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Mattis quits, criticizes Trump policies

By COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary Jim Mattis resigned Thursday as Pentagon chief just one day after President Donald Trump abruptly announced he was pulling all American troops out of Syria against the advice of his top national security advisers.

Mattis cited differences in views with the president in a resignation letter laced with criticism of Trump's foreign policy. The letter was distributed by Pentagon officials moments after Trump announced Mattis' impending "retirement, with distinction" via Twitter late Thursday afternoon.

"You have the right to have a secretary of defense whose views better align with yours," Mattis wrote in the letter indicating he would leave at the end of February. "I believe it is right for me to step down from my position."

Mattis' resignation sent shockwaves through the halls of the Pentagon, where officials on Friday declined to speak on the record but privately expressed admiration for their outgoing leader, who has been seen for the last two years as a stable presence in Trump's chaotic presidency. The outgoing defense chief delivered the news to his staff Thursday shortly after returning from a meeting with Trump.

It was Trump's unilateral decision to remove the roughly 2,000 American troops in Syria who are aiding a Kurdish-led militia of anti-Islamic State fighters that proved the final straw in Mattis' tenure as Trump's defense secretary, a defense official said Friday. With his resignation letter in hand, Mattis marched to the White House on Thursday afternoon and made one last effort before resigning to con-

US could pull 7K troops out of Afghanistan

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon is developing plans to withdraw up to half of the 14,000 American troops serving in Afghanistan, U.S. officials said Thursday, marking a sharp change in the Trump administration's policy aimed at forcing the Taliban to the peace table after more than 17 years of war.

One official said the troops could be out by summer, but no final decision has been made.

President Donald Trump has long pushed to pull troops out of Afghanistan, considering the war a lost cause. Earlier this year, he

was persuaded by Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and other military leaders to keep troops on the ground to pressure the Taliban and battle a stubborn Islamic State insurgency. Officials said the latest White House push for withdrawal was another key factor in Mattis' decision to resign Thursday.

The officials spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations.

U.S. troops stormed into Afghanistan in November 2001 in an invasion triggered by the Sept. 11 attacks.

Since then, America has lost more than 2,400 soldiers and spent more than \$900 billion in its longest war. Three

U.S. presidents have pledged to bring peace to Afghanistan, either by adding or withdrawing troops, by engaging the Taliban or shunning them, and by struggling to combat widespread corruption in the government.

The U.S. and NATO formally concluded their combat mission in 2014, but American and allied troops remain, conducting strikes on ISIS and the Taliban and working to train and build the Afghan military.

Taliban insurgents, however, control nearly half of Afghanistan and are more powerful than at any time since the U.S.-led invasion.

vince the president to reverse his Syria decision.

Mattis' resignation caught Trump by surprise, the official said on the condition of anonymity. It ended months of speculation among Washington officials that the retired four-star Marine general had lost his influence with the president, who he routinely disagreed with on major matters of foreign policy. The announcement also came just as news broke that Trump intended to remove half of the roughly 14,000 American troops in Afghanistan.

Mattis, who is beloved by American servicemembers in cult-like fashion for his warrior monk persona, cited in his letter the importance of the United States backing its key allies, which was viewed by officials as a rebuke of Trump's decision to pull support in Syria from the Kurdish-led militia. The group, the Syrian Democratic Forces,

continues to fight ISIS but also faces threat of an assault by the Turkish military, a NATO ally of the United States who views the Kurds as terrorists.

"One core belief I have always held is that our strength as a nation is inextricably linked to the strength of our unique and comprehensive system of alliances and partnerships," Mattis wrote. "While the [United States] remains the indispensable nation in the free world, we cannot protect our interests or serve that role effectively without maintaining strong alliances and showing respect to those allies."

Mattis, 68, took a low-profile approach to his job as defense secretary, avoiding television appearances and routinely touting the Pentagon as an apolitical institution focused solely on defending the United States. Despite their differences, Mattis never publicly stated displea-

sure with any of the president's policies until releasing his letter Thursday.

From their first meeting in the weeks after Trump's November 2016 election victory, Mattis and Trump found they did not agree on much. The two spent the bulk of the encounter discussing their differing opinions on topics, including the use of torture in interrogation and support for NATO, according to officials familiar with the engagement. But at the meeting, before Mattis was officially offered the top Pentagon job, he was able to convince Trump not to support torture or drastically alter the U.S. relationship with NATO.

However, during the last two years, Trump has repeatedly blindsided Mattis and other Pentagon officials with apparent spur-of-the-moment policy decisions with major implications for the U.S. military.

Call to Turkish leader led to Syria pullout

BY MATTHEW LEE
AND SUSANNAH GEORGE
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw American troops from Syria was made hastily, without consulting his national security team or allies, and over strong objections from virtually everyone involved in the fight against Islamic State, according to U.S. and Turkish officials.

Trump stunned his Cabinet, lawmakers and much of the world with the move by rejecting the advice of his top aides and agreeing to a withdrawal in a phone call with Turkish Pres-

ident Recep Tayyip Erdogan last week, two officials briefed on the matter said.

The Dec. 14 call, described by officials who were not authorized to discuss the decision-making process publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity, is a view into a Trump decision with profound consequences, including the resignation of widely respected Defense Secretary Jim Mattis.

