

GAO: Years of conflict weakened readiness

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

Two decades of conflicts have degraded the military's ability to fight in the air and at sea while ground forces have experienced a boost in their ability to carry out missions, a government watchdog agency report said.

The Navy was especially hard hit, seeing declines in availability of resources and ship maintenance backlogs, the Government Accountability Office said in a report released Wednesday.

"The Navy cited limited maintenance capacity at private and public shipyards as the primary challenge for recovering ship and submarine readiness," the GAO said in an analysis of military capabilities between 2017 and 2019.

The GAO broke down "readiness" into two categories — resources and capability. While resources focused on availability of personnel and equipment, capabilities assessed whether a service could carry out its assigned missions. Operations at sea expe-

rienced declines in both areas, the GAO found.

Meanwhile, all other military domains — ground, air, space and cyber — got a boost in resources. But that only translated into increased capability to carry out missions for ground units, the GAO said.

In the air domain, services reported numerous challenges, including the effects of 2018's Hurricane Michael, which damaged bases and put limits on the use of the Air Force's F-22 fighter jets.

Pilot shortages also hindered operations for the Army's AH-64 Apache attack helicopters and the Marine Corps' readiness was compromised by limited depot repair capacity for light attack helicopters, the GAO said.

Overall, continuous conflict has "degraded U.S. military readiness — the forces' ability to fight and meet the demands of their assigned missions," the GAO said.

In recent years, the Pentagon has sought to shift focus from counterterrorism to ca-

pabilities needed to counter military advances by Russia and China. But the Pentagon's 2018 National Defense Strategy acknowledged the challenge it faces in adapting because a "backlog of deferred readiness, procurement, and modernization requirements has grown in the last decade and a half and can no longer be ignored."

The public version of the GAO report offered few examples on how the military's operations have been hampered. Most of the analysis is classified.

The GAO, which was tasked by Congress to monitor the military's ability to carry out missions through 2022, says the Pentagon has now put in place a plan to "recover readiness."

"To maintain the U.S. military's advantage across all domains in a new security environment characterized by great-power competition, DOD is working to rebuild and restore readiness while also modernizing its forces," the GAO said.

Biden seems ready to extend troops in Afghanistan

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Without coming right out and saying it, President Joe Biden seems ready to let lapse a May 1 deadline for completing a withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan. Orderly withdrawals take time, and Biden is running out of it.

Biden has inched so close to the deadline that his indecision amounts almost to a decision to put off, at least for a number of months, a pullout of the remaining 2,500 troops and continue supporting the Afghan military at the risk of a Taliban backlash. Removing all of the troops and their equipment in the next three weeks — along with coalition partners that cannot get out on their own — would be difficult logistically, as Biden him-

self suggested in late March.

"It's going to be hard to meet the May 1 deadline," he said. "Just in terms of tactical reasons, it's hard to get those troops out." Tellingly, he added, "And if we leave, we're going to do so in a safe and orderly way."

James Stavridis, a retired Navy admiral who served as NATO's top commander from 2009 to 2013, says it would be unwise at this point to get out quickly.

"Sometimes not making a decision becomes a decision, which seems the case with the May 1 deadline," Stavridis said in an email exchange Wednesday. "The most prudent course of action feels like a six-month extension and an attempt to get the Taliban truly meeting their promises — essentially permitting a legitimate 'conditions

based' withdrawal in the fall."

There are crosscurrents of pressure on Biden. On the one hand, he has argued for years, including during his time as vice president, when President Barack Obama ordered a huge buildup of U.S. forces, that Afghanistan is better handled as a smaller-scale counterterrorism mission. Countering Russia and China has since emerged as a higher priority.

On the other hand, current and former military officers have argued that leaving now, with the Taliban in a position of relative strength and the Afghan government in a fragile state, would risk losing what has been gained in 20 years of fighting.

"A withdrawal would not only leave America more vulnerable

to terrorist threats; it would also have catastrophic effects in Afghanistan and the region that would not be in the interest of any of the key actors, including the Taliban," a bipartisan experts group known as the Afghan Study Group concluded in a February report. The group, whose co-chair, retired Gen. Joseph Dunford, is a former commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan and former chairman of the Joint Chiefs, recommended Biden extend the deadline beyond May, preferably with some sort of agreement by the Taliban.

Postponing the U.S. withdrawal carries the risk of the Taliban resuming attacks on U.S. and coalition forces, possibly escalating the war despite the February 2020 agreement.

Navy fires skipper of destroyer USS Hopper

By **WYATT OLSON**
Stars and Stripes

FORT SHAFTER, Hawaii — The Navy relieved the first woman to command the guided-missile destroyer USS Hopper on Tuesday “due to a loss of confidence in her leadership,” the service said Wednesday.

Cmdr. Kathryn Dawley had commanded the Pearl Harbor-based ship since April 2020.

The deputy commander of Destroyer Squadron 31, Capt.

Don Rauch, has been placed in temporary command of the Hopper until a permanent leader is chosen, the Navy said.

Dawley’s removal stemmed from morale problems among the crew, not from any issues of misconduct, a Navy spokesperson, who did not wish to be identified, told Stars and Stripes by telephone on Wednesday.

