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Militant losses accelerate under Trump

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — Nearly a third of the territory reclaimed from Islamic State in Iraq and Syria since 2014 has been won in the past six months due to new policies adopted by the Trump administration, a senior State Department official said Friday.

Brett McGurk, the State Department's senior envoy to the anti-ISIS coalition, said steps President Donald Trump has taken, including delegating decision-making authority to commanders in the field, have "dramatically accelerated" gains against the militants.

Combined ISIS losses in both countries since the group's peak control in early 2015 total about 27,000 square miles of territory — 78 percent of militant holdings in Iraq and 58 percent in Syria. About 8,000 square miles of territory has been reclaimed under Trump, McGurk said in a briefing for reporters.

He said ISIS has been driven out of 45 percent of Raqqa, the group's de facto Syrian capital since the launch of an offensive by U.S.-backed local forces two months ago. U.S. and coalition airstrikes have been instrumental in the ground successes

of the Syrian Democratic Forces, compromising Kurdish and Arab fighters.

Assessments by different sources of ground won and lost by the militants over the years have varied widely. Early this year, the defense consultant IHS Jane's put the total amount of territory controlled by the ISIS in early 2015 at 35,000 square miles. After "unprecedented" losses for the militants in 2016, it said in January that the group occupied a remaining 23,000 square miles.

Although the Trump administration has yet to announce its new strategy for the campaign against ISIS, McGurk cited "key changes" under Trump. In addition to the delegation of decision-making authority, which he said has allowed much greater responsiveness to opportunities and changing circumstances, he cited a "campaign of annihilation" that has concentrated on surrounding cities held by the militants before launching offensives, to ensure that no militants will escape.

He said the 2,000 militants remaining in Raqqa "most likely will die in Raqqa." The United Nations has estimated that 25,000 civilians also remain in the city.

McGurk, who held the same job in the Obama administration, also cited renewed administration efforts to "increase burden-sharing from the coalition" among what he said were 73 countries. Most of them do not contribute to the warfighting but are expected to help with stabilization efforts in cleared areas, including in the Iraqi city of Mosul, where U.S.-backed Iraqi security forces declared victory over ISIS last month.

Some U.S. lawmakers have criticized what they have said is a lack of post-conflict plans, while others have said — as Trump emphasized during his presidential campaign — that the U.S. should not be involved in "nation-building" overseas.

McGurk described extensive preparations, while emphasizing that the U.S. is not interested in reconstruction or nation-building. Instead, he said, U.S. and partner nations are removing mines, clearing rubble and making sure that basic services — electricity, sewage and water — are operational to allow displaced residents to return under the leadership of local councils.

"People say, 'We want you to run the hospital, the schools.'

We say, 'No, we're not very good at that.' It's not our responsibility," McGurk said.

Asked whether the current deterioration of relations between the U.S. and Russia has affected their cooperation in Syria, he said that "so far, we've not seen an effect on our engagement" there.

Last month, the two governments announced a cease-fire agreement in southwestern Syria, where U.S.-backed opposition forces have battled the Russian-backed Syrian army of President Bashar Assad in an ongoing civil war.

Russia, on Assad's behalf, has also agreed to "deconfliction" lines south of Raqqa and along the Euphrates River, where Assad's forces threatened to clash with U.S.-backed fighters combating ISIS. McGurk described daily "military to military" contacts between Russia and the U.S., and less-frequent diplomatic contacts.

Among the successes of the current policy, he said, are the near-cessation of civilian displacements inside Syria and Iraq, and the return of hundreds of thousands of displaced civilians to their homes in places previously occupied by ISIS.

Court deals blow to vets suing KBR over burn pits

McClatchy Washington Bureau

A federal judge has dismissed a major lawsuit against a defense contractor by veterans and their family members over burn pit operations in Iraq and Afghanistan that plaintiffs said caused them chronic and sometimes deadly respiratory diseases and cancer.

In the decision, U.S. District Court Judge Roger Titus wrote

that the company, KBR, could not be held liable for what was essentially a military decision to use burn pits for waste disposal. Titus said holding the Pentagon responsible was outside of his jurisdiction.

"The extensive evidence ... demonstrates that the mission-critical, risk-based decisions surrounding the use and operation of open burn pits ... were made by the military as

a matter of military wartime judgment," Titus wrote in an 81-page opinion.

The dismissal — the second by Titus in the case — deals a major blow to the more than 700 veterans, family members and former KBR employees who brought the suit.

Plaintiffs were disappointed, and some were furious.

"My husband is DEAD because of burn pits," Dina McK-

enna, whose husband, former Army Sgt. William McKenna, died in 2010 from a rare form of T-cell lymphoma after serving in Iraq, told McClatchy in an email. "I want someone to be held accountable."

Susan Burke, a Baltimore-based attorney who represents the plaintiffs, told McClatchy that her clients will file an appeal to the 4th Circuit.

3 Marines missing after Osprey crash

Associated Press

SYDNEY — Search and rescue operations were underway for three U.S. Marines who were missing after their Osprey aircraft crashed into the sea off the east coast of Australia on Saturday while trying to land.

Twenty-three of 26 personnel aboard the aircraft have been rescued, the Marine base Camp Butler in Japan said in a statement.