The White House, State Department and Pentagon all declined to comment on the account of the withdrawal decision.

U.S. troops first moved into Syria in 2015 to fight ISIS, a year after the Pentagon first launched a campaign of air-

strikes against the extremists in Iraq and Syria. Local ground forces with close U.S. support slowly pushed back ISIS in the years that followed and by the beginning of 2018, the extremists had lost more than 90 percent of the territory they once held.

Despite losing the physical caliphate, thousands of ISIS fighters remain in Iraq and Syria and the group continues to carry out insurgent attacks. Local commanders warn the group could easily move back into territory it once held if American forces completely withdraw.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo arranged the Dec. 14 call a day after he had unsuc-

cessfully sought clarity from Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu about Erdogan's threats to launch a military operation against U.S.-backed Kurdish rebels in northeast Syria, where American forces are based.

Pompeo, Mattis and other members of the national security team prepared a list of talking points for Trump to tell Erdogan to back off, the officials said. But the officials said Trump, who had previously accepted such advice and convinced the Turkish leader not to attack the Kurds and put U.S. troops at risk, ignored the script. Instead, the president sided with Erdogan.

Reports of drawdown stir Afghan fears

BY J.P. LAWRENCE
Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — A drawdown of American troops from Afghanistan could embolden the resurgent Taliban and worsen the deteriorated security situation, several former Afghan officials said Friday in response to reports that the U.S. would remove half of its forces.

The Trump administration has ordered the U.S. military to make plans to withdraw some 7,000 troops, unnamed defense officials told several media outlets Thursday.

The remainder of the more than 14,000 troops could begin returning home over the coming months in a phased pullout to end the 17-year war, *The Wall Street Journal* reported.

The news came in the hours after Defense Secretary Jim Mattis announced that he would resign at the end of February over disagreements with the president's approach to policy in the Middle East and followed Trump's call for a withdrawal of U.S. forces fighting the Islamic State in Syria, after he claimed victory in that fight earlier this week.

But ISIS is hardly defeated in that country, many analysts and allies said, and the withdrawal from Afghanistan — where U.S. forces are helping fight insurgents and terrorists — would similarly be premature, they said.

"The reality of an urgent and hasty withdrawal will be seen as a defeat and as a retreat," said Amrullah Saleh, the country's former spy chief. "Maybe it will be the end for the U.S., but a bitter beginning for us."

A U.S. withdrawal now will lead to the emergence of al-Qaida "version 2.0," said Saleh, who is viewed as a hardliner against the Taliban and Pakistan, which has long been accused of supporting the militants.

Reminders of previous exits

Afghans have vivid memories of their country fragmenting into civil war in the 1990s after a decadelong war with the Soviets in the 1980s, he said, and some blame America for not helping rebuild. They believe the U.S. abandoned the country after using it as a battleground to defeat its Cold War enemy in a proxy fight, he said.

The conflict in the wake of the Soviet withdrawal led to the rise of the hard-line Taliban group, which harbored al-Qaida in the years leading up to the 9/11 attacks. The U.S. has long said its mission in Afghanistan is to stabilize the country to prevent another such attack.

The withdrawal of U.S. troops now would be a reversal of an increase Trump ordered last year under a new strategy for the region that he said would involve an enduring commitment here.

Trump touted his plan as doing away

with the Obama administration's time-based withdrawal, in favor of holding fast until conditions improved.

Peace talk effects

The sudden announcement of plans to reduce American forces comes just days after the United Arab Emirates hosted talks between the United States and the Taliban. The militants have long sought the removal of foreign troops from the country as a condition for beginning peace negotiations. For some Afghans, Trump's move evokes memories of President Barack Obama's 2014 drawdown.

That was the wrong move at the wrong time, said Jawed Ludin, deputy foreign minister for political affairs under former President Hamid Karzai.

The Obama-era drawdown was based on political considerations instead of the situation on the ground in Afghanistan, he said.

If Trump's decision had been based on a settlement with the Taliban, that would be understandable, Ludin said, but he feared it was based on American politics again.

"This will be seen as a serious sign of weakness," he said. "The Taliban haven't even started negotiating properly about what they want in Afghanistan. If we start giving concessions like this, it's not going to help."

Mattis' resignation rocks Capitol Hill

BY CLAUDIA GRISALES
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Lawmakers on Capitol Hill were shaken Friday with the news of Defense Secretary Jim Mattis' resignation, a departure that leaves a gaping hole in military leadership and heightens concerns that the country's national security could be entering a free fall.

Republicans and Democrats expressed outrage in some cases and concern in others that Mattis is leaving in protest, after his resignation letter issued an unprecedented rebuke of President Donald Trump's foreign policy.

House Speaker-designate Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., called Mattis a "patriot" and she said his resignation letter raised serious alarm, highlighting concerns that Trump is on a path to put U.S. adversaries ahead of allies.

"I think everybody in the

country should read his letter of resignation," said Pelosi, who is poised to take over as speaker of the House come January. "I am shaken by the resignation of General Mattis for what it means to our country, for the message it sends to our troops and for the indication of what his view is of the commander in chief."

