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IG to review Hegseth's use of Signal app

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon's acting inspector general announced Thursday he would review Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth's use of the Signal messaging app to convey plans for a military strike against Houthi militants in Yemen.

The review will also look at other defense officials' use of the publicly available encrypted app, which is not able to handle classified material and is not part of the Defense Department's secure communications network.

Hegseth's use of the app came to light when a journalist, Jeffrey Goldberg of The Atlantic, was inadvertently added to a Signal text chain by national security adviser Mike Waltz. The chain included Hegseth, Vice

President JD Vance, Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard and others, brought together to discuss March 15 military operations against the Iran-backed Houthis.

"The objective of this evaluation is to determine the extent to which the Secretary of Defense and other DoD personnel complied with DoD policies and procedures for the use of a commercial messaging application for official business," the acting inspector general, Steven Stebbins, said in a notification letter to Hegseth.

The letter also said his office "will review compliance with classification and records retention requirements."

Hegseth and other members of the Trump administration

are required by law to archive their official conversations, and it is not clear if copies of the discussions were forwarded to an official email so they could be permanently captured for federal records keeping.

The Pentagon referred all questions to the inspector general's office, citing the ongoing investigation.

President Donald Trump grew frustrated when asked about the review.

"You're bringing that up again," Trump scoffed at a reporter. "Don't bring that up again. Your editors probably — that's such a wasted story."

In the chain, Hegseth provided the exact timings of warplane launches and when bombs would drop — before the men and women carrying out

those attacks on behalf of the United States were airborne.

The review was launched at the request of Sen. Roger Wicker, R-Miss., chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and Rhode Island Sen. Jack Reed, the committee's top Democrat.

In congressional hearings, Democratic lawmakers have expressed concern about the use of Signal and pressed military officers on whether they would find it appropriate to use the commercial app to discuss military operations.

Both current and former military officials have said the level of detail Hegseth shared on Signal most likely would have been classified. The Trump administration has insisted no classified information was shared.

Stocks slide as China imposes retaliatory 34% tariffs

The Washington Post

China said Friday that it will impose an additional 34% tariff on U.S. goods, matching this week's hike in levies targeting China by President Donald Trump that Beijing called "inconsistent with international trade rules."

The development signaled more pain on Wall Street, which had sustained hefty losses a day earlier. By midday Friday, the S&P 500 was down 4.4%; the Dow Jones Industrial Average had shed 3.7% and the tech-heavy Nasdaq was off 4.5%.

Global stocks have been in retreat since Trump unveiled sweeping new tariffs Wednesday, including a 10% tax on most imported goods and an additional punitive import tax tailored for each of about 60 coun-

tries.

China's State Council, announced the change, effective April 10, in a statement in which it condemned the "unilateral bullying" by the United States that had "seriously damaged China's legitimate rights and interests."

The new duties came along with a slew of nontariff measures Friday, reflecting Beijing's playbook of using a suite of pressure points that amount to what it considers a tit-for-tat response.

Though it imported nearly \$144 billion in U.S. goods last year, China exports far more to the United States than it imports, leaving Beijing unable to match Trump's tariffs dollar for dollar. Still, China has made it

clear that it can use other tools to make up the difference.

A long list of additional measures announced by the Chinese government Friday included export controls on rare earth metals needed to make high-tech products, the suspension of export licenses for 16 U.S. firms and the adding of 11 companies to an "unreliable entities list."

China's measures came as stock markets in Asia and Europe fell sharply Friday, continuing the steep declines recorded in the United States, amid fears of a full-blown global trade war and an economic recession sparked by Trump's tariff blitz.

The 10-year Treasury yield fell as investors fled to bonds for safety.

Crude oil fell 7% to roughly \$62 per barrel as commodities markets reacted to the possibility of slower economic growth.

China, one of the hardest hit by this week's tariffs, had vowed to take "firm countermeasures" to retaliate.

Analysts said the escalation hurts the chances of negotiations between Washington and Beijing.

Other regional leaders seized on Trump's suggestion that he might be open to cutting deals, despite his previous insistence that he was not interested in discussing exemptions to his tariffs.

Amid the ongoing uncertainty, shares in Australia, Japan and South Korea traded lower on Friday.

Putin accused of delaying ceasefire talks

Associated Press

BRUSSELS — The U.K. and French foreign ministers on Friday accused Russian President Vladimir Putin of dragging his feet in ceasefire talks aimed at halting Moscow's all-out invasion of Ukraine and demanded a swift response from Russia after weeks of U.S. efforts to secure a truce.

A Russian drone attack late Thursday on Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city, killed five civilians and dramatized the diplomatic insistence on a ceasefire. Emergency crews carried black body bags from a burning apartment building as onlookers wept and hugged in the dark.

Some of the 32 wounded, bloodied and in shock, limped out into the street or were carried on stretchers as flames shot from the windows of their homes.

"Now, I think it is obvious who wants peace and who wants war," Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha said at a NATO meeting in Brussels, refer-

ring to the Kharkiv strike. "We must get Russia serious about peace. We must pressure Russia into peace."

