

US wary as Afghanistan drawdown nears

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon is preparing for possible Taliban attacks on U.S. and coalition forces as they withdraw from Afghanistan, a prospect that complicates the outlook for winding down America's longest war.

May 1 was the date all U.S. and other foreign forces were to have departed Afghanistan under a February 2020 deal between the Taliban and the Trump administration. As part of that agreement, the Taliban halted attacks on U.S. troops, and none have been killed since then. But the Taliban said they would consider the United States to be in violation of the agreement for missing the deadline for full withdrawal. Their representatives have been vague about whether they intended to attack starting May 1.

President Joe Biden's decision to proceed with a final but delayed withdrawal adds a new element of security risk as the remaining 2,500 to 3,500 American troops, along with about 7,000 coalition troops and thousands of contractors, begin departing. Biden has said all will be gone by Sept. 11, the date of the 2001 terrorist attacks that prompted the U.S. to invade Afghanistan in the first place.

"We have to assume that this drawdown will be opposed," Pentagon press secretary John Kirby said Tuesday in explaining why Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin decided to

keep an aircraft carrier in the Middle East and to move at least four B-52 bombers and portions of an Army Ranger task force to the region as a precaution.

"It would be irresponsible for us not to assume that this drawdown and forces drawing down — both American and from our NATO allies — could be attacked by the Taliban," Kirby added.

Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told reporters traveling with him Thursday that the pullout is "complex and not without risk."

The military typically plans for worst-case scenarios to try to avoid being caught by surprise. The withdrawal from Afghanistan involves ground and air movements of troops, supplies and equipment that could be vulnerable to attack. For security reasons, withdrawal details are not being made public, but the White House and several defense officials confirmed Thursday that the drawdown has begun.

The State Department also is taking precautions. On Tuesday, it instructed all embassy personnel in Kabul to depart unless their jobs require them to be in Afghanistan. The order went well beyond the usual curtailment of staffers for security and safety reasons.

Even the most seasoned American analysts of the Afghan conflict are unsure what to expect of the Taliban. Bruce Riedel, a Middle

East analyst at the Brookings Institution and former CIA analyst, wrote this week that it's unclear whether the insurgents will attempt to disrupt the withdrawal, but he says they may escalate the war.

Seth Jones, a counterterrorism and Afghanistan expert as director of the international security program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said the Pentagon is wise to prepare for attacks, although he thinks the Taliban is likely to show restraint.

"They just want us to go," he said in an interview. "And anything that starts to complicate that at least runs the risk of backfiring." Among other things, killing Americans could prompt the Biden administration to rethink the withdrawal, which already is highly unpopular among many Republicans.

The possibility of resuming conflict with the Taliban is one of several uncertain aspects of the U.S. withdrawal — beyond the key question of whether the pullout will lead to the collapse of the Afghan government. The U.S. intends to continue counterterrorism operations, as needed, against al-Qaida and potentially other extremist groups in Afghanistan, but it's not yet clear where those forces will be positioned. Also unclear is the extent to which American and coalition forces will continue to provide air and other military support for Afghan security forces during and after the withdrawal.

Navy's top admiral says 355-ship fleet not possible

By CAITLIN DOORNBOS

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Navy cannot achieve its mandated 355-ship fleet with its current budget constraints, the service's top officer told House lawmakers Thursday.

The fiscal year 2021 budget can support a fleet of no more than "300 to 305," though Congress in the 2018 National Defense Authorization Act required the Navy to achieve a 355-ship fleet "as soon as practicable," Adm. Mike Gilday, chief of naval operations, said during a budget hearing with the House Appropriations Committee subpanel on defense.

It's not just the cost of ship construction and maintenance holding the Navy back from its

355-ship goal — it's also the price of manning and equipping the vessels, he said.

"That's not just the hulls — it's the people, it's to fill the magazines with munitions, to train the people, it's all of those things that give you a whole fleet that can fight," Gilday said.

The service now has 296 ships, he said.

While Gilday could not specify what the Navy will request for the new fiscal year before the White House releases its proposed defense budget, he said a January shipbuilding plan released by former President Donald Trump's administration found a 4.1% budget increase would be needed to reach 355 ships within a decade.

"The last time we were in a situation ... of trying to recapitalize the strategic deterrent and grow the conventional force was 1981-1985," Gilday testified. "During that time, the DOD budget grew at an annual rate of about 7%. Right now, our buying power has been flat since 2010."

The 355-ship goal initially resulted from a force structure assessment in 2016 analyzing current and future needs of the Navy. That number only includes manned ships, though the service aims to acquire a large amount of unmanned vessels "to perform missions that might otherwise be assigned to manned ships," according to a Congressional Research Service report issued April 22.

Senators call for military justice reform, as sexual assault in the ranks persists

BY SARAH CAMMARATA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y., has fought for sweeping changes to the military justice system for years by urging other senators to back a bill that would take control away from commanders to decide whether to prosecute sexual assault cases and other serious crimes.

Since the Military Justice Improvement Act was first introduced in 2013, the bill has faced resistance from lawmakers on both sides of the aisle and military leaders who have testified the change in control of the cases would undermine “good order and discipline.”

But now a new, revised version of Gillibrand’s original proposal has the support of a key lawmaker.

