken hostage. Gvili, a 24-year-old police officer known affectionately as "Rani," was killed while fighting Hamas militants.

Before Gvili's remains were recovered, 20 living hostages and the remains of 27 others had been returned to Israel since the ceasefire, most recently in early December. Israel in exchange has released the bodies of hundreds of Palestinians to Gaza.

The next phase of the 20-point ceasefire plan has called for creating an international stabilization force, forming a technocratic Palestinian government and disarming Hamas.

Israeli forces on Monday fatally shot a man in Gaza City, according to Shifa Hospital, which received the body. The man was close to an area where the military had launched the search operation for Gvili, the hospital said.

Judges find former Philippines president fit to stand trial at ICC

Associated Press

THE HAGUE, Netherlands — Judges at the International Criminal Court ruled on Monday that former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte is fit to stand trial, after postponing an earlier hearing over concerns about the octogenarian's health.

Duterte is facing charges of crimes against humanity for his alleged involvement in dozens of killings as part of his so-called war on drugs when in office, first as the mayor of a southern city and later as president.

Lawyers for the 80-year-old had argued Duterte was in frail health and his condition was deteriorating in the court's detention unit.

Duterte was arrested in March and was set to appear in court in The Hague in September. That hearing was delayed after a pretrial panel of judges granted "limited postponement" to give the court time to determine "whether Mr Duterte is fit to follow and participate" in the proceedings. Following an assessment by a panel of medical experts, judges found that Duterte "is able effectively to exercise his procedural rights and is therefore fit to take part in the pre-trial proceedings."

The hearing has now been rescheduled for Feb. 23.

The panel included experts in geriatric neurology and psychiatry. According to court filings, Duterte underwent cognitive testing, as well as mental and physical examinations.

Duterte's lead lawyer, Nick Kauf-

man, said he was disappointed in the decision and would seek to appeal. The defense was "denied the opportunity to present its own medical evidence and to question, in court, the contradictory findings of professionals selected by the judges," he said.

Two organizations supporting the families of suspects killed in

Duterte's crackdown hailed the court's decision as "a resounding victory for justice and accountability."

According to a filing last month, ICC prosecutors claim Duterte instructed and authorized "violent acts including murder to be committed against alleged criminals, including alleged drug dealers and users."

Prosecutors announced in February 2018 that they would open a preliminary investigation into the so-called war on drugs overseen by Duterte when he served as mayor of the southern Philippine city of Davao and later as president.

In a move that human rights activists say was aimed at escaping accountability, Duterte, who was president at the time, announced a month later that the Philippines would leave the court. Judges rejected a request from Duterte's legal team to throw out the case on the grounds that the court did not have jurisdiction because the Philippines had withdrawn from the court.



Duterte

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MIDEAST

Threats: Carrier moves toward region

FROM PAGE 1

they could resume fire if needed. Meanwhile, Ahmad “Abu Hussein” al-Hamidawi of Kataib Hezbollah issued his own threat in a statement.

“We affirm to the enemies that the war on the (Islamic) Republic will not be a picnic; rather, you will taste the bitterest forms of death, and nothing will remain of you in our region,” he said.

The threats came as the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln and guided missile destroyers with it moved into the region. On Monday, U.S. Central Command said the ships were “currently deployed to the Middle East to promote regional security and stability.”

Trump has said the ships are being moved “just in case” he decides to take action against Iran. Trump already has laid out two red lines for attack — the killing of peaceful protesters and Tehran conducting mass executions of those it has arrested in a massive crackdown over the demonstrations.

The “Axis of Resistance” alliances had allowed Iran to project its power across the Mideast but also was seen as a defensive buffer, intended to keep conflict away from Iranian borders. But it has collapsed after Israel targeted Ha-

mas, Hezbollah in Lebanon and others during the Gaza war. Meanwhile, rebels in 2024 overthrew Syria’s Bashar Assad after a yearslong, bloody war in which Iran backed his rule.

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio, speaking to Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani, also warned Iraq late Sunday about Iran’s influence.

“A government controlled by Iran cannot successfully put Iraq’s own interests first, keep Iraq out of regional conflicts or advance the mutually beneficial partnership between the United States and Iraq,” a statement on Rubio’s behalf read.

The United Arab Emirates announced on Monday that it would not allow its airspace, territory, or territorial waters to be used for military action against Iran. The UAE said it would stress dialogue and diplomatic resolutions.

Iranian Defense Ministry spokesperson Gen. Reza Talaei-Nik renewed warnings Monday to both Israel and the U.S. over any possible attack, saying it would “be met with a response that is more painful and more decisive than in the past.” Iranian state television quoted Talaei-Nik as adding that threats from the two countries required Iran “to maintain

full and comprehensive preparedness.”

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmail Baghaei separately told journalists: “Regional countries fully know that any security breach in the region will not affect Iran only. The lack of security is contagious.”

Iran over the weekend unveiled a new banner in Tehran’s Enghelab Square threatening the Lincoln, showing an aircraft carrier strewn with bodies and streaked with blood with the warning: “If you sow the wind, you will reap the whirlwind.” However, Iran is still reeling from the 12-day war launched in June that saw its air defense systems broadly destroyed and top military leaders killed, as well as its nuclear enrichment sites bombed by the U.S.

As a sign of concern over its airspace, Iran issued a notice to pilots Sunday that banned small private aircraft from flying in the country, with carveouts for the oil industry and emergency medical flights.

Many Western airlines have started to avoid Iranian airspace entirely due to the tensions, though Gulf Arab carriers flying to Moscow still rely on the route. Iranian air defense troops in 2020 shot down a Ukrainian commercial airliner, killing 176 people on



DANIEL KIMMELMAN/U.S. Navy

A MH-60R Sea Hawk helicopter is directed on the flight deck of Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln on Wednesday.

board.

The protests in Iran began on Dec. 28, sparked by the fall of the Iranian currency, the rial, and quickly spread across the country. They were met by a violent crackdown by Iran’s theocracy, the scale of which is only starting to become clear as the country has faced more than two-week internet blackout — the most comprehensive in the nation’s history.

The U.S.-based Human Rights Activists News Agency on Sunday put the death toll at 5,848, with the number expected to increase. It says more than 41,280 people have been arrested.

The group’s figures have been accurate in previous unrest and rely on a network of activists in Iran to verify deaths. That death toll exceeds that of any other round of protest or unrest there in decades, and recalls the chaos surrounding Iran’s 1979 Islamic Revolution. The Associated Press has not been able to independently verify the toll.

Iran’s government has put the death toll at a far lower 3,117, saying 2,427 were civilians and security forces, and labeled the rest “terrorists.” In the past, Iran’s theocracy has undercounted or not reported fatalities from unrest.

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AMERICAN ROUNDUP

First-ever parking fees at popular park draw ire

CA SAN DIEGO — For decades, parking lots at San Diego’s Balboa Park were packed, with lines of drivers snaking through lanes in search of a rare open spot.

Recently there were plenty of open spaces and several lots were half empty, while people lined up behind kiosks to pay newly imposed parking fees.

This month San Diego city imposed the first parking fees for the century-old cultural site, provoking confusion and contempt. Museums reported that visitation dropped 20% immediately, vandals defaced the meters and San Diego County mayors urged the city to reverse the unpopular policy.

San Diego Mayor Todd Gloria has said the parking fees will provide stable revenue for the park and its museums, and help close a city budget gap of roughly \$300 million this fiscal year and \$110 million next year.

Massive sewage spill flows into the Potomac River

DC WASHINGTON — A massive pipe that moves millions of gallons of sewage ruptured and sent wastewater flowing into the Potomac River northwest of Washington, D.C., sending repair crews scrambling.

DC Water, which operates the sewer system, was hooking up pumps to divert sewage around the rupture and allow crews to make repairs. It has cautioned people to stay out of the area and to wash their skin if exposed.

The spill was caused by a 72-inch diameter sewer pipe that collapsed late last Monday, shooting sewage out of the ground and into the river.

DC Water spokesperson John Lisle said the utility estimates the overflow at about 40 million gallons each day — enough to fill about 66 Olympic-size swimming pools — but it’s not clear exactly how much has spilled into the river since the overflow began.

Doctor pleads not guilty to killings of couple

OH COLUMBUS — An Illinois doctor indicted on murder charges in the December shooting deaths of his ex-wife and her dentist husband in their Columbus home pleaded not guilty to the killings in an Ohio courtroom on Friday.

Michael David McKee, 39, appeared remotely on camera from jail for his arraignment in Franklin County, where he faced four aggravated murder counts and one count of aggravated burglary while using a firearm suppressor in connection with the Dec. 30 double homicide of Monique Tepe, 39, and Dr. Spencer Tepe, 37. He was garbed in prison attire and did not speak during the brief hearing. Defense attorney Diane Menashe waived a request for bond, at least for now.



RICARDO B. BRAZZIELL, AUSTIN AMERICAN-STATESMAN/AP

School’s out, sledding is in

Parents and children prepare to sled down a hill Sunday at Doss Elementary following a winter storm that brought rain, sleet, and freezing temperatures to North Austin, Texas.

