

Trump vetoes NDAA, setting up override votes

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump on Wednesday issued his promised veto of the defense spending and policy bill that was passed easily by Senate and House lawmakers earlier this month, setting up votes to override Trump's attempt to kill the legislation.

Trump signed the veto of the fiscal year 2021 National Defense Authorization Act on Wednesday, his last day to do so, after spending months warning he would sink the bill without the changes that lawmakers declined to make before passing it. Trump cited measures in the \$740.5 billion bill limiting his ability to withdraw troops from Afghanistan and Germany, beginning a process to rename bases honoring Confederate Civil War generals and for its lack of language killing liability protections for social media companies.

Trump cited those and other issues that he has with the bill in a message to the House an-

nouncing he would not support the legislation, calling it "a 'gift' to China and Russia" without explaining how it would benefit either.

"For all of these reasons, I cannot support this bill," Trump said in the announcement. "My administration has taken strong actions to help keep our nation safe and support our service members. I will not approve this bill, which would put the interests of the Washington, D.C., establishment over those of the American people."

The House and Senate now must vote again on the bill. If two-thirds of members in both chambers approve the override, the NDAA will become law without the president's approval. Top lawmakers in the House and Senate indicated this week that the House would take up the measure on Dec. 28 and the Senate would vote the following day if the lower chamber approved the override.

Both chambers passed the bill with far more than the two-thirds approval needed to override a veto. The NDAA passed 84-13 in

the Senate and 335-78 in the House. It was not immediately clear, however, how many lawmakers would change their votes following Trump's rejection of the bill.

Some Trump allies who supported passage of the bill have since pledged not to override the president's veto, including the House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif. McCarthy said last week that he expected other Republican House members would "stand with the president" on his decision to nix the NDAA.

In a statement Wednesday, Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Jim Inhofe, R-Okla., wrote that the bill was "absolutely vital to our national security and our troops."

"Our men and women who volunteer to wear the uniform shouldn't be denied what they need — ever," Inhofe, a staunch Trump ally, said in the statement issued shortly after the veto was announced. "I hope all of my colleagues in Congress will join me in making sure our troops have the resources and equipment they need to defend this nation."

Last US troops in Afghanistan likely special operations forces

By CAITLIN M. KENNEY
Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — Special operations forces were the first deployed in the war in Afghanistan nearly 20 years ago and will likely be the last troops to leave the country, acting Defense Secretary Christopher Miller said after visiting U.S. forces and American military leadership in Afghanistan on Tuesday.

Miller traveled to Camp Morehead located south of Kabul, where U.S. special operations forces train Afghan commandos, to hear from troops about the war from the ground.

"I went there on purpose because I'm going to get the real deal from these guys. And their smart-ass comments and their insights led me to the conclusion we're in a good place," Miller said, without going into detail.

During his visit to Afghanistan ahead of the holidays, Miller met with Army Gen. Scott Miller, the commander of U.S. and coalition forces there, and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani to discuss the U.S. commitment to that country's security and the ongoing

withdrawal of roughly 2,500 U.S. troops by Jan. 15.

Miller said he had talked to Gen. Miller "extensively" about the work special operations troops will conduct in the next couple of months as all U.S. forces are expected to leave the country by May 2021. They will likely be the last U.S. forces in the country to continue counterterrorism operations against al-Qaida and support the Afghan security forces, he said.

Miller, a former soldier of the 5th Special Forces Group and among the first soldiers in Afghanistan in 2001, said he "always felt we made a huge strategic error by expanding the war" beyond special operations forces and then making them, including him, go to Iraq for the start of that war.

"I thought special operations and irregular warfare capability should have stayed in Afghanistan. [For] Iraq, the decision was made to do that. It should have been big Army, big Air Force ... and I think we probably would have had a little different outcome in Afghanistan if we would have done — maintained what we were doing then and are doing now,"

Miller said to reporters on the trip with him.

With the war in Afghanistan winding down for the United States, Miller said the take-away for the military is about strategy.

"I think we gave it our all, we sure did. I think there's some cautionary strategic lessons that I don't know whether the military will learn them or not," he said without specifying what those lessons are.

As for the Afghan forces, Miller said he heard during the trip that "the Afghan security forces are a lot more capable than frankly what I came in thinking they were." He added the U.S. can still inflict damage on the Taliban, if necessary.

During a luncheon at Hamid Karzai International Airport before his meetings with U.S. and Afghan leaders, Miller told U.S. troops and civilians about the importance of their work for the drawdown.

"We're supposed to be out by May 2021, y'all. That's the agreement, right? This mission is really the one that's going to get us to a place where we can depart with leaving behind a security capability that can survive whatever comes next," he said.

