

Biden facing pressure over DOD pick

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President-elect Joe Biden is facing escalating pressure from competing factions within his own party as he finalizes his choice for secretary of defense.

Black leaders have encouraged the incoming president to select an African American to diversify what has so far been a largely white prospective Cabinet, while others are pushing him to appoint a woman to lead the Department of Defense for the first time.

At the same time, a growing collection of progressive groups is opposing the leading female contender, Michèle Flournoy, citing concerns about her record and private-sector associations.

A coalition of at least seven progressive groups warned Biden to avoid Flournoy in an open letter to Biden obtained Wednesday by The Associated Press that referenced her record of “ill-advised policy decisions” — particularly in relation to Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Afghanistan — and an “opaque history of private-sector activity.”

“Ms. Flournoy’s consistent support for military interventions has contributed to devastating crises around the world, including in Yemen,” said Jehan Hakim, chairper-

son of the Yemeni Alliance Committee, which helped organize the letter.

Other contenders are emerging, including retired Army Gen. Lloyd Austin and Jeh Johnson, who served as the Pentagon’s top lawyer and then as head of the Department of Homeland Security during President Barack Obama’s second term. Both Austin and Johnson are Black.

The competing pressures are intensifying less than a month into Biden’s urgent push to build an administration while trying to preserve the broad coalition that fueled his victory over President Donald Trump last month.

Flournoy, meanwhile, had been seen as the leading candidate for defense secretary under a Democratic president since Hillary Clinton’s failed 2016 campaign.

She stood out as deeply experienced, respected on Capitol Hill and well known on the international stage. But soon after Biden’s victory, her stock seemed to slip as others, including Austin and Johnson, came into consideration.

A leading Black voice in Congress, South Carolina Rep. James Clyburn, has openly called for Biden to choose more Black men and women for Cabinet positions. The Pentagon job, which has never been held by a

woman or a Black person, is one of the last remaining opportunities for Biden to demonstrate his commitment to diversity at the senior levels of his national security team.

Liberal critics have suggested Flournoy’s views are more hawkish than the president-elect’s, particularly on the Afghanistan War, and some have pointed to her position as a co-founder of consulting firm WestExec Advisors, which provides what it calls “unique geopolitical and policy expertise to help business leaders” and which has become a source of Biden selections for other national security positions. Another of WestExec’s founders, Antony Blinken, is Biden’s nominee for secretary of state, and Avril Haines, the nominee for director of national intelligence, is a former WestExec principal.

The signatories include the Yemen Relief and Reconstruction Foundation; Justice Democrats, which is aligned with Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders; Demand Progress; and Just Foreign Policy, among others. The letter offers support for two potential Flournoy alternatives: Sens. Tammy Duckworth of Illinois and Kirsten Gillibrand of New York. Advisers for both camps declined to comment, though neither is believed to have emerged as a leading contender.

DOD ID's remains of Ind. brothers who died at Pearl Harbor

BY WYATT OLSON

Stars and Stripes

FORT SHAFTER, Hawaii — The remains of a pair of brothers who died aboard the USS Oklahoma during the Dec. 7, 1941, Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor have been identified.

Navy Fire Controlman 2nd Class Harold F. Trapp, who died at age 24, and Navy Electrician’s Mate 3rd Class William H. Trapp, 23 at the time of his death, were officially accounted for Nov. 24, the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency announced on its website Tuesday.

The Trapps were from La Porte, Ind.

On the eve of World War II, it was common for brothers to serve together aboard ships — a practice that ended after all five brothers from one family died aboard the

USS Juneau during the battle of Guadalcanal on Nov. 13, 1942.

The Oklahoma was moored on Battleship Row at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, on the morning of the attack. It was hit with multiple torpedoes released from Japanese aircraft, and the battleship quickly capsized.

Surviving crew members jumped 50 feet into the flaming water or scrambled across mooring lines to the nearby USS Maryland; 429 crew members died in the attack.

The ship was refloated and salvaged in 1943. Some crew members’ remains from the Oklahoma were so badly burned or decayed that identifications were not possible, and they were buried in gravesites for the unknown at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Honolulu.

Those graves were exhumed in recent

years and remains taken to the accounting agency’s lab at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam for analysis.

There were at least 10 sets of brothers serving aboard the Oklahoma at the time of the attack.

The three Barber brothers — Malcolm, LeRoy and Randolph — had all enlisted in the Navy in 1940 and were firemen on the Oklahoma. None survived.

The remains of some have only recently been identified.

Seaman 2nd Class Calvin H. Palmer and Seaman 2nd Class Wilferd D. Palmer were officially accounted for by DPAA in March 2019. Machinist’s Mate 2nd Class Leo Blitz and Fireman 1st Class Rudolph Blitz enlisted together at age 17 and died in the attack. Their remains were identified in May 2019.

Micronesia cuts Christmas drop over virus

BY WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

Coronavirus fears have spurred the Federated States of Micronesia to opt out of this year's Operation Christmas Drop, an annual Air Force mission bringing food, clothing and other donated supplies to thousands of remote Pacific islanders.

"The citizens of [Micronesia] recognize the value of Operation Christmas Drop, which is the longest-running U.S. humanitarian assistance program entering its 69th consecutive year, and choosing to cancel was not an easy decision to make," the nation's president, David Panuelo, said in a news release Tuesday.