The mystery that first surrounded the case — which featured no forced entry, no weapon and no obvious signs of theft, additional violence or a motive — drew national attention. McKee, of Chicago, was arrested 11 days later near his workplace in Rockford, Ill. He was returned to Ohio on Tuesday to face the charges.

Men face charges after dogs found out in cold

CT BRIDGEPORT — Two men face animal cruelty charges after they left dogs exposed to life-threatening cold at a Union Avenue address that was the site of similar abuse in 2018 and 2023, Bridgeport police said.

Benito Islesias, 72, and Rusty Rodriguez, 46, both of Bridgeport, were taken into custody on Friday about 11:45 p.m. Rodriguez also was charged with interfering with an officer after he disregarded officers’ commands and tried to hide one of the three dogs, police said. Both men posted bond and were released. They are scheduled to be arraigned in state Superior Court in Bridgeport on Friday, police said.

Officers responded to the 400 block of Union Avenue after dispatchers received an anonymous call that dogs had been left outside in the freezing cold for several hours, police said. Officers found two of the dogs barking and tethered to dilapidated wooden shelters in the backyard, police said. A third

dog was located in the basement. Police responded to the same address on Union Avenue for animal cruelty calls in 2018 and 2023, and Islesias was charged with animal cruelty in the 2018 incident, police said. Court records on the disposition of that case were not immediately available.

Effort to restore gambling loss tax deduction busts

DC WASHINGTON — A long-shot effort to restore the full federal tax deduction for gambling losses fell short on Capitol Hill last week.

The House Rules Committee declined to advance an amendment to a larger spending bill that would restore a gambler’s ability to deduct 100% of losses on annual tax filings.

Rep. Dina Titus, D-Nev., whose bipartisan-supported FAIR BET Act would restore the full tax deduction, pushed for the inclusion of a comparable proposal to be included in the Consolidated Appropriations Act, which passed the House on Thursday and has been sent to the Senate.

Under tax changes approved last year, bettors will be limited to deducting up to 90%, a shift industry advocates warn will create taxable “phantom income” for players who break even.

The proposal’s failure effectively sidelines the effort unless lawmakers insert the reversal into a different must-pass bill later this year.

Gambling industry officials and tax professionals argue that the 90% deduction limit unfairly targets professional gamblers and high-stakes players, who will now be required to pay taxes on unrealized earnings.

Mega Millions ticket just short of jackpot

CA SACRAMENTO — A Mega Millions ticket sold in Southern California fell just one number short of winning the \$120 million jackpot, lottery officials said. Instead, the lucky ticket won \$1,265,778.

The ticket matched five winning numbers but not the Mega Ball in the drawing Friday, with a 3x multiplier, the California State Lottery said. California adjusts lottery prizes based on the number of tickets sold and number of winners.

Car crashes into airport entrance, injuring 6

MI DETROIT — A car crashed through the entrance of the Detroit Metropolitan Wayne County Airport on Friday evening, striking a ticket counter and injuring six people, airport officials said.

The driver was taken into custody, the Wayne County Airport Authority said in a statement. The cause of the crash was not yet known, and airport police were investigating.

The WCAA Fire Department treated six people at the site.

Video posted on social media showed a blue, four-door sedan stopped, with its hood and truck popped open, in front of Delta Air Lines counters in what appeared to be a departure lobby.

Glass and other debris lay strewn on the ground at the entrance, and yellow police tape cordoned off the scene.

The driver’s name was not immediately released.

Earthquake monitors are able to track space junk

FL CAPE CANAVERAL — As more and more space junk comes crashing down, a new study shows how earthquake monitors can better track incoming objects by tuning into their sonic booms.

Scientists reported Thursday that seismic readings from sonic booms that were generated when a discarded module from a Chinese crew capsule reentered over Southern California in 2024 allowed them to place the object’s path nearly 20 miles farther south than radar had predicted from orbit.

Using this method to track uncontrolled objects plummeting at supersonic speeds, they said, could help recovery teams reach any surviving pieces more quickly — crucial if the debris is dangerous.

FACES

Goodbye to Brat

Charli xcx has her movie-star moment at Sundance premiere

By LINDSEY BAHR
Associated Press

Charli xcx plays herself in “The Moment,” a meta mockumentary about the end of Brat summer and grappling with otherworldly success.

“I was just really interested in telling this story about expectation,” Charli xcx told The Associated Press the day after “The Moment” debuted at the Sundance Film Festival.

The 33-year-old pop star from Essex, England, has been in the music industry since she was 16, with a career trajectory that she described as anything but straightforward. Then, in 2024, it hit a crescendo with her sixth studio album, “Brat,” which became a pop culture phenomenon. Finally, she said, she felt understood for a moment. And then, just as quickly, it changed.

“There was this sort of, kind of, you know, persona that people really associated me with and then there were a lot of expectations put on me as a person, as an artist, of who I was then supposed to be. And I didn’t fit into that sort of narrative,” she said. “I had got to this place where I was finally feeling so understood. Then I was, like, not understood again.”

Making something immensely popular and resonant can be a double-edged sword for an artist working in a business that would sometimes rather milk the “sure thing” forever than let someone evolve and move on. She found herself wanting to grapple with that tension, that existential conundrum that she’d experienced.

Charli xcx likes a meta moment

A straightforward documentary didn’t seem like right approach, so she and Aidan Zamiri, the 30-year-old Scottish photographer and music video director, got to work on something else, something that felt truer to them. “The Moment” is a little “This Is Spinal Tap,” a little “Black Swan,” a little meta, with the likes of Kylie Jenner and Rachel Sennott playing themselves, a little funny and a little wild. It’s heightened, but also true.

“I won’t lie; there are definitely some cross-overs,” she said. “I haven’t made the choices that Charli in the film makes, but I’ve definitely, like, come close to it. ... It was a very accurate depiction of what I’ve experienced in the music industry.”

One of the buzziest titles in a starry program, the A24 film will be in theaters faster than most: It opens in New York and Los Angeles on Friday and expands wide on Feb. 6.

In “The Moment,” Charli xcx is under pressure as Brat summer comes to an end, having to stage a concert film with Amazon, with a sleazy director not of her choosing played by Alexander Skarsgård; promote a Brat credit card; and fall in line with what music executives want from her. She’s also not sleeping and getting increasingly frazzled about everything.

Zamiri, who directed her “360” music video and has become one of her best friends, was excited by the challenging approach and to direct



CHRIS PIZZELLO, INVISION/AP

Charli xcx attends the Jan. 23 premiere of “The Moment” in Park City, Utah. The singer calls the film “a very accurate depiction of what I’ve experienced in the music industry.”

“The Moment” is a little “This Is Spinal Tap,” a little “Black Swan,” a little meta, with the likes of Kylie Jenner and Rachel Sennott playing themselves, a little funny and a little wild. It’s heightened, but also true.

his first feature film. He also understood intrinsically what she was going through.

“It’s this battle of expectations and of people wanting one thing from you and you feeling this pressure too, to stick with it, to keep providing that one thing for fear that maybe that attention, that excitement about you will falter if the next thing, they don’t love,” Zamiri said. “I love the process of making stuff. But part of it, which is often really exciting but also weird, is the sharing with the world because then it’s just no longer yours anymore ... it becomes its own thing, which I think we saw happen in real time with Brat.”

Unofficial coronation as an actor

The Sundance Film Festival was a kind of coronation for Charli xcx, the actor, with three films across the first weekend, including



A24/AP

Charli xcx stars in “The Moment,” a documentary that takes a different approach.

Gregg Araki’s “I Want Your Sex,” where she played the uptight girlfriend of Cooper Hoffman’s character, and Cathy Yan’s “The Galle-rist,” where she was an art world influencer type with bleached eyebrows. They’re not her first on-screen credits, but they do show her range in addition to her ability to carry a film, even if she’s playing a version of herself.

It’s a big moment for Charli xcx personally, too. She’s a self-professed cinephile. To now be so fully entrenched in the filmmaking industry, she said, “has been, like, everything and more.” She also did a companion concept album for Emerald Fennell’s upcoming “Wuth-ering Heights.”

“I really am sort of, like, desperate to, like, learn more and more and more about, you know, about every part of the film industry: Making a film, being in film. I’m so hungry.”

‘Mercy’ bumps ‘Avatar’ out of box office No. 1

By JAKE COYLE
Associated Press

With a winter storm blanketing a large swath of the country, Hollywood had its quietest weekend of the year so far at the box office. The Amazon MGM sci-fi thriller “Mercy” dethroned “Avatar: Fire and Ash” from the No. 1 spot with \$11.2 million in North America, according to studio estimates.

Some 250 theaters were forced to close, from Texas to Maine, according to data firm Comscore. More than 140 million Americans were under winter storm warnings, discouraging moviegoing.