1st female commander set for USS Lincoln

The San Diego Union-Tribune

SAN DIEGO — Navy Capt. Amy Bauernschmidt, who was selected earlier in December to be the first woman to command an aircraft carrier, has been assigned command of the USS Abraham Lincoln, the Navy announced Wednesday.

Bauernschmidt served as the San Diego-based Lincoln's executive officer — another first for a woman — from 2016 to 2019. After leaving the Lincoln, Bauernschmidt served as the commanding officer of the amphibious transport dock USS San Diego, a command she left in October.

"I am incredibly honored and humbled to be selected," Bauernschmidt said in a statement. "I love leading sailors and I

take that responsibility extremely seriously."

Bauernschmidt graduated from the Naval Academy in 1994. Women from that class, the Navy said, were the first to serve on combatant ships and aircraft.

She trained as a helicopter pilot and spent much of her early flying career with helicopter squadrons at Naval Air Station North Island in San Diego.

She is slated to take command of the ship this coming summer, the Navy said.

Bauernschmidt was commissioned about two months after the first women ever to serve aboard combat ships received their orders, according to her Navy biography. Congress lifted the ban on

women serving in such roles in 1993.

"That law absolutely changed my life," Bauernschmidt told CBS News in 2018. "We were the first class that graduated knowing and feeling honored with the privilege to be able to go serve along the rest of our comrades in combat."

A native of Milwaukee, she became a naval aviator in 1996 and was deployed in the Northern Arabian Gulf with Helicopter Anti-Submarine Squadron Light 45 aboard the destroyer USS John Young, according to her biography. She later served as an instructor pilot, department head and executive officer of several helicopter squadrons. She has more than 3,000 flight hours.

Next-generation nuclear sub facing cost overruns, delays

Bloomberg

The U.S. Navy's plan to deliver the first vessel in its \$128 billion next-generation submarine program on time is at risk by a dependence on inexperienced contractors with spotty quality control track records, according to a congressional watchdog.

The Government Accountability Office, in a restricted Nov. 6 report to the Pentagon and congressional defense committees, said the design contract for the first vessel in the Columbia-class sub fleet being built by General Dynamics could have a cost overrun of as much as 14%, or \$384 million.

The initial vessel in the new class of nuclear-missile-carrying subs, the Navy's highest-priority program, is due for delivery in 2027. The Navy wants the first submarine to launch on patrol in 2030.

Yet that timeline "hinges on timely and quality materials from" an "atrophied supplier base" as General Dynamics and its top subcontractor, Huntington Ingalls Industries, face "risk of delays from critical suppliers that are not yet ready to support construction," according to the 73-page report obtained by Bloomberg News and marked "For Official Use Only."

The GAO report outlines in detail the myriad challenges facing contractors and the Navy in the design and construction of a 12-vessel program that advocates say is the most survivable leg of the U.S. nuclear triad, comprising land, air and sea-based war-

heads.

As an example, the report says that General Dynamics "continues to identify problems with non-destructive testing and welding across the supplier base, including suppliers responsible for piping, valves and large mechanical equipment."

More broadly, the report signals the difficulties the Navy will face in trying to carry out the Trump administration's vision for a 355-to-500 vessel fleet by 2045, up from 297 today.

Those difficulties will be one of the first defense-procurement challenges confronting the Biden administration when it takes office next month amid a U.S. economy hobbled by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Columbia's five-year plan envisions \$30 billion being spent on the program through 2026, increasing from \$4.7 billion planned for next year to \$8.2 billion in 2026.

But first, several quality-control issues have to be addressed.

As the program enters formal construction and lead contractor General Dynamics prepares to award new subcontracts, "many suppliers have readiness and quality problems," according to the GAO report. "Of their top 25 suppliers, the shipbuilders assessed 18 as not yet ready to support construction demand, not meeting quality expectations or both."

Nevertheless, "the shipbuilders plan to spend \$4.2 billion on materials from these 18

suppliers out of an estimated \$5.5 billion" projected for all 25 firms. They will supply "complex machinery, raw materials and electrical components, among other things," GAO said.

Many of those contracts are sole-source for specific parts, GAO said.

Both General Dynamics and Huntington face the supply and contractor issues laid out in the report, in part, because they are simultaneously building Virginia-class attack submarines "at a schedule and pace unmatched since" the Cold War ended, the GAO said.

The Columbia class is designed to be the nation's newest nuclear patrol submarine for deterrence efforts; the Virginia class is designed to attack land and sea targets and gather intelligence.

General Dynamics spokeswoman Elizabeth Power said the GAO's conclusions don't reflect current progress and that "the vast majority of our critical suppliers are assessed as ready to support construction demand and to meet quality expectations."