The MV-22 Osprey involved in the mishap had taken off from the USS Bonhomme Richard and was conducting regularly scheduled operations when the aircraft crashed into the water, the statement said. The ship's small boats and aircraft immediately responded in the search and rescue efforts.

The Osprey is a tilt-rotor aircraft that takes off and lands like a helicopter, but flies like an airplane. They have been

involved in a series of high-profile crashes in recent years.

The aircraft was in Australia for a joint military training exercise held by the U.S. and Australia last month in Shoalwater Bay. The Talisman Sabre exercise, a biennial event between the two nations, involved more than 30,000 troops and 200 aircraft.

Australian Defense Minister Marise Payne said Saturday's incident occurred off

the coast of Shoalwater Bay in Queensland state.

"I can confirm no Australian Defence Force personnel were on board the aircraft," Payne said in a statement. "The United States are leading the search and recovery effort."

Payne said she had spoken with U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis "to offer Australia's support in any way that can be of assistance."

Bales defense to mention malaria drug at hearing

The Seattle Times

SEATTLE — The defense team for Robert Bales, in a hearing scheduled for Tuesday, plans to raise possible use of a controversial malaria drug as justification for a review of the life-without-parole sentence he received for the murder of 16 Afghans.

The U.S. Army Court of Criminal Appeals hearing in Northern Virginia comes four years after Bales was sentenced at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash., for one of the most notorious U.S. war crimes of recent decades. Early on March 12, 2012, Bales, then a staff sergeant, twice left a small base in southern Afghanistan to kill men, women and children in two Kandahar province villages.

Defense attorneys are expected to argue that while on a 2003-2004 tour in Iraq, and possibly in Afghanistan in 2012, Bales took the anti-malarial drug mefloquine, according to John Henry Browne, a Seattle attorney who has assisted in the soldier's defense.

In July 2013, the FDA issued its strictest warning about mefloquine, noting the potential for long-term neurological damage and serious psychiatric side effects. The defense team

did not raise Bales' possible use of the drug during sentencing proceedings the next month.

Defense attorneys now hope the drug issue can persuade a three-judge panel to lessen his sentence. But Bales has never recalled just what malaria medications he took, according to Browne.

A retired Army officer who headed up the prosecution team said he never saw any documentation in Bales' medical records that he took mefloquine in Iraq or Afghanistan.

"There is zero evidence that Bales was on mefloquine," said retired Lt. Col. Jay Morse, who is now in private practice but plans to attend Tuesday's hearing as an observer.

Appeals are automatic for Army criminal convictions. The three-judge panel has wide-ranging powers to adjust a sentence, or even to throw one out.

Bales' hearing will be held at Fort Belvoir, Va.

Defense attorneys have raised another issue in the appeal that involves Afghan witnesses who flew to the U.S. to testify against Bales at Joint Base Lewis-McChord. Bales' lawyers allege that some of those witnesses' ties to bomb-making were not disclosed, according to Browne.

Court throws out conviction in Blackwater shooting case

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — A U.S. appeals court on Friday threw out the first-degree murder conviction of a former Blackwater Worldwide security guard sentenced to life in prison in the killings of 14 unarmed Iraqi civilians in a Baghdad traffic circle in 2007.

The court also ordered resentencings for three others convicted in the incident.

The September 2007 shootings, which also wounded 17 people, fomented deep resentments about the accountability of American security forces during one of the bloodiest periods of the Iraq War.

The three-judge panel of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit ruled that the trial court "abused its discretion" in not allowing Nicholas Slatten, 33, of Sparta, Tenn., to be tried separately from his three co-defendants, even though one of them said he, not Slatten, fired the first shots in the civilian massacre.

In a split ruling, the court also found the 30-year terms of the others convicted of manslaughter and attempted manslaughter — Paul Slough, 37, of Keller, Texas; Evan Liberty, 35, of Rochester, N.H.; and Dustin Heard, 36, of Maryville, Tenn. — violated the constitutional

prohibition against "cruel and unusual punishment."

They received the enhanced penalty because they were also convicted of using military firearms while committing a felony, a charge that primarily has been aimed at gang members and never before used against security contractors given military weapons by the U.S. government.

Slough's wife, Christin, said while she was thrilled that Slatten's conviction was vacated, the ruling deepened her distrust of the federal judicial system. "We remain hopeful that all four of these men will be home where they belong sooner rather than later, but this was not the firm step in that direction that we had hoped or that the law required," she said.

On social media, a group representing friends and family of the four tweeted, "Not a complete home-run for all 4 men, but it is something."

It could not immediately be determined if Slatten would be retried.

The four contractors were convicted of firing wildly into cars stalled in traffic at Nisour Square on Sept. 16, 2007, pouring machine-gun bullets and grenades into crowds, including women clutching only purses and children holding their hands in the air.

Deal reached for 2 presidential planes

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Air Force, which has been looking for ways to lower the cost of new Air Force One planes, agreed Friday to buy two jumbo jets from Boeing that were ordered but never delivered to a now-defunct Russian airline.

Two people close to the matter confirmed last week that the Air Force and Boeing were in talks about the two planes that were still in the company's inventory. They spoke on condition of anonymity because the deal hadn't been publicly announced.

The contract details, includ-

ing costs, were not provided on Friday. But President Donald Trump has complained about the high cost of new presidential planes, even threatening at one point to cancel the order.