“Mercy,” a \$60 million thriller starring Chris Pratt as a man in a near-future standing trial before an AI judge, was the top new release. It arrived with withering reviews (20% fresh on Rotten Tomatoes) and a poor reception (a “B-” CinemaScore) from audiences.

That was still enough to finally dislodge James Cameron’s third Pandora epic from its monthlong perch atop the box office. “Avatar: Fire and Ash” slid to second place with \$7 million. While The Walt Disney Co. release is starting to peter out domestically, it remains a top draw overseas. It took in \$28.1 million internationally in its sixth weekend.

“Avatar: Fire and Ash” isn’t going to make nearly as much as the previous two “Avatar” movies. The 2009 original grossed \$2.9 billion and the 2022 sequel, “The Way of Water,” tapped out at \$2.3 billion. “Fire and Ash” has cleared \$1 billion internationally, but its domestic haul (\$378.5 million) is well off the pace of the other two films.

A handful of Academy Award nominees saw strong business.

Chloé Zhao’s “Hamnet,” nominated for eight Oscars including best picture, collected \$2 million in its first weekend of wide release. The Shakespeare drama, starring Jessie Buckley and Paul Mescal, is up to \$17.6 million domestically and \$42.1 million worldwide after eight weeks.

Josh Safdie’s “Marty Supreme,” nominated for nine Oscars, earned \$3.5 million in its sixth weekend of release. The A24 title, starring Timothée Chalamet, this week crossed \$100 million globally. It’s made \$86.2 million domestically thus far.

But newer releases struggled. “Return to Silent Hill,” the third installment in a horror series kick-started with 2006’s “Silent Hill,” opened with \$3.2 million.

“28 Years Later: The Bone Temple” dropped swiftly. The Sony release opened last week to just \$13.3 million in sales despite good reviews. Its second weekend was even worse, dropping 71% with \$3.6 million.



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OPINION

Jack Smith is in First Amendment denial

By JASON WILLOCK
The Washington Post

Former special counsel Jack Smith sat for a hearing with the House Judiciary Committee on Thursday, and congressmen from both parties for the most part bombastically plowed familiar political ground. But one subject that finally got due attention was the prosecutor’s effort to impose a gag order on Donald Trump while he ran for the office he now occupies.

Smith is out of power today, the target of presidential vitriol and threats as Trump sics the Justice Department on his political opponents. But it’s still worth setting the record straight on Smith’s tactics for those who can’t or won’t recognize how liberal legal aggression during the Biden years helped bring the country to this point.

When members of the House committee pressed Smith on the scope of his proposed gag order in the election-interference case against Trump, Smith repeatedly cast it as an ordinary measure to protect witnesses, one that judges largely affirmed. He told Kevin Kiley, R-Calif., that an appeals court that ruled on the gag order “found that it was justified.”

Sympathetic media coverage has mostly indulged Smith’s account. But it doesn’t come close to capturing the excess of what was attempted. In September 2023, the special counsel sought a sweeping gag order against Trump that would have not only barred him from criticizing potential witnesses but also sharply curtailed his ability to object to his own prosecution.

Smith asked Judge Tanya Chutkan to bar Trump from making “disparaging and inflammatory” statements about “any party” to the case. One of the parties to the case (United States of America v. Donald J. Trump) was the Joe Biden-led federal government. The requested gag order would have put Trump, as a candidate for president, at risk of being remanded to jail during the 2024 campaign for criticizing the incumbent Justice Department.

That’s not hyperbole; defendants who violate gag orders can be jailed, and statements from Trump that Smith’s filing identified as out of line included “This is not an

independent Justice Department, this is not an independent special counsel,” and “WE HAVE A DEPARTMENT OF INJUSTICE RIGGING THE ELECTION FOR CROOKED JOE BIDEN.” The filing generously conceded that Trump should still be allowed to make “proclamations of innocence.”

The point — and House Republicans could have done a much better job developing it in last week’s hearing — is that Smith wasn’t merely trying to protect witnesses in the case. He was trying to mute Trump’s public criticism of the prosecution itself.

Smith spun court rulings on the question as vindication. In fact, even sympathetic judges balked at his gag-order overkill. Chutkan, an Obama appointee, agreed in October 2023 to limit Trump’s ability to put potential witnesses on blast, but she also denied a big part of Smith’s request. She clarified that Trump was allowed to make statements “criticizing the government generally, including the current administration or the Department of Justice” and to assert “that his prosecution is politically motivated.”

That substantially reduced the First Amendment damage Smith tried to inflict. But the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit still had to roll back the gag order further “to bring it within constitutional bounds,” as the court put it. Three appellate judges — all also appointed by Democratic presidents — joined a ruling that noted a defendant’s right to “speak out against the prosecution and the criminal trial process that seek to take away his liberty.”

Smith testified at the House hearing that the appeals court narrowed the gag order so “that it didn’t cover me anymore, which I was fine with.” Really? Then he shouldn’t have fought so hard to outlaw Trump’s criticism of the prosecution. Smith told the House committee that “the First Amendment does not allow one to make statements that interfere with the administration of justice,” but he seems to still be in denial about the First Amendment requirements of a political campaign that had at its center the prosecution of one of the candidates.

Millions in COVID funds are still floating around

Las Vegas Review-Journal Editorial Board

The pandemic may seem like ages ago, but the financial fallout continues. In December, a Nevada legislative committee learned that the state still hasn’t burned through a quarter of the federal money it received from Congress during COVID. Washington plans to claw back any funds that aren’t spent by the end of this year.

The presentation to the Legislature’s Interim Finance Committee was instructive as a means of illustrating Congress’ lack of fiscal responsibility. The nation was on an unsustainable financial path before the pandemic hit in March 2020, but, during COVID, the red ink accelerated from a steady flow to a gushing hemorrhage.

No doubt some aid measures were necessary given the government-ordered closures of many businesses. But the pandemic also provided cover for a massive expansion of federal spending still reflected in the soaring national debt.

That tunnel vision raises questions about whether Smith’s broader case was viable. He charged Trump in part over his false claims that the 2020 election was stolen, but false political claims are usually constitutionally protected. On the evidence of the gag-order litigation, Smith’s First Amendment judgment is not perfect. In September, a Michigan judge dismissed the state’s prosecution of 2020 Trump electors who featured in Smith’s indictment, citing First Amendment concerns.

Democrats on the House committee hailed Smith as a model prosecutor and a moral beacon, but they should hope that prosecutors in the current administration can be held to a higher First Amendment standard. They probably should also hope that Attorney General Pam Bondi’s Justice Department won’t seize their phone call records without their knowledge in a criminal investigation, as the Biden Justice Department did for GOP members of Congress during the Trump case.

Smith defended those subpoenas as a necessary legal step to find out with whom Trump was communicating around the Jan. 6 riot. But it’s still a mystery why the subpoena for phone records belonging to Rep. Jim Jordan, R-Ohio, now chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, extended to April 2022 — well after Trump’s attempt to overturn the election and more than two years into the Biden administration.

The Trump Justice Department is behaving more recklessly (and incompetently) than Biden’s in pursuing the administration’s opponents; it would be nice if the House Judiciary Committee could conduct some oversight of the prosecutors actually in office. But it’s still important to ventilate what was arguably the most consequential criminal probe in American history. One day, the liberal legal establishment that venerates Smith will be back in control of the executive branch. It will need to decide whether to replicate his methods, in the hope that they will work the next time, or restore some measure of constitutional restraint.

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

early learning centers in two rural counties, a \$1.1 million plan to replace “culinary” equipment at a Northern Nevada prison and a \$666,000 expenditure for the training and certification of lactation consultants.

All of these endeavors may be worthwhile. But what do they have to do with helping Americans navigate a pandemic that has long since passed?

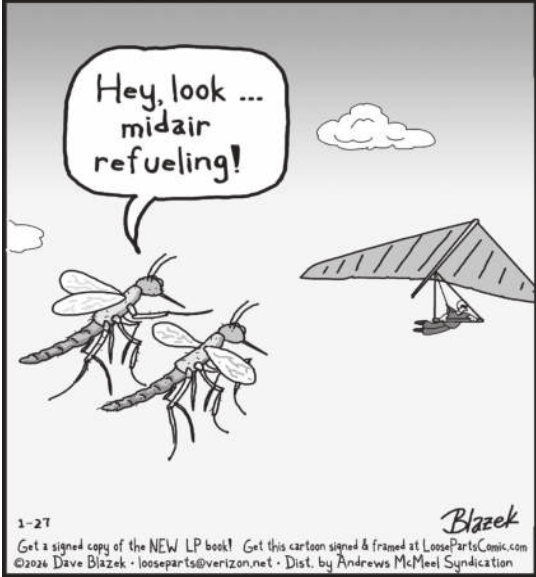
None of this even touches on the massive fraud that was endemic in federal COVID relief efforts such as the Paycheck Protection Program and expanded unemployment benefits. The General Accounting Office estimates that as much as \$300 billion ended up in the hands of cheats and grifters.