According to shipbuilder and Navy documents, the majority of skilled workers at the three primary submarine shipyards have less than five years of experience and the majority of supervisors have less than five years of experience. About 15% of the supervisors at General Dynamics' Groton, Conn., facility have five to nine years of experience. That figure drops to about 5% at Quonset Point, R.I., according to the GAO.

Latest Trump pardons benefit his allies

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump pardoned more than two dozen people, including former campaign chairman Paul Manafort and Charles Kushner, the father of his son-in-law, in the latest wave of clemency to benefit longtime associates and supporters.

The actions, in Trump's waning time at the White House, bring to nearly 50 the number of people whom the president has granted clemency in the last week. The list from the last two days includes not only multiple people convicted in the investigation into the Trump campaign's ties to Russia, but also allies from Congress and other felons whose causes were championed by friends.

Pardons are common in the final stretch

of a president's tenure, the recipients largely dependent on the individual whims of the nation's chief executive. Trump throughout his administration has shucked aside the conventions of the Obama administration, when pardons were largely reserved for drug offenders not known to the general public, and instead bestowed clemency on high-profile contacts and associates who were key figures in an investigation that directly concerned him.

Even members of the president's own party raised eyebrows, with Republican Sen. Ben Sasse of Nebraska issuing a brief statement that said: "This is rotten to the core."

The pardons Wednesday of Manafort and Roger Stone, who months earlier had his sentence commuted by Trump, were particularly notable, underscoring the presi-

dent's desire to chip away at the results and legacy of special counsel Robert Mueller's Russia investigation. He has now pardoned five people convicted in that investigation, four of them associates like former national security adviser Michael Flynn and campaign adviser George Papadopoulos, both of whom pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI.

"The pardons from this President are what you would expect to get if you gave the pardon power to a mob boss," tweeted Andrew Weissmann, a Mueller team member who helped prosecute Manafort.

Manafort, who led Trump's campaign during a pivotal period in 2016 before being ousted over his ties to Ukraine, was among the first people charged as part of Mueller's investigation into ties between the Trump campaign and Russia.

GOP blocks \$2K checks despite Trump's demand

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — House Republicans shot down a Democratic bid on Thursday to pass President Donald Trump's longshot, end-of-session demand for \$2,000 direct payments to most Americans as he ponders whether to sign a long-overdue COVID-19 relief bill.

The clash came as the Democratic-controlled chamber convened for a pro forma session scheduled in anticipation of a smooth Washington landing for the massive, year-end legislative package, which folds together a \$1.4 trillion government-wide spending with the hard-fought COVID-19 package and dozens of unrelated but

bipartisan bills.

Instead, Thursday's unusual 12-minute House session morphed into unconvincing theater in response to Trump's veto musings about the package, which was negotiated by Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin on Trump's behalf. House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, the No. 2 House Democrat, sought the unanimous approval of all House members to pass the bill, but GOP leader Kevin McCarthy, who was not present in the nearly-empty chamber, denied his approval and the effort fizzled.

If Trump were to follow through on his implied veto threat, delivered via video clip on Tuesday, the government would likely

experience a brief, partial shutdown starting on Dec. 29. It would also delay delivery of the \$600 direct payments that the bill does contain.

The optics appear terrible for Republicans, who had lobbed praise at the hard-fought COVID-19 relief package, which passed on Monday by sweeping votes after the White House assured GOP leaders that Trump supported the bill.

The path forward, including efforts to avert a government shutdown or perhaps even pass a last-ditch extension of soon-to-expire jobless checks, remained unclear. Any shutdown would probably be brief, but nothing is certain.

Democrats face a turnout test in Ga. Senate runoffs

Associated Press

ATLANTA — In the first week of early voting for Georgia's Senate runoff election, Cassie Yoder parked at a polling location in Cobb County and loaded miniature hand sanitizer bottles, knitted hats, hand warmers and face masks into a cart.

Her goal: to help voters stay in line in frigid temperatures and cast their ballots in a pair of high-stakes runoff contests that will determine which political party controls the Senate next year. The runoffs will also test whether Democrats can again pull together the diverse coalition that propelled President-elect Joe Biden to victory in Georgia in

November and cemented the state's status as a political battleground.

"We've never had an election happen like this in December," said Yoder, the Georgia state captain for the Frontline, a nonpartisan electoral justice project of the Movement for Black Lives and other partner organizations.

For Democrats to win control of the Senate, Georgia's Black communities, as well as the state's smaller Hispanic and Asian communities, likely need to vote in the Jan. 5 runoff election by history-making margins. There is hope that the candidacy of the Rev. Raphael Warnock, the Black senior pastor of

the church where Martin Luther King Jr. once preached, might help spur Black votes for both him and fellow Democratic candidate Jon Ossoff over the Republican incumbents, Kelly Loeffler and David Perdue.