After months of speculation about Mattis' future as defense secretary, Trump broke the news late Thursday that the Pentagon chief would be stepping down in February. Within minutes, the Mattis resignation letter was distributed throughout the Pentagon and with it, his words reverberated fears for what his departure could mean.

Even Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., issued his strongest rebuke yet of Trump in his statement on Mattis' departure. McConnell said it was essential the U.S.

maintain and strengthen its post-World War II alliances and maintain a clear-eyed understanding of its friends and foes.

The move raised the specter that Republican lawmakers could shift against Trump based on the Mattis resignation and questions of who could possibly replace him as defense secretary.

"I was sorry to learn that Secretary Mattis, who shares those clear principles, will soon depart the administration. But I am particularly distressed that he is resigning due to sharp differences with the president on these and other key aspects of America's global leadership," McConnell said.

Other Republicans followed suit, expressing concern that Mattis, a retired Marine general, was a stabilizer in the Trump administration.

"I slept better at night knowing that General Mattis was

protecting our nation, our allies, and our brave men and women in uniform — many of whom I've worked with in the trenches," Rep. Will Hurd, R-Texas, a former CIA agent, tweeted late Thursday.

Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., one of the first Democrats to raise the alarm Thursday evening, suggested Mattis was leaving because Trump's foreign policy had gone off the rails.

A high ranking Democratic colleague in the House, Rep. Adam Schiff, of California, agreed.

"Old Marines never die, but they do resign after the President ignores their advice, betrays our allies, rewards our enemies, and puts the nation's security at risk," Schiff tweeted. "Turn out the lights when Mattis leaves; we will not see his like again while Trump remains in office."

Finding a new defense secretary will be tricky

BY CLAUDIA GRISALES
AND CAITLIN M. KENNEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — With the impending departure of Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, a battle could be brewing on who should replace him with President Donald Trump pitted against Capitol Hill lawmakers, who must confirm the Pentagon's next top official, experts said Friday.

Mattis' resignation letter Thursday made clear that he and Trump did not agree on the president's abrupt announcements to draw down troops in Syria and Afghanistan.

The next defense secretary will have to be in lockstep with Trump's foreign policy and offer a new level of loyalty at the Pentagon that could be subject to the political whims of the commander in chief, experts said.

"He will need somebody who

is actually aligned with the president's view of a non-interventionist," said retired Lt. Col. Daniel L. Davis, a senior fellow and military expert for Defense Priorities, a right-leaning Washington think tank. "Trump has to have somebody who is on his team. So anybody who's got the interventionist credentials probably shouldn't apply."

Mattis now leaves behind a gaping hole in military leadership that could set Capitol Hill and Trump on a collision course. Senate Republicans and Democrats, who must confirm Mattis' successor through hearings and a floor vote, have already been vocal that they want another Mattis to succeed him.

But Trump could desire someone who is more of a loyalist.

Davis suggested someone like former Virginia Demo-

cratic Sen. Jim Webb, a former Navy secretary who worked in President Ronald Reagan's administration, could meet those requirements. And if Senate lawmakers are in agreement, Mattis' successor could be in place by as early as February.

Either way, the decision on who replaces Mattis could be fraught with conflict and controversy in light of the way that the Pentagon chief resigned, essentially rebuking the president for his increasingly unilateral approach to foreign policy.

Paul Rieckhoff, the founder and CEO of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, said Mattis had served as a stabilizing hand during a tumultuous two years and his departure leaves the military and veterans communities in a "fragile" state.

"If you look at the cumulative situation, our military and veterans need stability and

Mattis has been this block on everything from the parade to the transgender ban to Syria to Afghanistan," Rieckhoff told CNN's John Berman on Friday.

Rieckhoff issued a warning for the precarious road ahead.

"This is a very concerning fragile moment in American history especially for our military and veterans community," Rieckhoff added.

Mark Cancian, a senior adviser with the Washington think tank Center for Strategic and International Studies, said it's unclear who could win over the Senate and Trump.

He said he believes someone like Webb might be too much of an independent. And sitting senators who have been suggested in the past, such as Sens. Tom Cotton, R-Ark., and Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., might not be the right picks at this time.

Trump: Shutdown could last 'very long time'

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Facing a midnight deadline to avoid a partial government shutdown, President Donald Trump said Friday a closure could drag on “for a very long time” and he tried to lay blame on congressional Democrats if there’s no deal over his demand for U.S.-Mexico border wall money.

Trump’s tweet came ahead of a meeting with Senate Republicans to discuss the budget deal and border security. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell declined to answer questions as he left the Capitol with other GOP senators on their way to the White House.

Only a week ago, Trump said he would be “proud” to shut down the government, which Republicans control, in the name

of border security. “I will take the mantle. I will be the one to shut it down,” he asserted.

But with the hours dwindling before the midnight deadline, Trump sought to reframe the debate and make Democrats the holdouts to settling an impasse that threatens hundreds of thousands of federal workers on the eve of the end-of-the-year holidays.

And he exhorted McConnell to corral enough Democratic votes to send a House-passed plan to the White House, even though the measure is almost certain to be rejected in the Senate.

“Senator Mitch McConnell should fight for the Wall and Border Security as hard as he fought for anything. He will need Democrat votes, but as shown in the House, good things happen. If enough Dems don’t vote,

it will be a Democrat Shutdown!” Trump tweeted.