Panuelo said he had "full trust and confidence" in U.S. armed forces to carry out the annual supply drop in a safe manner.

"We are cancelling Operation Christmas Drop this year not due to a lack of trust and confidence, but due to ongoing concerns from our citizens in our most remote and vulnerable communities about the COVID-19 pandemic," Panuelo said in the

news release.

The Federated States of Micronesia — Yap, Chuuk, Pohnpei and Kosrae — consists of more than 600 islands located north-east of Papua New Guinea just north of the Equator.

The website for the U.S. Embassy in Micronesia said the nation has had no confirmed COVID-19 cases within its borders.

During Operation Christmas Drop, crews from C-130 Super Hercules cargo planes airdrop the bundled supplies to more than 20,000 people living on 55 remote islands spanning 1.8 million square nautical miles, the Air Force said in a statement last week announcing the operation's kickoff on Saturday.

Using guidelines from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, air crews participating in the Christmas drop are mitigating the spread of the virus by "implementing approved sanitation measures for all donations," Air Force Col. Robert Craig-Gray, Pacific Air Forces chief flight surgeon, said in the statement.

"Socially distanced teams wearing recommended protective gear on shift work will prepare the donations in bundles, which will all be disinfected prior to delivery across the islands," he said. "Every effort is being made to keep all participants and recipients involved safe and healthy so we can continue to carry out this amazing tradition of humanitarian assistance."

The primary U.S. Air Force units involved in this year's airdrop include the 36th Airlift Squadron, 374th Airlift Wing, from Yokota Air Base, Japan; the 515th Air Mobility Operations Wing from Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Hawaii; and the 36th Wing at Andersen Air Force Base on Guam.

For the sixth year in a row, the Japan Air Self-Defense Force will also participate.

Micronesia's withdrawal from the Christmas drop also came with the cancellation of a repatriation flight that had been planned for Saturday — the first such flight since its borders were closed in March due to the pandemic.

US to keep training Afghan, Iraqi forces

BY COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — American troops will continue training Afghan and Iraqi combat forces after the partial U.S. withdrawals from those nations ordered by President Donald Trump last month, the top U.S. general said Wednesday.

Army Gen. Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the United States would continue the train, advise and assist missions and the separate counterterrorism operations in those countries even after it removes some 2,500 troops from Afghanistan and about 500 from Iraq by mid-January. Pentagon officials previously declined to provide specific information about what remaining troops in those countries would be assigned to do, especially in Afghanistan.

Trump ordered the new drawdowns to be completed by Jan. 15, five days before he leaves office. The moves will leave about 2,500 troops in Afghanistan and 2,500 in Iraq at the beginning of President-elect Joe Biden's administration, falling short of Trump's long-stated promise to remove all American troops from those countries.

Milley's comments Wednesday were his first public remarks addressing the drawdowns announced Nov. 17 by acting De-

fense Secretary Christopher Miller. The general spoke during a virtual event hosted by the Brookings Institution, a liberal-leaning Washington think tank.

He defended the drawdown plan in Afghanistan as a move toward an exit from America's longest war ever, launched in the weeks after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. More than 20,000 U.S. troops have been wounded in Afghanistan and more than 2,200 have died there.

"We believe now that after 20 years, two decades of consistent effort, that we have achieved a modicum of success," he said, acknowledging the war had been stalemated for at least five years and was likely to end only via ongoing peace talks between the U.S.-backed Afghan government and the Taliban.

Milley declined to provide many details about the U.S. withdrawal plans for Afghanistan, citing security concerns.

The U.S. will shut down some bases that it has maintained across the country, however, reducing its footprint to "a couple of larger bases with several satellite bases that provide the capability to continue our train, advise and assist mission and our counterterrorism mission," Milley said, noting that top generals had approved plans to implement Trump's order.

Milley: US debating how many troops to keep in Somalia

BY COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Top U.S. officials have not decided how many troops to keep in Somalia, the top U.S. general said Wednesday, warning that the al-Shabab terrorist group based there remains a threat to America.

Army Gen. Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the debate was ongoing about the positioning of some 700 U.S. troops in Somalia, confirming reports the White House was seeking a change in the military posture there. Milley indicated that without some troops in or near Somalia to conduct counterterrorism operations, al-Shabab could gain power.

"They do have some reach, and they could, if left unattended, conduct operations against not only U.S. interests in the region, but also against the [U.S.] homeland," Milley warned during a virtual event Wednesday hosted by the Brookings Institution, a liberal-leaning Washington think tank. "So, they require attention."

Milley said the United States was taking a "hard look" at ways to reposition troops there "to conduct counterterrorism operations with a relatively small footprint [and] relatively low cost in terms of numbers of personnel and in terms of money."

Low US presence could help ISIS, Iran

Associated Press

MOSUL, Iraq — In a quest to root out Islamic State hideouts over the summer, Iraqi forces on the ground cleared nearly 90 villages across a notoriously unruly northern province. But the much-touted operation still relied heavily on U.S. intelligence, coalition flights and planning assistance.

While the planned U.S. troop drawdown in Iraq from 3,000 to 2,500 by mid-January is unlikely to have an immediate impact on the campaign against ISIS remnants, there are concerns that further withdrawals could set the stage for another resurgence of the extremist group.