An Associated Press VoteCast survey of Georgia voters in November found that 22% of white voters chose Warnock and 28% chose Ossoff, compared to the 90% of Black voters who chose Ossoff and 73% who chose Warnock. Democrats also have an opportunity to capture the 15% of Black voters who chose Matt Lieberman, another Democratic candidate who competed against Warnock in last month's race.

Calif. is first state to top 2M virus cases

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — California's Christmas Eve was marked by pleas to stay home for the holidays and a grim milestone as it became the first state to top 2 million confirmed cases of the coronavirus.

Johns Hopkins University reported Thursday that the state reached the mark, barely six weeks since hitting 1 million cases.

California's infection rate — in terms of number of cases per 100,000 people — is lower than the U.S. average, but its 40 million residents means it outpaces other states in sheer numbers. More than 23,000 Californians have died since the pandemic began.

Pleas to avoid social gatherings for the holidays rang with special desperation in Southern California. Los Angeles County is leading the surge, accounting for one-third of the COVID-19 cases in the state and nearly 40% of deaths.

Washington

OLYMPIA — Washington Gov. Jay Inslee has again extended the state's eviction moratorium, this time through the end of March.

Inslee said in a news release on Wednesday that the moratorium has been critical for many people as they cope with the financial impacts of the coronavirus pandemic.

The moratorium has been in place since March and extended several times. It was scheduled to expire next week.

It bans, with limited exceptions, residential evictions and late fees on unpaid rent. It also requires landlords to offer residents a repayment plan on unpaid rent. Inslee said next week that his office will provide additional details about the latest extension.

Oregon

SALEM — Gov. Kate Brown has set a target date of Feb. 15 for when more Oregon students, especially elementary level, will return to in-person learning.

The governor also announced Wednesday that beginning Jan. 1, the current state-wide mandatory metrics for schools to reopen to students will be advisory and that "decisions to resume in-person instruction must be made locally, district by district, school by school."

In an attempt to meet the target date the governor has directed the Oregon Department of Education and the Oregon Health Authority to implement several new policy initiatives, which includes on-site rapid testing and prioritizing teachers and school

staff in the state's next round of COVID-19 vaccinations.

Louisiana

BATON ROUGE — Louisiana's newest member of Congress is in intensive care with COVID-19.

Rep. Luke Letlow, 41, is receiving treatment at Ochsner LSU Health in Shreveport, according to his website and a post on his Twitter account. He had been treated previously at St. Francis Medical Center in Monroe, the post noted.

Bautsch didn't elaborate on Letlow's condition beyond the statement, news outlets reported.

Letlow is receiving remdesivir, an antiviral drug, said LSU Health Sciences Center Chancellor G.E. Ghali.

Kansas

TOPEKA — Democratic Gov. Laura Kelly said Wednesday that Kansas should stop giving local officials the final say over the state's response to the coronavirus pandemic because experience has shown "a patchwork approach" does not work.

Kelly made the comments during an Associated Press interview a day after she and her top health administrator argued that Kansas is now controlling the spread of COVID-19 despite its high case numbers. They argued that the state is seeing the benefits of a "unified" state strategy to boost testing and an increased willingness by the state's 105 counties to require people to wear masks, which she has pushed for months.

The governor also said she would like legislators to rewrite a law that allows people exposed to COVID-19 to avoid providing information that would allow health officials to trace their close contacts. The law was enacted to protect people's privacy, but health officials said it hinders disease tracking.

Alabama

MONTGOMERY — A person who received the Pfizer vaccine for COVID-19 had a severe allergic reaction several minutes later but appears to be recovering, the Alabama Department of Public Health said Wednesday.

The person, who wasn't identified in a statement by the agency, had a history of such reactions, but decided to get the COVID-19 vaccine anyway. The patient was immediately treated at Decatur Morgan Hospital, where the vaccine was administered on Tuesday, and the reaction was reported to the manufacturer.

Nationally, 10 people have been reported to have a severe reaction to the vaccine, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

More than 15,200 coronavirus vaccine doses have been given in the state, where more than 4,500 people have died from COVID-19, the illness caused by the coronavirus, and more than 334,000 have contracted the virus.

Michigan

LANSING — Michigan's rate of new COVID-19 cases has been dropping for more than 29 days, a state scientist reported Wednesday.

"It will be important during this holiday season, as well, and New Year's Eve, to ensure we're maintaining that social distancing. That will be very important," said Sarah Lyon-Callo, head of the epidemiology bureau.

The state last week reported its lowest weekly new case total, 28,072, since the end of October. The state reported a record total, 50,892, during Nov. 15-21, The Detroit News reported.