Later in the morning, not even waiting for a Senate vote, Trump tweeted that “the Democrats now own the shutdown!”

Trump also encouraged McConnell, R-Ky., to change Senate rules in order to pass the spending bill, by lowering the threshold for ending debate on legislation from 60 votes to 51, as it currently stands for judicial appointments in the Senate, where Republicans hold a slim majority.

“Mitch, use the Nuclear Option and get it done! Our Country is counting on you!” Trump tweeted, though McConnell has previously resisted the rules change.

A McConnell spokesman reiterated McConnell’s opposition, saying McConnell “has said for years that the votes are not there” among Republicans for the change.

Migrants seeking asylum to wait in Mexico

Los Angeles Times

WASHINGTON — Thousands of migrants seeking asylum in the U.S. will be forced to wait in Mexico while their cases are considered — a process that can often take well over a year — the Trump administration and Mexico’s government announced Thursday.

The dramatic change in long-standing U.S. policy will alter life for tens of thousands of Central Americans stuck on the border.

Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen hailed the shift as a “historic” measure that would “bring the il-

legal immigration crisis under control.”

“‘Catch and release’ will be replaced with ‘catch and return,’” Nielsen said in a statement.

But opponents called the move a misguided denial of a well-established legal right to seek protection in the U.S. from persecution in other countries.

Rep. Joaquin Castro, a Texas Democrat and the incoming chairman of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, called the new policy “the single biggest assault to date by this administration on the world’s most vulnerable populations coming to America — legally — and in

search of a better life.”

Democratic lawmakers and immigration advocates tied the policy shift to Trump’s frustrations over his inability to get Congress to pay for his proposed border wall.

The president is “refusing to admit defeat” Rep. Bennie G. Thompson, of Mississippi, the ranking Democrat on the House Homeland Security committee, said in a statement. “The administration is now hell-bent on taking out its frustration on vulnerable people fleeing violence by making our asylum process even more difficult.”

Under current policy, asylum applicants are often detained in the U.S. while their petitions move through the system. Because of the large caseload, lengthy backlog, and a shortage of detention space, many are ultimately given a court date and released, a practice that Trump has repeatedly denounced.

Under the new policy, migrants who enter the United States from Mexico and ask for asylum, whether or not they present themselves to U.S. authorities at a legal port of entry, may be returned to Mexico while they await further proceedings.

Toys R Us closure hurts donations to Toys for Tots

Associated Press

HIALEAH, Fla. — When Toys R Us closed, Toys for Tots felt the loss.

The toy giant’s decision to close its stores this year left some huge holes for the annual charity drive to fill.

Toys R Us shoppers donated more than 250,000 toys last year and the company gave \$5 million in corporate contributions — 40 percent of all corporate giving to the Marine Corps community effort.

The company’s 800 stores usually had boxes near the doors where customers

could toss a toy on their way out. They also took monetary donations.

From Florida to Spokane, Wash., several Toys for Tots campaigns said the closures hurt. In Orlando, for example, donations were down 25 percent. In Bakersfield, Calif., the local group reported being 10,000 toys down earlier this month.

Kelly Wilson, the north Atlanta coordinator for Toys For Tots, said her city needed 268,000 more toys earlier this week. She said donations collected at local Toys R Us stores would fill a large tractor-trailer or more each year.

“We are hopeful that all of our contributors just went somewhere else, got a toy from Kroger or Publix ... Target or Walmart since Toys R Us is not available,” she said.

Toys for Tots national spokesman Ted Silvester said losing Toys R Us was a “tough pill.” But he said other corporate sponsors such as Hasbro, Disney and Build-A-Bear helped fill the void while Marine units asked the public for more individual donations. In some cities, it’s too late to donate toys this year, but monetary donations are accepted to buy last-minute gifts.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Police: Man dressed as Santa tried to lure kids

PA PITTSBURGH — Police said a bearded man dressed as Santa Claus allegedly tried to lure three children into his vehicle in separate incidents near a Pittsburgh elementary school.

Public Safety spokeswoman Alicia George said the attempted luring was reported at about 8:30 a.m. Tuesday on two streets near Spring Hill Elementary. George said three students reported that a man wearing a Santa suit tried to get them to get into his car. He was described as in his 40s with a medium build and a beard and driving a white four-door car.

Police: Man steals wreath for own use

FL HIALEAH — A Florida man is accused of stealing a Christmas wreath off of the front door of a home and hanging it outside his own home.

News outlets reported Angel Hugo Soles Romaguera, 55, is facing burglary and petit theft charges in the Dec. 7 incident that was captured on a front-door camera.

Hialeah police Lt. Eddie Rodriguez told WPLG that Romaguera turned himself in Tuesday night after learning that police were searching for him. Investigators had spotted the wreath hanging outside his home, which is about 4 miles from the victim's house.

Doppelganger case settled for \$1.1M

KS OLATHE — Kansas will pay \$1.1 million to a Missouri man who spent nearly 17 years in prison for a robbery that he argued was committed

by his doppelganger.

Kansas Attorney General Derek Schmidt announced Tuesday that a settlement had been reached with Richard Anthony Jones, 42, of Kansas City, Mo. Schmidt said Jones was the first to settle a payout under a new state law that provides compensation to people who are wrongly imprisoned.