The Hopper is named after Rear Adm. Grace Hopper, who enlisted in the Navy Reserve

during World War II and had a long, notable career as a computer scientist.

Dawley was the first woman to command the Hopper, which was commissioned in 1997.

During the ceremony in which she took command in April 2020, Dawley said she regarded Grace Hopper as a role model who “embodied the qualities of a naval officer that I strive to be,” according to Navy news release at that time.

“Hopper has been my dream since I commissioned,” Dawley said of commanding the ship.

The ship is nearing completion of a three-year modernization at Pearl Harbor and is now preparing for sea trials.

This is the second time in three years that a Hopper skipper has been removed from command. Cmdr. Jeffrey Tamulevich was fired in May 2018 following allegations that he fraternized with a junior sailor.

McCain transits Taiwan Strait; Navy’s 4th trip in ’21 irks China

By **SETH ROBSON**
Stars and Stripes

A Navy warship steamed through the Taiwan Strait on Wednesday following reports of Chinese fighter jets overhead earlier in the week and one of its aircraft carriers training nearby.

The guided-missile destroyer USS John S. McCain conducted “a routine Taiwan Strait transit” through international waters in accordance with international law, the Navy said in a statement Wednesday.

The trip through the contested waterway is the fourth by a U.S. warship this year. The McCain made the Navy’s first transit of 2021 on Feb. 4.

As the destroyer passed through the strait again Wednesday, Taiwan Foreign Minister Joseph Wu told reporters that his country would defend itself “to the very last day” if attacked by China, which claims the island as its own territory to be won over peacefully or by force.

China flew 10 warplanes into Taiwan’s air defense identification zone on Monday and sent an aircraft carrier group for exercises near the island, Wu said, according to The Associated Press.

“We are willing to defend ourselves, that’s without any question,” he said. “We will fight a war if we need to fight a war, and if we need to defend ourselves to the very last day, then we will defend ourselves to the very last day.”

Asked about the McCain’s transit dur-

ing a press briefing Wednesday, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby described it as a freedom-of-navigation operation and not a response to any specific event or action by another country.

“We conduct freedom-of-navigation operations around the world to send a message about how strong we believe in international law and in freedom that all nations have to sail, operate and fly in accordance with international law,” he said. “Freedom of the seas doesn’t just exist for fish and icebergs.”

A spokesman for China’s Eastern Theater Command said the McCain’s transit sent an “erroneous signal to the ‘Taiwan Independence’ force, deliberately disrupted and undermined the regional situation, and jeopardized the peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait,” according to China Military Online, a government site.

“China is firmly opposed to it,” Senior Col. Zhang Chunhui said Wednesday, according to the website. He said the McCain was tracked as it moved through the strait.

The number of Navy transits through the 110-mile-wide waterway separating Taiwan from mainland China has increased along with tensions between the United States and China in the South and East China seas.

In December, the U.S. approved a \$280 million sale of advanced military communications equipment to Taiwan.

US, Baghdad end talks regarding troop presence

The Washington Post

BAGHDAD — The United States and Iraq concluded talks Wednesday on America’s troop presence there, issuing a joint statement that emphasized the growing capacity of the Iraqi military, six years after it crumbled in the face of Islamic State’s advance.

The statement followed a third round of talks between Washington and Baghdad, known as the Strategic Dialogue, and the first to take place under President Joe Biden.

“Based on the increasing capacity of the ISF [Iraq Security Forces], the parties confirmed that the mission of U.S. and Coalition forces has now transitioned to one focused on training and advisory tasks, thereby allowing for the redeployment of any remaining combat forces from Iraq, with the timing to be established in upcoming technical talks,” the document said.

In a news conference in Baghdad on Wednesday evening, Iraq’s national security adviser Qassem al-Araji said that the talks had led to “important progress” in opening the way for American combat troops to leave Iraq. But in practice, the statement’s newly debated description of the U.S. troop presence appeared to be more a restatement of current realities than a strategic shift. The coalition, led from Baghdad by U.S. Marine Brig. Gen. Ryan Rideout, officially transitioned to a formal advisory capacity in July.

Biden picks Giffords adviser, ex-ATF agent to lead bureau

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden, in his first major gun control measures since taking office, planned to announce executive actions Thursday aimed at addressing what the White House calls a “gun violence public health epidemic.”

Biden also is nominating David Chipman, a former federal agent and adviser at the gun control group Giffords, to be director of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.

Biden has faced increasing pressure to act after a recent series of mass shootings, but the White House has repeatedly emphasized the need for legislative action. While the House passed a background-check bill last month, gun control measures face slim prospects in an evenly divided Senate, where Republicans remain near-unified against most proposals.

A White House fact sheet said those shootings “underscored the relentlessness” of the epidemic.

Biden was to be joined at the Rose Garden event by Attorney General Merrick Garland. Most of the actions are coming from the Justice Department.

Biden is tightening regulations of buyers of “ghost guns” — homemade firearms that usually are assembled from parts and milled with a metal-cutting machine and often lack serial numbers used to trace them. It’s legal to build a gun in a home or a work-

shop and there is no federal requirement for a background check. The goal is to “help stop the proliferation of these firearms,” according to the White House.