Sen. Joni Ernst, R-Iowa, who had been on the fence for years about removing prosecution authority from the military chain of command, is now throwing her support behind Gillibrand, after a recent independent investigation into Fort Hood found a pervasive climate of abuse and sexual harassment at the Army base in Texas.

The lawmakers stood together Thursday at the Capitol to introduce the Military Justice Improvement and Increasing Prevention Act, along with a group of other senators and sexual-assault advocates.

Ernst explained at the briefing that the modified proposal would still give prosecution authority to trained, independent military prosecutors, but it adds new prevention measures.

“By the time we have a survivor and a perpetrator, we have failed. From 2004 to 2019, Congress enacted 249 statutory requirements related to sexual-assault response and prevention, but only

9% of those were focused on prevention,” said Ernst, a military sexual-assault survivor and an Army veteran who served in Iraq as a member of the Iowa National Guard.

The new bill aims to prevent the occurrence of serious crime such as sexual assault by improving the physical security of military installations and increasing training and education about sexual assault for service members and commanders.

Sens. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa; Ted Cruz, R-Texas; Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn.; Jeanne Shaheen, D-N.H.; and Mark Kelly, D-Ariz., were also at the news conference to voice their support.

Lawmakers and sexual-assault advocates made the case at the briefing that the steady number of sexual-assault cases and low rates of convictions for perpetrators reveal the military’s court system is not effective.

Hours after the event, Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., who had also previously been hesitant to back the change in military law, announced in a statement that he’s supporting the bill because of “the lack of meaningful progress toward making the military a place free from the debilitating effects of discrimination and violence.”

The most recent data from the Defense Department estimated almost 21,000 service members were sexually assaulted in 2018, marking a significant increase from the department’s previous 2016 survey that recorded about 14,900 instances of sexual assault.

“This same report also revealed a record low rate of conviction. It’s clear that this system is not working. We cannot have good order and discipline when crimes like these are occurring within our ranks and with a culture on base is one not of justice, but of retaliation,” Gillibrand said.

At the news conference, sexual-assault survivor Amy Marsh shared her story of retaliation and harassment after reporting a sexual assault — a pattern that is all too familiar, advocates say.

Marsh, a military spouse of a member of the Air Force, testified in March at a Senate hearing that a chief master sergeant sexually assaulted her while she lived on Travis Air Force Base, Calif.

Marsh explained when she came forward to report an assault, she and her husband were retaliated against so severely that her family requested to move to a different state and her case was dismissed.

“Had a trained, independent senior military prosecutor reviewed the facts of my case, I might have had a shot at sharing my side of the story in the court of law. Letting a judge or a jury make the decision instead of a commander,” Marsh said Thursday.

With tradition entrenched in its culture, the military has been unwilling to make the shift to independent prosecutors. The commander now remains in charge of discipline, ensuring responsibility for subordinates.

But experts have argued survivors of sexual assault have been silenced because they are less likely to report a crime, knowing the commander is in charge of the case.

Cruz, who has worked to whip up Republican votes with Gillibrand to enact the Military Justice Improvement Act, said lawmakers have heard testimony consistently that a commanding officer has “divided loyalties” to the assailant.

“The victim of assault believes the commanding officer is conflicted and so is afraid to report in the first place,” he said.

In fact, more than 76% of victims did not report the crime in fiscal year 2018, according to Pro-

tect Our Defenders, a national organization dedicated to combating rape and sexual assault in the military.

“Passing this bill will increase the reporting rates. It will increase the deterrence, and that will decrease and I hope substantially decrease rate of sexual assault in the military,” Cruz said.

He also emphasized Ernst’s support “changes the balance on the bill” by boosting its momentum.

Ernst said she has always been “very torn” on this issue but she has also said she would keep an “open mind” on taking this decision out of the chain of command if efforts to improve sexual assault in the military were not successful.

Advocates are hopeful that growing support from Congress this year, on top of the potential for the Pentagon to back a similar recommendation, could override possible pushback from top generals.

An independent commission created by Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin in February was tasked with considering “all options” to combat sexual assault in the military.

The Associated Press reported last week that the commission recommended to Austin that the decision to prosecute service members for sexual assault be made outside of the chain of command.

Don Christensen, a retired Air Force colonel and president of Protector Our Defenders, said Wednesday that he’s the most optimistic he has been in the last seven or eight years on this issue.

“My discussions I have had with people who are still in active duty — I think there’s a resignation within the forces, leadership that this is going to happen. It’s just a question of what’s it going to look like,” he said.

Biden's child tax credit to expire in '26

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden couldn't get everything he wanted into his own \$1.8 trillion families plan.

His proposed child tax credit is set to expire after 2025. It would provide parents with \$300 a month for each child under age 6 and \$250 a month for older children. Democratic lawmakers are pushing hard to make the credit a permanent policy, but the administration told them that the annual costs of roughly \$100 billion were too high.

Biden is embracing a dramatic shift from four decades of politics in which presidents from both parties focused more on containing government than expanding it. But the resistance to making the child tax credit permanent is a sign that even in a White House that embraces big government, there are some limits.

"This is a very expensive policy, probably another \$500 billion-plus to extend this for the rest of the decade," said Shai Akabas, director of economic policy at the Bipartisan Policy

Center. "According to the principles they've laid out, they would want to show they're paying for it, and the current 'pay-fors' would be insufficient even on a 15-year basis."