Eyewitness testimony sent Jones to prison for an attack and robbery in the parking lot of a Walmart in Roeland Park. No physical evidence linked Jones to the crime. He was freed after supporters found evidence that another man who looked just like him lived near the Walmart.

Escaped inmate lands herself in hot water

OH WAVERLY — An escaped inmate is back in custody after being found soaking in a hot tub at an Ohio senior living community, still wearing her yellow jail outfit.

The Pike County Sheriff's Office said the woman, 34, fled while being booked on drug-possession charges Tuesday. She was captured by the sheriff and the local police chief several hours later when a 911 caller reported the woman sitting in the hot tub at a senior community's activity center in Waverly.

Authorities haven't explained how or why the woman ended up there. The sheriff's office said the woman is being charged with felony escape in addition to the initial charges for alleged heroin possession.

Boy rewarded with bike for saving mom's life

FL ORLANDO — Firefighters gave a 7-year-old Florida boy a brand new bicycle as a reward for calmly calling 911 when he found his mom

"unresponsive" on the floor of their Orlando apartment.

Orlando Fire Department spokeswoman Danette Jameson said Xavier Ellis told dispatchers his address during the Nov. 27 call, adding that his mother suffers from a medical condition. Jameson said his quick-thinking helped save his mother's life.

Xavier thought he was going to the fire department Tuesday for a tour of the station as part of the annual Wheels for Kids drive. He didn't know one of the new bicycles was for him.

Xavier's great-grandfather Paul Meinholz told the Orlando Sentinel he taught Xavier to call 911 during emergencies. Xavier said he was thrilled with his new bike and plans to donate his old one.

2 GBI workers resign after taking illicit photo

GA ATLANTA — The Georgia Bureau of Investigation said two of its workers have resigned after taking a photo with a dismembered man's head during a medical examination.

News outlets reported GBI spokeswoman Nelly Miles said Jesse Landen Wilson and James N. Brown would've been fired if they didn't resign this week. Miles says Brown took a photo of Wilson posed with the remains of Robert Page, who authorities have said was dismembered by his neighbor.

Authorities have said Page was reported missing in November. Responding authorities followed a trail of blood leading to the yard of Christian Ponce-Martinez, 25, and discovered Page's remains hidden under a tarp and in a cooler.

Ponce-Martinez was arrested. Police say it appears the men argued at Page's home before the slaying.

Two men convicted of illegal antler collecting

WY PINEDALE — Two men have lost their hunting privileges for two years after being convicted of illegally collecting elk antlers.

The Wyoming Game and Fish Department said Matthew Nelson of Cheyenne and Jason Reidel of Pinedale also were each fined \$1,550.

The agency said wardens caught the pair with about 70 pounds of elk antlers in April north of Pinedale. The two had been out on snowmobiles and snowshoes picking up antlers in an area where bull elk had been wintering. The area is closed to shed antler gathering from Jan. 1 to April 30 to minimize harassment or disturbance of big game animals on their winter and spring ranges.

The antlers were confiscated and returned to the field.

Attentive student stops school shooting plot

VT MIDDLEBURY — Police said an attentive student helped foil an alleged school shooting plot at a Vermont middle school.

Investigators said the principal at Middlebury Union Middle School called police last Saturday after a student overheard two other students plotting to shoot a fourth student at the school. Police said the two students were planning to get guns from a relative and bring them to school Tuesday.

Prosecutors got an Extreme Risk Order and seized the guns from the relative's home.

One student has been taken to a hospital for a psychiatric evaluation and placed in the custody of the Department for Children and Families.

From wire reports

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Ravens, Chargers present contrast in styles

Associated Press

CARSON, Calif. — The quarterback matchup for Saturday's pivotal game between the Baltimore Ravens and Los Angeles Chargers might offer the biggest contrasts this season.

The Chargers, who have clinched their first postseason berth since 2013, feature cagy veteran Philip Rivers, who is having one of the best seasons of his 15-year career. The Ravens have surged back into postseason contention behind fleet-footed rookie Lamar Jackson, who has won four of his five starts.

They meet in a prime-time game with plenty of implications for the AFC playoff picture. Baltimore (8-6) has a one-game lead for the final AFC wild-card spot, but also is just a half-game behind Pittsburgh in the AFC North.

Los Angeles (11-3) is tied with Kansas City for the lead in the AFC West and home-field advantage throughout the playoffs. But it needs to win out along with the Chiefs to drop one of their final two games to win the division.

"Playoff football has begun. We can't wait around until January," Rivers said.

Rivers is third in the league with a 112.4 passer rating and needs 49 yards to join Peyton Manning and Drew Brees as the only players with 10 or more 4,000-yard seasons. He is averaging 314.1 yards per game at home with 16 touchdowns against four interceptions.

Rivers' 69.4 completion percentage is the

second highest of his career, and he has one of the deeper receiving corps in the NFL with Keenan Allen, Mike Williams and Tyrell Williams. The Chargers, though, are facing a Baltimore defense ranked first in the league overall and third against the pass.

Rivers has five 300-yard games this season; Baltimore has allowed only three the past two years.

"A lot of those guys, the secondary, are high draft picks that can cover you, and there's the linebacker that can really run," Rivers said. "You've got big boys on the interior that can stop the run and penetrate. It's a top defense in the league for a reason."