How could the American drawdown help ISIS and Iran? Here are three key ways:

1. Security could worsen in areas now free of ISIS

Senior Iraqi military officials in Baghdad have said that the withdrawal of 500 Amer-

ican troops will have little, if any, impact. But local officials in areas liberated from ISIS, where reconstruction has lagged and services have yet to be fully restored, fear a security vacuum if the Americans leave.

“It’s true we have a stronger army, stronger security forces,” said Najm Jibouri, the governor and former head of provincial operations in Nineveh, which includes Mosul. “But we still need training, support with intelligence gathering.

“If the U.S. leaves us now, it will be a big mistake,” he said.

2. Militants could become more resilient

ISIS lost the last territory under its control in 2017 but returned to its insurgent roots, carrying out hit-and-run attacks on Iraqi forces on a stretch of northern land.

A long-standing political and territorial dispute between the central government and the semi-autonomous Kurdish author-

ity in the north has hindered coordination against ISIS. The U.S. has long served as a mediator, a role that would be difficult to fill if it were to completely withdraw.

3. Iran’s growing influence could deepen

A wider U.S. withdrawal would also allow Iran to deepen its influence in Iraq, where it already has strong political, economic and security ties forged since the U.S.-led invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein in 2003.

The U.S. strike that killed Iran’s top general, Qassem Soleimani, and senior Iraqi militia leaders near Baghdad’s airport in January sparked outrage and led Iraq’s parliament to pass a non-binding resolution days later calling for the expulsion of all foreign troops.

The government later retreated from such threats, but Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi still faces pressure from Iran-aligned groups to eject U.S. forces.

Military health care personnel to receive vaccine first in DOD

BY CAITLIN M. KENNEY

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Military health care workers and then first responders will be the first to be vaccinated by the Defense Department when the coronavirus vaccines are approved, according to the Navy’s top officer.

“And if there’s anything we’re really good at, it’s mass immunization in the U.S. military,” Adm. Mike Gilday, the chief of naval operations, said Wednesday when asked about the coronavirus vaccination process before the Senate Armed Services Committee’s subpanel on readiness and management support.

On Tuesday, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices recommended health care workers and people living in long-term care facilities should be the first in the United States to receive the two pending vaccines.

While the Food and Drug Administration continues to work on approving the emergency use authorization for the Pfizer and Moderna coronavirus vaccines, the federal government has begun contacting local governments and some agencies about what

they can expect.

Sixty-four jurisdictions, which includes all 50 states, eight American territories, six major cities and five federal agencies, have been told how much of each vaccine they will be allocated within 24 hours of the authorization’s approval, said Army Gen. Gustave Perna, the commander of U.S. Army Materiel Command and the chief operations officer for Operation Warp Speed, the government’s effort to develop and distribute a vaccine for the coronavirus, as well as supply testing and equipment throughout the U.S.

The Defense Department is one of the five agencies to be allocated its own supply of the vaccines, along with the Department of Veterans Affairs, the State Department, the Indian Health Service and the Bureau of Prisons.

While the Pentagon has not released its plan of how the department will distribute and prioritize the vaccine among its personnel, Gilday offered a glimpse of the process during Wednesday’s Senate hearing. According to Gilday, the Defense Department’s vaccines are being sent to every military medical treatment facility within the U.S. as well as locations overseas.

Defense bill to move on with base renaming

BY STEVE BEYNON

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A provision to rename 10 Army bases that honor Confederate generals has made it into the final 2021 National Defense Authorization Act, according to a Democratic aide, rejecting a veto threat from President Donald Trump.

The final NDAA includes a proposal by Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., that would rename military bases and assets honoring Confederates within three years. It was passed by the Republican-led Armed Services committee. Each chamber of Congress passed its NDAA this summer, setting funding and policy priorities for the military. Capitol Hill is now negotiating a final bill to send to the president to be signed, which could be one of the last major acts of Trump’s presidency.

It’s unclear why Republicans stopped fighting the renaming measure, but Trump made a last-minute threat against the must-pass \$740 billion military funding measure unless it repeals Section 230 of the 1996 Communications Decency Act, calling it a “liability shielding gift” to “big tech.”

US jobless claims remain high at 712K

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits fell as the nation celebrated Thanksgiving last week to a still-high 712,000, the latest sign that the U.S. economy and job market remain under stress from the intensified viral outbreak.

Thursday's report from the Labor Department said that initial claims for jobless aid dropped from 787,000 the week before. Before the virus paralyzed the economy in March, the number of people applying for unemployment benefits each week had typically amounted to roughly 225,000. The chronically high pace of applications shows that nearly nine months after the pandemic struck, many employers are still

slashing jobs.

"Thanksgiving seasonals likely explain the drop" in jobless claims last week, Ian Shepherdson, chief economist at Pantheon Macroeconomics, wrote in a research note. "Expect a rebound next week."

The total number of people who are continuing to receive traditional state unemployment benefits declined to 5.5 million from 6.1 million. That figure is down sharply from its peak of nearly 23 million in May. It means that some jobless Americans are finding jobs and no longer receiving aid. But it also indicates that many of the unemployed have used up their state benefits, which typically expire after six months.