"This award is a significant step towards ensuring an overall affordable program," said Darlene Costello, the Air Force's principal deputy assistant secretary for acquisition. "As we move forward, we will continue to seek and implement cost savings opportunities."

The list price for a Boeing 747-8 is \$386.8 million, according to Boeing's website. It was

not clear whether that price would apply to planes that are already built and sitting in Boeing's inventory. Modifications to accommodate security, communications and other presidential requirements would have to be done, and would increase the final price.

In December, Trump complained on Twitter about the cost of new Air Force One planes. "Costs are out of control, more than \$4 billion. Cancel order!" the president-elect tweeted.

A month later, Boeing CEO Dennis Muilenburg met with Trump and declared they had

made "great progress" in discussions about holding down the program's cost. That led to talks between the company and the Pentagon.

The two Boeing 747-8 aircraft were ordered by Russian carrier Transaero but never delivered because the airline filed for bankruptcy protection in 2015, according to the people familiar with the matter. Aircraft makers such as Boeing and Airbus routinely try to resell planes that are ordered but never delivered.

The aircraft are expected to be in service in 2024.

NATO says Afghan inside attacker killed

KABUL, Afghanistan — A member of the Afghan police force has been killed by NATO advisers before he was able to attack their forces in southern Kandahar province, according to a statement from the NATO-led Resolute Support mission.

The statement released Saturday said the incident took place near Kandahar Airfield after the advisers had completed scheduled law enforcement training and were attacked by a police officer as they were preparing to return to their base.

The Romanian soldiers who were providing security for the advisers returned fire and killed the gunman, it said.

A Romanian soldier and another Afghan policeman were wounded and are being treated, it added.

From The Associated Press

Virginian is first black woman to lead West Point Corps of Cadets

The Washington Post

A northern Virginian selected to hold the top position in the chain of command for West Point cadets will be the first African-American woman to do so at the U.S. Military Academy.

West Point this week announced that Cadet Simone Askew, of Fairfax, Va., will serve as first captain of the Corps of Cadets during the upcoming academic year. Askew, an international history major at West Point, will assume her duties later this month.

"Simone truly exemplifies our values of Duty, Honor, Country," Brig. Gen. Steven W. Gilland, commandant of cadets, said in a release. "Her selection is a direct result of her hard work, dedication and commitment to the Corps over the last three years."

As first captain, Askew will be "responsible for the overall performance" of the West Point cadets, according to the release. She will act as an intermediary between the corps and West Point's

administration, and work on a class agenda.

There are more than 4,000 cadets at the U.S. Military Academy. The service academy, located on the bluffs above the Hudson River, is about 50 miles north of New York City.

Founded in 1802, West Point enrolled women for the first time in 1976. Federal data show that 20 percent of cadets at West Point in fall 2016 were women.

Askew, 20, is a member of the Army West Point Crew team and the Phi Alpha Theta Honorary National History Society.

Dave Goldfarb, her former principal at Fairfax High School, said he remembered Askew as a "very dynamic person." Askew was the type of student who consistently saw value in others, he said, and was both well-rounded and well-liked.

"She was always very positive, had great energy," Goldfarb said. "She excelled at including others. She was very much a collaborative leader."

Baby sitters accused of putting kids in back of U-Haul

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Two city workers thought something was amiss when they saw five children getting into the back of a U-Haul truck at a gas station. They stopped the driver from leaving and called 911.

Elyria police and firefighters arrived Wednesday afternoon

and found the children, ranging in age from 2 to 15, soaked with sweat, infested with lice and covered with bug bites.

A woman who described herself as the children's godmother was in the back of the U-Haul.

The woman, Jamie Adkins, 25, explained to officers that she had been caring for the four younger children the last

two weeks and that they had left Cleveland early that morning to travel to a flea market in Amherst, Ohio. Adkins said she had called the children's mother, who hadn't seen them for two weeks, and had told her where they were going and how they'd be getting there.

The 2-year-old, a boy, was taken to an Elyria medical

center and then flown to a children's hospital in Cleveland to be treated for heat exhaustion.

Adkins and the U-Haul driver, Brian Dekam, 55, both Cleveland residents, were taken into custody and charged with multiple counts of child endangering. They were eventually released for medical reasons, police said.

Task force on marijuana law offers little on new policies

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The betting was that law-and-order Attorney General Jeff Sessions would come out against the legalized marijuana industry with guns blazing. But the task force Sessions assembled to find the best legal strategy is giving him no ammunition, according to documents obtained by The Associated Press.

The Task Force on Crime Reduction and Public Safety, a group of prosecutors and federal law enforcement officials, has come up with no new policy recommendations to advance the attorney general's aggressively anti-marijuana views. The group's report largely reiterates the current Justice Department policy on marijuana.

It encourages officials to keep studying whether to change or rescind the Obama administration's more hands-off approach

to enforcement — a stance that has allowed the nation's experiment with legal pot to flourish. The report was not slated to be released publicly, but portions were obtained by the AP.

Sessions, who has assailed marijuana as comparable to heroin and blamed it for spikes in violence, has been promising to reconsider existing pot policy since he took office six months ago. His statements have sparked both support and worry across the political spectrum as a growing number of states have worked to legalize the drug.

