

Celebration in Syria as rebels take capital

Associated Press

DAMASCUS, Syria — Syrians poured into streets echoing with celebratory gunfire on Sunday after a stunning rebel advance reached the capital, ending the Assad family's 50 years of iron rule but raising questions about the future of the country and the wider region.

Joyful crowds gathered in squares in Damascus, waving the Syrian revolutionary flag in scenes that recalled the early days of the Arab Spring uprising, before a brutal crackdown and the rise of an insurgency plunged the country into a nearly 14-year civil war.

Others gleefully ransacked the presidential palace and residence after President Bashar Assad and other top officials vanished. Russian state news agencies were reporting that

Assad and his family had arrived in Moscow and were given asylum. Russia, a close ally, said Assad left the country after negotiations with rebel groups and had given instructions to transfer power peacefully.

Abu Mohammed al-Golani, a former al-Qaida commander who cut ties with the group years ago and says he embraces pluralism and religious tolerance, leads the biggest rebel faction and is poised to chart the country's future.

In his first public appearance since fighters entered the Damascus suburbs Saturday, al-Golani visited the sprawling Umayyad Mosque and called Assad's fall "a victory to the Islamic nation." Calling himself by his given name, Ahmad al-Sharaa, and not his nom de guerre, he told hundreds of peo-

ple that Assad had made Syria "a farm for Iran's greed."

The rebels face the daunting task of healing bitter divisions in a country ravaged by war and still split among armed factions. Turkey-backed opposition fighters are battling U.S.-allied Kurdish forces in the north, and the Islamic State is still active in some remote areas.

Syrian state television broadcast a rebel statement early Sunday saying Assad had been overthrown and all prisoners had been released. They called on people to preserve the institutions of "the free Syrian state." The rebels later announced a curfew in Damascus from 4 p.m. to 5 a.m.

The rebels said they freed people held at the notorious Saydnaya prison, where rights groups say thousands were

tortured and killed. A video circulating online purported to show rebels breaking open cell doors and freeing dozens of female prisoners, many of whom appeared shocked.

"This happiness will not be completed until I can see my son out of prison and know where is he," said one relative, Bassam Masr. "I have been searching for him for two hours. He has been detained for 13 years."

Rebel commander Anas Salkhadi later appeared on state TV and sought to reassure Syria's religious and ethnic minorities, saying: "Syria is for everyone, no exceptions. Syria is for Druze, Sunnis, Alawites, and all sects."

"We will not deal with people the way the Assad family did," he added.

DOD rattled by list urging Hegseth to fire 'woke' officers

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Military leaders are rattled by a list of "woke" senior officers that a conservative group urged Pete Hegseth to dismiss for promoting diversity in the ranks if he is confirmed to lead the Pentagon.

The list compiled by the American Accountability Foundation includes 20 general officers or senior admirals and a disproportionate number of female officers. It has had a chilling effect on the Pentagon's often frank discussions as leaders try to figure out how to address the potential firings and diversity issues under President-elect Donald Trump.

Those on the list in many cases seem to be targeted for public comments they made either in

interviews or at events on diversity, and in some cases for retweeting posts that promote diversity.

Tom Jones, a former aide to Republican senators who leads the foundation, said Friday that those on the list are "pretty egregious" advocates for diversity, equity and inclusion, or DEI, policies, which he called problematic.

"The nominee has been pretty clear that that has no place in the military," Jones said of Hegseth.

Hegseth has embraced Trump's effort to end programs that promote diversity in the ranks and fire those who reflect those values. Other Trump picks, like Kash Patel for FBI director, have suggested target-

ing those in government who are not aligned with Trump.

But Hegseth has been fighting to save his nomination as he faces allegations of excessive drinking and sexual assault and over his views questioning the role of women in combat. He spent the week on Capitol Hill trying to win the support of Republican senators, who must confirm him to lead the Pentagon, doing a radio interview and penning an opinion column.

Some service members have complained in the past about the Pentagon's DEI programs, saying they add to an already heavy workload. The Pentagon still has a long way to go in having a general officer corps or specialty occupations such as pilots that have a racial and gender make-

up reflective of the country.

A defense official who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the list said senior leaders are hoping that once Trump is sworn in, they will be able to discuss the issue further. They are prepared to provide additional context to the incoming administration, the official told The Associated Press, which is not publishing the names to protect service members' privacy.

Former Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel said Friday that the list would have "considerable, wide and deep consequences." He said when military members see people singled out, they will start focusing on their own survival rather than the mission or their job.

US sails near contested South China Sea islands

By Aaron Kidd
Stars and Stripes

A U.S. Navy warship Friday sailed close to disputed islands militarized by Beijing and other nations in the South China Sea, the service announced soon after the freedom-of-navigation operation.

The USS Preble steamed within 12 nautical miles of Swallow Reef in the Spratlys, according to Lt. Cmdr. Jamie Moroney, a spokesman for the U.S. 7th Fleet. The chain of about 100 islets and reefs is about 800 miles south of mainland China, 560 miles east of Vietnam and 206 miles west of the Palawan in the Philippines.

“These operations are designed to normalize adherence to the provisions under the Law of the Sea Convention, and uphold related navigational rights and freedoms,” Moroney said Friday. “To that end, they are planned well in advance, reviewed for compliance with international law and carried out in a safe and professional manner. They are not driven by current events.”