With layoffs still elevated and new con-

firmed viral cases in the United States now exceeding 160,000 a day on average, the economy's modest recovery is increasingly in danger. States and cities are issuing mask mandates, limiting the size of gatherings, restricting restaurant dining, closing gyms or reducing the hours and capacity of bars, stores and other businesses.

Most experts say the economy won't be able to sustain a recovery until the virus is brought under control with an effective and widely used vaccine.

Many jobless Americans are now collecting checks under two federal programs that were set up this year to ease the economic pain inflicted by the pandemic. But those programs are set to expire the day after Christmas.

Administration pushes pay freeze for federal workers

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The Trump administration has dropped its call for a 1% federal employee pay raise in January, advocating instead for a freeze on pay rates for the 2.1 million executive branch workers.

In a letter dated Monday to Capitol Hill, the Office of Management and Budget endorsed language in one of a set of agency funding bills crafted by the Senate that would provide for no raise.

"In the context of budgetary constraints and the recent, pandemic-related impacts on non-Federal labor markets, the Administration supports the policy in the bill to maintain for 2021 the current level of Federal civilian employee pay," the letter said.

Since the start of its fiscal year Oct. 1, the

government has been operating under a stopgap "continuing resolution" that expires Dec. 11. Congress is working to craft a replacement measure, using as its starting point the Senate bills — which have not reached voting even at the committee level — and bills the House passed this summer.

President Donald Trump's early-year budget plan called for a 1% federal employee raise along with proposals to reduce the value of retirement benefits, which Congress never actively considered.

When it passed a spending bill covering general government matters, the House in effect accepted that amount by not specifying a raise figure. Under the complex federal pay law, if no number is enacted into law by the end of a year, the White House's pro-

posed raise takes effect automatically.

Ken Thomas, president of the National Active and Retired Federal Employees Association, called the White House's change of position "disappointing, to say the least."

"In a year when federal employees have stepped up to respond to a global pandemic, with tens of thousands on the frontlines working on behalf of the American people and contracting COVID-19 in the process, a 1 percent pay increase was the least our nation could do to honor the commitment of Feds," he said in a statement.

The call for a freeze comes less than two months after the advisory group overseeing federal employee pay reported that comparable private sector jobs pay about 23% more on average.

4 people killed after explosion at UK sewage plant

Associated Press

LONDON — Four people died following an explosion in a silo that holds treated biosolids at a waste water treatment plant near the southwest England city of Bristol, police said Thursday.

Chief Inspector Mark Runacres of Avon and Somerset Police told a press briefing that three employees of Wessex Water and one contractor died in the incident, which is not being treated as terror-related.

He said a fifth person was injured during the explosion at Avonmouth.

His condition is not thought to be life-threatening.

"The fire service led the rescue operation but sadly, despite the best efforts of all those involved, we can confirm there have been four fatalities," he said.

Runacres would not speculate on the cause of the explosion. He said it took place in a silo holding organic matter from sewage before it "is recycled to land as an organic soil conditioner."

He said there were no ongoing public safety concerns.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson said "our

hearts go out" to the victims of the tragedy and their families.

"Deeply saddened to learn that four people have lost their lives in the water works explosion in Avonmouth," he said on Twitter.

Wessex Water chief executive Colin Skellett said he was "devastated" by the incident, and the company is working to understand what happened and why.

Sean Nolan, who witnessed the aftermath of the explosion, said he had heard a "boom and echo" but believed it to have been a vehicle collision.

Man wins big money twice in scratch-off lottery

FL JACKSONVILLE — Just call him extra lucky.

Munib Garvanovic, 56, of Jacksonville won a \$5 million top prize in a Florida Lottery scratch-off game three years after winning \$1 million in another lottery game, lottery officials said.

And he bought both tickets at the same gas station.

The big prize came from the 200X the Cash game. Garvanovic chose to receive a one-time, lump-sum payment of \$4,450,000, the Florida Times-Union reported. Earlier, he had claimed a \$1 million prize from the \$5,000,000 Gold Rush Doubler game.

He bought the \$20 ticket at a Gate gas station in Jacksonville. The retailer will receive a \$10,000 bonus commission for selling the winning ticket, lottery officials said.

Loose cows close highway ramp

OH COLERAIN TOWNSHIP — Police had to corral three cows that wandered onto a highway in southern Ohio.

The bovines were spotted overnight and officers from Green and Colerain townships had to close the ramp from westbound Interstate 74 to northbound I-275.

“They were sitting in the median eating,” Colerain Township Police Officer Jake McElvogue told WXIX-TV. “Honestly, they probably would have been fine if we had kept going, but the last thing we want someone to do is hit a cow.”

Police believe the cows wandered away from a nearby farm.

The cows were loaded into a trailer and taken to a local couple who can care for them until the owner is located, police said.

Feds: Stamp scam used to rip off government; 2 charged

NJ NEWARK — Two New Jersey men used their e-commerce company to defraud the government out of more than \$6 million by altering U.S. postage stamps, a criminal complaint alleged.

Jack Koch and Steven Koch were charged with theft of government property and postage stamp fraud.

Jack Koch, formerly known as Ismail Yilmaz, and Steven Koch, formerly known as Selim Memis, own an e-commerce company based in Wood-Ridge called Fresh N Clear that sells items through Amazon, according to the criminal complaint.