Russia has effectively rejected a U.S. proposal for a full and immediate 30-day halt in the fighting.

"Our judgment is that Putin continues to obfuscate, continues to drag his feet," U.K. Foreign Secretary David Lammy told reporters at NATO headquarters, standing alongside French counterpart Jean-Noël Barrot in a symbolic show of unity.

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio said that Russia's real intentions in the negotiations will become clear within weeks.

"We will know from their answers very soon whether they are serious about proceeding with real peace or whether it's a delay tactic," Rubio told reporters. "Now we've reached the stage where we need to make progress."

A Kremlin envoy who visited Washington this week for talks with Trump administration offi-

cials said Friday that further meetings would be needed to resolve outstanding issues.

Kirill Dmitriev told Russian reporters that "the dialogue will take some time, but it's proceeding positively and constructively."

He criticized what he called a "well-coordinated media campaign and attempts by various politicians to spoil Russia-U.S. relations, distort what Russia says and cast Russia and its leaders in a negative way."

Dmitriev, the head of Russia's sovereign wealth fund, was sanctioned by the Biden administration after Moscow launched the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24, 2022. The U.S. had to temporarily lift the restrictions to allow him to travel to Washington this week.

Civilian areas in three other Ukrainian regions were also hit in Russian attacks overnight, officials said. The Ukrainian air force said that Russia fired 78 strike and decoy drones. Russia's Defense Ministry said that its air defenses destroyed 107

Ukrainian drones.

"We see you, Vladimir Putin. We know what you are doing," Lammy said.

Russian forces are preparing to launch a new military offensive in the coming weeks to maximize pressure on Ukraine, and strengthen the Kremlin's negotiating position in the ceasefire talks, according to Ukrainian government and Western military analysts.

The planned multipronged ground offensive along the 620-mile front line comes as muddy fields dry out, which will allow tanks, armored vehicles and other heavy equipment to roll into key positions across the countryside.

The U.K. and France are helping to lead an effort known as the "coalition of the willing" to set up a force that might police any future peace agreement in Ukraine. A senior Ukrainian official said earlier this week that between 10 and 12 countries have said they are ready to join the coalition.

Europe, Canada say they'll spend more on defense

Associated Press

BRUSSELS — European NATO allies and Canada on Friday said they are willing to ramp up defense spending but are cool on U.S. demands for the size of their military budgets, particularly given President Donald Trump's readiness to draw closer to Russian leader Vladimir Putin.

U.S. allies have spent billions of dollars more on defense since Putin ordered a full-scale invasion of Ukraine three years ago, but almost a third of them still do not meet NATO's target of at least 2% of their gross domestic product.

Trump has said that U.S. al-

lies should commit to spending at least 5%, but that would require investment at an unprecedented scale. NATO figures indicate the U.S. was projected to have spent 3.38% last year, the only ally whose spending has dropped over the last decade.

"It is important that we all agree that Russia is a threat. If not, I don't know why we should always increase more and more defense spending," Canada's Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly told reporters at NATO headquarters in Brussels.

At a summit last year, NATO leaders said Russia "remains the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security."

Trump's public rehabilitation of Putin, who had become an international pariah indicted for war crimes, has disturbed U.S. allies, and they believe the decision to rule out NATO membership for Ukraine weakened Kyiv's hand at the negotiating table before peace talks have even begun.

Beyond that, Europe and Canada were alarmed last month when the United States split with European allies by refusing to blame Russia for its invasion of Ukraine in votes on three U.N. resolutions seeking an end to the three-year war.

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio said Washington is not in-

sisting that its allies hit the 5% spending target overnight, but "we think that's what NATO allies need to be spending for NATO to face the threats that itself has identified and articulated."

Rubio said that the extra spending is required to beef up military capabilities.

"We are as involved in NATO today as we have ever been, and we intend to continue to be. But it has to be a real alliance. And that means that our alliance partners have to increase their own capabilities," he said.

Asked whether the U.S. would also match the 5% target, Rubio said: "Sure. We're heading there now."

National Security Agency chief fired after activist urges ouster

The Washington Post

The director of the National Security Agency, the powerful U.S. wiretapping and cyberespionage service, was fired Thursday, according to one former and two current U.S. officials.

Gen. Timothy Haugh, who also heads U.S. Cyber Command, was let go along with his civilian deputy at the NSA, Wendy Noble, according to the officials. Like others in this report, they spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss personnel moves.

The firings were advocated for by far-right activist Laura Loomer during a meeting with President Donald Trump on Wednesday, she confirmed to The Washington Post on Thursday evening.

In the meeting, Loomer, a fervent Trump supporter, pressed for the dismissals of a number of officials besides Haugh and No-

ble — in particular, National Security Council staff whose views she saw as disloyal to the president.

At least five key National Security Council aides were fired Thursday.

"NSA Director Tim Haugh and his deputy Wendy Noble have been disloyal to President Trump," Loomer said in a post on X early Friday. "That is why they have been fired."

Loomer told The Post that she urged Trump to dismiss Haugh because he was "handpicked" by Gen. Mark A. Milley, who was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 2023 when Haugh was nominated to lead Cyber Command and the NSA.

As chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff — the country's top uniformed military officer — Milley would have had a role in helping select the nominee for Cyber Command, whose leader earns a fourth star upon

confirmation.

Milley, who retired in 2023, had his security detail and security clearance revoked in January by Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth over perceived disloyalty to Trump.

Noble was reassigned to a job within the Pentagon's Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence and Security. The NSA is part of the department.

Haugh, who assumed his dual position just over a year ago, was traveling on Thursday and could not be reached for comment.

The current and former officials said they were not aware of any official reason for Haugh's dismissal or Noble's reassignment.

The named acting NSA director is Lt. Gen. William J. Hartman, who was the Cyber Command deputy, one of the officials said.

Federal judge to temporarily block billions in health funding cuts to states

Associated Press

A federal judge will temporarily block President Donald Trump's administration from cutting billions in federal dollars that support COVID-19 initiatives and public health projects throughout the country.

U.S. District Judge Mary McElroy, appointed by Trump in 2019 but first nominated by former President Barack Obama, in Rhode Island said Thursday that she plans to grant the court order sought by 23 states and the District of Columbia.

"They make a case, a strong case, for the fact that they will succeed on the merits, so I'm going to grant the temporary restraining order," said McElroy,

who plans to issue a written ruling later.

New York Attorney General Letitia James tweeted about the judge's decision immediately after the hearing, saying: "We're going to continue our lawsuit and fight to ensure states can provide the medical services Americans need."

Assistant U.S. Attorney Leslie Kane objected to the temporary restraining order in court but she said she was limited in the argument she could make against it, adding that her office was unable to thoroughly review the thousands of documents under the time limitation.

The states' lawsuit, filed Tuesday, sought to immediately

stop the \$11 billion in cuts.

The money was allocated by Congress during the pandemic and mostly used for COVID-related initiatives, as well as for mental health and substance use efforts.

The lawsuit said losing the money would devastate U.S. public health infrastructure, putting states "at greater risk for future pandemics and the spread of otherwise preventable disease and cutting off vital public health services."

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has defended the decision, saying that the money was being wasted since the pandemic is over.

GOP moves ahead with tax breaks, funding cuts

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — After a long wait, the Senate is launching action on President Donald Trump's "big, beautiful bill" of tax breaks and spending cuts at a risky moment for the U.S. and global economy.

More than a month after House Republicans surprised Washington by advancing their framework for Trump's \$4.5 trillion in tax breaks and \$2 trillion in spending cuts, Senate Republicans voted Thursday to start working on their version. The largely party-line vote, 52-48, sets the stage for a potential Senate all-nighter Friday spilling into the weekend.

But work on the package is coming as markets are on edge in the aftermath of Trump's vast tariffs scheme, complicating an already difficult political and procedural undertaking on what Republicans hope will become their signature domestic policy package.

Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D., opened the chamber Thursday saying they expected to be ready to begin.

Trump says he's on board with the plan and Republicans, in control of Congress, are eager to show the party is making progress toward delivering on campaign promises. By nightfall, as voting began, one Republican, the libertarian-leaning Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky, voted against, as did all Democrats.

Democrats don't have the votes to stop the GOP plan. But they intend to use the procedural tools available to prolong the process. Democrats argue that Republicans are focusing on tax breaks for the wealthy at the expense of the programs millions of Americans rely on for help with health care, child care, school lunches and other everyday needs.

South, Midwest face more rain, flooding

Associated Press

LAKE CITY, Ark. — Parts of the Midwest and South faced the possibility of torrential rains and life-threatening flash floods Friday, while many communities were still reeling from tornadoes that destroyed whole neighborhoods and killed at least seven people.

Forecasters warned of potentially catastrophic weather, with round after round of heavy rains expected in the central U.S. through Saturday. Satellite imagery showed thunderstorms lined up like freight trains to take the same tracks over communities in Arkansas, Tennessee and Kentucky, according to the national Weather Prediction Center in Maryland.

The downpours inundated highways Friday morning in Kentucky, causing numerous road closures, and submerging downtown Hopkinsville, where water rescues were under way. A mudslide on a busy highway on the outskirts of Louisville caused a long traffic backup as crews worked to clear the road.

"The main arteries through

Hopkinsville are probably 2 feet under water," said Christian County Judge-Executive Jerry Gilliam. "So the mayor has closed downtown down for all traffic. Our office is actually in the middle of it and we were here before the water rose. So there's only one way we could get out."

The National Weather Service's Oklahoma-based Storm Prediction Center warned of a moderate risk of severe thunderstorms Friday along a corridor from northeast Texas through Arkansas and into southeast Missouri. That area could see clusters of severe thunderstorms in the late afternoon and evening, with the potential for some storms to produce strong to intense tornadoes and very large hail.

Those killed in the initial wave of storms that spawned powerful tornadoes on Wednesday and early Thursday were in Tennessee, Missouri and Indiana. They included a Tennessee man and his teen daughter whose home was destroyed, and a man whose pickup struck

downed power lines in Indiana. In Missouri, Garry Moore, who was chief of the Whitewater Fire Protection District, died while likely trying to help a stranded motorist, according to Highway Patrol spokesperson Sgt. Clark Parrott.

Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee said entire neighborhoods in the hard-hit town of Selmer were "completely wiped out" and said it was too early to know whether there were more deaths as searches continued. He warned people across the state to stay vigilant with more severe weather predicted.

By late Thursday, extremely heavy rain was falling in parts of southeastern Missouri and western Kentucky.

Heavy rains were expected to continue there and in other parts of the region in the coming days and could produce dangerous flash floods capable of sweeping away cars.

The potent storm system will bring "significant, life-threatening flash flooding" each day, the National Weather Service said.

Five to 8 inches of rain had fallen by Thursday morning in Hopkinsville, causing the Little River to surge over its banks and flood downtown.

A pet boarding business was under water, forcing rescuers to move dozens of dogs to a local animal shelter, said Gilliam, the county executive.

On Friday morning, crews had already rescued people from four or five vehicles and multiple homes, mostly by boat to evacuate people, said Randy Graham, the emergency management director in Christian County.

Rain totals approached nearly 9 inches elsewhere in Christian County, the weather service said. Another 4 to 8 inches of rain could fall later Friday and Saturday.

Kentucky's road conditions website showed scores of state roads closed by high water on Friday morning. A landslide closed a nearly 3-mile stretch of Mary Ingles Highway in northern Kentucky early Friday, according to the Kentucky Transportation Cabinet.

Brown University to see big cut in federal funding

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Trump administration is planning to halt more than half a billion dollars in contracts and grants awarded to Brown University, adding to a list of Ivy League colleges that have had their federal money threatened as a result of their responses to antisemitism, a White House official said Thursday.

Nearly \$510 million in federal contracts and grants are on the line, said the official, who was not authorized to speak publicly about the plan and spoke on condition of anonymity.

In an email Thursday to campus leaders, Brown Provost

Frank Doyle said the university was aware of "troubling rumors" about government action on its research money. "At this moment, we have no information to substantiate any of these rumors," Doyle said.

Brown would be the fifth Ivy League college targeted by President Donald Trump's administration, which is using federal money to enforce its agenda at colleges.

Dozens of universities — including every Ivy League school except Penn and Dartmouth — are facing federal investigations into antisemitism following a wave of pro-Palestinian protests last year.

US added 228,000 jobs as economy showed strength

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — U.S. employers added a surprising 228,000 jobs last month, as the American labor market continues to show resilience as President Donald Trump wages trade wars, purges federal workers and deports immigrants working in the United States illegally. The unemployment rate ticked up to 4.2%.

The hiring numbers were up from 117,000 in February and were nearly double the 130,000 that economists had expected. Labor Department revisions shaved 48,000 jobs off January and February payrolls.

Workers' average hourly

earnings rose 0.3% from February, about what economists had expected. Compared to a year earlier, hourly pay was up 3.8%, a bit lower than the 4% that had been forecast and nearing the 3.5% year-over-year gains that are seen as consistent with the Federal Reserve's 2% annual inflation target.

Health care companies added almost 54,000 jobs and restaurants and bars nearly 30,000 as the job market bounced back from bitter weather in January and February. The federal government lost 4,000, a sign that Elon Musk's purge of the federal workforce may only be starting to show up in the data.

S. Korea's president removed over martial-law declaration

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korea's Constitutional Court unanimously removed Yoon Suk Yeol from office Friday, ending his tumultuous presidency and setting up a new election, four months after he threw the nation into turmoil with an ill-fated declaration of martial law.

The verdict capped a dramatic fall for Yoon, a former star prosecutor who became president in 2022, just a year after he entered politics.

In a nationally televised hearing, the court's acting chief Moon Hyung-bae said the eight-member bench found Yoon's actions were unconstitutional and had a grave impact.

"By declaring martial law in breach of the constitution and other laws, the defendant

brought back the history of abusing state emergency decrees, shocked the people and caused confusion in the society, economy, politics, diplomacy and all other areas," Moon said.

"Given the negative impact on constitutional order caused by the defendant's violation of laws and its ripple effects are grave, we find that the benefits of upholding the constitution by dismissing the defendant far outweigh the national losses from the dismissal of the president," the justice concluded.

Anti-Yoon protesters near the court erupted into tears and danced when the verdict was announced in the late morning. Two women wept as they hugged and an old man near them leapt to his feet and screamed with joy.

The crowd later marched

through Seoul's streets.

Outside Yoon's official residence, many supporters cried, screamed and yelled at journalists when they saw the news of the verdict on a giant TV screen. But they quickly cooled down after their organizer pleaded for calm.

"We will absolutely not be shaken!" a protest leader shouted on stage. "Anyone who accepts this ruling and prepares for an early presidential election is our enemy."

No major violence has been reported by late afternoon.

An election will be held within two months for a president.

Yoon said in a statement issued via his defense team that he deeply regrets failing to live up to the public's expectations, but stopped short of explicitly accepting the verdict.