Still, the tax credit is integral to the administration's goal of reducing child poverty to the single digits and improving the well-being, education and earnings of America's next generation. It was first introduced in part of Biden's \$1.9 trillion coronavirus package as a yearlong benefit that increased the size of the existing credit, opened it up to almost every family and enabled it to be paid out monthly.

"With two parents, two kids, that's up to \$7,200 in your pocket to help take care of your family," Biden said in his joint address to Congress on Wednesday night.

For the child tax credit, the challenge is that it is part of an already colossal series of spending packages that, along with infrastructure, totals \$4 trillion and would be paid for by tax hikes on corporations and the wealthy. Biden has proposed a permanent change to the child

tax credits so that parents with no income tax burden can qualify. But the payments would drop down to \$1,000 annually—or \$83 monthly—in 2026.

This choice by Biden reflects a political calculation about who controls Congress and the White House after the 2024 elections. There is a belief that no lawmaker would favor an increase in child poverty, yet there is a risk that Democrats could fall out of power or have to make deep sacrifices to Republicans in order to preserve the payments.

The credit could also get caught up in negotiations as parts of the 2017 tax cuts by former President Donald Trump are also expiring at the same time.

"I've been around here long enough to know that bad things happened in the middle of the night during fiscal cliffs," Sen. Michael Bennet, D-Colo., who has championed the tax credit expansion, said on a call with reporters. "We shouldn't take that chance with our kids."

Incentives hoped to boost US vaccine drive

Associated Press

Free beer, pot and doughnuts. Savings bonds. A chance to win an all-terrain vehicle. Places around the U.S. are offering incentives to try to energize the nation's slowing vaccination drive and get Americans to roll up their sleeves.

These relatively small, mostly corporate, promotion efforts have been accompanied by more serious and far-reaching attempts by officials in cities such as Chicago, which is sending specially equipped buses into neighborhoods to deliver vaccines. Detroit is offering \$50 to people who give others a ride to vaccination sites, and starting Monday will send work-

ers to knock on every door in the city to help residents sign up for shots.

Public health officials say the efforts are crucial to reach people who haven't been immunized yet, whether because they are hesitant or because they have had trouble making an appointment or getting to a vaccination site.

"This is the way we put this pandemic in the rearview mirror and move on with our lives," said Dr. Steven Stack, Kentucky's public health commissioner.

Demand for vaccines has started to fall around the country, something health officials expected would happen once the most vulnerable and most eager to get the shot had the op-

portunity to do so. Now the vaccination drive is moving into a new, more targeted phase.

"This will be much more of an intense ground game where we have to focus on smaller events, more tailored to address the needs and concerns of focused communities," Stack said.

Nationally, 82% of people over 65 and more than half of all adults have received at least one dose of vaccine, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

But while vaccinations hit a high in mid-April at 3.2 million shots per day on average, the number had fallen to 2.5 million as of last week.

Suspect in stolen car kills Ariz. police officer

Associated Press

GILBERT, Ariz. — A suspect in a stolen car struck and killed one officer and critically injured another during a wild chase involving gunfire and multiple law enforcement agencies in the suburbs of Phoenix, authorities said Thursday.

Chandler Police Officer Christopher Farrar was killed and a Gilbert Police officer was hospitalized in critical condition, their departments said.

"Chris was struck and killed by a violent

felon in a stolen vehicle following a multi-agency shooting and pursuit," Chandler Police Chief Sean Duggan said.

The suspect was injured while finally being taken into custody as several officers engaged in gunfire, Gilbert Police spokesman P. Alaniz said. An employee at a Ford dealership also was among the injured, Alaniz said.

The pursuit began when a Pinal County deputy pursued the vehicle in the Eloy area and was fired upon, Alaniz said, stressing that the crime remains under investigation.

"He continued pursuit into the city of Chandler where the suspect drove into the airport and busted through a gate going into the airport, causing the airport to shut down," Alaniz said.

The suspect then got back on a highway into Gilbert, where he broke into the SanTan Motorplex and stole a vehicle from the Ford dealership there, running over the two officers as he tried to get away, Alaniz said.

Duggan said his slain officer had touched many lives during his 18 years on the force.

US vows again to ban menthol smokes

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — U.S. health regulators pledged again Thursday to try to ban menthol cigarettes, this time under pressure from African American groups to remove the mint flavor popular among Black smokers.

The Food and Drug Administration has attempted several times to get rid of menthol but faced pushback from Big Tobacco, members of Congress and competing political interests in both the Obama and Trump administrations. Any menthol ban will take years to implement and will likely face legal challenges from tobacco companies.

Thursday's announcement is the result of a lawsuit filed by anti-smoking and medical groups last summer to force the FDA to finally make a decision on menthol, alleging

that regulators had “unreasonably delayed” responding to a 2013 petition seeking to ban the flavor.

The deadline for the agency's response was Thursday. The FDA said it aims to propose regulations banning the flavor in the coming year and declined to speculate on when the rule would be finalized.

The action would also ban menthol and fruity flavors from low-cost, small cigars, which are increasingly popular with young people, especially Black teens.