Jackson has rushed for 566 yards this season, tops among quarterbacks. Since becoming starter, he has 427 yards, fifth most by anyone in the league. Jackson also has a 58.9 completion percentage and a 79.1 passer rating.

Chargers safety Derwin James, who faced Jackson twice in college, said the biggest improvement he has seen from Jackson is in understanding defenses.

"You're not seeing as many home run balls from him. You are still seeing the big gains and people attacking him, but the running ability is always going to be there," James said.

Here is what else to watch as the Chargers host the Ravens:

Battle of the backs: Saturday also features an intriguing running backs matchup between LA's Melvin Gordon and Baltimore's Gus Edwards.

Gordon returns after missing the past

three games due to a sprained MCL in his right knee. He is sixth in the AFC in rushing with 802 yards and is second in rushing average per game (80.2).

Edwards has rushed for 486 yards the past five games, fourth most in the league. Baltimore is the first team since the 1976 Steelers to have 190 rushing yards or more in five straight games.

Third-down success: The Ravens are 37-for-72 (51 percent) on third down since Jackson took over five weeks ago.

One reason is that the running game has provided more manageable situations on third down. But when it's time to pass, Jackson is ready and able to fling it.

"Lamar has done a really good job when we've passed the ball in most of those third-down situations," offensive coordinator Marty Mornhinweg said.

Converting third downs keeps the offense on the field, and the defense has done a good job making the opposition punt. Baltimore is allowing a 34.2 success rate on third downs, third-best percentage in the NFL.

Cardiac Chargers: The Chargers have won four straight, but they fell behind by 10 points or more in the first half of three games. With Baltimore's reliance on the run and controlling the clock, Los Angeles will need to avoid another slow start.

"I wish there was a switch that we could just flip and turn on. But I think it's just guys sticking to the plan, doing their job and just believing that if we keep doing the right things that the game will turn," coach Anthony Lynn said.

Top 25 roundup

Texas Tech dealt first loss by No. 2 Duke

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Zion Williamson was the must-see player to watch on an NBA stage. The Duke star was heckled when he missed a dunk in warmups and had Blue Devils diehards — and casual hoops fans and NBA stars — roaring each time he touched the ball.

He felt at home as a guest inside the New York Knicks' locker room.

Williamson might look pretty good next season in a blue-and-orange uniform, too.

Williamson had 17 points, 13 rebounds and wowed a crowd of nearly 20,000 before he fouled

out, and the second-ranked Blue Devils ended No. 12 Texas Tech's unbeaten start with a 69-58 victory Thursday night at Madison Square Garden.

"It is the Garden," Williamson said. "It's where big-time players are made."

The biggest was the 6-foot-7, 285-pound Williamson, who has been pegged as a can't-miss prospect in the NBA. Philadelphia 76ers star Jimmy Butler sat courtside and cheered for Williamson and Knicks President Steve Mills was in the house. With the nine-win Knicks slogging through another miserable season, the idea of what Williamson could

do in New York surely tantalized Mills' mind.

RJ Barrett scored 16 points for the Blue Devils (11-1) and Tre Jones had 13 points in the first meeting between the programs. Both reached the Elite Eight last season and the atmosphere had a late-March feel.

Jarrett Culver scored 25 points for the Red Raiders (10-1) in their first loss since the NCAA Tournament.

No. 21 Houston 60, Utah State 50: Armoni Brooks scored all of his 15 points in the second half and the host Cougars overcame a sluggish first half to rally past the Aggies.

Brooks shot 5-for-10 in the

second half and led the way as Houston (11-0) came back from a 10-point halftime deficit for its 24th consecutive home win. DeJon Jarreau had 10 points off the bench for the Cougars, who shot 32 percent from the field, including 39 percent in the second half.

Dwayne Brown Jr. had 19 points and seven rebounds off the bench, and Quinn Taylor added 14 points and nine rebounds for Utah State (9-3), which shot 37 percent from the field but was 5-for-19 in the second half. Utah State lost its 15th straight against an AP Top 25 opponent.

Marshall downs USF in Gasparilla Bowl

Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — It was a family affair as Marshall ended the season with another bowl victory.

Isaiah Green completed 17 of 25 passes for 221 yards, cousin Keion Davis ran for two touchdowns and Marshall beat South Florida 38-20 in the Gasparilla Bowl on Thursday night.

“It’s fun to get to play my senior year with my cousin, sharing the experience,” said Davis, who was the game MVP.

Marshall, 6-0 in bowl games under head coach Doc Holliday, gained 503 yards. The Thundering Herd (9-4) had 282 rushing yards and 221 through the air.

“It was my first time contributing to a (bowl) win,” Green said. “It feels good to be able to show people that just because I’m a freshman doesn’t mean I can’t play this game like I’m not a freshman.”

Green also had a touchdown run in the first quarter, while Davis’ second TD — from 16 yards out — put the Thundering Herd ahead 38-20 with 6½ minutes to play.

Davis had 94 yards on 14 carries, while Brenden Knox gained 93 yards on 12 rushes — all during the first half.

Knox left with a broken hand, giving Davis extended playing time.

Davis entered with 308 rushing yards and one TD in eight games.