Gov. Gretchen Whitmer responded with a ban on indoor restaurant dining, in-person high school classes and other business restrictions. The dining ban remains in place through Jan. 15.

Florida

MIAMI — It might not be as cool as the endoskeleton from "The Terminator" or as amiable as Rosie from "The Jetsons," but a Florida airport is getting its own robot designed to kill COVID-19 and other pathogens.

The machine began this month patrolling Key West International Airport after hours, emitting high-intensity ultraviolet light that kills bacteria and viruses in the air and on surfaces. It's not yet clear whether the nightly disinfections will have a substantial effect against the thousands of travelers bringing new germs through the airport every day.

Richard Strickland, director of airports for Monroe County, said the \$100,000 robot's acquisition was motivated by a desire to augment the airport's other cleanliness and passenger protection practices in the coronavirus era.

"Passengers should know that, as they travel to Key West International Airport and utilize the facilities here, that we've made every effort possible against COVID to protect passengers' safety," Strickland said.

Pair exits flight via slide before plane takes off

NY NEW YORK — A Delta flight out of New York City was halted after a man and a woman carrying a service dog exited the aircraft using an emergency slide, an airline spokesman said.

The incident occurred as the jet was leaving from La Guardia airport to Atlanta, said the spokesman, Morgan Durrant.

Witnesses reported that the man appeared agitated before standing up and refusing a flight attendant's orders to sit down. He opened the cabin door and used a slide leading down to the runway, quickly followed by the woman with the dog.

The aircraft was forced to return to the gate where the remaining customers deplaned and were later put on alternate flights.

'Giving Wall' closes after donations stolen

IN NEWBURGH — A southern Indiana woman who created a donation spot where people could leave clothes, toys and other items for those in need closed it down after a "Grinch" swiped all of the donations in a single night.

Newburgh resident Janet Richard started "The Giving Wall" on a retaining wall near her home where people were encouraged to leave donations so that others in need could take what they needed on the honor system.

Richard said someone visited the wall twice and took off with everything that had been left there by others, the Evansville Courier & Press reported.

She said she's disappointed and has decided to end the donation spot for this year.

Unattended stove starts fire at fire station

VA CHESTERFIELD — Firefighters at a Virginia fire station apparently forgot one of their universal rules when they rushed to respond to a medical emergency.

A crew from the Courthouse Road Fire Station in Chesterfield County dashed off, forgetting that there was food cooking on the stove, the Richmond Times-Dispatch reported.

An automatic fire suppression system extinguished the fire before it spread, a chemical agent doused the flames on top of the stove and a water sprinkler head activated just outside the area of the stove, Deputy Fire Marshal Joe Harvey said. The crew returned to the fire station 30 minutes later when they learned of the fire.

Man gets long prison sentence after fifth DUI

NE OMAHA — An Omaha man was sentenced to 15 to 20 years in prison after his fifth drunken driving conviction.

The Omaha World-Herald reported that Wilbur L. Jackson, 44, also was found guilty of leaving the scene of an accident, second-offense reckless driving and other charges.

A Cass County deputy learned that a Dodge Charger had struck a Toyota near Elmwood on Feb. 3. The collision caused the Toyota, driven by a 68-year-old woman, to drive into a cornfield.

Jackson's car was spotted a short time later with front-end damage, and he was arrested.

Jackson must serve at least 7½ years in prison before being eligible for parole, and his driv-

er's license was revoked for 15 years.

Whale watching rules tightened for 2021

WA MOUNT VERNON — New regulations for whale watching in Washington waters will take effect in 2021 in an effort to protect endangered orcas, according to the state Fish and Wildlife Commission.

According to the rules approved by the commission, from July through September, commercial whale watching companies can view orcas during two, two-hour periods daily, The Skagit Valley Herald reported. The rules restrict the number of commercial vessels to three within a half-mile of the whales and include penalties for violations.

City votes to support removal of monument

GA DECATUR — Commissioners in an Atlanta-area city voted in favor of a resolution that supports removing a cannon from a city square that honors the Creek War of 1836, which saw the removal of Native Americans from the South.

The vote came after high school students in Decatur called for the removal of the monument near the old DeKalb County courthouse, saying it was a symbol of oppression. They told city commissioners the cannon should be removed because it has ties to the forced removal of Native Americans.

Since the monument is located on DeKalb County's property, county officials will ultimately get to decide if it is removed, The Atlanta-Journal Constitution reported.

Police: Man shooting at another killed by 3rd man

PA ERIE — A man firing shots at a gun range in northwest Pennsylvania began firing at another man and was then shot to death by a third man, state police said.

Troopers in Erie County were called to the State Gamelands gun range in Greene Township, police said.