The Spratlys are entirely claimed by China, Vietnam and Taiwan. Beijing, however, maintains about seven outposts there, according to the CIA’s World Factbook website. Three of those

spots — Fiery Cross, Mischief and Subi reefs — house military bases. The Malaysian navy maintains a presence on Swallow Reef.

Moroney said the Preble had no interactions with foreign forces during its passage.

The Preble returned to duty with the 7th Fleet in mid-October outfitted with a high-energy laser for testing at sea. The 60-kilowatt HELIOS system can “dazzle,” or blind or impair sensors aboard surveillance drones, or punch a hole through drones, low-flying aircraft and, in some cases, missiles, according to Lockheed Martin, its maker

The Navy routinely operates near the Spratlys and the Paracels, another contested island chain in the South China Sea, to protest restrictions on innocent passage. In the Spratlys, all three claimants require either permission or advance notice before a military vessel travels through the area.

The Spratlys are partially claimed by a handful of other countries, including the Philippines, which occupies nine features there, according to the CIA factbook. Among those are Sabina and Second Thomas shoals, the sites of frequent clashes between China and the Philippines.

Taiwan: 14 China warships, 4 balloons reported near island

Associated Press

TAIPEI, Taiwan — China sent 14 warships, seven military aircraft and four balloons near Taiwan between Saturday and Sunday, according to Taiwan’s Defense Ministry, as Beijing ramps up pressure on the island it claims as its own.

China’s military activities come amid speculation Beijing might organize military drills around the island in response to Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te’s recent visit to Pacific allies, including U.S. stops in Hawaii and Guam.

China claims Taiwan, a self-ruled democracy of 23 million people, as its own territory, and bristles at other countries’ formal exchanges with Taiwan. The United States, like most countries, doesn’t recognize Taiwan as a country but is its main unofficial backer and sells it arms.

The Chinese government has pledged to annex Taiwan, through military force if necessary, and sends ships and mil-

itary planes near the island almost daily.

The 14 warships, seven military planes and four balloons were reported over 24 hours between 6 a.m. on Saturday and 6 a.m. on Sunday, according to Taiwan’s Defense Ministry. The ministry said six of the aircraft crossed the median line of the Taiwan Strait, an unofficial demarcation zone between Taiwan and China.

One of the balloons brushed over the island’s northern tip, according to the ministry.

Lai on Friday called on China to refrain from threats and said Beijing’s military exercises “will not be able to win the respect” of neighboring countries.

Lai’s first overseas trip since taking office in May included visits to the Marshall Islands, Tuvalu and Palau, three of the 12 countries that have diplomatic ties with Taiwan. The rest of the world, including the U.S., has official ties with China.

US giving Ukraine nearly \$1B in long-term weapons support

Associated Press

SIMI VALLEY, Calif. — The United States will provide nearly \$1 billion more in longer-term weapons support to Ukraine, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said Saturday as the Biden administration rushes to spend all the congressionally approved money it has left to bolster Kyiv before President-elect Donald Trump takes office next month.

The latest package will include more drones and munitions for the High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems, or HIMARS, that the U.S. has provided. While these weapons are critically needed now, they will be funded through the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative, which pays for longer-term systems to be put on contract.

The weapon systems purchased are often intended to support Ukraine’s future military capabilities, not make an immediate difference on the battlefield.

The \$988 million package is on top of an additional \$725 mil-

lion in U.S. military assistance, including counter-drone systems and HIMARS munitions, announced Monday that would be drawn from the Pentagon’s stockpiles to get to the front lines faster. The U.S. has provided Ukraine with more than \$62 billion in military aid since Russia’s invasion in February 2022.

“The baton will soon be passed,” Austin said. “Others will decide the course ahead. And I hope that they will build on the strength that we have forged over the past four years.”

With questions about whether Trump will maintain military support to Ukraine, the Biden administration has been trying to spend every dollar remaining from a massive foreign aid bill passed earlier this year to put Ukraine in the strongest position possible.

Before Saturday’s announcement, there was roughly \$8 billion left to use to pull existing weapons out of U.S. stockpiles and to put additional weapons on contract to help Ukraine.

Naval Academy can still use race in admissions

The Baltimore Sun

The U.S. Naval Academy may continue using race in its admissions process, a federal judge ruled Friday, brushing back an attempt by a group that had successfully overturned affirmative action in college admissions to extend that to the Annapolis-based military academy.

“Over many years, military and civilian leaders have determined that a racially diverse officer corps is a national security interest,” U.S. District Judge Richard D. Bennett wrote in his

ruling. “The Naval Academy has established a compelling national security interest in a diverse officer corps in the Navy and Marine Corps.”

The president of Students for Fair Admissions, which had sued the Naval Academy in October 2023 three months after it won its case against Harvard College and the University of North Carolina in the U.S. Supreme Court, expressed disappointment in the ruling and vowed to appeal.

“SFFA will appeal this to the appellate court,” Edward Blum

said in a statement. “If we are unsuccessful there, then we will appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court.”

“It is our hope that the U.S. military academies will ultimately be compelled to follow the Supreme Court’s prohibition of race in college admissions,” he said.