The sheer amount of pandemic money still floating around state coffers is a reflection of how members of Congress have abrogated their responsibility to set the nation on a sustainable fiscal path in favor of using the U.S. Treasury as an ATM for their own self-preservation.

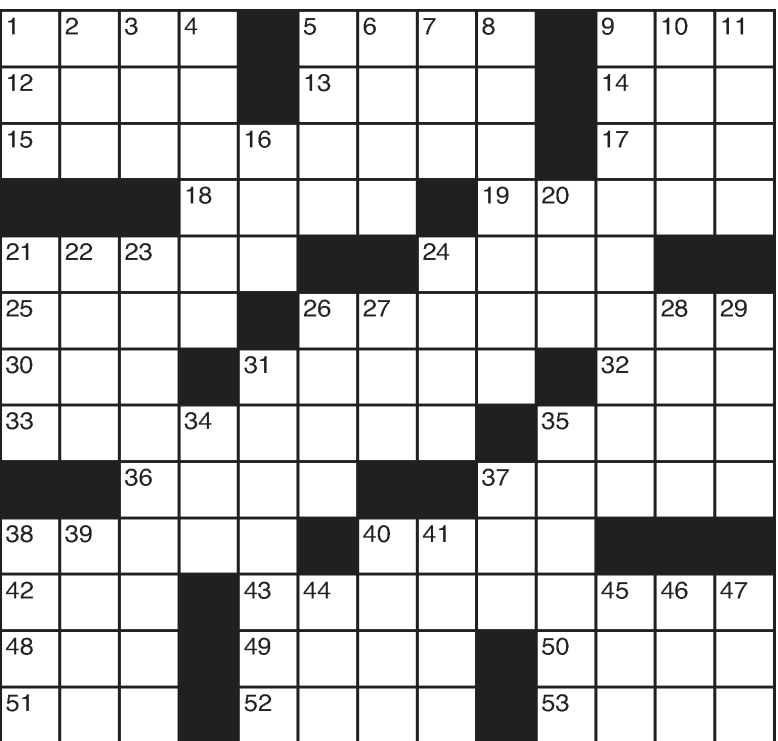
Bizarro



Loose Parts



Eugene Sheffer Crossword



- ACROSS
- DOWN
- 23 Excellent
24 Scraps
26 Chucklehead
27 Samovar
28 Salacious
29 Goes astray
31 Made a hard copy of
34 Physics particle
35 Mia Hamm's sport
37 Teeny
38 Some August babies
39 Nights of yore
40 Whirl
41 Ad Council ads, briefly
44 Flamenco cheer
45 Kanga's kid
46 Rock producer Brian
47 "For shame!"

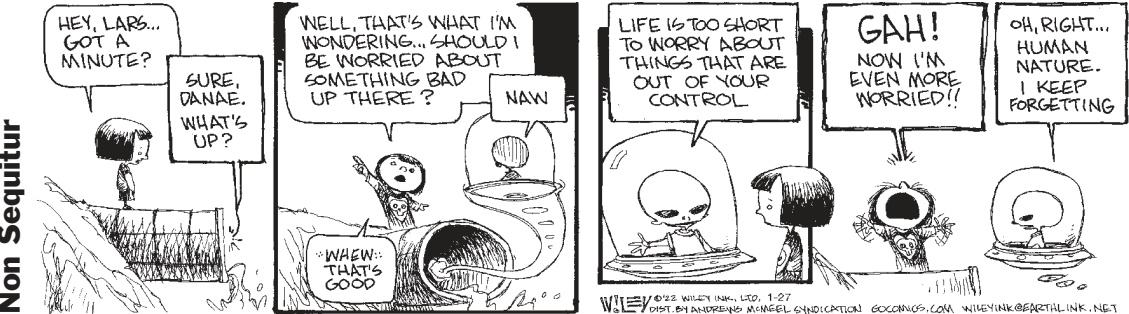
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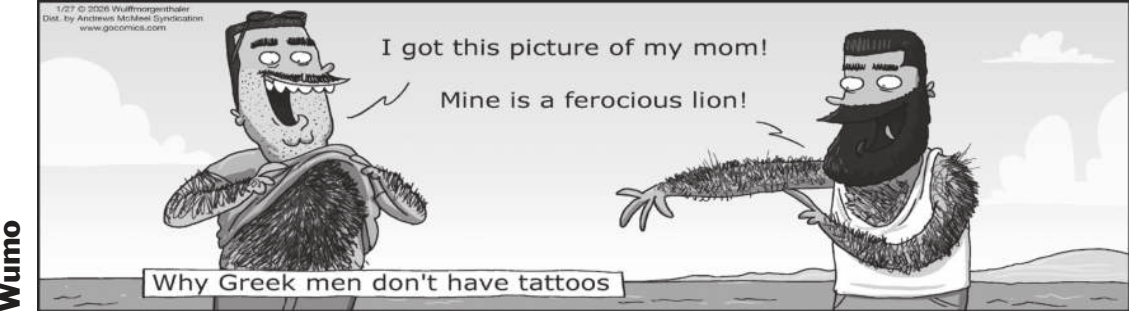
Pearls Before Swine



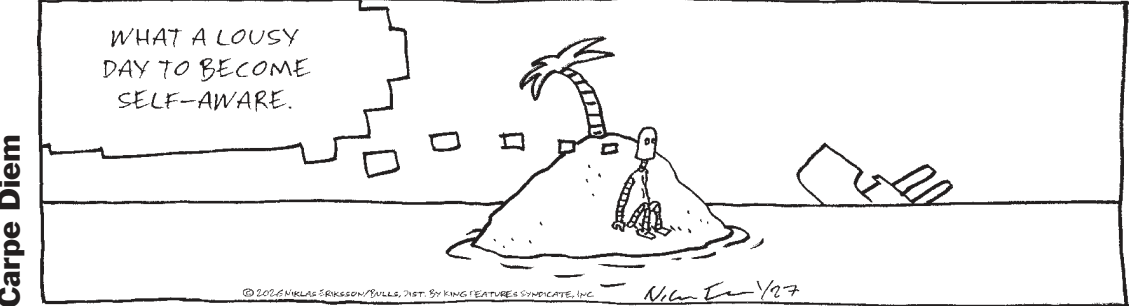
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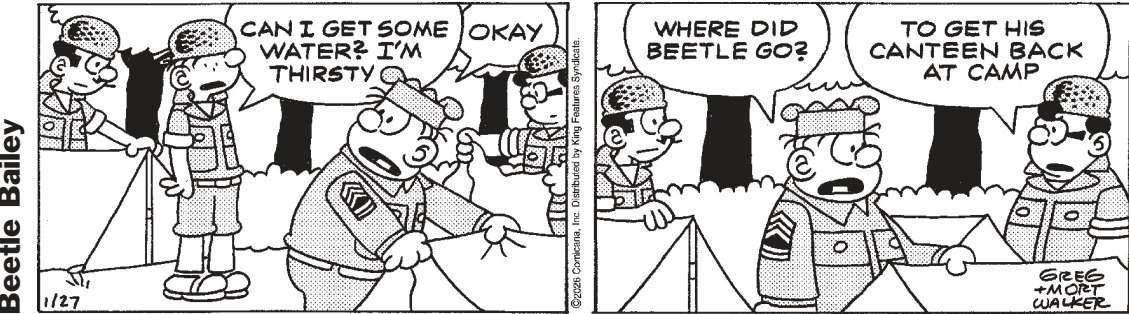
Wumo



Carpe Diem



Beetle Bailey



Answer to Previous Puzzle

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1-27 CRYPTOQUIP

DT IZP UWCWVPB FT WC

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W HWXC FB W VWBGPC, DI

ZWN QPPC NJSPB-NPPGPG.

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: PRODUCT MADE SPECIFICALLY FOR THE CLEANING OF CERTAIN CURLY-HAIRED DOGS' COATS: SHAMPOODLE.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: G equals D

WINTER OLYMPICS

Germans favorites in wide open luge fields

By TIM REYNOLDS
Associated Press

Nobody knows for certain when luge — the French word for sled — started, since nobody surely took note of the first time someone slid feet-first down a slope.

Some say the 15th century, with evidence that there were races in Norway around that time. USA Luge believes that the sport could date all the way back to around 800 B.C., citing research that Vikings used sleds that had two runners, kind of like those kids have gotten for decades.

The sport, at least as we know it now, began taking off in 1964. It's all about speed, sliders on their backs, going feet-first and reaching more than 85 mph (137 kph) on some of the tracks that are in use around the world today. Here is what to know as the Winter Olympics arrive.

How it works

Luge features men's singles, women's singles, men's doubles and women's doubles in the Olympic program along with a team relay featuring one entrant from each discipline. Sliders push off of handles to start their run, then dig their fingertips — using gloves with tiny spikes on them — into the ice to help generate more speed before getting settled on the sled for the trip down the chute. They use their bodies (hands, leg, weight) to make minor steering adjustments. There are no brakes, so the athletes pull up the front of the sled and use their feet to slow down as the track tilts uphill.