Israeli ground troops enter Gaza's north

Associated Press

DEIR AL BALAH, Gaza — Israeli strikes killed more than a dozen people in the Gaza Strip Friday, as Israel sent more ground troops into the Palestinian territory to ramp up its offensive against Hamas.

At least 17 people were killed after an airstrike hit the southern city of Khan Younis, according to hospital staff. Hours later, people were still searching through the rubble, looking for survivors.

The attack came a day after Israeli strikes killed at least 100 Palestinians. Hundreds more

have died in the past two weeks, as Israel has intensified operations, intended to pressure Hamas to release remaining hostages it took during its attack on Israel in October 2023. On Friday, Israel said it had begun ground activity in northern Gaza, in order to expand its security zone.

Israel's military had issued sweeping evacuation orders for parts of northern Gaza before expected ground operations. The U.N. humanitarian office said around 280,000 Palestinians have been displaced since Israel ended the ceasefire with

Hamas last month.

In recent days, Israel has vowed to seize large parts of the Palestinian territory and establish a new security corridor across it.

To pressure Hamas, Israel has imposed a monthlong blockade on food, fuel and humanitarian aid that has left civilians facing acute shortages as supplies dwindle — a tactic that rights groups say is a war crime. Israel said earlier this week that enough food had entered Gaza during a six-week truce to sustain the territory's roughly 2 million people for a long time.

Crew faulted in sinking of New Zealand navy vessel

Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand — A lack of training, qualifications and experience among the crew on board a New Zealand navy ship that ran aground, caught fire and sank off the coast of Samoa have been identified by a military Court of Inquiry in a final report released Friday as contributing to the disaster.

The deficiencies were among a dozen failings of the crew, ship and New Zealand's navy that contributed to the loss of the HMNZS Manawanui in October 2024, the 120-page report said. An interim report had already divulged that the ship's crew didn't realize the vessel was on autopilot and believed something else had gone wrong as it plowed toward a reef.

All 75 people on board evacuated to safety as the boat founders about a mile off the coast of Upolu, Samoa's second largest island. The ship was one of only nine in New Zealand's navy.

Officials did not immediately know the cause of the sinking and the Court of Inquiry was ordered to find out. Insufficient training, lack of qualified personnel on board and inadequate risk management were among a raft of problems uncovered in its findings released Friday.

The report also underlined the so-called hollowness of New Zealand's navy, which prompted the organization to "take risks" to meet demands "with a lean and inexperienced workforce," its authors wrote.

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Antetokounmpo powers Bucks past 76ers

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Giannis Antetokounmpo became the first player in NBA history to have 35 points, 17 rebounds and a career-high 20 assists as the Milwaukee Bucks beat the Philadelphia 76ers 126-113 Thursday night.

Antetokounmpo helped the Bucks shoot 51.6% from 3-point range. The Bucks are coming off a win Tuesday against Phoenix in which they shot 68.9% from the field, the highest in an NBA game since 1998, and 58.6% from 3-point range.

Brook Lopez scored 17 points, Kyle Kuzma had 16 and AJ Green hit four 3-pointers for 12 points. Bucks coach Doc Rivers left the bench in the first half, citing an illness, and watched from the locker room as assistant Darvin Ham took over.

Rookie Adem Bona led the 76ers with a career-high 28 points on 13-for-15 shooting.

Magic 109, Wizards 97: Paolo Banchero had 33 points, a career-high 18 rebounds and eight assists, and Orlando defeated Washington.

Franz Wagner added 27 points for the Magic, who moved a game ahead of Atlanta for the top Eastern Conference play-in tournament spot.

Rookie Bub Carrington scored a career-high 32 points

and had nine rebounds for the Wizards in their second-to-last home game. The 14th overall selection in the NBA draft shot 12 of 18 overall and made a career-high seven of his 10 3-point attempts.

Grizzlies 110, Heat 108: Ja Morant made a 12-foot jumper in the lane as time expired, lifting Memphis to a win over Miami and giving interim coach Tomas Iisalo his first victory with the team.

Morant finished with 30 points for Memphis, which snapped a four-game slide. Desmond Bane had 17 points and 10 rebounds, Scotty Pippen Jr. added 17 while Jaylen Wells and Jaren Jackson Jr. scored 13 apiece for the Grizzlies.

Tyler Herro scored 35 points for Miami, which had its six-game winning streak snapped. Bam Adebayo had 26 points and Kel'el Ware finished with 13 points and 15 rebounds for the Heat.

The Heat became locked into the play-in tournament when Milwaukee beat Philadelphia earlier Thursday. It's the third consecutive play-in berth for the Heat, who went from there to the NBA Finals in 2023 and reached the playoffs before falling to Boston last year.

Trail Blazers 112, Raptors 103: Shaedon Sharpe scored 36

points to lead Portland past Toronto.

Sharpe, from London, Ontario, was in an all-Canadian backcourt with Toronto's Dalan Banton as Portland won back-to-back games to keep its Western Conference postseason hopes alive. Sharpe added six rebounds and five assists. Banton added 23 points.

Deni Avdija finished with 26 points and 15 rebounds for the Trail Blazers, who are behind idle Sacramento for the final play-in spot in 10th place.