Investigators said their initial investigation indicates that Robert Eppley, 26, of North East, was shooting downrange but then turned and started firing at a 28-year-old Erie man. Police said a 67-year-old Erie man allegedly saw what was happening and shot Eppley multiple times. Eppley died at the scene and the 28-year-old victim was being treated for multiple gunshot wounds at an Erie hospital, police said.

Police said the older man was in custody.

Flushed masks among items clogging sewers

SC GREER — Officials in a South Carolina city said masks worn during the pandemic are among many items being flushed into its sewer system and creating clogs.

The Greer Commission of Public Works is asking the public to avoid flushing things such as masks, wipes, rags and cooking grease.

Officials expect the problem to get worse around the holidays, The Greenville News reported.

The utility system is urging customers to only flush toilet paper and avoid pouring cooking grease down drains.

— From The Associated Press

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Chiefs keep winning one-score games

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — The Kansas City Chiefs have built big leads and blown most of the advantage. They've rallied from early deficits to pull away in the fourth quarter. They've played nip-and-tuck showdowns in which neither team had an opportunity to rest easy.

The one constant the past six games: They always end up winning.

The latest close shave for the defending Super Bowl champions came on Sunday, when the Chiefs built a 14-0 lead in New Orleans; gave all of it away and trailed 15-14 in the third quarter; rallied to lead 32-22 late in the fourth; and then had to grind out a couple of first downs to preserve a 32-29 victory over the Saints.

In doing so, they became the first team in NFL history to win six straight games by a single score.

"I didn't know that stat," Kansas City coach Andy Reid said. "You know, I just see so many teams, and we all see it, teams that are supposed to win don't win, and it happens every week. And the competition is so great

in this league that if you're off by a hiccup, man, it's a problem. You're going to lose."

Yet the Chiefs don't lose. Those six victories — part of a nine-game winning streak — have come largely against teams that are in the playoff mix or only recently had their hopes dashed. It began with a 33-31 win over the Panthers; included back-to-back road wins over the Raiders and Buccaneers; a win over the Broncos at home; and two more road wins over the Dolphins and Saints, both of whom are barreling toward decent playoff seeds with two games left in the regular season.

This is a relatively new phenomena, too. Kansas City went 12-4 last season but was just 5-4 in games decided by one score, though it did rally from considerable deficits in all three playoff games on its way to winning the title.

Perhaps that has paid off this season: The Chiefs have been through the pressure cooker and learned how to win.

"Our guys have battled through that and that's — I'm very proud of the guys for hav-

ing that mental toughness to do that," Reid said. "I appreciate that mental grit and mental toughness they've had to work through this."

The experience, particularly at the most important of positions, no doubt helps. The Chiefs have arguably the NFL's best quarterback in Patrick Mahomes and tight end in Travis Kelce. Elite wide receivers in Tyreek Hill and Sammy Watkins. Top pass rushers in Chris Jones and Frank Clark. One of the league's best ballhawks in safety Tyrann Mathieu.

All of them were integral parts of the Super Bowl run last season.

Just as important as experience and talent, though, may be mindset. Despite the pressure of chasing a second consecutive crown — in the midst of a pandemic, no less — Kansas City carries to the field each week a devil-may-care attitude. It becomes evident by watching the team for even a quarter of football that the players genuinely love playing the game, and what's more, they love playing the game for Reid, and they love playing it for each other.

"Coach Reid just goes out there and just lets us, like, be free-spirited and just play the game," Hill said.

Even when games get tight in the closing minutes.

"I've always felt it was a strength. You have to be able to do that to win games in this league," Mahomes said. "It looks cool and feels awesome to win by 20 or 30 points. Teams that find a way to win on offense, defense and special teams no matter what the score is are the teams that make a run every year."

Notes: Hill (hamstring), RB Clyde Edwards-Helaire (hip) and LBs Damien Wilson (ankle) and Anthony Hitchens (COVID-19 protocol) did not practice Wednesday. Hill appears likely to play against Atlanta, while Edwards-Helaire could be out until the playoffs. "We're taking Tyreek day by day. His hamstring kind of tightened up on him a little bit during the game (in New Orleans). I think he'll be fine," Reid said. "Clyde is a different story. We probably won't have Clyde this week, but he's working at it. He's ahead of schedule."

White, Memphis hold off late Florida Atlantic rally

Associated Press

MONTGOMERY, Ala. — Brady White already held several Memphis career records, but he left another mark in his finale.

White passed for 284 yards and three touchdowns to lead the Tigers to a 25-10 victory over Florida Atlantic on Wednesday night in the Montgomery Bowl, snapping a five-game bowl losing streak.

Memphis (8-3) built a big halftime lead, withstood a third-quarter rally and ended coach Ryan Silverfield's first season with a second straight win.