The Justice Department will issue a proposed rule aimed at reining in ghost guns within 30 days, though details of the rule weren’t immediately issued.

A second proposed rule, expected within 60 days, will tighten regulations on pistol-stabilizing braces, like the one used by the Boulder, Colo., shooter in a rampage last month that left 10 dead. The rule will designate pistols used with stabilizing braces as short-barreled rifles, which require a federal license to own and are subject to a more thorough application process and a \$200 tax.

The ATF is currently run by an acting director, Regina Lombardo. Gun-control advocates have emphasized the significance of this position in enforcing gun laws, and Chipman is certain to win praise from this group. During his time as a senior policy adviser with Giffords, he spent considerable effort pushing for greater regulation and enforcement on ghost guns, changes to the background check system and measures to reduce the trafficking of illegal firearms.

Chipman spent 25 years as an agent at the ATF, where he worked on stopping a trafficking ring that sent illegal firearms from Virginia to New York. He is a gun owner.

744K jobless claims amid more layoffs

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits rose last week to 744,000, signaling that many employers are still cutting jobs even as more people are vaccinated against COVID-19, consumers gain confidence and the government distributes aid throughout the economy.

The Labor Department said Thursday that applications increased by 16,000 from 728,000 a week earlier. Jobless claims have declined sharply since the virus slammed into the economy in March of last year. But they remain high by historical standards: Before the pandemic erupted, weekly applications typically remained below 220,000 a week.

For the week ending March 27, 3.7 million people were receiving traditional state unemployment benefits, the government said. If you include supplemental federal programs that were established last year to help the unemployed endure the health crisis, a total of 18.2 million are receiving some form of jobless aid as of the week of March 20.

Economists monitor weekly jobless claims for early signs of where the job market is headed. Applications are usually a proxy

for layoffs: They typically decline as the economy improves. Or they rise as employers re-trench in response to sluggish consumer demand.

During the pandemic, though, the numbers have become a less reliable barometer. States have struggled to clear backlogs of unemployment applications, and suspected fraud has clouded the actual volume of job cuts.

By nearly all measures, though, the economy has been strengthening. During March, employers added 916,000 jobs, the most since August, and the unemployment rate declined from 6.2% to 6%. In February, the pace of job openings reached its highest level on record. Last month, consumer confidence posted its highest reading in a year.

And this week, the International Monetary Fund forecast that the U.S. economy will grow 6.4% this year. That would fastest annual pace since 1984 and the strongest among the world’s wealthiest countries.

All of which suggests that employers will keep hiring steadily this year as the broader economy improves. That said, the United States still has 8.4 million fewer jobs than it had in February 2020, just before the pandemic struck.

Biden: Infrastructure plan can change but must pass

Associated Press

President Joe Biden drew a red line on his \$2.3 trillion infrastructure plan Wednesday, saying he is open to compromise on how to pay for the package but inaction is unacceptable.

The president turned fiery in an afternoon speech, saying that the United States is failing to build, invest and research for the future and adding that failure to do so

amounts to giving up on “leading the world.”

“Compromise is inevitable,” Biden said. “We’ll be open to good ideas in good faith negotiations. But here’s what we won’t be open to: We will not be open to doing nothing. Inaction, simply, is not an option.”

Biden challenged the idea that low tax rates would do more for growth than investing in infrastructure. The president has taken

heat from Republican lawmakers and business groups for proposing that corporate tax increases should finance an infrastructure package that goes far beyond the traditional focus on roads and bridges.

“What the president proposed this week is not an infrastructure bill,” Sen. Roger Wicker, R-Miss., said on NBC’s “Meet the Press.” “It’s a huge tax increase, for one thing. And it’s a tax increase on

small businesses, on job creators in the United States of America.”

Biden last week proposed funding his \$2.3 trillion infrastructure plan largely through an increase in the corporate tax rate to 28% and an expanded global minimum tax set at 21%. But he said Wednesday he was willing to accept a rate below 28% so long as the projects are financed and taxes are not increased on people making less than \$400,000.

Virginia votes to legalize marijuana

Associated Press

RICHMOND — Virginia became the first Southern state to legalize marijuana Wednesday, as lawmakers voted to approve Gov. Ralph Northam's proposed changes to a bill that will allow adults to possess and cultivate small amounts of the drug starting in July.

Northam sent the bill back to lawmakers substantially changed from the version that squeaked out of the General Assembly in February. The amendments lawmakers agreed to Wednesday would accelerate the timeline of legalization by about three years, well before retail sales would begin, a move that's been cheered by racial justice advocates.

"The time has come for our state to legalize marijuana. The amendments ensure that while we're doing the complicated work of standing up a commercial market,

we aren't delaying immediate reforms that will make our Commonwealth more equitable for all Virginians," House Majority Leader Charniele Herring said in urging her colleagues to approve the governor's changes.

Democrats said the bill was a matter of urgency, a necessary step to end what state figures show is a disparate treatment of people of color under current marijuana laws.

Northam's amendments cleared the House 53-44 with two abstentions during a one-day session held for the purpose of putting the finishing touches on the year's legislation. In the Senate, lawmakers deadlocked 20-20 and Democratic Lt. Gov. Justin Fairfax broke the tie, voting to approve the changes.