“Keion is a special player,” Holliday said. “He makes things happen every time he gets the opportunity to play.”

Blake Barnett, slowed by shoulder and ankle injuries, replaced Chris Oladokun for South Florida 10 minutes into the game and completed 11 of 23 passes for 212 yards. Barnett, a transfer from Arizona State who also started one

game for Alabama in 2016, sat out two of the Bulls’ previous three games.

USF (7-6) lost the bowl game played on its regular-season home field to end the season by losing six in a row after a 7-0 start.

“We know this, there’s work that needs to be done in the program, and we’ve got to go get it done,” coach Charlie Strong said.

Green scored on a 10-yard dash and Anthony Anderson had a 1-yard TD run over a 37-second span as Marshall took a 14-0 lead with 4:43 left in the first. The second score was set up by Darius Hodge’s fumble recovery and 29-yard return after Barnett couldn’t handle a high snap.

After USF wide receiver Tyre McCants took a direct snap and threw a 38-yard touchdown pass to Randall St. Felix, the Thundering Herd went up 21-7

during the final minute of the first on Knox’s 8-yard TD run.

St. Felix had six receptions for a school-bowl record 165 yards.

Marshall has outscored its opponent 101-39 in the first quarter this season.

Davis’ 5-yard run made it 28-7 with 90 seconds left in the second.

USF got to 28-10 on Coby Weiss’ 22-yard field goal four seconds before halftime.

South Florida settled for a 31-yard field goal by Weiss on a second-half opening 14-play drive.

“We were in position to make some plays and we didn’t make them,” Strong said. “We had our opportunities.”

Marshall countered with Justin Rohrwasser’s 28-yard field goal before Barnett connected on a 33-yard scoring pass with St. Felix that cut the Bulls’ deficit to 31-20 late in the third.

Woolfolk key to Black Knights turning program around

Associated Press

Army coach Jeff Monken has accomplished the unimaginable at West Point — two straight seasons with 10 wins.

Call it the fullback phenomenon.

Houston (8-4) will face the ground game led by senior captain Darnell Woolfolk up close and personal on Saturday in the Armed Forces Bowl in Fort Worth, Texas. In an era where aerial assaults are the norm, Monken maintains a simple formula for success — keep the ball — and nobody does that better than the No. 22 Black Knights (10-2) with their potent triple option and stable of bruising runners.

Woolfolk (5-foot-9, 235 pounds), Andy Davidson (6-2, 235), Connor Slomka (6 foot, 240), and Calen Holt (6 foot, 230) have combined for 1,642 yards rushing and 23 touchdowns. They are the major keys to a ball-control offense that moves the chains with me-

thodical monotony and leads the nation in time of possession at just under 39 minutes.

Their prowess was on full display in an overtime loss on the road against then-No. 5 Oklahoma in September. The Black Knights had three scoring drives of 16 plays or more, ran a season-high 87 plays, and held the ball for nearly 45 minutes as the fullback foursome combined for 114 yards rushing and two touchdowns against a foe that qualified for the College Football Playoff.

Woolfolk is the workhorse of the group. He has 885 yards on 210 carries and 14 touchdowns rushing, tops on the team in all three categories and just ahead of junior quarterback Kelvin Hopkins Jr. (847, 197, 12).

When the ball is snapped, the fullback gets hit no matter what in the Army offense, and Woolfolk, with his bulging thighs, is usually the one to deliver the first salvo.

“The fullback is our bread

and butter,” Hopkins said. “We can’t do anything on offense without getting that fullback established.”

That Woolfolk is even on the Army roster was a stroke of good fortune. A two-way star at fullback and linebacker for powerhouse Maine-Endwell High School on New York state’s Southern Tier, he was headed to play Division III ball after Lafayette defensive coordinator John Loose delivered a familiar message — too slow to be a running back, too short to play defense, even in Division I’s second tier.

When Monken was hired five years ago, he added Loose to his new staff and the proverbial light bulb quickly went off.

“I knew he would be absolutely perfect in our offense,” said Loose, in his second stint as an assistant at West Point. “He runs so hard. He’s very, very hard to tackle. He’s a tough competitor. He has everything you want in a fullback in our offense.”

All it took to seal the deal was a little bit of research and a family visit for lunch at West Point. The chance to play at college football’s top level and on national television at Michie Stadium was a bonus hard to ignore.

“It happened to work out well,” said Woolfolk, who knew nothing about the military when Army came calling and will graduate as a field artillery officer. “I just think it comes down to the offense we’re playing. It fits me well. It fits my running style, my mentality. If things were different, I don’t know how happy I would be.”

Woolfolk’s freshman year was spent mostly on special teams. He emerged as a sophomore, registering 600 yards on 109 carries and scoring nine TDs and last season had 812 yards rushing on 157 carries and scored 14 times.

His importance both on and off the field cannot be underestimated.

NHL roundup

Canadiens' Price earns 300th victory

Associated Press

GLENDALE, Ariz. — Carey Price reached another milestone and the Montreal Canadiens got another big win.

Price stopped 36 shots for his 300th career win, leading the Canadiens to a 2-1 victory over the slumping Arizona Coyotes on Thursday night.