RJ Barrett, of Mississauga, Ontario, had 18 points, five rebounds and four assists for Toronto. Orlando Robinson added 14 points. Ochai Agbaji finished with 15 points and A.J. Lawson, of Brampton, Ontario, 13 off the bench.

Timberwolves 105, Nets 90: Anthony Edwards shook off an injury scare and finished with 28 points to lead Minnesota past Brooklyn for their fourth consecutive win.

Edwards, who also added five rebounds, appeared to avoid serious injury when he briefly left the game after he stepped backward onto the foot of Nets coach Jordi Fernandez while making a 3-pointer late in the second quarter. Edwards was helped off the court, but returned for the start of the second half.

Rudy Gobert added 21 points for Minnesota while shooting 9 of 10 from the field and adding 18 rebounds.

Warriors 123, Lakers 116: Stephen Curry scored 37 points, Brandin Podziemski added 28 and Golden State defeated Los Angeles for their fourth win in a row in a potential first-round playoff preview.

Podziemski had a career-high eight 3-pointers on a night when Curry was 4 of 11 from long range. Curry was coming off a 52-point effort, including 12 3-pointers, at Memphis on Tuesday.

LeBron James had 33 points and nine assists to lead the Lakers.

Austin Reaves added 31 points, including nine 3-pointers, Rui Hachimura had 24 points and Luke Doncic had 19 points, missing all six of his 3-point attempts.

Doncic's basket got the Lakers to 105-99 in the closing minutes. Curry and Podziemski hit back-to-back 3-pointers and James and Reaves answered with 3s of their own, leaving the Lakers down by seven.

James and Curry traded scoring runs in the third, when the Lakers closed within eight after trailing by 16 in the second quarter. James had 12 of 14 points for his team early on.

Morant: 'I feel like I've been the villain for the last 2 years'

Associated Press

MIAMI — It was the sort of moment that Ja Morant craves. He hit a game-winning jumper at the buzzer to lift the Memphis Grizzlies past the Miami Heat, then skipped down the court listening to the silence he created.

He was the villain. And he doesn't mind.

"I feel like I've been the villain for the last two years now," Morant said. "Not even just to this crowd."

Morant has certainly spent

plenty of time in that role. His ability to take over games was on display Thursday night; the game-winner capped a 30-point night and helped Memphis snap a four-game losing streak. That could have been the story.

It wasn't. At least, not the whole story.

Morant's history with guns — real ones and now pretend ones — is a talking point again. He was suspended twice by the NBA in 2023, once for eight games and the other for 25, for

showing guns on social media, first in a Denver-area nightclub and then for having one in the passenger seat of a vehicle.

He was criticized this week for making a finger-shooting motion in the direction of the Golden State Warriors' bench, evidently avoiding league sanction because Buddy Hield of the Warriors was doing the same his way. And in Miami on Thursday night, there was more celebrations involving him mimicking the act of shooting a

gun toward his own bench after a made 3-pointer. It made headlines.

"I'm well aware," Morant said. "I'm well aware."

He was asked if the criticism bothers him. He indicated that it doesn't.

"I'm kind of used to it," Morant said. "I was pretty much a villain for two years now. Every little thing, if somebody can say something negative about me, it's going to be out there. So, yeah. I don't care no more."

Judge's 3-run homer sets pace for Yanks

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Aaron Judge started another home run barrage with a three-run, first-inning drive that made him the third-fastest Yankees player with 500 extra-base hits and finished with three hits and four RBIs to lead New York over the Arizona Diamondbacks 9-7 Thursday night.

New York's Trent Grisham and Jazz Chisholm Jr. added two-run homers off Merrill Kelly (1-1), who allowed a career-high nine runs, nine hits and three walks in 3½ innings. The Yankees had 22 homers on a 4-2 opening homestand, five more than any other team hit in its first six games.

Judge fell a triple short of the cycle and is hitting .417 with five homers and 15 RBIs.

Carlos Carrasco (1-0) got his first Yankees win, giving up three runs and five hits in 5½ innings. On a night with a 71-degree temperature, up from 42 on Wednesday, he started 17 of 22 batters with strikes.

Red Sox 8, Orioles 4: Alex Bregman, Kristian Campbell and Triston Casas all hit two-run homers, and Boston beat Baltimore to take two of three in the series.

Cedric Mullins led off the bot-

tom of the first with a home run for Baltimore, but Charlie Morton (0-2) allowed five runs in five innings in his home debut for the Orioles. Morton struck out 10, but the two home runs he yielded each followed a walk.

Bregman went deep in the first for his first RBIs of the season. Then Campbell, who signed a \$60 million, eight-year deal before Wednesday's game, hit his home run in the second to make it 4-1.

Casas' drive made it 7-3 in the seventh.

All three home runs were hit to left field, where the Orioles moved the wall in from last season. Bregman's shot reached the seats, meaning it would have been out in 2024, too, but the other two did not.

Phillies 3, Rockies 1: Taijuan Walker pitched six scoreless innings, Kyle Schwarber homered and Philadelphia defeated Colorado.