Who to watch

The easy answer for this used to be “the Germans,” but the fields are more wide open these days. Germany still has stars like back-to-back men's world champion Max Langenhan, the legendary Felix Loch and women's world champion Julia Taubitz. But host Italy (led by Dominik Fischnaller) should be strong, Austria is loaded (especially Madeleine Egle in

women's singles, Selina Egle and Lara Kipp in women's doubles, and Thomas Steu and Wolfgang Kindl in men's doubles) and the Americans (including Summer Britcher, Ashley Farquharson and Emily Fischnaller in women's singles) have a slew of legitimate medal hopefuls. Women's doubles is in the Olympic program for the first time this winter.

Venues and dates

Competition will take place from Feb. 7-12 at the Cortina Sliding Center.

Memorable moments

The U.S. has won six Olympic medals, but none of them gold — three silver and three bronze. There was a tie for gold at the 1972 Olympics in men's doubles, when Italy's Paul Hildgartner and Walter Plaikner had the same time as East Germany's Horst Hörnlein and Reinhard Bredow. Official timing was extended to thousandths of a second after that race, instead of the hundredths like in many sports.

Fun facts

It could be a home Olympics for Emily Fischnaller; the veteran U.S. slider has competed under the name Emily Sweeney until this season. She married Italian star Dominik Fischnaller in 2025 and the couple has a home a short drive from the Cortina track. ... The Tobis — German doubles stars Tobias Wendl and Tobias Arlt — have a chance to break a tie with retired German women's great Natalie Geisenberger as the most decorated Olympic lugers ever. Wendl and Arlt have six golds, matching Geisenberger's total. She has seven medals overall, one more than the Tobis. To give some idea of Germany's dominance in luge, consider this: Germany has 22 gold medals, the most of any nation. Second on that list? That would be East Germany, which hasn't existed since 1990, with 13 golds.



PHOTOS BY MATTHIAS SCHRADER/AP

Winner Kaysha Love of the United States celebrates after the women's monobob race at a World Cup race in Innsbruck, Austria in November. She is the reigning world monobob champion.

German men, US women lead the way in bobsled

By TIM REYNOLDS
Associated Press

The biggest rivalry going into the bobsled competition at the Milan Cortina Olympics is pretty much not in dispute.

On one side, there is Germany. And on the other side, there is everybody else.

The sport made its Olympic debut in 1924 and Germany didn't win its first gold medals until 1952. But the country, including the days of both East Germany and West Germany, has dominated like no other, with 22 gold medals since 1952 and rest of the world combining for 21 golds in that span.

How does it work?

There are four types of bobsled races: two-man, four-man, two-woman and monobob, which has just one female pilot in the sled and nobody else. All sleds have one driver, and the person in the back of the sled is considered the brakeman; his or her role is exactly as it sounds, to pull the brakes once the sled has crossed the finish line. Races start with everyone running either alongside or behind the sled, down a ramp before they jump into the sled. For aerodynamic reasons, everyone's head should stay down during a race (except the driver, of course). Speeds can reach 90 mph (145 kmh).

Who to watch

Germans tend to dominate sliding, and four-time Olympic gold medalist Francesco Friedrich is generally considered the best bobsledder of all time. He will face competition from teammate Johannes Lochner, and American pilot Frank Del Duca will try to crash the medal party. For the women, U.S. star Kaysha Love is the reigning world monobob champion, while veterans Kaillie Humphries Armbruster (three gold medals) and Elana Meyers Taylor (five medals) are never to be counted out. Germany's women are very strong as well.

Venues and dates

Competition in bobsled is from Feb. 15-22, all at the Cortina Sliding Center on the remodeled Eugenio Monti track.



Francesco Friedrich of Germany and his team celebrate winning the 4-man bobsled at a World Cup event in November. Friedrich is considered the world's top bobsled driver.

Memorable moments

For USA Bobsled, the quintessential Olympic moment likely remains the four-man bobsled gold medal by Steven Holcomb in the famed “Night Train” sled at the 2010 Vancouver Games, when he and his team ended a 62-year drought for the Americans in the sport's biggest race. There also is the unforgettable, made-for-the-movies tale of the Jamaican bobsled team at the 1988 Olympics in Calgary when they bucked overwhelming odds and competed in the two- and four-man events. Jamaica still has a bobsled team as well, and plenty of other smaller nations — even those that never see snow — have embraced the sport more and more since.

Fun facts

Friedrich will try to become the first pilot with more than four gold medals; he's currently tied with another German great, Andre Lange, for the most in Olympic history. If a team crashes, it remains in the competition provided that the sled actually crosses the finish line. Unlike skaters, who have blades on their feet, bobsleds don't have anything sharp on the bottom of the sleds. They glide on runners, which are steel tubes.



ROMAN KOKSAROV/AP

Felix Loch of Germany celebrates placing 2nd in the men's race of the Luge World Cup. He is one of the top contenders at the Milan Games.

Play resumes in grieving Minneapolis

By Dave Campbell
Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — The Minnesota Timberwolves returned to the court after the postponement of their game against the Golden State Warriors the day before, the focus clearly distracted by a community in crisis.

“Their group was suffering. The vibe in the stands, it was one of the most bizarre, sad games I’ve ever been a part of,” Golden State coach Steve Kerr said after the 111-85 victory Sunday. “You could feel the somber atmosphere. Their team, you could tell they were struggling with everything that’s been going on and what the city has been through.”

Before the game, Minnesota coach Chris Finch’s voice cracked and faltered as the he expressed on behalf of the team a heartbreak for the community’s collective fear and pain from the ongoing immigration crackdown, following the fatal shooting of 37-year-old Alex Pretti by a federal officer.

Finch presents a straightforward, no-nonsense approach in his public statements and rarely reveals much emotion, but he was clearly moved by the situation in Minneapolis. The game between the Timberwolves and Warriors was postponed by 24 hours, after Pretti was killed Saturday.

“I’m more than a resident. This is my home. I love living here. I love being a part of this community. I’ve been embraced from day one. People have been amazing. It’s sad to watch what is happening,” said Finch, who was hired by Minnesota five years ago. “On the human level, certainly as somebody who takes great pride in being here, I know a lot of our players feel the same. They all love being here, and it’s just hard to watch what we’re going through.”

Afterward, Finch called it a “ghost of a performance” after his



Golden State Warriors head coach Steve Kerr, left, and Minnesota Timberwolves head coach Chris Finch talk after a game Sunday in Minneapolis.

team’s lowest final score in more than four years. Kerr said he thought it was impossible for the fans and players to focus on the court.

“They came to the game to try to forget about stuff, I guess, but I don’t think anything went away from the city and for their team,” Kerr said.

On the court, Stephen Curry scored 26 points to lead Golden State. Anthony Edwards led the Timberwolves with 32 points and 11 rebounds in their fifth straight loss, their longest skid in more than three years.

Minnesota held a moment of silence for Pretti prior to the national anthem, just as they did for Renee Good before their game Jan. 8,

the day after she was fatally shot by a federal officer. The Trump administration in December launched what the Department of Homeland Security declared the largest immigration enforcement operation in history and earlier this month announced a surge of more officers to push their force past 2,000.

The NBA announced Saturday that the rescheduling decision was made to “prioritize the safety and security of the Minneapolis community” after Pretti was killed during a confrontation in a commercial district less than 2 miles south of Target Center. Finch said Sunday that the Wolves pushed for the postponement to respect the public grieving process.

“Playing basketball just didn’t feel like the right thing to do,” Finch said, thanking the NBA and Golden State for their support.

Warriors coach Steve Kerr, long one of the league’s most outspoken coaches, was measured but clearly moved as he expressed his own sympathy.

“This has always been a great stop on the NBA tour. I love the city of Minneapolis. People here are wonderful, and it’s very sad what’s happening. I feel for the city. There’s a pall that’s been cast over the city. You can feel it. A lot of people are suffering, and obviously a loss of life is the No. 1 concern. Those families will never get their family members back,” Kerr said.