“We will save save hundreds of thousands of lives and prevent future generations from becoming addicted smokers,” said Dr. Janet Woodcock, the FDA's acting commissioner.

She cited research estimates that banning menthol would prevent 630,000 tobac-

co-related deaths over 40 years, more than a third of them among African Americans.

Menthol is the only cigarette flavor that was not banned under the 2009 law that gave the FDA authority over tobacco products, an exemption negotiated by industry lobbyists. The act did, though, instruct the agency to continue to weigh banning menthol.

The flavor's persistence has infuriated anti-smoking advocates, who point to research that menthol's numbing effect masks the harshness of smoking, likely making it easier to start and harder to quit.

The mint-flavored cigarettes are overwhelmingly used by young people and minorities, particularly Black smokers, 85% of whom smoke menthols. That compares to about a third of white smokers.

Census: 70% of voters cast '20 ballots early or by mail

Associated Press

DENVER — More than two-thirds of all U.S. citizens of the voting age population participated in the 2020 presidential election, according to a new U.S. Census Bureau report, and 69% of those cast ballots by mail or early in-person voting — methods that Republicans in some states are curtailing.

That's an explosion in the use of mail and early voting compared to four years earlier, when just 40% of voters cast ballots that way. The change was in part a result of the pandemic, which prompted health officials to urge voters to stay away from crowded in-person polling places.

The figures are part of a Census Bureau survey of voters, released Thursday, that offers new details about the extraordinary turnout in the 2020 presidential race between Republican Donald Trump and Democrat Joe Biden. In some experts' estimates, the election posted the highest turnout rate since 1900, before women had the right to vote.

Trump pointed to the high mail voting and early voting numbers to suggest that the election was rife with fraud and irregularities. Those false claims are now driving a GOP effort in several states to make mail voting harder and to trim the number of early voting days.

The Census Bureau survey found turnout rose the most among Latinos, up 6.1 percentage points, and white voters, who saw a 5.6 percentage point increase from 2016. Black voters saw the smallest increase, with their turnout rate rising 3.2 percentage points over four years ago.

While 63% of African Americans voted, that rate did not match the record high of 65% that cast ballots in 2008, when the nation's first Black president, Barack Obama, was first elected. In 2020, 71% of white citizens and 59% of Latino citizens voted, the Census Bureau found.

The Census did find that the 2020 election featured the largest increase in voting.

Stampede at religious festival in Israel is fatal

Associated Press

JERUSALEM — A stampede at a religious festival attended by tens of thousands of ultra-Orthodox Jews in northern Israel killed at least 45 people and injured about 150 early Friday, medical officials said. It was one of the country's deadliest civilian disasters.

The stampede began when large numbers of people thronged a narrow tunnel-like passage during the event, according to witnesses and video footage. People began falling on top of each other near the end of the walkway, as they descended slippery metal stairs, witnesses said.

One of the injured, Avraham Leibe, told Israeli public broadcaster Kan that a crush of people trying to descend the mountain caused a “general bedlam” on a slippery metal slope followed by stairs. “Nobody managed to halt,” he said from a hospital bed. “I saw one after the other fall.”

Video footage showed large numbers of people, most of them black-clad ultra-Ortho-

dox men, squeezed in the tunnel. Initial reports and witnesses said police barricades had prevented people from exiting quickly.

The stampede occurred during the celebrations of Lag BaOmer at Mount Meron, the first mass religious gathering to be held legally since Israel lifted nearly all restrictions related to the coronavirus pandemic. The country has seen cases plummet since launching one of the world's most successful vaccination campaigns late last year.

Lag BaOmer draws tens of thousands of people, most of them ultra-Orthodox Jews, each year to honor Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, a second-century sage and mystic who is believed to be buried there.

This year, media estimated the crowd at about 100,000 people.

In the immediate aftermath of the stampede, rescue workers collected the bodies, wrapped them in white covers and laid them side by side on the ground at the site.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Alligator, cow cause separate traffic delays

TX HOUSTON — Some days, Houston area traffic can be a nightmare. Other days, it can be a zoo, literally.

A cow and an alligator caused traffic delays on Wednesday during separate incidents in which the animals took themselves for a spin on Houston area roadways.

At around 8 a.m., the cow was spotted moving along Interstate 10 in east Houston, stopping traffic during morning rush hour. Harris County Sheriff Ed Gonzalez tweeted that a pedestrian tried to rope the cow. The sheriff office's livestock unit later arrived at the scene and was able to get the cow to a nearby cemetery, where it was loaded onto a trailer and reunited with its owners.

A few hours later, a not fast but furious alligator parked itself on the shoulder of a busy bridge near the Houston suburb of Baytown. At least one lane of traffic was blocked as several officers, including members of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, placed a rope around the reptile's neck. After the alligator wrestled and spun on the ground, officers held it down as its mouth was taped shut. KTRK-TV reported the alligator was put in the back of a truck and was taken to a nearby waterway, where it was released.

Historic bell recovered from church fire

VT WILLIAMSTOWN — A historic church bell made in the Boston foundry of Paul Revere has been salvaged in a church fire in Williamstown.

"That's an incredible historic artifact," Stephen Morse, a

church organist and historian, told NECN.

The bell was badly blackened in the fire Monday night that heavily damaged the Williamstown United Federated Church. No one was in the church at the time.