But the Supreme Court ruling in SFFA’s favor included a footnote specifying that the ruling didn’t address military academies because of their “potentially distinct interests.”

“The record in this case dem-

onstrates the wisdom of that caution,” Bennett said in his decision. “The admissions policies of Harvard College and the University of North Carolina placed these civilian universities in the maelstrom of our Nation’s continued struggle with race.”

“It is in this environment that the U.S. Naval Academy seeks to perform its mission to prepare its students to become officers in the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps.”

Bennett served over 20 years in the U.S. Army Reserve and Maryland National Guard.

Care packages prepped for Operation Christmas Drop

By ALEX WILSON

Stars and Stripes

ANDERSEN AIR FORCE BASE, Guam — Hundreds of volunteers crowded into a hangar over the weekend to decorate about 220 boxes of food, supplies and toys to be air-dropped to isolated communities across the South Pacific.

At least 1,000 people from local charities, school groups and churches joined U.S. airmen and their families Saturday morning for the “Bundle Build” at Andersen’s Hangar 5, the finishing touches for the U.S. Air Force’s 73rd Operation Christmas Drop.

The packages were full of canned goods, water, rice, clothing, diving gear, first aid kits and toys. They are bound for 60 remote islands, according to Master Sgt. Theresa Buck, this year’s operation president.

This year, air force contingents from Australia, Canada, South Korea and Japan pitched in to support the mission, Buck, a distribution superintendent for the 734th Air Mobility Squadron, told Stars and Stripes at the event.

“We’ve had such amazing

support this year that each box gets six toys,” she said. “So for the kids on the islands, it gives them something to look forward to as well.”

For some volunteers, the event defines the Christmas season.

December Taisakan, 18, said she grew up on Yap, an island in Micronesia of about 11,000 people. She recalled how close to the ground the massive C-130J Super Hercules aircraft would fly as they dropped the packages.

“I remember there would be four boxes, and all the people from the island would come together and divide them among the families,” she said Saturday at the event.

One of Taisakan’s favorite childhood presents, a toy makeup set, was included in one of the boxes. Taisakan, who moved to Guam to attend Okkodo High School in Ukudu, said she was excited to be on the other side of the operation.

“It just makes Christmas better,” Taisakan said. She said she hopes the box she and the volunteers from Bethel Baptist Church decorated would make it to Yap.

S. Korean ex-defense chief detained over martial law

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korean prosecutors Sunday detained a former defense minister who allegedly recommended last week’s brief but stunning martial law imposition to President Yoon Suk Yeol, making him the first figure detained over the case.

The development came a day after Yoon avoided an opposition-led bid to impeach him in parliament, with most ruling party lawmakers boycotting a floor vote to prevent the two-thirds majority needed to suspend his presidential powers. The main opposition Democratic Party said it will prepare a new impeachment motion against Yoon.

On Sunday, ex-Defense Minister Kim Yong Hyun was taken into custody at a Seoul detention facility after undergoing an investigation by prosecutors, a law enforcement official said, requesting anonymity in line with privacy rules.

The official gave no further details. But South Korean media reported that Kim voluntarily appeared at a Seoul prosecutors’ office, where he had his mobile phone confiscated and was detained. The reports said police searched Kim’s former office and

residence on Sunday.

Repeated calls to Seoul prosecutors’ offices and police agency were unanswered.

Senior prosecutor Park Se-hyun said in a televised statement Sunday that authorities launched a 62-member special investigation team on the martial law case. Park, who will head the team, said the probe would “leave no suspicions.”

Yoon accepted Kim’s resignation offer on Thursday after opposition parties submitted a separate impeachment motion against him.

Kim is a central figure in Yoon’s martial law enforcement, which led to special forces troops encircling the National Assembly building and army helicopters hovering over it. The military withdrew after the parliament unanimously voted to overturn Yoon’s decree, forcing his Cabinet to lift it before daybreak Wednesday.

In Kim’s impeachment motion document, the Democratic Party and other opposition parties accused him of proposing martial law to Yoon. Vice Defense Minister Kim Seon Ho told parliament that Kim Yong Hyun ordered the deployment of troops to the National Assembly.

Legislatures take aim at election results

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — While the election was over a month ago, voters in some parts of the country are discovering that having their say at the ballot box is not necessarily the final word.

Lawmakers in several states have already initiated or indicated plans to alter or nullify certain results. Republican lawmakers in North Carolina are moving to undercut the authority of the incoming Democratic governor; Republicans in Missouri are taking initial steps to reverse voter-approved abortion protections and Democrats in Massachusetts are watering down an at-

tempt by voters to hold the Legislature more accountable.

The actions following the Nov. 5 election continue a pattern that has accelerated in recent years and has been characterized by critics as undemocratic.

“I think certainly when you’re a voter and you’re voting on the issue, you’re not thinking about whether someone’s then going to overturn or just ignore the things that you voted on,” said Anne Whitesell, an assistant professor of political science at Miami University in Ohio.

The strategies range from outright reversals to “slow walking” the implementation of voter-ap-

proved ballot initiatives, such as lawmakers refusing to provide funding. Whitesell said that was a prevalent strategy for some Republican governors and lawmakers after voters in their states approved expanding Medicaid coverage following the passage of the Affordable Care Act. The matter ultimately had to be settled in the courts, extending the lag time between vote and implementation.