Scoreboard

Eastern Conference				
Atlantic Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Boston	28	17	.622	—
Toronto	29	19	.604	½
New York	27	18	.600	1
Philadelphia	24	20	.545	3½
Brooklyn	12	32	.273	15½
Southeast Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Miami	25	22	.532	—
Orlando	23	21	.523	½
Atlanta	22	25	.468	3
Charlotte	18	28	.391	6½
Washington	10	34	.227	13½
Central Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Detroit	33	11	.750	—
Cleveland	27	20	.574	7½
Chicago	23	22	.511	10½
Milwaukee	18	26	.409	15
Indiana	11	35	.239	23
Western Conference				
Southwest Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
San Antonio	31	15	.674	—
Houston	27	16	.628	2½
Memphis	18	25	.419	11½
Dallas	19	27	.413	12
New Orleans	12	36	.250	20
Northwest Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Oklahoma City	37	10	.787	—
Denver	31	15	.674	5½
Minnesota	27	19	.587	9½
Portland	23	23	.500	13½
Utah	15	31	.326	21½
Pacific Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
L.A. Lakers	27	17	.614	—
Phoenix	27	19	.587	1
Golden State	26	21	.553	2½
L.A. Clippers	21	24	.467	6½
Sacramento	12	35	.255	16½
Sunday's games				
Detroit 139, Sacramento 116				
Golden State 111, Minnesota 85				
New Orleans 104, San Antonio 95				
Toronto 103, Oklahoma City 101				
Miami 111, Phoenix 102				
L.A. Clippers 126, Brooklyn 89				
Denver at Memphis, ppd				
Dallas at Milwaukee, ppd				
Monday's games				
Indiana at Atlanta				
Philadelphia at Charlotte				
Orlando at Cleveland				
L.A. Lakers at Chicago				
Memphis at Houston				
Portland at Boston				
Golden State at Minnesota				
Tuesday's games				
Portland at Washington				
Sacramento at New York				
Milwaukee at Philadelphia				
New Orleans at Oklahoma City				
Brooklyn at Phoenix				
Detroit at Denver				
L.A. Clippers at Utah				

ROUNDUP

Pelicans rebound to defeat Spurs after squandering 20-point lead

Associated Press

SAN ANTONIO — Saddiq Bey and Zion Williamson each had 24 points and 10 rebounds and the New Orleans Pelicans squandered a 20-point lead before rebounding to beat the San Antonio Spurs 104-95 on Sunday night.

San Antonio held a 24-5 advantage to open the fourth quarter, but New Orleans closed the game on a 17-3 run to avoid a season sweep by the Spurs.

Victor Wembanyama had 16 points, 16 rebounds and four blocks to lead San Antonio. Keldon Johnson

added 15 points as the Spurs failed to capitalize on a double-digit rally.

Pistons 139, Kings 116: Cade Cunningham had 29 points and 11 assists and host Detroit routed Sacramento for its fifth victory in six games.

The Eastern Conference-leading Pistons rebounded from a home loss to Houston on Friday night to improve to 33-11. Tied at 35 after a quarter, Detroit broke it open in the second by outscoring the Kings 43-30.

Raptors 103, Thunder 101: Immanuel Quickley had 23 points and

11 rebounds to help visiting Toronto defeat NBA-leading Oklahoma City.

R.J. Barrett scored 14 points and Scottie Barnes added 10 points and 10 rebounds for the Raptors, who won their fourth straight.

Heat 111, Suns 102: Bam Adebayo scored 22 points, Jaime Jaquez Jr. added 20 and visiting Miami beat short-handed Phoenix.

The Heat had a short turnaround after blowing out Utah 147-116 on Saturday night, but took advantage of the Suns playing without Devin Booker and Jalen Green.

Clippers 126, Nets 89: Kawhi



New Orleans Pelicans guard Saddiq Bey grabs a rebound over Spurs forward Harrison Barnes during the first half in San Antonio on Sunday.

Leonard scored 21 of his 28 points in the first half as host Los Angeles built a 38-point lead in the second quarter and beat Brooklyn.

James Harden scored 19 points,

John Collins added 18, and Jordan Miller had 16. Ivica Zubac finished with 11 points and 10 rebounds as the Clippers won for the eighth time in nine games.

AUSTRALIAN OPEN/GOLF

Pegula tops Keys, sets up all-American quarterfinal

By John Pye
Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Jessica Pegula knocked podcast pal and defending champion Madison Keys out of the Australian Open on Monday to secure a quarterfinal against Amanda Anisimova, another all-American match.

Their fourth-round wins on Day 9 meant four Americans reached the women's singles last eight in Australia for the first time since 2001, when Serena and Venus Williams, Jennifer Capriati, Monica Seles and Lindsay Davenport made it through.

"Sucks that one American has to go out in the quarterfinals," Anisimova said.

Pegula had a slightly different take: "At least one of us will get through and I think that's great for American tennis. Yeah, it's been pretty crazy how well the women have been doing and how many top-ranked girls there are. I'm just happy to be a part of that conversation."

Pegula and Anisimova advanced a day after No. 3 Coco Gauff and 18-year-old Iva Jovic earned their places on the other side of the draw.

Pegula's 6-3, 6-4 win at Rod Laver Arena ended Keys' first Grand Slam title defense in a tough section of the draw.

Anisimova, runner-up at the last two majors at Wimbledon and the U.S. Open, advanced 7-6 (4), 6-4 over Wang Xinyu as the temperature started rising at Melbourne Park and organizers triggered the heat stress policy which allowed for extra cooling breaks.

"What a battle out there. Tough conditions against a really good opponent," Anisimova said.

No. 2 Iga Swiatek continued her quest to complete a career Grand Slam with a 6-0, 6-3 win over home qualifier Maddison Inglis, giving the center court crowd little to cheer on the Australia Day national holiday.



MARK BAKER/AP

Jessica Pegula of the U.S. plays a backhand return to her compatriot Madison Keys during their fourth-round match at the Australian Open in Melbourne, Australia on Monday.

Swiatek next meets No. 5 Elena Rybakina, runner-up to Aryna Sabalenka here in 2023.

Pegula's play

Pegula is in the quarterfinals for the fourth time in Australia but has never previously gone further at the season-opening major. Anisimova is in the last eight here for the first time.

"I have been seeing, hitting, moving, I feel very well this whole tournament, and to be able to keep that up against such a great player as Maddie and defending champion was going to be a lot tougher of a task today," Pegula said, "I was still able to do that really well."

Pegula and Keys had played three times previously, and Keys had won the last two. But on Monday it was Pegula who dominated, racing to 4-1 leads in both sets.

Pegula's best performance in a major was reaching the U.S. Open final in 2024.

Italian men

Three Italian men started Day 9. Only two could advance.

Two-time defending champion Jannik Sinner beat compatriot Luciano Darderi 6-1, 6-3, 7-6 (2) two days after admitting he felt lucky to survive the third round.

Sinner struggled with the extreme heat and cramping in his Saturday afternoon win over No. 85-ranked Eliot Spizzirri, and only took control of that match after the roof was closed in the third set.

His evening match Monday was much cooler, and so was Sinner. He served a personal best 19 aces and controlled the tempo against Darderi, taking the last seven points in the tiebreaker.

Lorenzo Musetti reached the quarterfinals for the first time in Australia with a 6-2, 7-5, 6-4 win over an ailing Taylor Fritz.

It completed a Grand Slam set of quarterfinals for the 23-year-old Italian.



ROSS D. FRANKLIN/AP

Scottie Scheffler celebrates his win in the American Express at PGA West on Sunday in La Quinta, Calif. He made birdies on half his holes and won by four strokes.

Scheffler starts new season with his same winning ways

By Doug Ferguson
Associated Press

LA QUINTA, Calif. — New year, same Scottie Scheffler.

The world's No. 1 player loves coming to the California desert early in the season to take stock of his game and get into tournament shape. There's wasn't much wrong Sunday in The American Express.

Scheffler made birdie on half of his holes, going from a two-shot deficit early to a lead that stretched to six shots late before he closed with a 6-under 66 for a four-shot victory.

"There's always a certain amount of rust when it comes to playing competitive golf," Scheffler said. "You can simulate as best you can at home, but you can only get into the heat of the moment when you're posting a score and you're in contention when you're at a tournament. So it's nice to see some of the stuff that I've been being practicing and working on has paid off."

He had four birdies in a six-hole stretch on the front nine to blow past 18-year-old Blades Brown and everyone and the rest of the field.

Scheffler won for the 20th time on the PGA Tour — all in the last four years — to earn a lifetime membership. More indicative of his dominance in the game is winning nine of those 20 tournaments by four shots or more.

He also joined Jack Nicklaus and Tiger Woods as the only players to have 20 PGA Tour titles and four majors before turning 30.

The world's No. 1 player briefly

shared the stage with Brown, who finished high school two weeks ago and tied for 17th in a Korn Ferry Tour event in the Bahamas that finished Wednesday. He's the first player to play eight straight days of PGA Tour-sanctioned competition.

Brown was one shot behind 54-hole leader Si Woo Kim and one shot ahead of Scheffler heading to the tee at the par-3 fourth on the Stadium Course at PGA West. Five holes later, Brown and Kim both were five shots behind and Scheffler was putting it into overdrive.

"Eight rounds I know sounds like a lot, but I was having a lot of fun," he said. "You're telling me I get to play in a PGA Tour event and to play with Scottie Scheffler and see him win it, that was insane."

It all looked so routine at the end. Scheffler rapped in a par putt to finish at 27-under 261, stuffed the golf ball in his pocket and smiled. It all looks so routine.

Scheffler seized control quickly after a birdie-bogey start. He hit 8-iron to 2 feet on the par-3 fourth hole, played the par-5 fifth smartly with a shot away from the water and a pitch-and-run he nearly holed from across the green for birdie. Wedges led to two more birdies to close out the front, two more early on the back to lead by four.

Brown's chances seemed to end on one hole.