The final version of the legislation would allow adults 21 and up to legally possess up

to one ounce of cannabis without the intent to distribute beginning July 1. It would also allow the home cultivation of up to four plants per household beginning July 1. Public use of the drug will be prohibited.

It will be years before legal retail sales follow legalized possession. The bill lays out the complex process of creating a new state agency to oversee the marijuana marketplace, with sales beginning and regulations taking effect on Jan. 1, 2024.

Many parts of the bill dealing with the regulatory framework will have to be reapproved by lawmakers next year. The possession and cultivation pieces will not.

Republicans, who overwhelmingly opposed the bill when it initially went through the General Assembly, railed against the latest version, citing several reasons.

GOP Del. Chris Head called the bill "a train wreck."

Doctor testifies Floyd was killed by a lack of oxygen

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — George Floyd died of a lack of oxygen from being pinned on his stomach with his hands cuffed behind him and his face jammed against the pavement, a medical expert testified Thursday at former Officer Derek Chauvin's murder trial.

Floyd's breathing while he was being held down by Chauvin and two other officers was too shallow to take in enough oxygen, which in turn damaged his brain and caused his heart to stop, said Dr. Martin Tobin, a lung and critical care specialist at the Edward Hines, Jr. VA Hospital and Loyola University's medical school in Chicago.

Tobin was called to testify as part of an effort by prosecutors to establish that it was

Chauvin's actions — not Floyd's illegal drug use and underlying health conditions, as the defense contends — that killed the 46-year-old Black man last May.

Tobin took direct aim at the defense theory, declaring: "A healthy person subjected to what Mr. Floyd was subjected to would have died as a result of what he was subjected to."

Chauvin kept his knee on Floyd's neck for 3 minutes, 2 seconds, after Floyd had "reached the point where there was not one ounce of oxygen left in the body," Tobin said.

The witness cited several factors that he said had made it difficult for Floyd to breathe, beyond Chauvin's knee on his neck: officers lifting up on his handcuffs, the hard street, his prone position, his turned head,

and a knee on his back.

Tobin, analyzing a graphic presentation of the three officers pinning Floyd for what prosecutors say was almost 9½ minutes, said Chauvin's knee was "virtually on the neck for the vast majority of time." He said it was "more than 90% of the time in my calculations."

He said it appeared that Floyd was getting enough oxygen for about the first five minutes to keep his brain alive because he was still speaking.

But Tobin said where Chauvin had his knee after the five-minute mark would not make much of a difference, because at that point, Floyd had already experienced brain damage.

Number of unaccompanied kids at border hits new high

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. government picked up nearly 19,000 children traveling alone across the Mexican border in March, authorities said Thursday, the largest monthly number ever recorded and a major test for President Joe Biden as he reverses many of his predecessor's hardline immigration tactics.

A complex mix of factors in the United States and Central America drove the in-

crease. It has coincided with the Biden administration's decision to exempt unaccompanied children from pandemic-related powers to immediately expel most people from the country without giving them an opportunity to seek asylum. Children are instead released to "sponsors" in the U.S., usually parents or close relatives, while being allowed to pursue their cases in heavily backlogged immigration courts.

The Border Patrol encountered 18,663 unaccompanied children in March, well above previous highs of 11,475 in May 2019 and 10,620 in June 2014. The agency started publishing the numbers in 2009. Before then, adults made up the vast majority of those crossing the border.

March's count was roughly double those encountered by the Border Patrol in February and more than five times the number in March 2020.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

10-year-old drives family minivan to get Cheerios

MN STILLWATER — A 10-year-old Stillwater boy who led police on a chase in his parents' minivan says he was headed to the store to buy Cheerios.

The St. Paul Pioneer Press reported Tuesday that a police officer spotted the boy driving the van around 9:30 p.m. Sunday and knew immediately he was either 10 or 11 years old.

The boy fled when the officer turned on his emergency lights, leading police on a chase that reached speeds of 50 mph. At one point he drove through an intersection and a residential yard in reverse, narrowly missing a tree. Police eventually blocked his path, ending the chase. No one was hurt.

The boy told police he was headed to Target or a downtown Stillwater co-op to buy Cheerios for breakfast. His parents told police they were sleeping and had no idea he had taken their van.

Video shows dog attacking horse-drawn carriage

NC WAXHAW — The driver of a horse-drawn carriage in North Carolina is being credited with helping steer the horse and passengers to safety after a dog repeatedly attacked the animal as it was pulling the cart.

Bridger Medlin, the owner of the carriage ride company, said in a Facebook post Sunday that the driver tried to fend off the dog as it bit the horse on its face and legs Saturday in a Waxhaw park.

In a video of the encounter that was posted online, children onboard could be heard scream-

ing as the dog lunged at the horse. The video showed the horse eventually kicking the dog away, before the dog collapses and someone holds it on the ground.

Medlin's post said the driver "risked her life to protect the riders and the horse, Miss Charlotte," adding that the driver was able to "get the carriage riders off the carriage safely while fighting off the attacking dog."

The post said that the driver was hospitalized, but her injuries weren't detailed.