North Carolina provides one of the most egregious examples of a legislature moving to counter the will of the voters.

Barring pending protests changing a legislative race re-

sult, voters there ended the Republican supermajority for the upcoming two-year session and elected Democrats to several statewide offices, including governor and attorney general. Despite that, Republican lawmakers holding a lame-duck session pushed through a series of wide-ranging changes before they lose their veto-proof majority next year.

Those include taking powers from several of the Democrats elected to statewide office. Under the abrupt changes, the new governor would lose the authority to appoint members to the state elections board.

Few answers so far in search for CEO’s killer

Associated Press

NEW YORK — They have seen him smiling on a hostel security camera, but don’t know his name. They found the backpack he discarded while fleeing, but don’t know where he’s gone.

As the search for UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson’s killer goes on, investigators are reckoning with a tantalizing dichotomy: They have troves of evidence, but the shooter remains an enigma.

Police don’t know who he is, where he is or why he did it, though they are confident it was a targeted attack instead of a random act.

“The net is tightening,” New York City Mayor Eric Adams said Saturday.

Hours after he spoke, police

divers were seen searching a pond in Central Park, where the killer fled after the shooting. Officers have been scouring the park for days for any possible clues and found his bag there Friday.

Late Saturday, police released two additional photos of the suspected shooter that appeared to be from a camera mounted inside a taxi. The first shows him outside the vehicle and the second shows him looking through the partition between the back seat and the front of the cab. In both, his face is partially obscured by a blue, medical-style mask.

Retracing the gunman’s steps using surveillance video, police said, it appears he left the city by bus soon after the shooting

Wednesday morning outside the New York Hilton Midtown. He was seen on video at an uptown bus station about 45 minutes later, NYPD Chief of Detectives Joseph Kenny said.

With the high-profile search expanding across state lines, the FBI announced late Friday that it was offering a \$50,000 reward for information leading to an arrest and conviction, adding to a reward of up to \$10,000 the NYPD has offered. Police have said they believe the suspect acted alone.

Police provided no updates on the hunt Saturday, but investigators are urging patience — even with a killer on the loose.

Hundreds of detectives are combing through video recordings and social media, vetting

tips from the public and interviewing people who might have information, including Thompson’s family and coworkers and the shooter’s randomly assigned roommates at the Manhattan hostel where he stayed.

The shooter paid cash at the hostel, presented what police believe was a fake ID and is believed to have paid cash for taxi rides and other transactions. He didn’t speak to others at the hostel and almost always kept his face covered with a mask, only lowering it while eating.

But investigators caught a break when they came across security camera images of an unguarded moment in which he briefly showed his face soon after arriving in New York on Nov. 24.

US employers added 227K jobs in November recovery

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — America’s job market rebounded in November, adding 227,000 workers in a solid recovery from the previous month, when the effects of strikes and hurricanes had sharply diminished em-

ployers’ payrolls.

Last month’s hiring growth was up considerably from a meager gain of 36,000 jobs in October. The government also revised up its estimate of job growth in September and October by a combined 56,000.

Friday’s report from the Labor Department report showed the unemployment rate ticked up from 4.1% in October to a still-low 4.2%. Hourly wages rose 0.4% from October to November and 4% from a year earlier — both solid figures and

slightly higher than forecasters had expected.

The November employment report provided the latest evidence that the U.S. job market remains durable even though it has lost significant momentum from the 2021-23 hiring boom.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

NASA delays astronaut flights to moon again

FL CAPE CANAVERAL — NASA announced more delays Thursday in sending astronauts back to the moon more than 50 years after Apollo.

Administrator Bill Nelson said the next mission in the Artemis program — flying four astronauts around the moon and back — is now targeted for April 2026. It had been on the books for September 2025, after slipping from this year.

The investigation into heat shield damage from the capsule's initial test flight two years ago took time, officials said, and other spacecraft improvements are still needed.

This bumps the third Artemis mission — a moon landing by two other astronauts — to at least 2027. NASA had been aiming for 2026.

Renewed push for DEI legislation expected

KY FRANKFORT — Kentucky lawmakers seem ready to resume work on a bill dealing with diversity, equity and inclusion practices at public universities. But the outcome could be different next year because they have had months to try to work out their differences, the state Senate's new majority floor leader said.

"It's an issue that seems to continue to play its way into policy discussions across many states," Republican state Sen. Max Wise said.

A conservative quest to limit DEI initiatives gained momentum this year in statehouses and college governing boards.

GOP lawmakers in about two dozen states filed bills seeking to restrict DEI initiatives. They were countered by Democrats who sponsored supportive DEI measures in about 20 states.

In Kentucky, DEI legislation died this year amid a House-Senate impasse. For Republicans, it was a rare setback on a priority, hot-button issue.

Stowaway claims she sought asylum in France

NY NEW YORK — A Russian woman with permanent U.S. residency who was returned to the United States after authorities said she sneaked on board a flight from New York to Paris made her first appearance in court, claiming she had been abused.

Svetlana Dali spoke through a Russian interpreter to her attorney during a brief appearance before a Brooklyn magistrate judge. Her lawyer, Michael Schneider, said she claims she was poisoned after arriving in Paris and then was returned to the U.S. despite requesting asylum there.