He took an aggressive line and pulled his tee shot into the water on the par-5 fifth. He had to drop in front of the tee boxes — he

chose to drop in the dormant Bermuda rough instead of the teeing ground — and then hit a poor wedge when he got back into position that led to double bogey.

Brown went 11 holes without a birdie and had to late bogeys that led to a 74. He fell from a tie for second to a tie for 18th, costing him a spot at Torrey Pines next week.

But it was a good lesson alongside a great teacher.

Day closed with a 64 that moved him up 18 spots to a runner-up finish, along with Ryan Gerard (65), Matt McCarty (68) and Andrew Putnam (68).

Kim, who plays often with Scheffler at Royal Oaks in Dallas, also lost his way on one hole. He was two shots behind on the par-5 eighth when he took two shots to get out of a greenside bunker, chipped strong and made double bogey. He missed a 3-foot par putt on the next hole. Kim rallied with three birdies on the back nine to salvage a 72 and tie for sixth.

Scheffler's only big blunder was when it didn't matter, a tee shot into the water on the par-3 17th known as "Alcatraz," and by then he had plenty of get-of-jail-free cards. His double bogey only kept the margin from being greater against the strongest field The American Express has had in decades.

Scheffler now takes a week off before ending the West Coast with three straight events, starting with the Phoenix Open where this amazing run began four years ago. He won his first PGA Tour title in a playoff. It hasn't been that close lately.

NFL

Seahawks win NFC title, head to Super Bowl

By Andrew Destin
Associated Press

SEATTLE—Sam Darnold was cast aside by the New York Jets, who drafted him No. 3 overall in 2018. The Minnesota Vikings didn't bring him back after he led them to a 14-3 season but flopped in the playoffs.

Now, in his first season with the Seattle Seahawks, he's Super Bowl-bound.

Darnold threw for three touchdowns, Seattle's "Dark Side" defense came up with a critical fourth-down stop, and the Seahawks advanced to the Super Bowl, beating the Los Angeles Rams 31-27 in an electrifying NFC championship game Sunday.

"You can't talk about the game without talking about our quarterback," second-year coach Mike Macdonald said. "He shut a lot of people up tonight, so I'm happy for him."

Led by Darnold — an eight-year veteran playing for his fifth team — Seattle (16-3) reached its fourth Super Bowl in franchise history and first in 11 years. The Seahawks lost that most recent appearance to the New England Patriots, their opponent in two weeks at Levi's Stadium in Santa Clara, Calif.

Darnold, who was blown out in his playoff debut last year with Minnesota — by Los Angeles, no less — played through an oblique injury and completed 25 of 36 passes for 346 yards with no turnovers. Jaxon Smith-Njigba had 153 yards receiving — the second-most in a playoff game in franchise history — and a touchdown on 10 catches.

Seattle needed Darnold to keep pace with Matthew Stafford, who drove the Rams (14-6) into position to take the lead with 4:59 remaining. On fourth-and-4 at the Seattle 6, coach Sean McVay elected to go for it and Stafford's pass was broken up in the end zone by Devon Witherspoon.

"He's just the heart of our defense," safety Julian Love said of Witherspoon. "He just is



Seahawks quarterback Sam Darnold throws during the first half of the NFC championship against the Los Angeles Rams on Sunday in Seattle.

the essence. 'Spoon is it. He plays with just such a raw energy. And we love him for it."

LA didn't get the ball back until there were 25 seconds left, and Puka Nacua was tackled inbounds near midfield on the final play.

Stafford threw for 374 yards and three touchdowns, but the Rams were undone by critical errors, including a muffed punt by Xavier Smith in the third quarter. On the next play, Darnold connected with Jake Bobo for a 17-yard touchdown and a 24-13 lead.

The Seahawks led 31-20 late in the third quarter on Darnold's 13-yard TD pass to Cooper Kupp, but Los Angeles got back into the game when Seattle cornerback Riq Woolen was flagged for taunting after breaking

up a pass to Nacua on third-and-12, giving the Rams a first down.

On the next play, Stafford threw at Woolen again, and Nacua beat him in the corner of the end zone for a 34-yard touchdown.

"Even though I made a great play, I wasn't great for my team," Woolen said, "and I've got to be better with that and celebrate with the team."

LA forced a punt on the Seahawks' next possession and went on a 14-play, 84-yard drive that came up empty thanks to Witherspoon's pass breakup.

Seattle stayed aggressive on its final possession, with Darnold throwing for three first downs to run out most of the clock.

Darnold set the tone with his first comple-

tion of the game, a 51-yarder to Rashid Shaheed. Four plays later, Walker ran 2 yards for a TD to make it 7-0.

Leading 13-10, the Rams forced a three-and-out late in the second quarter, but after two straight incompletions by Stafford, Los Angeles punted the ball back, and it took Darnold just 34 seconds to put the Seahawks ahead for good.

Smith-Njigba caught a deep pass from Darnold, absorbed a big hit by Kam Curl and held on for a 42-yard gain. Four plays later, Darnold and Smith-Njigba hooked up for a 14-yard TD that made it 17-13 heading into halftime.

"I told my team, I'm going to do whatever it takes. Whatever y'all ask of me, I'm gonna get it done, whatever that might be," said Smith-Njigba, the NFL's leading receiver in the regular season. "And that's what you saw today. You just saw grit, determination, you saw passion out there and you saw a group, a collective, going out there and getting the job done."

Stafford's potential return

McVay bristled when asked if he expects Stafford to return next season. The 37-year-old is a finalist for his first MVP award after throwing for a league-leading 4,707 yards and a career-best 46 touchdown passes.

"I know that if he wants to, he's still playing at a pretty damn good clip," McVay said. "I mean, he's the MVP of the league, and if he's not, respect for everybody else. But this guy played a level that's just different."

Bobo finds the end zone

Bobo's touchdown catch was his first since Jan. 5, 2025, which also came against the Rams, and the fourth of his three-year career. He gave all the credit to Darnold.

"He's the best in the world," Bobo said. "It didn't surprise anybody in here, I'll tell you that."

Rams' McVay, Stafford lament missed opportunities in loss

By Andrew Destin
Associated Press

SEATTLE — Sean McVay had zero interest in discussing whether Matthew Stafford, his soon-to-be 38-year-old quarterback, will be back for the Los Angeles Rams next year.

McVay had a bit more to say about how his team came up short against the Seahawks yet again Sunday, losing 31-27 in the NFC championship game. The Rams lost twice in a two-month span at Seattle, falling 38-37 in December when the Seahawks converted two 2-point conversions in regulation and a third in overtime.

This loss denied Los Angeles a chance of winning the franchise's third Super Bowl and the second and five years for McVay and Stafford.

"I'm never really short on words, and I am right now," McVay said. "It's tough, but this is sports, and you got to be able to deal with it."

Aside from one questionable decision — the Rams going for it on fourth-and-4 at the Seattle 6 with

4:59 remaining while trailing by four — McVay had his team humming as usual.

LA totaled 479 yards of offense to 396 for the Seahawks. Stafford, an MVP finalist, completed 22 of 35 passes for 374 yards and three touchdowns.

Before that critical fourth-down play, McVay raced down the sideline, looking like he might call timeout. But he didn't, and Devon Witherspoon broke up Stafford pass in the end zone.

"I thought about it, and didn't decide to do it," McVay said. "Obviously it didn't work out for us. But I thought our guys played well. There were a lot of things that we got a lot of what we wanted today. Felt really good about the way that our guys executed, specifically on the offensive side. And you know, that was a situation where we just kind of came up short."

In the third quarter, the Rams had their latest of several special-teams miscues this season when Xavier Smith muffed a punt and Seattle recovered. On the next



Los Angeles Rams quarterback Matthew Stafford runs over Seahawks linebacker DeMarcus Lawrence during the second half of the NFC championship Sunday in Seattle.

play, Sam Darnold connected with Jake Bobo for a 17-yard touchdown and a 24-13 lead.

Smith also juggled a punt earlier in the game.

"That one, it was costly," McVay

said. "I love him. He's done a great job. ... But that was a tough one."

Los Angeles countered each time the Seahawks took a double-digit lead. The NFL's top-scoring offense put together consecutive

touchdown drives after Smith's gaffe.

Stafford found Davante Adams for a 2-yard touchdown and then connected with Puka Nacua for a 34-yard score.

"It was a battle," Stafford said. "The whole game wasn't like we were all just waiting for one play here or there. There's a million plays in a football game that can turn the tide, and we had our opportunity and didn't make it."

Had Stafford completed that fourth-down pass, it could have been the sixth game-winning drive of his playoff career, and third this postseason.

Stafford guided the Rams past the Carolina Panthers in the wildcard round with a late TD pass to Colby Parkinson, and then set up Harrison Mevis for a game-winning field goal against the Chicago Bears in the divisional round.

"Great football team we just played," Stafford said. "Feel like it's a great effort, really good football game, obviously we didn't come out on top. Tough pill to swallow at the moment."