Church members believe the bell can be cleaned and restored.

Racist message found on ancient petroglyph

UT SALT LAKE CITY — Racist graffiti has been found covering ancient Native American petroglyphs in Utah on one of the most popular rock art panels in Moab, according to officials.

A tour guide with the Moab Tour Co. discovered the words "white power" — a phrase associated with white supremacists — on Monday and graphic images on "The Birthing Scene," a panel on a slab covered on four sides with Native American art. The Utah Bureau of Land Management is offering a reward to find who is responsible.

The art features figures from the Anasazi period nearly 2,000 years ago.

The person who graffitied the racist message had to cross out their first attempt after misspelling the word "white."

Ex-restaurant workers indicted on fraud charges

AL BIRMINGHAM — Two former workers at a Chick-Fil-A restaurant in Birmingham have been charged with defrauding customers by sending payments for catering and other sales into personal accounts, federal prosecutors said Wednesday.

Larry James Black Jr., 37, of Center Point, and Joshua Daniel Powell, 40, of Moody, came up

with a scheme to steal hundreds of thousands of dollars in customer payments, allegedly using fraudulent email and digital payment accounts to trick customers, the U.S. attorney's office said in a statement.

Prosecutors said that rather than the restaurant, money went into bank accounts controlled by the men between April 2018 and January 2020. An indictment detailed more than \$30,000 in transfers that prosecutors said were illegal.

Sledgehammer attack damages mural at church

CA LOS ANGELES — A man used a sledgehammer last week to smash the face of a Virgin of Guadalupe mural painted on tiles at a church in Los Angeles.

The man was recorded on security camera video during the predawn attack at St. Elisabeth Catholic Church in the Van Nuys neighborhood on April 21.

The parish website posted photos of the damage and called the vandalism "one of our saddest moments" in addition to what people have endured during the coronavirus pandemic.

The Virgin of Guadalupe is considered central to Mexican identity and is widely worshipped as the patron saint of the Americas.

The parish asked for donations to restore the mural, which was painted 35 years ago, and install a plexiglass casing for protection.

Fire destroys barn used as Civil War field hospital

PA ELIZABETH-TOWN — An early morning fire destroyed a Pennsylvania barn used as a field hos-

pital during the battle of Gettysburg in the Civil War, authorities said.

Adams County emergency dispatch records indicate that the Mount Joy Township fire was reported just after 2 a.m. Wednesday, The (Hanover) Evening Sun reported.

Chief Eric Hubbard of the Barlow Volunteer Fire Company said the structure was fully engulfed in flames when firefighters arrived. The barn was vacant at the time and no injuries were reported, he said.

The barn was kept in its historic state by the owners, the Outlet Shoppes of Gettysburg, Hubbard said. A state police fire marshal had been called to determine the cause of the blaze, he said.

Corvette Museum raising money for expansion

KY BOWLING GREEN — In order to better tell the evolving story of the Corvette, leaders of the National Corvette Museum in Bowling Green, Ky., have announced plans for an expansion.

The board of directors said they plan to build a 30,000-square-foot addition after raising enough money for the project, which is estimated to cost around \$12 million, the Daily News reported. A campaign to raise money has begun.

"We've reached the point where we need more room," said Glenn Johnson, who is chairman of the museum's board of directors.

The plan is to use about 25,000 square feet for exhibit space and use the rest for office space and a lounge, museum curator Derek Moore said.

— From wire reports

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and Military News

Teams betting big on quarterbacks

Associated Press

Last season wasn't just the strangest in the 100 years of pro football, it was also the highest-scoring by almost any measure — average score, total points and especially passing touchdowns.

And because the NFL is a copycat league, you didn't have to be a general manager, scout or even Mel Kiper Jr. to make an educated guess about how Day 1 of the draft would unfold.

On the one hand, some of the strangeness was gone. Commissioner Roger Goodell was on stage in Cleveland along with a dozen top prospects and smaller-than-usual, but a just-as-frenzied-as-ever crowd of draftniks. On the other, the selections made clear that tossing the pigskin around the NFL is in like never before.

Quarterbacks occupied the top three slots — Clemson's Trevor Lawrence to Jacksonville; BYU's Zach Wilson to the New York Jets, and North Dakota State's Trey Lance to San Francisco — and five of the first 15. Receivers filled the next three and totaled five among the 32 picks.

Most every selection after that — weighted toward cornerbacks, edge rushers and left tackles, who protect the QB's blind side — was designed solely to make life harder

or easier for those first two groups to play pitch and catch. There's increasingly scant rewards for rushing the football compared to throwing it these days. That's why only two running backs and one guard made the cut in the first round.

The NFL and its draft have been heading in this direction for nearly two decades. Rule changes made it easier for high-flying offenses to operate, while wisely cutting down on the brain-rattling hits that made the game hard to watch without wincing. Why build a team patiently when a great quarterback can turn a franchise around on a dime? We saw 43-year-old Tom Brady turn the trick in Tampa last season, and 24-year-old Josh Allen nearly do it in Buffalo.

Some draftniks were skeptical whether Wilson, who grew up in Utah, could be that guy, especially under the withering glare of Jets fans and New York's quick-tempered media. They quickly learned one thing Wilson doesn't lack is confidence.