A criminal complaint filed in Brooklyn federal court said Dali admitted to an FBI agent who interviewed her when she returned to Kennedy International Airport that she flew to Paris as a stowaway on a Delta Air Lines flight on Nov. 26.

The complaint said airport surveillance footage showed she was initially rebuffed by a Transportation Security Administration official because she lacked a boarding pass when she first tried to enter Kennedy's Terminal 4.

Five minutes later, she successfully accessed the security

screening machines without a boarding pass by entering a special lane for airline employees at the same time a large Air Europa flight crew walked through, the complaint said.

Man charged in arms sales to North Korea

CA LOS ANGELES — A California man has been arrested and charged with illegally shipping weapons and ammunition to North Korea, authorities said.

Shenghua Wen, who came to the U.S. from China on a student visa more than a decade ago and stayed in the country illegally, was arrested and charged with conspiring to violate federal law barring the shipments, according to the U.S. Attorney's office in Los Angeles.

According to a copy of a federal complaint, Wen, 41, told U.S. authorities in interviews earlier this year that he had exported weapons and ammunition to North Korea at the request of its government. He said he met with North Korean officials at consular offices in China before he came to the U.S. on a student visa in 2012, the complaint said.

Oldest-known wild bird lays an egg at age 74

HI HONOLULU — The oldest known wild bird in the world has laid an egg at the ripe age of about 74, her first in four years, U.S. wildlife officials said.

The long-winged seabird named Wisdom, a Laysan albatross, returned to Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge at the

northwestern edge of the Hawaiian Archipelago and laid what experts estimated may be her 60th egg, the Pacific Region of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service said in a Facebook post last week.

Wisdom and her mate, Akeakamai, had returned to the atoll in the Pacific Ocean to lay and hatch eggs since 2006. Laysan albatrosses mate for life and lay one egg per year. But Akeakamai has not been seen for several years and Wisdom began interacting with another male when she returned last week, officials said.

"We are optimistic that the egg will hatch," Jonathan Plissner, supervisory wildlife biologist at Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge said in a statement.

Prison guard arrested for drug trafficking

AL MONTGOMERY — A security guard at an Alabama prison was arrested on drug trafficking charges, the state prison system said.

Law enforcement agents arrested Alesia Jarrett, a prison guard at Elmore Correctional Facility, the Alabama Department of Corrections said.

Jarrett was found in possession of about 250 grams of methamphetamine. She had been under investigation for suspected drug smuggling into the facility, the agency said.

She is charged with conspiracy to traffic methamphetamine, promoting prison contraband and an ethics charge of using her position for personal gain. Jail records show she is being held on a \$1.5 million bond.

— From wire reports



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SMU edges Alabama for last CFP spot

Associated Press

SMU captured the last open spot in the College Football Playoff, edging Alabama to land in a first-of-its-kind, 12-team bracket that placed undefeated Oregon at No. 1.

The selection committee preferred the Mustangs (11-2), losers of a heartbreaker in the Atlantic Coast Conference title game, who had a far less difficult schedule than Alabama (9-3) of the SEC but, ultimately, still one fewer loss.

The expanded bracket marks a new era for college football, though the Alabama-SMU debate made clear that there is no perfect formula for identifying a champion.

"We just felt, in this particular case, SMU had the nod above Alabama," said Michigan athletic director Warde Manuel, the chair of the selection committee. "But it's no disrespect to Alabama's strength of schedule. We looked at the entire body of work for both teams."

The tournament starts Dec. 20-21 with four first-round games involving teams seeded 5-12. It concludes Jan. 20 with

the national championship game in Atlanta.

Georgia, Boise State and Arizona State join Oregon with first-round byes: Georgia, the SEC champion, was seeded second; Boise State, the Mountain West champion, earned the third seed; and Big 12 titlist Arizona State got the fourth seed and the fourth and final first-round bye.

All will play in quarterfinals at bowl games on Dec. 31-Jan. 1.

Clemson stole a bid and the 12th seed with its crazy victory over SMU — the result that ultimately cost Alabama a spot in the playoff field. The Tigers moved to No. 16 in the rankings, but got in as the fifth-best conference winner.

Texas, Penn State, Notre Dame and Ohio State get home field in first round: There was tension around how the rest of the teams were seeded because that determined who gets home-field advantage in the first round. The games are No. 12 Clemson at No. 5 Texas; No. 11 SMU at No. 6 Penn State; No. 10 Indiana at No. 7 Notre Dame; and No. 9 Tennessee at No. 8 Ohio State.

Alabama comes up short in the bracket's biggest debate:

The Big Ten will lead the way with four teams, followed by the SEC with three and the ACC with two.

The lasting memory from the inaugural bracket reveal will involve the decision that handed the ACC that second bid.

There's a portion of college football fandom that believes almost everything in the sport has been rigged in favor of Alabama and the SEC over recent years. The Crimson Tide have won three national titles in the 10-year history of the playoff and had made the field eight times, including last year when it edged out undefeated Florida State for the last of what was then four spots.

SEC backers argue the preferential treatment is deserved, mainly because the SEC is a 16-team league loaded with powerhouse programs.