"They'll go down in history

for their fight and everything they did this season," Silverfield said, adding that his team ended up playing with 53 scholarship players.

Meanwhile, Willie Taggart's debut season with the Owls ended at 5-4 after the offense sputtered much of the way.

The game was created to replace the canceled Fenway Bowl. Cramton Bowl will also host the Camellia Bowl on Christmas Day. This one ended in a driving rain.

White, who was named the game's MVP, completed 22 of 34 passes with three short touchdowns while also throw-

ing an interception, having a big game even with a quiet night from star receiver Calvin Austin III.

New Orleans Bowl

Georgia Southern 38, Louisiana Tech 3: Quarterback Shai Werts had three touchdown runs and threw a 65-yard scoring pass to help the Eagles beat the Bulldogs.

Werts scored one of his touchdowns on a designed QB run that covered 37 yards. His two other rushing TDs came from a yard out.

Georgia Southern (8-5) came up with four interceptions — in-

cluding two near its own goal line in the first quarter. Safety Justin Birdsong intercepted two passes — the first against Louisiana Tech starter Aaron Allen and the second against reserve JD Head in the third quarter.

The Eagles came in averaging 262 yards rushing and finished with 322 against the Bulldogs.

Malik Murry broke off a 43-yard run on the opening drive to set up Werts' first short TD run. Gerald Green's 55-yard run in the fourth quarter highlighted his 108-yard, one-TD performance. Werts finished with 71 yards rushing.

Thunder-Rockets opener postponed

Associated Press

HOUSTON — The James Harden soap opera in Houston now comes with a canceled season opener — and a \$50,000 fine for the league's leading scorer.

The Rockets' opener against the Oklahoma City Thunder on Wednesday night was scrapped after coronavirus cases and Harden's violation of the NBA's COVID-19 protocols left Houston without the league-mandated eight players available to start a game.

It was a dispiriting blow to the NBA on just the second night of an uncertain season launching with the pandemic still raging.

The NBA announced the postponement in a release that said three Rockets players had returned tests that were either positive or inconclusive and that four other players were quarantined because of con-

tract tracing.

The release also said that Harden was unavailable for the game because of a violation of health and safety protocols after video of the disgruntled star surfaced on social media where he was without a mask at a crowded party in a private event space Monday night.

The league later announced the fine for Harden, saying the protocols prohibit attending indoor social gatherings of 15 or more people or entering bars, lounges, clubs or similar establishments.

Already a distraction to the team amid months of rumors that he wants to be traded, Harden's latest move potentially threatened the health and safety of his team and kept it from beginning its season.

The drama began when reports surfaced that Harden and

Russell Westbrook both wanted out of Houston. The Rockets dealt Westbrook to the Wizards earlier this month after just one disappointing season in exchange for John Wall and a future first-round pick.

That move did nothing to quell the reports that Harden still wanted to be traded, and the scrutiny only intensified when the 2018 MVP didn't report to camp on time. While the rest of the team was preparing for the season, Harden was photographed partying in Atlanta at a rapper's birthday party and at a nightclub in Las Vegas.

He finally arrived in Houston but missed the team's first two preseason games under new coach Stephen Silas while going through the league's COVID-19 testing protocol. Harden rejoined a team that looked quite a bit different than the one which

lost to the Lakers in the Western Conference semifinals last summer.

Houston has 16 players on its roster; with seven dealing with tests or quarantine and one hurt. That would have left eight eligible players, which is the league minimum to start a game. Harden's unavailability lowered the Rockets' total of available players to seven.

Houston's injury report released Wednesday morning said that Ben McLemore and rookie KJ Martin were not with the team and were self-isolating and that DeMarcus Cousins was questionable because of a sprained right ankle.

Harden, according to the protocols, may now be ordered into quarantine and could lose more than \$500,000 for each game missed because of protocol violations.

Tatum's three, Antetokounmpo's miss benefit Celtics

Associated Press

BOSTON — Jayson Tatum banked in a fallaway, go-ahead three-pointer in the final second, and Giannis Antetokounmpo missed the potential tying free throw with 0.4 seconds left, allowing the Boston Celtics to escape with a 122-121 victory over the Milwaukee Bucks on Wednesday night in the teams' season opener.

Tatum scored 30 points and Jaylen Brown had 33 for Boston, which entered the fourth quarter leading by 17 points. The Celtics trailed 120-119 when Tatum dribbled the clock down from 8.9 seconds before lofting a high-arching three over Antetokounmpo from the left side that kissed the glass on its way down.

The ensuing inbound pass was thrown at the rim and Antetokounmpo tried to tip it in, but he was fouled. The two-time reigning NBA MVP made the first foul shot, but bounced the

second off the front of the rim.