Threats of a federal crackdown have united liberals, who object to the human costs of a war on pot, and some conservatives, who see it as a states' rights issue. Some advocates and members of Congress had feared the task force's recommendations would give Sessions the green light to begin

dismantling what has become a sophisticated, multimillion-dollar pot industry that helps fund schools, educational programs and law enforcement.

But the tepid nature of the recommendations signals just how difficult it would be to change course on pot.

Some in law enforcement support a tougher approach, but a bipartisan group of senators in March urged Sessions to uphold existing marijuana policy. Others in Congress are seeking ways to protect and promote pot businesses.

The vague recommendations may be intentional, reflecting an understanding that shutting down the entire industry is neither palatable nor possible, said John Hudak, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution who studies marijuana law and was interviewed by members of the task force.

UAW not giving up despite Miss. loss

Associated Press

CANTON, Miss. — Supporters of the United Auto Workers say they're not giving up their fight to unionize a Nissan auto assembly plant in Mississippi after a stinging defeat, even as UAW opponents say Friday's loss proves workers don't want the union.

More than 62 percent of workers voting in a two-day election at Nissan Motor Co.'s Canton plant voted against the UAW, with 2,244 ballots against the union according to the National Labor Relations Board. Voting for union representation were 1,307 workers, or 38 percent.

Amid tears at a union office near the plant just north of Jackson, UAW supporters voiced defiance, with some calling for the election to be rerun after the minimum six-month wait. The union filed charges moments before the polls closed Friday night making new allegations that Nissan had broken federal labor law and intimidated workers into voting "no." If the labor board agrees, it could order a new election at the plant.

UAW Secretary-Treasurer Gary Casteel had telegraphed the likelihood of new charges Monday, when he alleged illegal activity by the company. Among the claims: Nissan provided a faulty contact list to the union, it caused a contract worker to be fired because of his union support, and a manager told workers July 28 that they would lose benefits if they voted for a union.

"Despite claiming for years to be neutral on the question of a union, Nissan waged one of the most illegal and unethical anti-union campaigns that I've seen in my lifetime," Casteel said in a statement Friday.

Company spokeswoman Parul Bajaj said Nissan lived up to its obligations in providing the list. She generally denied the other charges.

Idea of Dems funding candidates who oppose abortion draws ire

Associated Press

The proposal seemed modest in today's polarized political climate: The head of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee suggested his group might help fund candidates who didn't share the party's support for abortion rights.

The backlash from abortion-rights activists and organizations was quick and harsh. The basic message: Don't go there.

A coalition of progressive groups, including Planned Parenthood and NARAL Pro-Choice America, issued a "statement of principles" challenging the party to be unwavering in its support for abortion rights. Scores of women who have had abortions made the same point in an open letter to House Dem-

ocratic leader Nancy Pelosi, a staunch abortion-rights supporter who nonetheless has said there's room in the party for opposing views.

"The DCCC should not be supporting any politician who does not respect a woman's right to control her body," said Karin Roland, of the women's rights group Ultraviolet. "There is no future of the Democratic Party without women — so stop betraying them for a misguided idea of what's needed to win elections."

The latest brush fires were sparked this week by the DCCC chairman, Rep. Ben Ray Lujan of New Mexico, when he told The Hill newspaper that the committee is willing to aid candidates who oppose abortion rights. His core argument:

Democrats will only reclaim power by winning in GOP-leaning districts and states where the liberal base can't deliver victories on its own.

Some Democratic officials suggest the argument over Lujan's remarks is overblown — a handful of outliers won't change the agenda if Democrats reclaim congressional majorities.

Abortion-rights leaders have a different view.

"Every time the Democrats lose an election, they start casting about in ways that are deeply damaging to the base," NARAL president Ilyse Hogue said. "If they go out and start recruiting anti-choice candidates under the Democratic brand, the message is, 'We're willing to sell out women to win,' and politically that's just suicide."

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Cow shootings spark fear of serial cow killer

NM CARLSBAD — The fatal shootings of several cows in southeastern New Mexico have sparked fears of a serial cattle killer running loose.

The Carlsbad (N.M.) Current-Argus reported Eddy County Sheriff's Office announced this week that another six cattle on two properties were shot and killed. Detectives said a high-caliber rifle was used in the shooting from within a half-mile radius.

The case is being labeled as one of "extreme animal cruelty," which is a fourth-degree felony.

Women trash restaurant during fight over order

FL JACKSONVILLE — Two women trashed a Florida Chick-fil-A restaurant during an argument over an order.

Allison Music, who was in the restaurant and posted videos of the tirade online, told Action News Jax it happened Monday night in Jacksonville. She wrote in a Facebook post that two women beat on a locked door trying to get inside as the store was closing.

Video she posted shows the women arguing with employees, tossing condiments on the floor and throwing an object that could be heard breaking.

According to a police report, the women caused \$900 in damage.

Man arrested after rant on too few cucumbers

PA NEW HOLLAND — Police said a Pennsylvania man ranted that there weren't enough cucumbers on

his Wendy's salad before he threw his food at an employee and made a threat.

Police said they were called to the New Holland, Pa., fast-food restaurant last weekend after Theodore Gunderson Jr., 58, cursed, threw the salad at an employee and said, "If I had a gun or knife you would be the first to go."