This season, the Tide had the 16th toughest schedule and went 3-1 against teams in the Top 25. SMU's numbers: 60th in strength of schedule, 0-2 against the top 25.

But the committee also indi-

cated it was reluctant to penalize teams that play in conference title games. SMU did. Alabama didn't. And the way the Mustangs fought back from a three-touchdown deficit before finally losing to Clemson had an impact among the 13 people making the decision.

Automatic byes and bids made the bracket strange: Conference commissioners OK'd the idea of giving conference champions preferable treatment in this first iteration of the 12-team playoff. There's a good argument that needs to change.

The committee actually ranked Boise State, the Mountain West Champion, at No. 9 but the Broncos are the 3 seed, set to play in the Fiesta Bowl on Dec. 31. Arizona State was 12th-ranked but jumped to the No. 4 seed and will play in the Peach bowl on New Year's.

There's also no reseeding of teams after each round, which means No. 1 Oregon will face the winner of Tennessee-Ohio State in the Rose Bowl. Oregon beat Ohio State 32-31 earlier this year in one of the season's best games.

Daily runs for 4 TDs, Army beats Tulane for AAC title

Associated Press

WEST POINT, N.Y. — The first conference championship celebration in Army history was underway at midfield and Bryson Daily made clear it would be a brief one.

The Black Knights are going after another trophy next week.

"Beat Navy," Daily said.

He and the Black Knights ought to be a tough matchup for the Midshipmen — or just about anyone.

Daily rushed for four touchdowns to tie the American Athletic Conference championship game record, and No. 24 Army

completed a perfect first season in the league by beating Tulane 35-14 on Friday night.

Kanye Udoh rushed for 158 yards, including a 72-yarder to set up a Daily TD, and a score. Daily added 126 yards on the ground for the Black Knights (11-1), who overwhelmed AAC opponents with their bruising, clock-eating rushing attack during their first trip around the league, then ran it to perfection in the championship game. Army won the first conference title in its 134-year history.

The Black Knights have one game left in the regular season and it's the one they want

most: against Navy next Saturday for the Commander-in-Chief's Trophy.

"Now we've got the biggest game of the year coming up in eight days and we're looking forward to that," Army coach Jeff Monken said.

Daily had runs of 5, 3, 4 and 7 yards. The 221-pound quarterback's four rushing scores gave him 29 this season, breaking the AAC record of 25 set by Navy QB Will Worth in 2016. The conference player of the year has rushed for multiple TDs in 10 consecutive games.

Except for an unsuccessful stint in Conference USA from

1998-2004, the Black Knights had played as an independent since their program began in 1890. Monken said this week that Army felt that it needed to be in a conference to have a pathway to college football's expanded postseason.

Darian Mensah threw two touchdown passes for Tulane (9-4), which was playing in its third straight AAC championship game and has lost the last two. The Green Wave had hopes of hosting before losing at home to Memphis on Thanksgiving night, ending their 17-game winning streak in conference games.

Mobley scores 41 as Cavs top Hornets

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Evan Mobley scored a career-high 41 points, Donovan Mitchell added 18 points, eight rebounds and eight assists, and the Cleveland Cavaliers extended their strong start with a 116-102 victory over the injury-riddled Charlotte Hornets on Saturday.

Mobley scored 23 points as the Cavaliers built a 40-18 lead after the first quarter en route to their 21st victory in 24 games. The forward then had seven points in a late 12-2 surge as Cleveland held on.

Brandon Miller scored 24 points for the Hornets, who got as close as 104-100 with 5:05 left to play in their eighth straight loss.

The Cavs won their fourth straight game since a two-game losing streak in late November and continued their franchise's best start since the 2008-09 season.

Wizards 122, Nuggets 113: Jordan Poole scored 39 points, and host Washington overcame a career-high 56 by Nikola Jokic to beat Denver and snap its 16-game losing streak.

Jamal Murray (hamstring), Aaron Gordon (calf) and Dario Saric (ankle) were all out for Denver, which left Jokic as

something of a one-man show for the Nuggets. He took 38 shots from the field — also a career high — and had 16 rebounds and eight assists.

But Washington always had an answer.

The Wizards (3-18) won for the first time since Oct. 30. Their 16-game skid tied a franchise record.

Poole made a career-high nine 3-pointers, and Washington as a team made 16. Denver went 5 of 24, which is why the Nuggets couldn't fully take advantage of Jokic's dominance.

Thunder 119, Pelicans 109: Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 16 of his 31 points in the first quarter and Jalen Williams added 27 to power visiting Oklahoma City over New Orleans.

The Thunder built a 77-51 half-time lead by dominating the Pelicans in the paint and in transition, and won for the seventh time in eight games.

Dejunte Murray scored 26 points and Herb Jones added 24 for New Orleans, which committed 18 turnovers and lost for the 16th time in 18 games.

The Pelicans cut their deficit to 99-80 with by outscoring Oklahoma City 29-22 in third quarter and got as close as 114-105 with

3:31 left. The Thunder scored five straight to pull away.

Pistons 120, Knicks 111: Cade Cunningham had 29 points, 15 assists and 10 rebounds, and visiting Detroit beat New York.

Malik Beasley had 23 points off the bench and Jaden Ivey chipped in 16 for the Pistons, who snapped a three-game losing streak.