"When a team isn't doing super well and you can go in there and actually be a key piece to actually flip that organization around, I think that's so special," he said.

But that wasn't even the gutsiest move of Thursday night. That belonged to the last quarterback taken — Alabama's Mac

Jones, at No. 15 by New England — who promptly took to Twitter to hype his own draft trading card.

"Can't imagine a better place to be than #PatsNation," Jones tweeted, a move sure to endear him to grumpy Patriots coach Bill Belichick.

Speaking of Alabama, the Crimson Tide tied the record of six first rounders, set by the Miami Hurricanes' in 2004. In this case, all but one of the six were offensive players. Alabama's conference, the SEC, had an additional six players chosen, and they lined up mostly on the attacking side of the ball, too.

The conference that once served as a kind of Amazon fulfillment center for fearsome defenders, bruising running backs and 10-3 final scores, is now, like the NFL, squarely in favor of lighting up the scoreboard.

Toward that end, LSU receiver Ja'Marr Chase was drafted with the fifth pick by Cincinnati, where he'll be reunited with his former Tigers teammate, quarterback Joe Burrow; and Alabama receiver Jaylen Waddle was taken at No. 6 by Miami, where he'll, too, get to sing the Crimson Tide fight song with his college quarterback, Tua Tagovailoa.

Elite defensive talent still available heading into Day 2

Associated Press

One of the best linebackers in college football, the top defensive tackles in the class and the consensus best safety were all still on the board heading into the second day of the NFL Draft.

The first round was dominated Thursday night by quarterbacks (five in the first 15 picks), the Southeastern Conference (12 first-rounders) and Alabama (a record-tying six players selected).

"It just makes me feel like a proud papa," Alabama coach Nick Saban said in an interview with the ESPN "College GameDay" crew.

The Tide matched a record set by Miami in 2004.

The Big 12 was shut out of the first 32 picks, as was Notre Dame, but that was expected to change quickly after Round 2 on Friday.

The best and most notable players still available in the NFL Draft:

Irish backer: Notre Dame's Jeremiah Owusu-Koramoah was the Butkus Award winner as the nation's top linebacker last year and

maybe the most surprising player to slip out of the first round.

He's a vicious tackler and explosive athlete, but built more like a safety than a run-stuffing linebacker at 221 pounds. His lack of coverage polish might have scared some teams off, making him a high upside second-rounder.

Irish tackle Liam Eichenberg, who was popping up late in the first round of several mock drafts, also was expected to come off the board on Day 2.

D-tackles: Not one interior defensive lineman was selected in the first round. That wasn't a surprise. Alabama's Christian Barmore is considered the best of the bunch and up-and-down play made him a borderline first-rounder.

There could have been a run on the big fellows on Day 2, though, starting with the 310-pound Barmore or maybe Washington's Levi Onwuzurike, who opted out of last season.

Other intriguing defensive linemen include All-American Daviyon Nixon of Iowa; Alim McNeill of North Carolina; Tommy Togiai of Ohio State; Jay Tufele of Southern California;

and Marvin Wilson of Florida State.

Big 12: The only Power Five conference to produce no first-round picks Thursday night had a handful of players likely to get the call soon after the second round began.

TCU's Trevon Moehrig was considered the most likely safety to go in the first round, but instead that position got left out altogether. Moehrig was better in 2019 than 2020 and is light at 202 pounds but was still the best bet to be the first safety selected.

Rival pass rushers Ronnie Perkins of Oklahoma and Joseph Ossai of Texas couldn't crack a first round that had five edge players taken between 18-32, but they could have kept that run going into Day 2.

Texas tackle Samuel Cosmi and Oklahoma State tackle Tevin Jenkins weren't expected to last long with teams such as Jacksonville, Atlanta, Miami, Philadelphia and Cincinnati holding early second-round picks and holes in their offensive lines.

If they'd preferred a center over a tackle, Oklahoma's Creed Humphrey would have been a good fit.

Kikuchi takes no-hit bid into 7th for M's

Associated Press

HOUSTON — Yusei Kikuchi took a no-hit bid into the seventh inning, Taylor Trammell homered and the Seattle Mariners beat the Houston Astros 1-0 on Thursday to stop a four-game losing streak.

Kikuchi (1-1) did not allow a hit until Carlos Correa doubled to deep right-center field with one out in the seventh.

That was the only hit allowed by Kikuchi, who pitched seven innings, struck out seven and walked two. Anthony Misiewicz pitched a perfect eighth and Kendall Graveman a one-hit ninth for his third save, completing a two-hitter.

Trammell hit his fourth home run of the season in the third inning off Luis Garcia (0-3).

Orioles 4, Yankees 3: At Baltimore, Cedric Mullins delivered a winning sacrifice fly in the

10th inning against Jonathan Loaisiga (2-1).

Trey Mancini had his first three-hit game since returning from colon cancer surgery, including had an RBI single in the first and a tying solo homer in the sixth off Jordan Montgomery.

Cardinals 4, Phillies 3: Tyler O'Neil scored on a game-ending wild pitch from David Hale (0-1) in the 10th inning, helping host St. Louis beat Philadelphia and gain a four-game split.

Alex Reyes (1-0) pitched two perfect innings.