The complaint alleges that since the beginning of this year, the company bought more

than 240,000 U.S. Postal Service labels and altered them so they could ship larger items, while still paying a lower, flat rate meant for smaller shipments under 70 pounds.

Baby goat missing from herd that lives on ‘Big Fish’ movie set

AL MILLBROOK — The owners of an outdoor recreation destination in Alabama fear a days-old baby goat has been stolen from a free-ranging herd near a former movie set and tourist attraction.

Two newborn goats from the herd on Jackson Lake Island in Millbrook have disappeared since November, according to the owners.

The property has public access for fishing and camping, as well as the fictional town of Spectre, where scenes for the 2003 Tim Burton film “Big Fish” were shot, The Montgomery Advertiser reported. There are about 55 grown goats on the property.

One of the goats, Bambi, was taken in early November but was returned about a day later, said Lynn Bright, who owns the property and goats. Bambi died after being away from his mother, she added. Bluebell, who was born Friday, has since gone missing.

Teens accused of using mace in carjack attempt

KS WICHITA — Police arrested two teenage boys accused of spraying a woman with mace at a Wichita shopping center during a failed attempt to steal her car.

The arrests stem from an incident at the West Way Shopping Center, the Wichita Police Department said in a news release. A 50-year-old woman reported two males tried to steal her SUV as she was getting inside. She told police they opened her vehicle door, sprayed her with mace and tried to pull her out of the vehicle. They were unsuccessful and fled on foot.

Officers spotted the juveniles running and after a foot pursuit both teens were arrested.

Hurricane cleanup uncovers historic sign in subfloor

LA DERIDDER — Cleanup operations after hurricanes Laura and Delta uncovered a bit of city history under a floor in downtown DeRidder.

The American Press reported that crews ripping up damaged flooring at the Greater Beauregard Chamber of Commerce discov-

ered a subfloor bearing the name of the city’s earliest drug store.

The words “City Drug Store” are now visible in the building’s entryway, spelled out in original hexagon-shaped porcelain tiles facing away from the building’s interior. Beauregard Museum director Elona Weston said news articles indicate the drug store was in operation as early as 1911.

Hikers, historians aim to uncover trail to late 1890s gold mine

ID BOISE — Historians and hikers in Idaho have teamed up to uncover a 120-year-old route used by gold miners that was partially rediscovered near Thunder Mountain, the Idaho Statesman reported.

The Idaho Trails Association has partnered with the U.S. Forest Service to survey three sections of the trail, which was originally about 50 miles long, according to Morgan Zedalis, assistant forest archaeologist for Payette National Forest’s Heritage Program.

The Heritage Program history of the trail said it was created after brothers Ben and Lou Caswell struck gold in the late 1890s in what is now part of the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness in southern Idaho.

The Caswells sold their mining claims to investor William H. Dewey in 1900, spurring a gold rush, officials said. William Campbell and W.A. Stonebraker then created a more accessible route for miners.

The U.S. Forest Service historians, including Zedalis, are seeking to rediscover the original route of Three Blaze Trail, much of which is obscured by plant growth or burned by wildfires.

Most restitution sought for sheep deaths denied

WY SAVERY — The state of Wyoming has denied most of a damage claim submitted by ranchers who say black bears killed an estimated 145 lambs and ewes last spring.

Ladder Livestock Co. in south-central Wyoming sought almost \$29,000 in restitution. The Wyoming Game and Fish Commission awarded the ranch \$1,355.80 for the deaths of two ewes and six lambs.

Wyoming compensates people for livestock losses caused by trophy game animals including black bears, grizzly bears, mountain lions and wolves.

Investigators determined one or more bears killed the two ewes and estimated six lambs but couldn’t verify that bears killed the dozens of other lambs and ewes lost.

— From The Associated Press

Rockets, Wizards swap Westbrook, Wall

Associated Press

HOUSTON — Russell Westbrook is headed to the Washington Wizards and John Wall is moving to the Houston Rockets in a significant swap of point guards — one an MVP, the other a No. 1 overall draft pick — just weeks before the season starts.

The Wizards also shipped a future lottery-protected, first-round pick to the Rockets on Wednesday night.

“Having the opportunity to acquire a player of Russell’s caliber and character was something that we could not pass up when looking at both the immediate and long-term future of our team,” Wizards general manager Tommy Sheppard said in a release. “With that said, the decision to part ways with John, one of the greatest players in franchise history, was extremely difficult. What he has meant to our organization and our community is immeasurable and will not be forgotten.”

While Wall has played his en-

tire professional career in the nation’s capital, the move ends Westbrook’s tenure in Houston after just one disappointing season. He arrived from Oklahoma City in July 2019 for Chris Paul and draft picks.

The Rockets had hoped that the 32-year-old Westbrook would be the final piece they needed to win their first title since winning back-to-back championships in 1994-95. But instead, Houston was eliminated from the playoffs by the eventual champion Los Angeles Lakers in the Western semifinals. Westbrook was the 2017 NBA MVP and is a nine-time All-Star, but has failed to win a title.

Many questioned whether the pairing of two ball-dominant guards like Westbrook and James Harden would work in Houston, but the longtime friends insisted it would.