The dog belonged to a park visitor, according to the post.

Medlin said Miss Charlotte was expected to heal, though her face may be permanently scarred.

Turning off AC ends airport standoff

CA OAKLAND — Oakland International Airport was closed for nearly four hours Tuesday after a knife-wielding man threatened to harm himself but police managed to safely end the situation by turning up the heat, authorities said.

Shortly before 6 a.m., a man in his 30s passed a note to a Transportation Safety Administration employee at Terminal 1 that said: "Help me," KTVU-TV reported.

The man, who was "highly agitated," then pulled a large knife and held it to his throat, Alameda County Sheriff's Department spokeswoman Tya Modeste said.

The terminal was evacuated. Deputies negotiated with the man, who was threatening to harm himself, authorities said.

They distracted the man by turning off the air conditioning, causing him to become uncom-

fortably hot and remove some of his clothing, Modeste said.

At that point, deputies used a Taser on the man and a sergeant wrestled away the knife. The man suffered only a slight injury to his neck, the spokeswoman said.

He was taken away in an ambulance just before 10 a.m. The Sheriff's Office said he would receive psychiatric help.

His name wasn't immediately released.

Lawmakers approve alcohol delivery bill

AL MONTGOMERY — Alabama could soon allow people to get beer, wine and liquor delivered to their homes, under a bill approved Tuesday by state lawmakers.

The Alabama Senate on Tuesday voted 28-0 to accept House of Representatives changes to an alcohol delivery bill sponsored by Sen. Jabo Waggoner, R-Vestavia Hills. The bill now goes to Gov. Kay Ivey.

The beverages would only be delivered to people age 21 and older by companies licensed to deliver. There would also be limits on how much could be delivered in a 24-hour period. For example, beer deliveries would be limited to five cases, and wine deliveries would be limited to 12 bottles.

More than 5,000 people go to illegal party in forest

AZ PHOENIX — More than 5,000 people gathered last weekend in the Tonto National Forest northeast of Phoenix for an illegal party that was broken up by U.S. Forest Service personnel, according to authorities.

The Tonto National Forest requires a permit application to be

submitted and approved for all gatherings of over 75 people. According to Phoenix TV station KPHO, forest officials say campers and partiers restricted access by taping off sections of the main road to designate the party area and vehicles were parked all along the main roads.

Authorities said violations included DUI, double riding, speeding, reckless vehicle operation, staging camps in illegal areas, blocking roadways, illegal use of fireworks and target shooting.

Skier survives tumble down Mount Washington

NH CONCORD — A skier survived a tumble of 1,000 feet down a slope of the Northeast's highest mountain, though it took rescuers several hours to evacuate him to safety.

Arild Hestvik, 61, of Newark, Del., had climbed the steep slope of a chute called the Main Gully on New Hampshire's Mount Washington on Saturday in preparation to ski down, the Concord Monitor reported.

"Hestvik reported that his boot released from his binding before he even made his first turn, causing him to fall the full length of Main Gully," said Frank Carus, Lead Snow Ranger with the Mount Washington Avalanche Center.

Rescuers first got a call for help around 4 p.m. on Saturday and requested aid from an emergency helicopter, the newspaper reported. Trees prevented the helicopter from landing near Hestvik's location.

Hestvik had injuries but was stable, rescuers said, and so they carried him out, reaching a parking lot at 9 p.m. An ambulance took him to a hospital.

— From wire reports

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US Olympic pipeline in jeopardy

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — It's a point of pride that stretches across dozens of universities, many of them rivals, and all the college sports leagues, many of which compete for the same dollars and the same talent. As one banner on the Pac-12 conference's website puts it: "Olympians made here."

The coronavirus pandemic, along with the substantial changes in the college sports business model that will come into play as soon as this year, have led many leaders in both the college and Olympic worlds to wonder if that will still be true a decade from now.

In one question from a survey sent by The Associated Press to Division I college athletic directors across the country, nearly 65% of those who responded said "Yes" when asked if the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee should pay part of the bill to the universities that run sports programs that, in turn, feed the U.S. Olympic pipeline.

At stake is a stretch of Olympic dominance that has seen the U.S. win a world-leading 678 medals in both Summer and Winter Olympics since 2000. A huge portion of that success is underwritten by a college industry that, according to one estimate, spends \$5 billion a year on Olympic sports programs. At the Rio Games in 2016, nearly 80% of America's 558 athletes competed in a college program.

"The fact that we're one of the few countries that competes at the level we do on the Olympic stage without having government fund the program is because of college athletics and what it does to develop Olympic athletes," said Florida AD Scott Stricklin.

Stricklin is chairing a task force that includes about two dozen leaders of major programs and conferences who are looking for ways to keep the pipeline running. The mission takes on an even greater sense of urgency with the United States poised to host its first Summer Olympics in a generation in 2028. A key question looming over those home games is whether America's colleges will be able to produce world-class athletes at the same clip they have over the past several decades.

The AP sent its survey to all 357 ADs in Division I, and received 99 responses to multiple-choice questions about their views of how upcoming changes will affect the college-sports landscape. The ADs were also given a chance to add comments, and they were granted anonymity in exchange for candor.