Matt Carpenter put the Cardinals ahead in the sixth with a three-run, pinch-homer off Aaron Nola, a ball that bounced out of the outstretched glove of Roman Quinn at the top of the right-field wall.

Athletics 3, Rays 2: At St. Petersburg, Fla., Matt Chapman

homered and hit a go-ahead double against Diego Castillo (0-2) with two outs in the ninth.

Shane Bieber, a Tampa Bay left-hander starting on the day after his 24th birthday, made an unusual regular-season debut, becoming the fourth player to appear in the regular season after first playing in the postseason. He gave up two runs and five hits in four innings, throwing at up to 100.5 mph.

White Sox 3-11, Tigers 1-0: Dylan Cease (1-0) struck out a season-best nine in his first career shutout, Yoán Moncada and Yermín Mercedes homered, and host Chicago completed a doubleheader sweep of slumping Detroit.

José Abreu and Leury García each drove in two to help doom the AL-worst Tigers to their 12th loss in 14 games. Chicago

has won six of seven.

Brewers 2, Dodgers 1: Travis Shaw hit a two-run homer in the fourth following Avisail García's walk off Trevor Bauer (3-1), who allowed four hits in eight innings.

Los Angeles has lost eight of its last 11.

Rangers 4, Red Sox 1: Catcher Jose Trevino hit a tie-breaking two-run homer soon after his battery mate's final pitch, helping push Kyle Gibson and host Texas over Boston.

Cubs 9, Braves 3: Jason Heyward drove in two runs with two hits, and visiting Chicago ended its five-game losing streak.

Diamondbacks 5, Rockies 3: Eduardo Escobar hit a go-ahead triple, Josh Rojas connected for a solo homer and host Arizona climbed out of an early three-run hole to beat Colorado.

Essential Quality brings strongest résumé to Derby

Associated Press

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — Horse racing could be in line for another Triple Crown bid and this time the likely candidate is an undefeated horse from a barn other than Bob Baffert's.

Baffert, of course, is the sport's dominant trainer who guided American Pharoah in 2015 and Justify in 2018 to sweeps of the Kentucky Derby, Preakness and Belmont.

Essential Quality brings the most impressive résumé into the 1¼-mile Derby on Saturday. No surprise, then, that he's the early 2-1 favorite in a full field of 20 horses.

Even Baffert agrees.

"To me, it's Essential Quality's race," said the six-time Derby winner, who will attempt to win a record-breaking seventh with a rare long shot, 15-1 Medina Spirit.

That's the case, in part, because Baffert's top two candidates — Life Is Good and Con-

cert Tour — were derailed by injury and a dull effort in a final prep, respectively.

Essential Quality certainly has all the credentials most observers would want in a Triple Crown contender.

The gray colt comes into the Derby undefeated in five career races over four different tracks. He was last year's 2-year-old champion and winner of the Breeders' Cup Juvenile. He showed toughness in his final prep in the Blue Grass Stakes, winning by a neck over Derby foe Highly Motivated after a stretch duel.

"He's a solid, solid horse, hasn't missed a beat," trainer Brad Cox said. "He's a very classy horse. He knows when to turn it on and off."

Jockey Luis Saez agreed, saying, "I know at the top of the stretch he's always going to give me that kick."

Essential Quality breaks from post 14, which has produced just

two Derby winners, the last being Carry Back in 1961.

The colt has proven adaptable in his races. He can sit off a fast pace and make a charge. If the pace is moderate, he can run closer and finish strongly.

"With his tactical speed, he hopefully would get a good trip and sit pretty close, and if he fires his best shot, I think that's good enough," said Larry Collmus, who announces the Derby for NBC.

Saez adds, "He always wants to win. He knows where the wire is."

Cox is making his Derby debut at 41, trying to become the first Louisville-born trainer to win the race. He grew up blocks away from the Churchill Downs stable gate.

Essential Quality knows the track well, too. He earned his first victory over the same dirt surface on last year's Derby Day undercard when no spectators were on hand due to the corona-

virus pandemic. On Saturday, there will be about 45,000 fans.

"I do feel like we have a little bit of a homecourt advantage," Cox said. "With a 20-horse field, you have to overcome some things and have what you call racing luck. If he gets the racing luck and a clean trip, we should be in a great position."

Essential Quality is regally owned and bred — by Dubai Sheikh Mohammed al Maktoum's Godolphin stable — and his father is Tapit, who had a modest racing career only to become America's most dominant sire over the last 16 years.

A victory by Essential Quality on Saturday at Churchill Downs would bring extra scrutiny of human rights issues involving the sheikh, who won't be among the limited fans in attendance.

Thirty horses have gone into the Derby undefeated and nine have emerged with their record unscathed, the last being Justify.

Varlamov, Islanders shut out Rangers

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Semyon Varlamov stopped 25 shots for his league-leading sixth shutout of the season and 250th career win as the New York Islanders beat the rival Rangers 4-0 Thursday night.

Leo Komarov, Oliver Wahlstrom, Anthony Beauvillier and Mathew Barzal scored, and Brock Nelson and Scott Mayfield each had two assists for the Islanders. Coming off three straight losses to first-place Washington, they won for the third time in eight games (3-4-1).

Varlamov had seven saves in the first period, 10 in the second and eight in the third for his 33rd career shutout and fourth win in five starts against the Rangers this season. He became the first goalie to shut out the Rangers three times at Madison Square Garden in one season.