After the Rockets were sent home from the playoffs early again, rumors started to swirl that the two weren’t happy in

Houston and both wanted out.

But after spending years building their entire team around Harden, who won MVP honors in 2018, the Rockets weren’t interested in parting with him.

This move could be new general manager Rafael Stone’s way of appeasing Harden so the Rockets can continue their quest for a title this season instead of rebuilding without the superstar.

Stone was promoted to GM last month after Daryl Morey stepped down before quickly taking a job with the Philadelphia 76ers.

The Westbrook-Wall deal works under the NBA’s rules because the two players are owed about the same amount: Each gets more than \$80 million over the next two seasons, plus each has a player option of more than \$45 million for 2022-23.

And both were looking to move on.

Wall, the No. 1 overall pick out of Kentucky in the 2010 draft,

became the face of the franchise for Washington, a five-time All-Star who repeatedly helped get his team to the playoffs.

But Wall’s Wizards never reached 50 wins in a season or made it past the conference semifinals.

Wall, who is 30, has averaged 19 points and 9.2 assists for his career.

He has been troubled by injuries of late, appearing in only 41 games in 2017-18 because of left knee surgery, then just 32 in 2018-19 because of a left heel problem that required an operation.

While recovering from that, Wall tore his left Achilles tendon and sat out all of last season.

After a report surfaced that Wall wanted out of Washington, Sheppard said on Nov. 23 that Wall “didn’t request” to be moved when they spoke that morning.

“There’s no plans to trade John,” Sheppard said during a video conference with reporters that day.

Olympic decathlon champ Rafer Johnson dies at 86

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Rafer Johnson, who won the decathlon at the 1960 Rome Olympics and helped subdue Robert F. Kennedy’s assassin in 1968, died Wednesday. He was 86.

He died at his home in the Sherman Oaks section of Los Angeles, according to family friend Michael Roth. No cause of death was announced.

Johnson was among the world’s greatest athletes from 1955 through his Olympic triumph in 1960, winning a national decathlon championship in 1956 and a silver medal at the Melbourne Olympics that same year.

His Olympic career included carrying the U.S. flag at the 1960 Games and lighting the torch at the Los Angeles Memorial Coli-

seum to open the 1984 Games. Johnson set world records in the decathlon three different times amid a fierce rivalry with his UCLA teammate C.K. Yang of Taiwan and Vasily Kuznetsov of the former Soviet Union.

Johnson won a gold medal at the Pan American Games in 1955 while competing in just his fourth decathlon. At a welcome home meet afterward in Kingsburg, Calif., he set his first world record, breaking the mark of two-time Olympic champion and his childhood hero Bob Mathias.

On June 5, 1968, Johnson was working on Kennedy’s presidential campaign when the Democratic candidate was shot in the kitchen of the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles. Johnson joined former NFL star Rosey Grier

and journalist George Plimpton in apprehending Sirhan Sirhan moments after he shot Kennedy, who died the next day.

“I knew he did everything he could to take care of Uncle Bobby at his most vulnerable moment,” Kennedy’s niece, Maria Shriver, said by phone. “His devotion to Uncle Bobby was pure and real. He had protected his friend. Even after Uncle Bobby’s death he stayed close.”

Johnson later called the assassination “one of the most devastating moments in my life.”

Born Rafer Lewis Johnson on Aug. 18, 1934, in Hillsboro, Texas, he moved to California in 1945 with his family, including his brother Jim, a future NFL Hall of Fame inductee. Although some sources cite Johnson’s birth year as 1935, the family has

said that is incorrect.

They eventually settled in Kingsburg, near Fresno in the San Joaquin Valley. It was less than 25 miles from Tulare, the hometown of Mathias, who would win the decathlon at the 1948 and 1952 Olympics and prove an early inspiration to Johnson.

Johnson was a standout student and played football, basketball, baseball and track and field at Kingsburg Joint Union High. At 6-foot-3 and 200-plus pounds, he looked more like a linebacker than a track and field athlete.

During his junior year of high school, Johnson’s coach took him to Tulare to watch Mathias compete in a decathlon, an experience Johnson later said spurred him to take up the grueling 10-event sport.

Steelers 11-0 after defeat of Ravens

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — Mike Tomlin isn't one for excuses. Even as COVID-19 wreaked havoc with his team's schedule, pushing its matchup with Baltimore from Thanksgiving night to the middle of the afternoon in the middle of the week in the middle of a pandemic, the longtime Pittsburgh Steelers coach refused to reach for one.

So while the Steelers stayed perfect with a disjointed 19-14 win over the undermanned Ravens in the first NFL game on a Wednesday in eight years, their play was anything but. And Tomlin knows it.

"To be bluntly honest, I'm really disappointed in our performance tonight," he said after Pittsburgh improved to 11-0. "We did enough to win tonight, that's all."

Calling it "junior varsity"-level play, Tomlin seethed in the aftermath, a testament to both how high the bar is set and just how far Pittsburgh came from clearing it.

Asked about an offense that managed just one touchdown in four trips to the red zone — missed opportunities that allowed Baltimore (6-5) to hang around until the final minutes — Tomlin didn't offer analysis as much as rage.

"Us sucking," he said, declining to get into specifics.