The clerk called police, and officers arrived to find Gunderson in his vehicle with the windows rolled up. Police said Gunderson eventually rolled down his window but then tried to drive away as an officer reached inside.

Bear, alligators freed at sanctuary caught

MI BROWN CITY — Authorities said a bear and two alligators that got loose after locks were cut at a Michigan animal sanctuary were captured.

The owner of Summer Wind Farms Sanctuary near Brown City discovered the animals were out of their enclosures Wednesday. The owner captured the alligators, but the 1-year-old bear remained missing as Sanilac County sheriff's deputies responded.

The bear was found a few hours later at the sanctuary, which is located about 60 miles north of Detroit. The bear was tranquilized and returned to its enclosure. The sheriff's department said it's investigating the animals' release as a criminal matter.

City won't force removal of Confederate flag

SC ORANGEBURG — A South Carolina city refused to order the removal of a Confederate flag from a piece of land in front of an ice cream shop.

An appeals board in Orangeburg decided Thursday in a 6-0 vote that the flag on a 130-square-foot parcel in front of Edisto River Creamery doesn't violate the city's zoning laws, local media outlets reported.

The ice cream shop's owner, Tommy Daras, wanted the flag removed, saying it cost him customers, and he has received threats and racially charged letters.

The land was deeded to the Sons of Confederate Veterans a dozen years ago.

Joseph Braxton with the Sons of Confederate Veterans said if the restaurant appeals, the heritage group will defend its right to fly the flag on its property.

The restaurant was once owned by Maurice Bessinger, who, in 2005, gave the Sons of Confederate Veterans' local group a deed to the piece of land in front of the restaurant.

Team to give away dolls of pioneering senator

ME PORTLAND — A minor league baseball team in Maine is going to give away bobblehead dolls of the first woman to serve in both houses of Congress as part of a celebration of women's equality.

The Portland Sea Dogs will give away dolls of Margaret Chase Smith on Aug. 26 as part of Women's Equality Day. Smith served 32 years in Congress and was the first woman whose name was placed in nomination for president at a major party convention.

Smith was a Republican who was born in Skowhegan and served in Congress until 1973. She died in 1995. The Morning Sentinel reported there'll be 1,000 bobbleheads, which depict Smith holding a gavel.

Woman raises cash for pig saved from traffic

PA LANCASTER — A Pennsylvania woman who rescued a piglet that was darting in and out of rush-hour traffic is getting help from local businesses to fund a surgery it needs to survive.

Francesca McAndrews told LNP she was driving to work when she saw the tiny swine dodging cars in Lancaster last month. She slammed on her brakes and caught the little pig.

She thinks the piglet fell off a livestock truck. Veterinarians say the animal needs surgery on a hernia it likely developed in the fall from the truck.

Two local businesses are holding fundraisers to help pay for the pig's medical bills.

Court overturns naked 'Sasquatch' conviction

OR PORTLAND — An appeals court overturned the conviction of an Oregon man with bipolar disorder who attacked a hunter while naked and claiming to be a Sasquatch.

The Oregon Court of Appeals ruled that Linus Norgren's statements to a deputy shouldn't have been allowed at trial.

Norgren told authorities he was a Sasquatch from a family of Sasquatches. The appellate judges said that's enough to show he had a break from reality, and his waiver of Miranda rights was not knowing and intelligent.

Washington County deputies arrested Norgren in October 2013, saying the man hit the hunter with a rock and tried to choke him. The hunter fought back and held the naked man at gunpoint.

Norgren was convicted of assault and attempted murder, and sentenced to 10 years in prison.

From wire reports

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Darvish dominant in Dodgers debut

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Yu Darvish fit right in with the Dodgers: He dominated.

The prized new pitcher struck out 10 over seven innings of three-hit ball during a brilliant debut for Los Angeles, leading the top team in the majors past the New York Mets 6-0 on Friday night.

"It couldn't have went any better," Dodgers manager Dave Roberts said. "I can't even tell you how excited he was to throw that first pitch."

Chris Taylor hit a leadoff homer against Jacob deGrom, and Mets nemesis Chase Utley added a two-run shot as Los Angeles improved baseball's best record to 77-32 with its 11th victory in 12 games.

Yasiel Puig also went deep for the steamrolling Dodgers, who have outscored New York 42-11 in winning all five meetings this season.

"They're loaded," New York manager Terry Collins said before the game.

On the best extended roll by a big league team since World

War II, the Dodgers are 42-7 since June 7 — a stretch unequaled in franchise history. They've won 22 of 25 since July 4, with all three losses coming against Atlanta.

"Everybody's really confident," Taylor said.

Acquired from Texas for three prospects at Monday's trade deadline, Darvish (1-0) only makes the Dodgers more imposing. The four-time All-Star snapped a five-game losing streak and won for the first time in nine outings since June 12 at Houston.

"His stuff looked electric," Utley said.

Darvish went 6-9 with a 4.01 ERA in 22 starts for the Rangers this year — and his last one was a dud. The Japanese right-hander gave up a career-high 10 runs over 3²/₃ innings July 26 in a 22-10 loss to Miami, and said afterward he detected how he was tipping his pitches.

But his first start with Los Angeles went smooth as could be.