Igor Shesterkin finished with 23 saves, falling to 0-4-1 in five starts against the Islanders.

Bruins 5, Sabres 2: David Krejci and Brad Marchand

each had a goal and an assist, and host Boston beat Buffalo.

David Pastrnak scored his 199th career goal for Boston just 1:16 into the game, and Charlie Coyle broke a 2-all tie on a breakaway midway through the third. Taylor Hall also scored for the Bruins, and Tuukka Rask finished with 29 saves.

Lightning 3, Stars 0: Blake Coleman converted a short-handed penalty shot and Andrei Vasilevskiy stopped 20 shots for his 26th career shutout to lead host Tampa Bay past Dallas.

Ondrej Palat and Brayden Point also scored for Tampa Bay, which has won four consecutive games.

Hurricanes 3, Red Wings 1: Teuvo Teravainen had a goal and assist for his first points in more than two months, and host Carolina beat Detroit to stretch its points streak to nine games.

Teravainen was in his second game back after sitting out 32 of 33 games because of a concussion.

Devils 5, Flyers 3: Yegor Sharangovich scored twice, Mackenzie Blackwood made 21 saves and host New Jersey beat Philadelphia.

Jesper Boqvist, Pavel Zacha and Jesper Bratt also scored as the Devils won their second straight game after an 0-9-1 stretch. Defensemen Damon Severson and Will Butcher each recorded two assists.

Penguins 5, Capitals 4 (OT): Jake Guentzel scored his 22nd goal 2:11 into overtime to give visiting Pittsburgh a victory over Washington, a result that clinched a playoff berth for both teams.

Guentzel's winner on a one-time redirection of John Marino's pass came after Washington's Tom Wilson forced overtime with 14.3 seconds to play. **Maple Leafs 4, Canucks 1:** Auston Matthews scored his NHL-leading 36th goal of the season as host Toronto defeated Vancouver.

Mitch Marner had a goal and an assist, and William Nylander and Pierre Engvall added goals for Toronto. David Rittich, who

got the start in place of Jack Campbell, made 15 saves.

Panthers 4, Blackhawks 3 (OT): Sam Bennett scored at 4:08 of overtime to give visiting Florida a win over Chicago.

Alex DeBrincat scored on a one-timer with 18 seconds left in regulation for his 24th goal, tying the game at 3-all and forcing overtime.

Blues 5, Wild 4 (OT): Ryan O'Reilly scored his second goal of the game at 3:43 of overtime and visiting St. Louis beat Minnesota.

Sammy Blais, Tyler Bozak and Marco Scandella also scored for St. Louis. Ville Husso made 26 saves as the Blues won their fourth straight and seventh in the last 10.

Flames 3, Oilers 1: Elias Lindholm scored twice as visiting Calgary beat Edmonton.

Dillon Dube also scored for Calgary, and Jacob Markstrom stopped 30 shots while making his 10th straight start. The Flames pulled four points behind Montreal for the fourth and final playoff spot in the North Division.

Durant's season-high 42 points lead Nets past Pacers

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Kevin Durant scored a season-high 42 points, including 22 in the third quarter, and the Eastern Conference-leading Brooklyn Nets glided to a 130-113 victory over the depleted Indiana Pacers on Thursday night.

Playing without Kyrie Irving and James Harden, the Nets built a double-digit lead by the second quarter and were never seriously threatened.

Durant hit 16 of 24 shots and had 10 assists in his eighth start since being sidelined for nearly two months with a hamstring injury. It was the All-Star forward's third game of 30 points or more since his return, which

was also interrupted for three games by a thigh injury.

Rockets 143, Bucks 136: Kevin Porter Jr. scored a career-high 50 points, and NBA-worst Houston beat visiting Milwaukee after Giannis Antetokounmpo left less than a minute into the game with a sprained ankle.

Houston snapped a five-game losing streak on the back of a dazzling performance from Porter, who scored 32 points in the second half and 17 in the fourth quarter. His previous career best was 30 points as a rookie with Cleveland last season.

Timberwolves 126, Warriors 114: Ricky Rubio scored 26

points and rookie Anthony Edwards added 25 as host Minnesota beat Golden State.

The Timberwolves extended their season-long winning streak to four games. Edwards scored 18 of his points in the fourth quarter.

Nuggets 121, Raptors 111: Nikola Jokic had 19 points and 11 rebounds in just three quarters to lead Denver past visiting Toronto.

Michael Porter Jr. scored 23 points for the Nuggets, who had seven players score in double figures and used a 31-8 run over the third and fourth quarters to win their fourth straight.

Mavericks 115, Pistons 105: Tim Hardaway Jr. scored

a career-high 42 points, helping Dallas beat host Detroit.

Trey Burke added 15 points for Dallas, which moved a game ahead of Portland for the No. 6 spot in the Western Conference. The Mavericks' Luka Doncic missed the game because of a left elbow issue, and the Pistons were without their leading scorer as well in Jerami Grant.

Pelicans 109, Thunder 95: Zion Williamson scored 27 points and visiting New Orleans beat Oklahoma City.

Williamson also had eight rebounds and six assists. Brandon Ingram added 24 points for New Orleans, which won for the third time in nine games.