There really was no need to.

The Steelers turned it over twice, once on a fourth-down heave into the end zone by Ben Roethlisberger, the other a fumbled

punt by Ray-Ray McCloud that set up a 1-yard touchdown plunge by Gus Edwards. They let Ravens backup quarterback Robert Griffin III briefly turn back the clock to his 2012 Rookie of the Year season and looked at times like a team in the middle of ho-hum midweek practice — which, to be fair, Wednesdays typically are — rather than a showdown with its longtime rivals.

"Obviously we won, but it sure doesn't feel like it," said Roethlisberger, whose 1-yard strike to JuJu Smith-Schuster early in the fourth quarter gave the Steelers a 12-point lead they flirted with squandering. "Just not good football. It starts with me. It's a mental game, it's been a challenging and draining week but at the end of the day we need to step on the field and play good football when it's time."

Pittsburgh didn't for long stretches, though some of the credit goes to a spirited effort from Baltimore. Running onto Heinz Field missing more than a dozen players on the reserve/COVID-19 list, including reigning NFL MVP Lamar Jackson and running backs Mark Ingram and J.K. Dobbins, the Ravens didn't exactly roll over.

While Griffin completed just 7 of 12 passes for 33 yards and a first-quarter Pick-6 by Joe Haden that gave the Steelers an early lead, Griffin ran for a game-high 68 yards before leaving in the fourth quarter with a left hamstring injury.

Trace McSorley, one of 11 players pro-

moted from the practice squad, came on and connected with Marquise Brown for a 70-yard touchdown with 2:58 to go. But Pittsburgh was able to drain the clock behind a third-down grab by James Washington, eliminating the Ravens from repeating as AFC North champions.

"The way the game went, obviously we wanted to win," Griffin said. "We felt like we had a chance to come in here and win, shock the world and do something special. I put it on myself. I feel like if I didn't pull my hamstring in the second quarter we would have won. It was really emotional trying to fight through that. I feel like I let my guys down."

A COVID-19 outbreak in Baltimore forced the NFL to push the game back three times: first from Thanksgiving to Sunday, then from Sunday to Tuesday, and eventually from Tuesday to Wednesday. The teams kicked off in the afternoon to not interfere with NBC's annual Christmas special at Rockefeller Center.

Good idea. The fewer eyeballs on this one the better.

While NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell called it "a great game," the product on the field suggested otherwise.

The Ravens couldn't pass. Pittsburgh's receivers couldn't catch. And a contest that looked like a mismatch — the Steelers went off as 10 ½-point favorites, a rarity in a rivalry that is one of the NFL's best.

Goodell: NFL committed to finishing regular season

Associated Press

NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell said Wednesday the league remains committed to finishing the regular season as scheduled.

Goodell also said on a conference call that while the NFL is considering a bubble format for the playoffs, it wouldn't necessarily resemble what the NHL and NBA used successfully in completing their seasons.

"It will take partnership and discipline to complete this season. I'm confident we'll be able to do it," Goodell said, referring the NFL Players Association, the clubs and the players.

Added Dawn Aponte, the league's chief football administrative officer: "In terms of the guidelines we have used, our guiding principle is medical and we are trying to ensure we are playing all games safely. Pro-

viding we can do so within 17 weeks, that is what our objective is and will continue to be."

Goodell and Dr. Allen Sills, the NFL's chief medical officer, noted that a bubble concept can have many iterations depending on what is needed.

"We don't see the bubble as most refer to it in one location," Goodell said. "We feel strongly that our protocols are working. We're willing to adjust and adapt those protocols, take additional steps. But I don't see us doing the bubble in the sense that the media focuses on it."

Sills pointed to the need "to recognize whenever we think about structuring something for the teams, look at the risks and benefits. There is no plan that will be completely risk-free. We have to make what we

think is the best and safest decision.

"All options remain on the table and will be driven by what the data show us. We have adjusted our protocols nearly every week."

Sills also stressed that the NFL won't be seeking any preferential treatment when vaccines become readily available.

He emphasized that vaccines must first go to the front-line health workers.

For week 12, the NFL was forced to reschedule the Baltimore at Pittsburgh game from Thanksgiving night to Sunday, then Tuesday and finally Wednesday because of a COVID-19 outbreak among the Ravens.

Also, the Broncos played their regularly scheduled game with the Saints on Sunday despite having no experienced quarterbacks due to violations of the league's coronavirus protocols.

59 MLB players let go by teams

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Kyle Schwarber and Albert Almora Jr. were cut loose by the Chicago Cubs after helping the team win its first World Series title in more than a century, among 59 players who became free agents as part of the fallout from the coronavirus pandemic when their teams declined to offer them 2021 contracts by Wednesday night's deadline.

Cincinnati reliever Archie Bradley, Atlanta outfielder Adam Duvall, Colorado outfielder David Dahl and Minnesota outfielder Eddie Rosario also were let go by their clubs, who did not want to allow those players to become eligible for salary arbitration in February, which would have been their right had they been tendered contracts.

Schwarber earned \$2,596,296 in prorated pay from his \$7.01 million salary last season but hit .188 with 11 homers in 59 games, down from 38 homers, 92 RBIs and a .250 batting average in 155 games in 2019. Almora batted .167 in 28 games last season and earned \$1,667,667 prorated from \$4.5 million, down from a .236 average, 12 homers and 32 RBIs in 2019.