"He seems like he just fits in perfect. I was just happy that we got a horse — another horse — that we could fit in into

the rotation, so now you're not seeing three lefties in a row," catcher Yasmani Grandal said. "We knew we needed a righty starter."

Mixing his 95-96 mph fastball with a 71-75 mph curve and the rest of his polished assortment, Darvish walked only one and silenced a Mets team that has lost five of six.

"He throws anything at any time and he was very good tonight," New York slugger Jay Bruce said.

A few hours after Dodgers icon Sandy Koufax strolled through the clubhouse, Darvish put on a pitching show of his own. He snared a line drive to escape trouble in the first and retired his final nine batters, striking out the last three.

"First inning, it's a different environment, different players behind me," Darvish said through a translator. "But (from the) first inning to the second inning, it was all good."

Josh Fields and Luis Avilan finished up as Los Angeles held the Mets to four singles — two by Michael Conforto and one by deGrom, who became the first New York pitcher to steal a

base since Oliver Perez in May 2008.

Taylor set the tone by opening the game with a tough at-bat against deGrom (12-5), who threw 31 pitches in the first inning and needed 81 to get through three as the Dodgers hit 21 foul balls.

Taylor worked an 0-2 count full and connected on the ninth pitch he saw, a 97 mph fastball, for his second career leadoff homer.

"Got to be better in the first inning," said deGrom, who has lost consecutive starts after winning eight straight. "My stuff was good tonight. I wasn't able to locate it."

Puig added a solo shot in the second, setting a career high with his 20th home run.

Utley, booed all night, homered into the second deck in right field off Josh Smoker in the sixth. The second baseman, who broke New York shortstop Ruben Tejada's leg with a late takeout slide in the 2015 playoffs, has 39 career home runs against the Mets, most among active players.

"I know Chase enjoys playing here," Roberts said.

Truex hopes luck holds heading into NASCAR Chase

Associated Press

DARLINGTON, S.C. — Martin Truex Jr. believes being far away from NASCAR's hub has helped him during the most successful stretch of his career, a run he hopes ends with a championship this season.

Truex, the Monster Energy NASCAR Cup Series points leader, also is tied for the series lead with three victories. Already locked into the playoffs for a third straight season, Truex believes he's better prepared to end the year with NASCAR's trophy.

"It just seems like consistency has gotten better as we go down this road together as a team," Truex said Tuesday. "Last year was good and this year so far seems even better

so hopefully we can continue that upward trend."

A big reason, at least in Truex's mind, is his Furniture Row Racing team's headquarters in Denver, two time zones from the NASCAR center outside of Charlotte, N.C. The location gives the team an all-in-the-same-boat feeling that has made them bond into a winning group.

"I think it's a great team, a great situation," Truex said. "Being in Denver, all by ourselves out there, my crew chiefs, my engineers, we're just like a family and we get better and better as we work together."

That's certainly apparent this season.

Along with his three victories, Truex has had eight top

fives and 14 top 10s in 21 races this season. He's led the most laps of any driver (1,291) and has been out front in 16 of 21 events so far this season.

"You don't know what tomorrow is going to bring, you don't know what next weekend is going to bring, so we're enjoying while we have success," he said. "We're working hard to stay where we're at."

The next step is running for a title.

Truex made the final four two years ago, yet finished 12th at Homestead to fall to fourth in the points race. In 2016, Truex came in as a playoff powerhouse with crown jewel victories in the Coca Cola 600 in Charlotte and Southern 500 in Darlington. He then won two

of the first three chase races to move out front. But problems in the round of 12 ended Truex's run as he finished 11th overall.

This time around, Truex isn't looking ahead. He thinks a focus on the week-to-week racing will keep himself and his crew sharp so when the playoffs come, they'll be ready.

"The last two years we had some good success in the playoffs and we did that by not changing our strategy," Truex said. "Obviously, we haven't got a championship yet so we've got some work to do on it. But I feel good about this year and we'll see how it ends up."

Truex was outside of the track "Too Tough To Tame," at Ramsey's Pond to do a little down-time fishing.

Can Van Niekirk take over Bolt's role?

Associated Press

LONDON — Usain Bolt doesn't really want to anoint the next "Usain" in track and field, but when pressed during the buildup to his last world championships he does have a name in mind — Wayde van Niekirk.

"One person I know that will step up and he's been doing good — Van Niekirk is really showing that he wants to really take my place," Bolt said.

Beyond the amazing things Bolt did in his career, two record runs by other athletes stand out over the past decade: David Rudisha setting a world record to win the 800 meters at the London Olympics and South Africa's Van Niekirk running in the outside lane at the Rio Games last year to win gold with a 400-meter world record.

Rudisha is out injured for the world championships, which started in London on Friday.

But this year, there seems to be no stopping Van Niekirk.

Just how good is he now? Top time in the 400, world-best time (the equivalent of a world record) in the rarely-run 300, second-best time in the 200 this season. And even in the 100, his 9.94 seconds makes him the sixth-best performer this year.

Don't count on him running all three sprints in London, though. A 200-400 double would probably make him the star of the event.

While van Niekirk may have the times and the fitness to take over Bolt's mantle, he is still lacking the outsize personality and charisma. Unlike Bolt, there is still no lightning when the South African runner enters a room.