The Olympics question received a jarringly high number of "Yes" answers to a proposal that might not be a true reflection of what's possible — the USOPC depends on the largesse of the colleges to develop talent more than the other way around — but rather, on how concerned the universities are about their ability to keep operating business as usual.

"I think it's important to get the conversation going because NCAA is a vital piece in the Olympic process," said gymnast Shane Wiskus, an Olympic hopeful who moved to the Olympic Training Center (OTC) in Colorado Springs after his college program, Minnesota, announced it would be shutting down its program.

"NCAA gymnastics has done a lot for me and I do fear that if changes aren't made, that could go away and maybe even affect the Olympic process," Wiskus said.

While Wiskus and other athletes who are good enough have an option to train at OTC and other centers funded by their individual sports' national governing bodies, a cut in college programs could strain that system. Before most athletes even reach that elite level, they're invested in years of expensive training and see limited opportunities for a payoff. A college scholarship has long been one of the key gateways for the fencers, gymnasts, rowers and others with an Olympic dream looming but a lack of resources to take that final step.

But most of the 85 programs cut by Division I universities since the coronavirus pandemic hit last year have involved Olympic sports. Next on the horizon are proposals being debated by the NCAA and in Congress that would allow players to cut sponsorship deals and make money off their names, likeness and images (NIL). A more far-reaching bill proposes revenue sharing between the sports programs and athletes.

Once any of these proposals go into play, it's likely that the billions of dollars generated by the two biggest sports on most campuses, football and men's basketball, will be further divvied up. That will leave less to be used to underwrite the dozens of Olympic sports that aren't self-sustaining.

In a related question in the AP survey, 73% of the ADs answered "Yes" to the question: "If your school were to offer compensation beyond scholarships to students, are there any sports that would lose funding or be cut by your school?"

Most of those sports feed the Olympic team.

Booker, Paul lead Suns past Jazz

Associated Press

PHOENIX — Devin Booker scored 35 points, Chris Paul added 29 and the Phoenix Suns beat the Utah Jazz 117-113 in overtime Wednesday night in an entertaining matchup between the top two teams in the NBA.

The Suns scored the first five points in overtime and never trailed again to pull within 1 1/2 games of league-leading Utah.

Mitchell led Utah with 41 points. Bojan Bogdanovic added 20 points, and Rudy Gobert had 16 points and 18 rebounds.

Nets 139, Pelicans 111: Kevin Durant returned from a 23-game absence to spark his team's most explosive half of the season, finishing with 17 points and perfect shooting in Brooklyn's blowout victory over visiting New Orleans.

Durant went 5-for-5 and added seven rebounds and five assists in 19 minutes in his return from a strained left hamstring.

Wizards 131, Magic 116: Bradley Beal returned from a five-game absence to score 26 points, Russell Westbrook had his 20th triple-double of the season and visiting Washington made a season-best 19 three-pointers to beat Orlando.

Washington snapped a four-game losing streak, but not before it blew most of a 21-point, third-quarter lead.

Nuggets 106, Spurs 96: Nikola Jokic had 25 points, 10 assists and nine rebounds to help the surging Denver beat San Antonio.

Pacers 141, Timberwolves 137: Aaron Holiday scored 22 points, brother Justin Holiday had 21 and short-handed Indiana beat visiting Minnesota.

The Pacers were without All-Star forward Domantas Sabonis and three other injured starters, and had lost nine of 10 home games.

Rockets 102, Mavericks 93: John Wall had 31 points and seven assists in his return from injury and host Houston beat Dallas to snap a five-game skid.

Kristaps Porzingis had 23 points and 12 rebounds for Dallas after missing a game with a sprained right wrist.

Celtics 101, Knicks 99: Jaylen Brown had 32 points and 10 rebounds and visiting Boston rallied in the fourth quarter to beat New York.

Grizzlies 131, Hawks 113: Grayson Allen scored 17 of his season-high 30 points in a dominant third quarter, leading visiting Memphis past Atlanta.

Hornets 113, Thunder 102: Jalen McDaniels had a career-high 21 points in his second career start to help visiting Charlotte beat Oklahoma City.

Braves sweep doubleheader from Nats

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Atlanta pinch-hitter Pablo Sandoval drove a two-run homer to the deepest part of the ballpark off a Washington reliever who took over after Stephen Strasburg's six scoreless innings Wednesday, lifting the Braves to a 2-0 victory over the Nationals and a doubleheader sweep.

Sandoval drove a 96 mph fastball from Tanner Rainey (0-1) over 400 feet following Dansby Swanson's two-out single in the seventh and final inning.

Luke Jackson (1-0) earned the win in Game 2, and Sean Newcomb got three strikeouts for the save.

Ronald Acuña Jr. doubled and had a pair of singles as Atlanta won the opener 7-6.

Washington is missing nine players because of a coronavirus outbreak that led to the postponement of the team's first four games. Four players tested posi-

tive for COVID-19, and another five who would have been on the 26-man roster are under quarantine.

Reds 11, Pirates 4: Tyler Naquin hit another leadoff homer, this time off Chad Kuhl (0-1), Kyle Farmer added a two-run double in the first, and host Cincinnati won its fifth straight.