Walker, who was pulled from the Phillies' rotation in 2024 because of his ineffectiveness, was making his season debut as a starter filling in for the injured Ranger Suárez. He allowed three hits and struck out four.

After striking out Hunter Goodman for the final out of the sixth inning, Walker received a

standing ovation from the Philadelphia crowd — the same fans that booed him during introductions.

The win capped off a three-game sweep of the Rockies for Philadelphia.

Astros 5, Twins 2: Christian Walker and Jeremy Peña homered and Brendan Rodgers had three hits and three RBIs to lead Houston to a win over Minnesota.

Hunter Brown (2-0) gave up two runs in the first and shut down the Twins the rest of the way, allowing five hits and no walks with eight strikeouts in six innings. The 26-year-old righty retired 15 of the last 16 batters he faced.

Bryan King, Bryan Abreu and Josh Hader pitched scoreless innings in relief. Hader earned his third save.

Twins starter Joe Ryan (0-2) allowed five runs on five hits and struck out six over five innings.

Minnesota took a 2-0 lead in the first inning of its home opener. Matt Wallner led off with a drive to the warning track that got stuck under the padding on the wall in right-center. He reached third base on the play, then scored on Carlos Correa's groundout. Byron Buxton fol-

lowed with an infield single. He stole second and scored on Trevor Larnach's line-drive single to left-center.

The Astros got those runs back when Walker and Peña started the second with back-to-back homers.

Rodgers put the Astros on top for good with a two-run single in the fourth and drove in Victor Caratini with a double in the sixth to make it 5-2.

Brewers 1, Reds 0: Nestor Cortes bounced back from his dreadful Milwaukee debut by allowing just one hit over six innings in a victory over slumping Cincinnati.

The Reds lost 1-0 for a third straight game after falling by that score to the Texas Rangers each of the previous two days.

Cortes (1-1) was pitching five nights after allowing homers on each of his first three pitches in a 20-9 loss to the New York Yankees, his former team. Cortes yielded eight runs, five walks and six hits in two innings of a game that helped draw attention to the Yankees' use of "torpedo bats."

He was much sharper Thursday, striking out six and walking two. The Reds' only hit off Cortes was a one-out double by Jose Trevino in the third.

USC star JuJu Watkins named AP Player of the Year

Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — JuJu Watkins, the sensational sophomore who led Southern California to its best season in nearly 40 years, was honored Thursday as The Associated Press women's basketball Player of the Year.

Watkins, whose Trojans won the Big Ten regular-season title for their first conference crown in 31 years, received 29 votes from the 31-member national media panel that votes on the AP Top 25 each week. Notre Dame's Hannah Hidalgo got the other two. Both were first-team

AP All-Americans.

"I think what's so significant about this award is that this was a year that didn't have an absence of talent and stars, and JuJu found a way to elevate herself and her team," USC coach Lindsay Gottlieb said.

Watkins became just the fourth player to win the award in her sophomore year, joining Oklahoma's Courtney Paris (2007) and UConn stars Maya Moore (2009) and Breanna Stewart (2014). The AP started giving out the award in 1995 and Watkins is the first Trojans

player to win it.

"She makes a lot of things that aren't easy look easy," Gottlieb said. "It's one thing to say she's a generational talent, but another to actually do it and put yourself up with names like Stewie, Maya and Courtney Paris."

Watkins is already in the top 10 on USC's career scoring list, ranking ninth. She was averaging 23.9 points, 6.8 rebounds and 3.4 assists before her season was cut short in the NCAA Tournament with an ACL injury suffered in the second round against Mississippi State.

Watkins accepted the award via Zoom from Los Angeles.

"I'm just so honored to be recognized in this fashion," she said. "I want to thank my teammates, my amazing coaches, my family and friends. They made all this possible. I feel so blessed to be able to do what I love."

Watkins raised her game against the best opponents.

In the six games against teams in AP's top 10, she averaged 26.2 points, 7.3 rebounds and 2.4 blocks while shooting 35.4% from behind the 3-point line.

Blues beat Penguins in OT for 11th straight

Associated Press

ST. LOUIS — Robert Thomas scored a power-play goal in overtime and the St. Louis Blues tied a franchise record with their 11th consecutive win, 5-4 over the Pittsburgh Penguins on Thursday night.

Jake Neighbours scored twice and Pavel Buchnevich and Jordan Kyrou also scored for the Blues. Joel Hofer made 24 saves as St. Louis set a franchise record with its 10th straight home win.

Bryan Rust, Rickard Rakell and Rutger McGroarty each had a goal and an assist and Connor Dewar also scored for the Penguins. Tristan Jarry made 14 saves as Pittsburgh lost its fourth straight road contest.

Neighbours' second goal was set up by Jimmy Snaggerud. Snaggerud, a first round pick by the Blues in the 2022 draft, was signed to an entry-level contract last Friday.

Senators 2, Lightning 1: Linus Ullmark made 31 saves, Shane Pinto and Jake Sanderson scored and Ottawa beat Tampa Bay, with the Lightning wrapping up a playoff spot after the game when Colorado beat Columbus.