NFL PLAYOFFS



ASHLEY LANDIS/AP

New England linebacker Elijah Ponder (91) runs after recovering a fumble against the Broncos during the first half of the AFC Championship game Sunday in Denver. The play led to the Patriots touchdown.

Patriots back in Super Bowl with gritty win over Broncos

BY ARNIE STAPLETON
Associated Press

DENVER — Drake Maye handled the sloppy, snowy conditions better than the home team and he scored New England's only touchdown on a 6-yard keeper, propelling the Patriots to their 12th Super Bowl with a 10-7 win over the Denver Broncos in the AFC championship game Sunday.

Maye threw for just 86 yards, but ran for 65 and iced the win with a 7-yard keeper on third-and-5 in the waning minutes to send New England (17-3) to the Super Bowl in Mike Vrabel's first year as coach.

The Patriots will play the Seattle Seahawks, who beat the Los Angeles Rams in the NFC championship game, on Feb. 8 in Santa Clara, Calif.

"I'm just proud of this team," said the 23-year-old Maye, who's the second-youngest starting quarterback to reach the Super Bowl, behind only Miami's Dan Marino. "Don't have many words. Just thankful for this team. Love each and every one of them. It took everybody."

Christian Gonzalez intercepted Jarrett Stidham, starting in place of an injured Bo Nix, with 2:11 remaining for New England's second takeaway. The first set up the Patriots with a short field and led to Maye's touchdown scamper that tied it at 7 heading into halftime.

With Nix looking on from a suite following ankle surgery Tuesday in Alabama, Stidham made his first start in more than two years.

His first completion since the 2023 regular-season finale was a 52-yard dart to Marvin Mims Jr. to the New England 7 that set up Courtland Sutton's 6-yard touchdown catch.

That was Stidham's highlight as he turned the ball over twice and finished 17 of 31 for 133 yards with the TD.

"I was super excited for the opportunity and just hate that we fell short," Stidham said.

The Patriots, who went 4-13 last year under Jerod Mayo, became the third team in the Super Bowl era to win a conference championship with 10 points or less. Buffalo beat Denver 10-7 in the 1991 AFC title game, and Los Angeles beat Tampa Bay 9-0 in the 1979 NFC championship game.

Vrabel, who won three Super Bowls as a playmaking linebacker for New England, could become the first person in NFL history to also win as a head coach for the same franchise.

"I won't win it. It'll be the players that'll win the game," Vrabel said. "I promise you, it won't be me that'll win it, and I promise you that I'll do everything I can, and our staff, to have them ready for the game."

The Broncos (15-4) had a 7-0 lead early in the second quarter that was short-lived. Elijah Ponder recovered Stidham's backward pass at the Denver 12 with three minutes left, setting up the tying touchdown two plays later.

"I thought I threw it forward and obviously the replay said differently," Stidham said. "Prob-

bly should have just eaten the sack and let (Jeremy) Crawshaw punt the ball and flip the field."

Both kickers missed two field goals in the frigid conditions with the Broncos' Wil Lutz and the Patriots' Andy Borregales wide on long tries just before the snow came in at halftime. Lutz's 45-yard attempt late in the fourth quarter was tipped by Leonard Taylor III.

New England's victory was its 40th in the playoffs, breaking a tie with the San Francisco 49ers for the most in NFL history.

It was sunny at kickoff with a temperature of 26 degrees, but by halftime the snowflakes began falling and grounds crews had to use snowblowers to mark the hashmarks and yard lines by the fourth quarter, when it was 16 degrees.

"It was a lot of fun out there," Denver cornerback Pat Surtain II said. "Snow game, for the conference, to go to the Super Bowl — it doesn't get any better than that. I felt like I was a little kid out there just playing in the snow."

And the Patriots had the most fun of all.

"What an atmosphere out here," said Maye, in his second NFL season. "Battle of the elements. Love this team. How about the defense? I love each and every one of them."

New England has allowed 26 points across three playoff games. The only team to allow fewer points over three playoff games before a Super Bowl appearance was the 2000 Ravens, who allowed just 16 points.

Denver coach Payton has second thoughts on passing up easy FG

BY PAT GRAHAM
Associated Press

DENVER — Sean Payton conceded he will have second thoughts about his decision to pass up an easy field goal, as well as the play he called instead.

The Denver Broncos and their fans now have the entire offseason to argue over which part of that critical fourth-and-1 play was worse.

Because Payton decided not to kick a chip-shot field goal for a 10-0 lead in good weather in the first half of Sunday's AFC championship game against the New England Patriots, Denver ended up needing to make a kick once the blowing snow and wind rolled in after halftime. The decision played an integral role in the Broncos' 10-7 loss.

"There's always regrets," Payton said. "I felt like here were are, fourth-and-1, close enough — it's also a call you make based on the team you're playing and what you're watching on the other side of the ball. Yeah, there will always be second thoughts."

That fateful move put Denver on a slippery slope that would've challenged any quarterback — to say nothing of perennial backup Jarrett Stidham.

Everyone from Bill Cowher on the pregame show to Tony Romo in the broadcast booth was talking about the importance of the Broncos taking every point they could with Stidham stepping in for the injured Bo Nix, but Payton didn't heed that advice.

Wil Lutz missed two field goals (one was blocked) on a day Denver's defense gave up one touchdown. And that score was set up

when Stidham turned the ball over deep in New England territory.

Had the Broncos not given away three points, they may have been able to overcome those mistakes.

"There will be a number of things when we watch the tape I will look at and critique and pay close attention to," Payton said. "It was a hard-fought game, and we didn't do enough to win."

Early in the second quarter — and with the skies still clear — Denver led 7-0 and faced fourth-and-1 at the Patriots 14. The Broncos called timeout to discuss their options. The offense returned to the field and Stidham's pass to RJ Harvey fell incomplete.

"Just didn't work out on that one play," said Stidham, who threw for 133 yards and a score, along with a fourth-quarter interception that sealed the win for New England. "That's just football."

Late in the game, trailing 10-7, Payton sent Lutz out to try a 45-yard kick into a tricky wind and on a snow-covered field. Leonard Taylor III got a hand on the kick.

"Unfortunately, you couldn't see the lines on the field and honestly I think we might have been a yard short on the snap," Lutz said. "But you can't see the lines on the field and we had to kind of estimate."

Denver was right there, too. Only three teams have won a game to advance to the Super Bowl while scoring 10 points or fewer — and the Broncos were on the wrong end in two of them. They also lost 10-7 to Buffalo in the 1991 AFC title game, with backup quarterback Gary Kubiak replacing the injured John Elway.



GARRETT W. ELLWOOD/AP

Denver head coach Sean Payton opted not to kick a field goal on fourth-and-1 in the first half, which cost the Broncos in their 10-7 loss.

SPORTS

All-American

Pegula beats defending champ Keys, sets up quarterfinal vs. Anisimova » **Australian Open, Page 21**



PHOTOS BY ASHLEY LANDIS, LEFT, AND LINDSEY WASSON/AP
Quarterbacks Drake Maye, left, and Sam Darnold will face off for the New England Patriots and Seattle Seahawks, respectively, in Super Bowl 60 on Sunday, Feb. 8.

Super Bowl matchup set

Patriots, Seahawks make triumphant returns to title game after close wins

BY ROB MAADDI
Associated Press

Drake Maye vs. Sam Darnold. Two stingy defenses. A second-year head coach vs. a veteran coach in his second act. Super Bowl 60 is set and it's a rematch: The New England Patriots vs. the Seattle Seahawks. The Patriots will seek their NFL-record seventh Super Bowl victory when they face the Sea-

hawks on Feb. 8 at Levi's Stadium in Santa Clara, Calif. Led by Maye, coach Mike Vrabel and a stifling defense, New England is back in the Super Bowl for the first time since Tom Brady and Bill Belichick won their sixth ring together seven years ago. The Patriots (17-3) beat the Denver Broncos 10-7 on Sunday in the AFC championship game to advance to their 12th Super Bowl. Darnold, Mike Macdonald and a

suffocating defense have led Seattle to the big stage for the fourth time in franchise history. The Seahawks are seeking their second Lombardi. Darnold, a No. 3 overall pick in 2018 now with his fifth team, played one of his best games to lead Seattle to a 31-27 victory over the Los Angeles Rams in the NFC title game. He threw for 346 yards and three touchdowns with no turnovers.

"That doesn't matter to me," Darnold said about the doubters he's proven wrong. "I just come to work every single day with these guys. These guys in the locker room, that's what it's about to me, man. The way we've come to work ever since April in OTAs, training camp, one day at a time and we're here. We did it." "We did not care," Macdonald said about coming into the season as underdogs in the NFC West be-

hind the Rams and 49ers. "It's about us. It's always been about us and what we do and now we're going to the Super Bowl." Maye scored on a 6-yard touchdown run in the second quarter in Denver after a critical turnover by Jarrett Stidham, who made his fifth career start filling in for injured Broncos quarterback Bo Nix. "The Pats are back, baby," Maye said. "Now, gotta win one."

Avs stay red-hot behind Nelson's hat trick » NHL, Page 18