Red Sox 9, Rays 2: Christian Vázquez homered, Xander Bogaerts had three hits and J.D. Martinez went for extra bases for the seventh game in a row as host Boston completed a three-game sweep.

Indians 4, Royals 2: José Ramírez's second two-run homer of the game snapped a tie in the eighth against Greg Holland (0-1) for host Cleveland.

Rockies 8, Diamondbacks 0: Antonio Senzatela pitched eight electric innings on a cool evening, Chris Owings had three extra-base hits before leaving with right leg soreness and host Col-

orado beat Arizona to snap a four-game skid.

Twins 3, Tigers 2: Jorge Polanco hit a two-run double in the sixth for visiting Minnesota.

Rangers 2, Blue Jays 1: Kyle Gibson (1-0) struck out eight and allowed six hits over six scoreless innings for host Texas.

Brewers 4, Cubs 2 (10): Lorenzo Cain hit his second homer of the game for visiting Milwaukee, a three-run shot in the 10th off Chicago's Brandon Workman (0-1).

Athletics 4, Dodgers 3 (10): Mitch Moreland hit an RBI single off Jimmy Nelson (0-1) with one out in the 10th, and host Oakland got its first win after coming within one loss of what would have been its first 0-7 start.

Giants 3, Padres 2 (10): Alex Dickerson scored on Donovan Solano's sacrifice fly in the 10th off Tim Hill (0-1), leading visiting San Francisco past San Diego.

Phillies 8, Mets 2: Alec Bohm and J.T. Realmuto each hit a three-run homer, Rhys Hoskins had a solo shot and host Philadelphia took two of three from a division rival after opening with a three-game sweep of three-time defending NL East champion Atlanta.

Cardinals 7, Marlins 0: Yadier Molina hit a two-run homer and Dylan Carlson added a grand slam as visiting St. Louis finished a three-game sweep that dropped the Marlins to 1-5 for the first time since 2015.

Mariners 8, White Sox 4: Kyle Seager slapped an opposite-field, bases-clearing double for the big blow in his team's seven-run sixth inning, and host Seattle avoided a sweep.

Orioles 4, Yankees 3 (11): Visiting Baltimore right fielder Anthony Santander threw out New York's Gio Urshela trying to score on a fly ball in the 11th for the final out.

Pandemic delays French Open start by a week

Associated Press

PARIS — For the second year in a row, the traditional French Open schedule is being disrupted by the coronavirus pandemic.

The clay-court Grand Slam tennis tournament said Thursday that it will push back the start of this season's event by one week because of surging virus cases in France.

"This postponement will give us a little more time to improve the health situation and should allow us to optimize our chances of welcoming spectators at Roland Garros," said Gilles Moretton, the president of the French tennis federation. "Whether for the fans, the players or the atmosphere, crowd presence is essential to the tournament, the first international sporting event of the spring."

The French Open was sched-

uled to start on May 23, but first-round matches will now get underway on May 30.

Last year's tournament was pushed back to September because of the pandemic, with crowds limited to 1,000 per day.

The delay will have a knock-on effect on the grass-court season, but not Wimbledon.

Tennis authorities lengthened the gap between the French Open final and the start of Wimbledon to three weeks in 2015, giving players extra time to get used to the fastest surface in the game. But because of the delay announced Thursday, the season will be reduced to two weeks plus Wimbledon.

"All four Grand Slam tournaments are united in their view on the importance of a meaningful build-up to every Grand Slam ... However, given the considerable challenges ahead of

the FFT in staging Roland Garros, and to avoid further impact on the rest of the calendar, the grass court season will be reduced by one week in 2021," the Grand Slam board said in a statement.

Wimbledon was canceled last year because of the pandemic, the first time since World War II that the oldest Grand Slam tennis tournament wasn't played.

The move to delay this year's French Open came as hospitals in the country approach saturation from virus cases. To slow down the pace of infections, new nationwide restrictions have been enforced, including a three-week school closure, a month-long domestic travel ban and the closing of nonessential shops.

The French tennis federation said the decision was taken in

order to maximize chances the event will be played "in front of as many spectators as possible" in a safe environment.

Ugo Valensi, the executive director of the Grand Slam board, said the organization supports the delay. But French tennis player Alize Cornet slammed Sports Minister Roxana Maracineanu for the decision.

"Our sport minister is a disaster," Cornet said, speaking to Tennis Channel. "It's a pretty selfish decision, to be honest. Because the calendar is going to suffer from this postponement. I understand it's not an easy time for the tournament, but we have to think about the players and the calendar."

This year's Australian Open was delayed by three weeks because of the virus, and quarantine restrictions affected the preparations of several players.

Toronto's Campbell wins 10th straight

Associated Press

TORONTO — Jack Campbell made 32 saves for his franchise-record 10th straight victory, Auston Matthews scored his NHL-leading 28th goal and the Toronto Maple Leafs beat the Montreal Canadiens 3-2 on Wednesday night.

Campbell broke the record he shared with Felix Potvin (1993-94), Jacques Plante (1970-71) and John Ross Roach (1924-25).