It was Cunningham's fifth triple-double of the season, three behind league leader Nikola Jokic.

Jalen Brunson had 31 points and 10 assists for the Knicks, who had their four-game winning streak stopped.

Mavericks 125, Raptors 118: Luka Doncic had 30 points, 13 rebounds and 11 assists for his second straight triple-double, Kyrie Irving scored 29 points and visiting Dallas beat Toronto to extend its winning streak to seven games.

Doncic's second triple-double of the season was the 79th of his career, moving him past Wilt Chamberlain and James Harden and into sole possession of seventh on the all-time list.

Klay Thompson scored 20 points as the Mavericks extended the NBA's longest active win-

ning streak.

Doncic had 15 points, eight assists and six rebounds by half-time. He banked in a 35-foot 3-pointer at the second-quarter buzzer to give Dallas a 70-54 lead at the break.

Grizzlies 127, Celtics 121: Ja Morant had 32 points, nine assists and nine rebounds and Memphis snapped a 10-game road losing streak in Boston with a win over the Celtics.

Jaren Jackson Jr. added 27 points and nine rebounds for the Grizzlies, who won in TD Garden for the first time since Nov. 27, 2013. Memphis has won eight of its last nine.

Jrue Holiday had 23 points for Boston, which went 18 for 60 from the 3-point line. Jaylen Brown and Payton Pritchard each finished with 22 points.

Heat 121, Suns 111: Bam Adebayo scored 25 points, Jimmy Butler added 24 and host Miami moved back over the .500 mark by beating Phoenix.

Adebayo finished with 12 rebounds and eight assists for the Heat (11-10). Duncan Robinson scored 19 and Tyler Herro added 17 points, eight rebounds and seven assists for Miami, which outscored the Suns 68-53 after halftime.

No. 4 Kentucky rallies from 18 down to beat Gonzaga

Associated Press

SEATTLE — Andrew Carr had 19 points and No. 4 Kentucky erased an 18-point second half deficit to beat No. 7 Gonzaga 90-89 in overtime on Saturday night.

Otega Oweh converted at the rim in the opening minute of overtime to put the Wildcats in front 81-79, their first lead since early in the first half.

Amari Williams added a dunk, and Kentucky held on the rest of the way despite Nolan Hickman's 3-pointer that pulled the Bulldogs within a point with

5 seconds to go.

The Wildcats, who started the half down 50-34, tied the game at 79 on Carr's jumper with 49 seconds left in regulation.

Gonzaga's Graham Ike led all scorers with 28 points and 11 rebounds.

Kentucky's Lamont Butler didn't play because of an ankle injury.

The Wildcats led by as many as seven in overtime before the Bulldogs, who had hit just three 3-pointers in regulation, went on a run of their own with a pair of 3-pointers to cut the deficit to

86-83. On the other end, Carr corralled an offensive rebound and got the second-chance bucket to put Kentucky up three.

No. 5 Marquette 88, No. 11 Wisconsin 74: Kam Jones scored 32 points to lead the host Golden Eagles past the Badgers.

Coming off its first loss of the season this week at Iowa State, Marquette (9-1) also got double-digit efforts from David Joplin, Chase Ross and Stevie Mitchell, who combined for 37 points, while shooting 50% (31-for-62) from the floor.

Wisconsin (8-2) dropped its second straight despite 22 points from Max Klesmit and 17 from John Blackwell.

No. 20 North Carolina 68, Georgia Tech 65: Seth Trimble scored 19 points and the host Tar Heels held off the upset-minded Yellow Jackets in the ACC opener for both teams.

Trimble was 5-for-6 from the field and 8-for-9 on free throws for North Carolina (5-4, 1-0 ACC). RJ Davis added 16 points, seven rebounds and three assists, while Ian Jackson chipped in 15 points off the bench.

Zacha, Bruins rally past Flyers in overtime

Associated Press

BOSTON — Pavel Zacha scored 2:49 into overtime, and the Boston Bruins beat the Philadelphia Flyers 4-3 on Saturday for their fourth straight victory.

Boston's Brad Marchand tied it with 5:22 left in regulation. Trent Frederic had the other two goals for the Bruins, who are 7-2 since interim coach Joe Sacco took over for fired coach Jim Montgomery.

Zacha scored the winner after Boston goalie Jeremy Swayman stopped Joel Farabee's breakaway seconds earlier.

Rookie Matvei Michkov scored two first-period goals for Philadelphia in its second straight loss. Cam York also scored, and Travis Sanheim had two assists.

Coming off a frustrating loss against Florida when they gave up a season-high seven goals, the Flyers blew a third-period lead for the second game in a row.

Michkov scored a power-play goal at 7:24 when he one-timed a shot from the right circle off a short tip pass from Sean Couturier. His second came on a redirected shot at the edge of the crease.

Utah 5, Sabres 2: Michael Kesselring had a goal and an assist to help visiting Utah beat sliding Buffalo.

Nick Schmaltz, Jack McBain, and Kevin Stenlund also scored for Utah. Karel Vejmelka made 23 saves.

Rookie Tyson Kozak scored his first NHL goal and Jiri Kulich also scored for the Sabres, who are winless in six straight games (0-4-2). Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen made 23 saves.