Schwarber returned from a serious knee injury and hit .412 with two RBIs in the 2016 World Series as the Cubs won their first championship since 1908. He served as the designated hitter for games in Cleveland.

Almora made a key play in Game 7, running for Schwarber in the 10th inning, advancing on Kris Bryant's fly ball and scor-

ing the go-ahead run on Ben Zobrist's double in an 8-7 victory.

Just 137 players remained eligible to exchange salary arbitration numbers with their teams on Jan. 15, down from 155 on the eve of the deadline last January.

While the total number of players let go at the deadline was up only a bit from 56 last year, more high-quality players were set free by teams, many trying to cut expenses after a regular season that included a sharp revenue drop because no fans were allowed in stadiums due to health conditions.

Milwaukee was on the verge of cutting hard-throwing reliever Corey Knebel but instead traded the right-hander to the World Series champion Los Angeles Dodgers for a player to be named or cash just ahead of the deadline. Knebel was an All-Star in 2017 with 39 saves and 126 strikeouts in 76 innings but missed 2019 following Tommy John surgery and struck out 15 in 13 ½ innings in the pandemic-shortened season as his average fastball velocity dropped 3 mph to just under 95 mph.

Fifty-nine players agreed to one-year contracts ahead of the deadline, many of them facing a threat of being cut.

Minnesota reached deals with five players, including pitcher José Berríos (\$500,000 signing bonus plus \$5.6 million salary) and center fielder Byron Buxton (\$5,125,000).

Kansas City agreed with designated hitter Jorge Soler (\$8.05 million), first base-

man Hunter Dozier (\$2.72 million), right-handers Jesse Hahn (\$1.75 million) and Jakob Junis (\$1.7 million), and outfielder Franchy Cordero (\$800,000).

The New York Mets agreed to a \$5.2 million, one-year deal with left-hander Steven Matz and finalized their \$15.5 million, two-year contract with free-agent reliever Trevor May, a deal that had been pending a physical. The Mets allowed pitchers Chasen Shreve, Nick Tropeano, Paul Sewald and Ariel Jurado to go free; Tropeano was claimed off waivers from Pittsburgh in October, before owner Steve Cohen bought the team from the Wilpon and Katz families.

First baseman Matt Olson and Oakland agreed to a \$5 million, one-year contract, and first baseman Jesús Aguilar and Miami agreed to a \$4.35 million, one-year deal.

Boston agreed with pitcher Matt Barnes (\$4.5 million) and catcher Kevin Plawecki (\$1.6 million). Philadelphia agreed with pitchers Hector Neris (\$5 million, down from the \$7,111,111 option the Phillies declined in October) and Zach Elfin (\$4.45 million).

Atlanta reached agreements with right-hander Luke Jackson (\$1.9 million), infielder Johan Camargo (\$1.36 million) and left-hander Grant Dayton (\$900,000). and Milwaukee struck deals with catcher Omar Narváez (\$2.5 million) and shortstop Orlando Arcia (\$2 million).

The New York Yankees and right-hander Luis Cessa agreed at \$1 million.

Michigan AD responds; BYU will take Liberty's place

Associated Press

ANN ARBOR, Mich. — Michigan athletic director Warde Manuel strongly rebuked any notion that the Wolverines would try to avoid facing rival Ohio State in the regular-season finale, calling the notion “ridiculous” and infuriating in a scathing statement Wednesday.

Manuel spoke hours after Michigan's game against Maryland this weekend was canceled because of an outbreak of COVID-19 in the Wolverines' program. The outbreak could also threaten Michigan's annual rivalry game against Ohio State on Dec. 12 — and the Buckeyes' chances to play for a Big Ten title.

Ohio State had to cancel its game last week at Illinois because of a spike in COVID-19 cases in its program. It was the sec-

ond game the Buckeyes (4-0) have lost from their regular-season schedule. One more would leave them unable to reach a conference-mandated minimum to be eligible for the Big Ten championship game.

Earlier this week, ESPN analyst and former Ohio State quarterback Kirk Herbstreit apologized after saying he thought the Wolverines would wave a “white flag” and potentially avoid facing the Buckeyes, who would be heavily favored in their matchup.

In a video released by Michigan, Manuel fired back, although he didn't mention Herbstreit by name.

Elsewhere, No. 8 BYU will play at No. 14 Coastal Carolina on Saturday after the Chanticleers' original opponent, No. 25 Liberty, was hit with COVID-19 issues.

The Flames said Thursday they have

paused all team activities and will not play another regular-season game, but intends to prepare for a bowl game.

The Cougars (9-0) have been looking to add another game to improve their case for a major bowl bid. Meanwhile, Coastal Carolina (9-0) has ESPN's “College GameDay” coming to Conway, S.C.

BYU at Coastal Carolina will start at 5:30 p.m. EST and air on ESPNU.

“It's good to have a partner like ESPN that can help put together such a meaningful game at this point in the season,” Cougars athletic director Tom Holmoe said in a statement.

Discussions between BYU and Coastal Carolina began earlier in the week when it became apparent that Liberty might not be able to play because of COVID-19 cases.