Pinto opened the scoring for the Senators with 6:15 left in the first period, and Sanderson made it 2-0 on a power play at 5:17 of the second. Brandon Hagel got one back for Tampa Bay

at seven minutes of the second with his 34th of the season.

Andrei Vasilevskiy stopped 17 shots for Tampa Bay.

Canadiens 4, Bruins 1: Nick Suzuki and Brendan Gallagher each had a goal and an assist, Sam Montembeault made 18 saves and Montreal beat Boston for their third straight victory.

Christian Dvorak and Cole Caufield — with his team-leading 35th — also scored for Montreal. The Canadiens hold the second wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference, two points ahead of the New York Rangers.

Suzuki assisted on Caufield's goal for his 80th point of the season, then added an empty-netter for his 26th goal of the season.

Jeremy Swayman made 27 saves for Boston. Last in the Eastern Conference, the Bruins have lost seven in a row.

Stars 5, Predators 1: Jake Oettinger made 28 saves and Dallas beat Nashville for their seventh straight victory.

Mikael Granlund, Mason Marchment, Rooth Hintz and defenseman Lian Bichsel scored for Dallas. The Stars are second in the NHL behind Western Conference and Central Division rival Winnipeg.

Steven Stamkos opened the scoring for Nashville at 4:37 of the second with his 24th of the season. Granlund tied it with 36 seconds left in the second. Ma-

son Marchment gave Dallas the lead 39 seconds into the third, Hintz scored at 5:47 and Bichsel with 7:18 to go.

Justus Annunen stopped 22 shots for Nashville.

Avalanche 7, Blue Jackets 3:

Cale Makar scored to become just the ninth NHL defenseman with 30 goals in a season and Colorado clinched a playoff berth with a win over Columbus.

Makar also had two assists while Charlie Coyle, Nathan MacKinnon and Devon Toews also had a goal and two assists each for the Avalanche, who scored five straight times after falling behind 3-2 in the second period.

Miles Wood, Parker Kelly and Brock Nelson also scored for Colorado while Mackenzie Blackwood made 27 saves.

Sean Monahan, Zachary Aston-Reese and Boone Jenner scored for the Blue Jackets and Elvis Merzlikins made 21 saves before being lifted with about 14 minutes to play.

Jets 4, Golden Knights 0: Backup Eric Comrie made 26 saves for his second shutout in two months as Winnipeg beat Vegas in a matchup of Western Conference divisional leaders.

The Jets took a step toward securing the Central Division and home-ice advantage in the first round of the playoffs.

They have three more points

than Washington in the race for the Presidents' Trophy and four more than Dallas in the Central.

Vegas, after back-to-back losses this week, finds its once solid grip on the Pacific Division more tenuous.

Los Angeles is within three points after beating the Utah Hockey Club 4-2 on Thursday night.

Mark Scheifele, Adam Lowry, Colin Miller and Cole Perfetti scored and Nino Niederreiter had two assists. Comrie, who backs up Vezina Trophy winner Connor Hellebuyck, got his first shutout since Feb. 4 against Carolina.

Oilers 3, Sharks 2: Jeff Skinner tipped in the tiebreaking goal late in the second period and Edmonton overcame an injury to Leon Draisaitl and beat San Jose.

Skinner scored just a few minutes after Draisaitl went to the locker room with an undisclosed injury. He never returned to the game.

Connor Brown and Viktor Arvidsson also scored to give the Oilers their third straight win. Calvin Pickard made 27 saves.

Edmonton kept pace with Los Angeles in the race for second place in the Pacific Division and home-ice advantage in the first round of the playoffs.

Jack Thompson and Tyler Toffoli scored for San Jose. Georgi Romanov made 35 saves.

Trump again says PGA Tour, LIV Golf should merge

Associated Press

DORAL, Fla. — President Donald Trump arrived at his Doral resort Thursday for a LIV Golf event, shortly after reiterating to reporters aboard Air Force One that he wants to see the two men's professional tours united.

The president has spoken out on the subject before, and Trump has been involved in some of the talks that may even-

tually unify the PGA Tour and Saudi-funded LIV. Those talks have gone on for at least a year and how — or if — a deal can be struck is unclear.

"Ultimately, hopefully, the two tours are going to merge. That'll be good. I'm involved in that too," Trump told reporters on the flight to Miami. "But hopefully we're going to get the two tours to merge. You have the PGA Tour and the LIV Tour.

And I think having them merge would be a great thing."

Trump called the LIV golfers — a roster that includes Brooks Koepka, Bryson DeChambeau, Phil Mickelson, Dustin Johnson and others — "some of the best players in the world."

Trump was driven to the edge of the hotel property late Thursday afternoon, shortly after he arrived, in a golf cart by his son Eric Trump, who played in the

LIV Miami pro-am at Doral earlier Thursday alongside Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and others. Trump waved to a few dozen supporters and briskly walked into a nearby building.

The LIV tournament at Trump's Doral property starts Friday and concludes Sunday. Trump, an avid golfer, is expected to play at one of his other properties in Jupiter, Fla., at some point this weekend.