Buffalo's six-game winless streak is its longest since it lost eight straight games in November 2022.

Jets 4, Blackhawks 2: Mark Scheifele snapped a third-period tie and Kyle Connor had two assists, helping visiting Winnipeg beat Chicago in the first

game for interim Blackhawks coach Anders Sorensen.

Mason Appleton had a goal and an assist as the Jets picked up their second straight win after a four-game losing streak. Nino Niederreiter and Gabriel Vilardi also scored, and Connor Hellebuyck made 12 saves.

Alex Vlasic scored for the second straight game for Chicago, which has dropped five in a row. Sorensen was promoted from the team's top minor league affiliate when Luke Richardson was fired Thursday.

The Blackhawks had a 2-1 lead before Niederreiter converted a backhand 13:10 into the second, beating Arvid Soderblom. It was Niederreiter's 10th of the season.

Islanders 4, Hurricanes 3: Jean Gabriel-Pageau had a goal and two assists, Bo Horvat snapped a 13-game scoring drought and host New York beat Carolina.

Maxim Tsyplovskiy had a goal and an assist, and Oliver Wahlstrom also scored to help the Islanders snap a two-game skid and win for the second time in seven games (2-3-2). Ilya Sorokin finished with 28 saves.

Andrei Svechnikov had two goals, Jesperi Kotkaniemi also scored and Shayne Gostisbehere had two assists as the Hurricanes lost for the fourth time in five games. Pyotr Kochetkov made 21 saves.

Svechnikov got his second power-play goal of the game at 9:23 of the second to give Carolina a 2-1 lead. Wahlstrom evened the score at 2-2 less than a minute later. Tsyplovskiy put New York ahead for good with 3:44 to go in the period, and Horvat made it a two-goal lead 2:39 later.

Florida 3, Sharks 1: Matthew Tkachuk scored twice for his fourth consecutive multi-point game, Sergei Bobrovsky stopped 28 shots in his return to the lineup and host Florida beat San Jose.

It's the fourth time Tkachuk

has had multiple points in four straight games, his second such streak since joining the Panthers.

Aleksander Barkov also scored for Florida, which is 5-0-1 in its past six games. Bobrovsky was back after missing the Panthers' two-game trip earlier in the week while he and his wife await the birth of a child.

The win was No. 408 of Bobrovsky's career, breaking a tie with Glenn Hall for 11th-most in NHL history.

Capitals 4, Canadiens 2: Tom Wilson scored twice in the third period as visiting Washington rallied to beat Montreal.

Pierre-Luc Dubois and Dylan Strome also scored to help the Capitals come back from a 2-0 deficit. Aliaksei Protas had two assists and Logan Thompson finished with 22 saves to help Metropolitan Division-leading Washington get its ninth straight road win and extend its points streak to 6-0-1.

Alex Newhook and Cole Caufield scored in the first period for the Canadiens, who had won two straight. Sam Montebault finished with 31 saves.

Dubois got the Capitals on the scoreboard just 30 seconds into the second period. Wilson scored the tying goal at 7:10 of the third and then put Washington ahead with 8:12 remaining.

Senators 3, Predators 1: Claude Giroux, Jacob Bernard-Docker and Nick Cousins scored, and host Ottawa beat Nashville.

Tim Stutzle had two assists for the Senators in their second straight win. Linus Ullmark made 37 saves.

The Predators dropped to 0-4-3 during a seven-game slide.

Avalanche 2, Red Wings 1: Valeri Nichushkin scored his third goal in two games, Alexander Georgiev made 28 saves and visiting Colorado beat slumping Detroit.

Cale Makar scored on the power play for the Avalanche. Makar leads all NHL defense-

men with 35 points (nine goals, 26 assists) in 28 games.

Lucas Raymond scored his eighth goal in the last nine games for the Red Wings, who have lost five straight — all by a single goal. Ville Husso made 23 saves.

Penguins 5, Maple Leafs 2: Michael Bunting scored a third-period power-play goal that gave host Pittsburgh the lead for good in a win over Toronto.

Rickard Rakell also scored a power-play goal while Bryan Rust had a goal and an assist for the Penguins. Blake Lizotte and Kris Letang added short-handed empty-net goals in the final minute.

Letang now has the 23rd-most points among defensemen in NHL history, while Lizotte established a career-high with a four-game point streak.

Kings 4, Wild 1: Adrian Kempe and Alex Laferriere scored goals, Darcy Kuemper made 22 saves, and host Los Angeles beat Minnesota to end the Wild's five-game win streak.

Trevor Moore added two empty-net goals for the Kings, who have won a season-high five consecutive games.

Kemper was in the right place at the right time to send Anze Kopitar's rebound in off his left skate in the last minute of the first period. Laferriere doubled the lead on the power play midway through the second through a screen set by Phillip Danault.

Oilers 4, Blues 2: Connor McDavid had a goal and an assist and host Edmonton beat St. Louis for its second straight win.

Corey Perry, Zach Hyman and Troy Stecher also scored, and Leon Draisaitl had two assists for the Oilers, who have won five of six. Stuart Skinner stopped 29 shots.

Dylan Holloway and Jake Neighbours had goals for the Blues, who had won two straight. St. Louis lost in regulation for the first time in six games (4-1-1) under coach Jim Montgomery.