And that is just fine with the soft-spoken 25-year-old from Cape Town.

"I find it extremely difficult to even come close to what Usain has represented

in his charismatic ways," Van Niekirk said. "Usain has set the bar quite high."

Yet nothing daunts him. The 400-meter record by Michael Johnson was set in 1999 and was supposed to be untouchable. And few gave a chance to Van Niekirk to get even close to the mark last year when he was allotted the outside for the Olympic final, where all others can target you — and you see no one usually until it's too late to react.

Still, it produced one of the most stirring runs in Olympic history when nobody could catch him as he won in a record 43.03 seconds.

Bolt's 200 world record of 19.19 is considered out-of-reach. But Van Niekirk knows better. "I long time don't believe in 'unbeatable' anymore," he said.

At a blink, he seems to be in a league all his own, yet opposi-

tion is pushing him.

During his last race in Monaco two weeks ago, he only just held off Isaac Makwala, who has emerged as a top challenger. Underscoring his excellent form this season, the Botswanan became the first man ever to run a sub-20 200 and a sub-44 400 on the same night. And in the 200, Makwala has the season's top time ahead of Van Niekirk.

In the 200, Andre De Grasse was expected to take over from Bolt, but the Canadian is out injured. Too bad Bolt won't be joining Van Niekirk in the 200. He's only running the 100 and the relay in London, his farewell meet.

The 30-year-old Bolt said age conspired against him so late in his career. "That is one of the most disappointing things: that he came along at this late stage that I didn't get to compete against him."

Buckeyes hope receivers will produce deep threat

Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio — There are no marquee names among the Ohio State wide receivers. At least not yet.

The Buckeyes are hoping one of the half dozen or so experienced receivers can become a household name — or at least emerge as the reliable deep-ball threat the team has been missing.

The candidates for go-to guy include Parris Campbell, who was expected to be a star last year and just didn't get there, and fellow junior Terry McLaurin, who seems poised to step from his role as special-teams stalwart to reliable pass-catcher. McLaurin has just two career TD catches, while Campbell is still looking for his first.

Then there's Johnnie Dixon, who is fully healthy for the first time in his three years at Ohio State. Sophomores K.J. Hill, Binjimen Victor and Austin Mack showed flashes of poten-

tial last season and looked like seasoned veterans in the wide open spring game.

Coach Urban Meyer has said true freshmen Trevon Grimes, Jaylen Harris and Elijah Gardiner also could see playing time.

"I feel like the attitude is back," McLaurin said. "You see out there if you watch practice, every ball that's in the air, we want it, we've got to have it. I talk about it every day. I talked about it in the spring — that attitude, that swagger. I think it's back."

Receivers coach Zach Smith said he needs six wideouts who are game-ready. But the Buckeyes will settle for one who can consistently get open downfield and catch long throws from J.T. Barrett. Smith said receivers "underperformed" last year, but that was just part of the problem.

"It's not looking for a deep-ball guy," he insisted. "It's looking for the offense to complete deep balls and execute them.

We've had guys get open, we've had guys not get open. The quarterback doesn't make a great throw, the O-line doesn't protect. It's been an offensive issue. Call it the perfect storm."

Meyer and new offensive coordinator Kevin Wilson have made it clear that completing long passes is a priority. And they like the development and maturity of this group of receivers.

"It's one of the best groups we've ever had, culturally," Meyer said. "There are zero issues. It's just show up and go to work, be at your body weight and give your very best. They are unproven, but those kind of players usually turn out to have very good careers."

Campbell is expected to operate out of the hybrid H-back position that Curtis Samuel owned last season. Expectations are high, even though the junior has just 13 catches for 121 yards in his career, all last year.

"He's always been a role player, always been a really good player, but he's never had to be the guy," Smith said. "We had Michael Thomas, we had Curtis Samuel, now it's Parris's turn to be the guy on offense."

Besides returning tight end Marcus Baugh, who caught 24 passes for 269 yards and two touchdowns, Hill is the most productive returning receiver, catching 18 passes for 262 yards and a touchdown last season.

The fleet Dixon may be the most intriguing of the bunch. Plagued by knee problems since he got to Columbus, the junior has been limited to just 14 games in three seasons and says he almost quit after last season. But he didn't miss a spring practice for the first time in his Ohio State career, and caught a team-leading six passes for 108 yards in the spring game.

"It's the best feeling I've had in a while," Dixon said. "I haven't been healthy really since early high school years."

Murphy's 2 homers lift Nats over Cubs

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Postseason or regular season, Daniel Murphy keeps crushing the ball at Wrigley Field.

Murphy hit two home runs to back Tanner Roark, and the Washington Nationals won the opener of a series between division leaders by beating the Chicago Cubs 4-2 on a chilly Friday afternoon.

With the game-time temperature at 63, Murphy hit a two-run homer in the first and connected off Kyle Hendricks leading off the sixth for a 3-0 lead.

"We started this series off the right way and, hopefully, gave ourselves a chance to win the series tomorrow," he said. "We're really excited about coming in and seeing if we can win a series. That's what it's all about this time of year."

Counting the postseason, Murphy is 20-for-38 with four home runs in his last 10 games at Wrigley. With the Mets in the

2015 NL Championship Series, he hit two homers in Chicago and four overall to help New York sweep.

Roark (9-7) didn't allow a run until Javier Baez chased him with a two-run homer with one out in the seventh. The right-hander allowed five hits while improving to 3-1 in his past four starts.