Paul Byron and Shea Weber scored as Montreal won the second game of a back-to-back for the first time in four tries this season. The Canadiens, coming off a 2-1 loss at Colorado on Wednesday night, have won six of their last nine overall.

"Definitely a trying two games with the travel involved," said Price, who started both games. "But we found a way to do it. Great character showed up tonight."

Oliver Ekman-Larsson scored for the Coyotes, who have just two goals in the last three games and have lost seven of eight. Darcy Kuemper stopped 26 shots.

"We're close, but we don't get points being close," Ekman-Larsson said. "We're trying to get back in the race and we're trying to find our game right now."

This was the first meeting between the teams since their offseason trade that sent Max Domi to Montreal and Alex Galchenyuk to Arizona.

"That was fun. So many memories here," Domi said. "It was like, emotional. I was only here for three years but it felt like 20."

The Canadiens started the second period on a power play after the Coyotes' Nick Cousins checked Jeff Petry against the boards just before the first-period horn. Cousins was whistled for high-sticking on the hit.

Montreal took advantage of the extra man 22 seconds into the second to take a 1-0 lead. Off a draw, Jonathan Drouin passed to Petry, who fed Weber for an uncontested shot from distance that beat Kuemper.

"I thought guys just dug in,"

Weber said.

Lightning 5, Flames 4 (SO): J.T. Miller scored in the seventh round of the shootout, lifting visiting Tampa Bay over Calgary.

Maple Leafs 6, Panthers 1: Auston Matthews had two goals and two assists to help host Toronto to the runaway victory over Florida.

Golden Knights 4, Islanders 2: William Karlsson and Paul Stastny scored 1:03 apart in the third period, and Vegas goaltender Marc-Andre Fleury earned his league-leading 20th victory in a win over visiting New York.

Jets 5, Sharks 3: Nikolaj Ehlers recorded his fourth career hat trick, Mason Appleton got his first career goal and visiting Winnipeg beat San Jose for the sixth time in seven games.

Penguins 2, Wild 1: Bryan Rust scored two goals to lead host Pittsburgh past Minnesota.

Flyers 2, Predators 1: Cart-

er Hart made 31 saves for his second straight win in his second NHL start, helping host Philadelphia beat Nashville.

Blackhawks 5, Stars 2: Patrick Kane had two goals and an assist, and visiting Chicago earned its first winning streak in two months by beating Dallas.

Bruins 3, Ducks 1: Jaroslav Halak stopped 24 shots for host Boston, and David Pastrnak had a goal and two assists in a victory over Anaheim.

Canucks 5, Blues 1: Bo Horvat and Jake Virtanen each had a goal and an assist, powering host Vancouver past St. Louis.

Red Wings 4, Hurricanes 1: Niklas Kronwall had a goal and an assist and Jonathan Bernier stopped 38 shots, helping visiting Detroit down Carolina.

Blue Jackets 2, Devils 1: Cam Atkinson scored on a penalty shot and Sergei Bobrovsky had 29 saves, lifting host Columbus past New Jersey.

NBA roundup

Heat hold off Rockets for 1st 3-game streak of season

Associated Press

MIAMI — The plan for the Miami Heat on the game's final play was simple: Do not let James Harden win the game for Houston.

Dwyane Wade and the Heat pulled it off.

Wade ran at Harden and got him to give up the ball as the clock ran down, Eric Gordon missed a three-pointer — one that Wade said he tipped ever so slightly — as time expired, and the Heat held off the Rockets 101-99 on Thursday night for their first three-game winning streak of the season.

"If somebody else hit it, we would deal with it," Wade said. "But it wasn't going to be James Harden."

Harden scored 35 for the Rockets, whose five-game winning streak was snapped. The worst part of the night for Houston, however, will likely be the loss of point guard Chris Paul in the second quarter to a strained left hamstring.

All the Rockets know, for now, is that Paul will miss time. He will undergo an MRI on Friday to determine the severity and likely timetable for returning.

"We lose a guy of the magnitude of Chris, now we're fighting again," Rockets coach Mike D'Antoni said. "And the flaws that we have are going to come out again and we've got to overcome those."

Josh Richardson scored 22 points and Tyler Johnson added

19 for the Heat, who were up by 16 early, then wasted an 11-point lead in the fourth before rallying.

Gordon's three-pointer with 37 seconds left got Houston within two, and the Rockets got a stop on a long ensuing Heat possession. Wade missed, Hassan Whiteside got the offensive rebound and Wade wound up missing again, with the Rockets finally corralling the ball with 3.8 seconds left.

The last play eventually went to Gordon, and his three — Houston's 54th attempt of the night from beyond the arc — was off, and Miami escaped. The Heat are 4-4 this season when shooting under 40 percent; the rest of the NBA, com-

bined, is 9-103 in such games.

Clippers 125, Mavericks 121: Danilo Gallinari scored 32 points, Lou Williams added 26 and host Los Angeles snapped a four-game losing streak by beating Dallas.

Rookie Luka Doncic scored a season-high 32 points for the Mavericks and JJ Barea added 19. DeAndre Jordan had 11 points and 22 rebounds in his first game back at Staples Center against his former team.

Dallas trailed 89-82 at the start of the fourth quarter before scoring eight straight points to take the lead, with six coming from Devin Harris. That would be the first of six lead changes and four ties over the final 10 minutes.