Matthews also had an assist, Zach Hyman had a goal and an assist and T.J. Brodie scored his first goal for Toronto. The Maple Leafs are 27-10-3, winning five straight and going 8-0-1 in their last nine to open a seven-point lead over Winnipeg in the all-Canadian North Division.

Corey Perry scored twice for Montreal, and Jake Allen made 29 saves.

Wild 8, Avalanche 3: Kevin Fiala had his first career hat trick, Kirill Kaprizov scored two of his team's three power-play goals and host Minnesota handed Colorado its first regulation loss in 16 games.

Luke Johnson, Ryan Hartman and Joel Eriksson Ek also scored, as the Wild caught NHL wins leader Philipp Grubauer on a rare off night in the net. He was pulled midway through the third period for Jonas Johansson, who gave up the eighth goal — to Fiala — that matched the Wild record. Cam Talbot made 29 saves for Minnesota.

Nathan MacKinnon, Andre Burakovsky and Mikko Rantanen scored for Colorado.

Oilers 4, Senators 2: Connor McDavid set up three goals by Leon Draisaitl and scored a spectacular winner with 6:06 to play to help visiting Edmonton improve to 8-0 against Ottawa this season.

Draisaitl and McDavid, the NHL's top two scorers, were reunited on the same line for the game and each finished with four points, and Mikko Koskinen made 28 saves. The Oilers are 6-1-2 in their last nine.

Josh Norris and Connor Brown scored for Ottawa, The Senators have lost four of five.

Blues 3, Golden Knights 1: Jordan Binnington made a season-high 50 saves and host St. Louis Blues beat Vegas to snap a seven-game skid.

Vladimir Tarasenko, Sammy Blais and Jake Walman scored

to help St. Louis end an 0-6-1 stretch. It also gave the Blues their first home victory since an overtime win Feb. 18 over San Jose.

Nicoals Roy scored for Vegas, and Marc-Andre Fleury made 32 saves.

Kings 4, Coyotes 3: Carl Grundstrom tipped home the tiebreaking goal with 6:05 to play and host Los Angeles overcame a two-goal deficit in the third period to beat Arizona.

Adrian Kempe and Jeff Carter scored early in the third period to even it for the Kings, who snapped their three-game skid with the comeback. Grundstrom and Trevor Moore both redirected Drew Dougherty's hard shot through traffic, with Grundstrom getting credit for his fifth goal of the season.

Islanders acquire Zajac, Palmieri from Devils for players, draft picks

Associated Press

EAST MEADOW, N.Y. — The New York Islanders and New Jersey Devils are seemingly becoming trading partners at the NHL deadline.

For the second straight year, the New York City metropolitan-area rivals worked out a deal for the young and developing Devils to send an experienced player to the Islanders for their playoff push for a Stanley Cup.

Last year, it was veteran defenseman Andy Greene. The Devils shipped right wing Kyle Palmieri and two-way center Travis Zajac to the Island on Wednesday for New York's first-round pick this year, a conditional fourth-round choice next year and forwards A.J. Greer and Mason Jobst.

The move before Monday's trade deadline is not surprising. Islanders general manager Lou Lamoriello led the Devils to three Cups and Devils GM Tom Fitzgerald was at Providence when Lamoriello was the athletic director.

"I feel my relationship with Lou is extremely strong, there's a trust factor between the both of us and that's important to Lou and it's very important to me," Fitzgerald said. "Last year we were dealing with same thing ... there

are players that Lou values on our team, for obvious reasons. For me, players want to play for Lou, especially his ex-players and I think that's important through all this and Travis was no different. He knows what the environment's going to be, he knows what the expectations will be."

New Jersey will pay half of Zajac and Palmieri's salaries.

The Islanders are tied with Washington atop the East Division, with third-place Pittsburgh four points back. New York is 9-4-0 since losing captain Anders Lee to a torn ACL in a game against New Jersey on March 11.

Palmieri, who has not played since last weekend and will be a free agent after this season, gives the Islanders a proven goal scorer to help with Anders Lee out for the season with a knee injury. The 30-year-old Long Island native has scored at least 24 goals in each of his first five seasons with the Devils. He got off to a slow start this year and has eight in 34 games.

Zajac, who has spent his whole career with the Devils, recently played in his 1,000th regular-season game. The 35-year-old can do everything, from winning faceoffs, scoring and killing penalties.

Canucks suffer variant outbreak

Associated Press

VANCOUVER, British Columbia — The Vancouver Canucks said 25 players and coaches have tested positive in a COVID-19 outbreak involving a variant of the virus.

The team said Wednesday that 21 players, including three from the taxi squad, and four members of the coaching staff have tested positive, and one other player is considered a close contact.

"This is a stark reminder of how quickly the virus can spread and its serious impact, even among healthy, young athletes," the team said in a statement.

All players and staff are in quarantine, and 19 of the 22 players on Vancouver's active roster were listed on the NHL's COVID protocol list Wednesday.

The Canucks say the team has confirmed that a variant is involved in the outbreak, and full genome sequencing is being conducted by the B.C. Centre for Disease Control to determine which specific variant.

They said an ongoing investigation by Vancouver Coastal Health and contract tracing found that the outbreak was sparked by a single unidentified individual picking up the infection in a "community setting."