Hendricks (4-4) gave up three runs and five hits in seven innings in his longest outing since May 24. Baseball's ERA leader last season, he missed about seven weeks because of tendinitis in his right hand before returning on July 24.

"Pitch efficiency is much better," Hendricks after his third start back. "It clicked right there about the fourth inning. I started getting some quicker outs, quicker innings. When you get through seven, it felt real good."

Chicago has lost three straight after winning 14 of 17 following the All-Star break. After giving up three homers to

Arizona's Paul Goldschmidt on Thursday, the Cubs got pounded by Murphy this time.

He hit a two-run shot halfway up the bleachers in right-center in the first and went the opposite way in the sixth, driving his 19th home run to left-center. That gave him two multi-homer games this season and five in his career.

After Baez cut the lead to one in the seventh with his 15th home run, Brian Kintzler got the final two outs of the inning.

Anthony Rendon hit a sacrifice fly against Carl Edwards Jr. in the eighth.

Ryan Madson worked the bottom half, and Sean Doolittle finished for his fifth save in as many chances since he was acquired from Oakland on July 16. He gave up a leadoff single to Jason Heyward before striking out Baez and getting Ian Happ to ground into a double play.

More lights: Cubs manager Joe Maddon would like to see

more night games at Wrigley and day baseball mostly limited to Saturdays and Sundays.

"This constantly having to rush to the ballpark and not having the normal method during the course of the day, it does matter because then you go on the road, it's entirely different," he said.

The Cubs didn't add lights to Wrigley until 1988. They are allowed to play 43 night games and would like to get that number up to 54.

Maddon dismissed the idea that the Cubs have an advantage over a visiting team that mostly plays at night.

"I think 107 years indicates it wasn't such a good idea," he said.

The Cubs won the World Series last fall for the first time since 1908.

Trainer's room: Two-time Cy Young Award winner Max Scherzer and Gio Gonzalez will miss their scheduled starts this weekend.

Bauer, Indians extend Yankees' losing streak to four

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Trevor Bauer won his third straight start, and Cleveland extended New York's losing streak to four with a 7-2 victory.

Bauer (10-8) allowed one run in seven innings, on Todd Frazier's fifth-inning homer. Third baseman Giovanny Urshela made an outstanding defensive play on Clint Frazier's grounder to throw out Ronald Torreyes at home plate, and Gary Sanchez stranded the bases loaded with a strikeout.

Traded from Atlanta to Minnesota to New York, Jaime Garcia (1-1) became the first pitcher to make three straight appearances as a starter for three different teams since Gus Weyhing in 1895, according to the Elias Sports Bureau. Garcia gave up six runs, five earned, and five hits in 4²/₃ innings.

Twins 8, Rangers 4: Bartolo Colon threw his first complete

game in two years to earn his first win with host Minnesota.

In his fourth start for the Twins, the 44-year-old Colon (3-9) scattered nine hits in his 37th career complete game and first since Sept. 5, 2015, with the New York Mets.

Diamondbacks 2, Giants 1: Paul Goldschmidt had three hits for visiting Arizona, and rookie Anthony Banda earned his first career win.

Brewers 2, Rays 0: Brandon Woodruff allowed seven hits in 6¹/₃ innings in his major league debut and Orlando Arcia homered and scored both runs for visiting Milwaukee.

The Brewers won for the third time in four games and moved within a half-game of the Cubs for the top spot in the NL Central.

Angels 8, Athletics 6: Pinch hitter Luis Valbuena hit a two-run single in his team's four-run seventh, helping host Los Angeles rally for its fourth

straight win.

The Angels won for the sixth time in eight games to get back to .500 at 55-55. They are two games back in the race for the final American League wildcard spot.

Astros 16, Blue Jays 7: Alex Bregman hit a two-run homer and Marwin Gonzalez added a three-run shot as part of a nine-run fourth inning, helping host Houston stop a three-game slide.

Rockies 4, Phillies 3: Colorado left-hander Kyle Freeland left with a strained left groin after facing three batters, and D.J. LeMahieu singled in the go-ahead run in the eighth for host Colorado.

Red Sox 3, White Sox 2 (11): Mitch Moreland homered with two outs in the 11th inning, lifting host Boston to its fourth consecutive victory.

Braves 5, Marlins 3: R.A. Dickey won for the first time in seven starts, Nick Markakis hit

a three-run homer and visiting Atlanta overcame Giancarlo Stanton's two home runs to beat Miami.

Mariners 5, Royals 2: James Paxton tied a Seattle record by winning his seventh straight start, and the visiting Mariners moved back over .500 by beating Kansas City.

Pirates 10, Padres 6: Gregory Polanco hit a three-run homer into the Allegheny River during host Pittsburgh's six-run seventh inning.

Tigers 5, Orioles 2: Justin Upton hit a grand slam in the eighth inning and surprising Detroit earned its fourth straight victory by beating host Baltimore.

Reds 3, Cardinals 2: Joey Votto drove home a pair of runs with a double and a single, and Asher Wojciechowski went five innings in his return to the rotation, leading host Cincinnati to a win over St. Louis.