Suns 106, Mavericks 102: Devin Booker scored 22 points, Mikal Bridges added 18 and Phoenix won at home.

Chris Paul had eight points and five assists in his debut with the Suns. The 10-time All-Star was quiet for much of the game but made a few clutch plays in the final minutes.

Kings 124, Nuggets 122 (OT): Buddy Hield tipped in Harrison Barnes' miss at the buzzer, lifting Sacramento to a road win.

Nikola Jokic recorded a triple-double with 29 points, 15 rebounds and 14 assists, but he had a crucial offensive foul with 2.6 seconds left in regulation and lost the ball on the inbound with 6.5 seconds left in overtime when Barnes punched it loose.

Pelicans 113, Raptors 99: JJ Redick converted a four-point play with just over a minute remaining and finished with 23

points, Brandon Ingram had 24 points, and New Orleans overcame an 11-point deficit and beat Toronto in Tampa, Fla.

Jazz 120, Trail Blazers 100: Rudy Gobert had 20 points and 17 rebounds, leading Utah to a road win.

Magic 113, Heat 107: Evan Fournier gave Orlando the lead with a late three-pointer, converted a three-point play in the final minute and scored 25 points in a win over visiting Miami.

76ers 113, Wizards 107: Joel Embiid scored the go-ahead basket with 1:09 left and had 29 points and 14 rebounds to help host Philadelphia spoil Russell Westbrook's triple-double Washington debut.

Spurs 131, Grizzlies 119: DeMar DeRozan had 28 points and nine assists, Dejounte Murray added 21 points and visiting San Antonio overcame Memphis star Ja Morant's 44-point

game.

Cavaliers 121, Hornets 114: Collin Sexton scored 27 points, Darius Garland added 22 and Cleveland won its first home game in nearly 300 days, overcoming the hot shooting of Terry Rozier.

Hawks 124, Bulls 104: Trae Young scored 37 points and revamped Atlanta won, spoiling Billy Donovan's debut as Chicago's coach.

Timberwolves 111, Pistons 101: Malik Beasley scored 23 points and Karl-Anthony Towns had 22 points, 11 rebounds and seven assists, leading host Minnesota past Detroit.

Pacers 121, Knicks 107: Domantas Sabonis scored a career-high 32 points and Victor Oladipo added 16 of his 22 in the second half, leading host Indiana past New York.

NHL schedule: 868 games in 116 days

Associated Press

The Stanley Cup champion Tampa Bay Lightning will host the Chicago Blackhawks in one of five games to open the NHL's coronavirus pandemic-shortened 2021 season on Jan. 13.

The league released a first-of-its kind schedule Wednesday featuring four realigned divisions based on geography and limited to division play only. Each team will play 56 regular-season games, which will be squeezed into what's tentatively scheduled as a 116-day stretch ending on May 8.

It includes an NHL first: An all-Canadian North Division made up the nation's seven teams will play each other nine or 10 times. The three remaining eight-team divisions have all U.S. teams, which will face each division foe eight times.

Though the playoffs are set to open May 11, that date could be pushed back in the event the league is required to reschedule games amid the pandemic.

Though the schedule is set, much remains undetermined, including game

times. A much bigger question is whether the NHL receives approval from Canada's provincial and federal health officials to allow the nation's teams to play in their home cities.

The San Jose Sharks, meantime, will open training camp Dec. 31 in Scottsdale, Ariz., and their season with two games at the Coyotes. Like the NFL's San Francisco 49ers who are closing out their season at Arizona, the Sharks are temporarily without a home after Santa Clara County banned contact sports through at least Jan. 8.

The NHL took into account the possibility of the ban being extended by having the Sharks open with eight straight road games. Their home opener against Vegas isn't scheduled until Feb. 1.

There are numerous quirks in the schedule, which will feature at least one game a day over an 868-game season, and has teams playing mostly two-game sets against the same opponent in the same city to reduce travel:

■ The Sharks have three stretches in

which they will play the same opponent four consecutive times, twice at home and twice on the road.

■ Vancouver will play three-game home sets against Montreal, Ottawa and Calgary, and a three-game set at Toronto.

■ The Los Angeles Kings and Anaheim Ducks will face each other five consecutive times from April 20 to May 1.

"The back-to-backs are more like baseball," Washington Capitals general manager Brian MacLellan said. "You are going to do a lot of prep and then going to have a very good knowledge of where that team is after you play that first game."

Geography benefits the eight teams of the realigned East Division, made up of Boston, Buffalo, New Jersey, New York Islanders, New York Rangers, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and Washington.

The Islanders for example, will close the season playing nine of their final 11 games within the state of New York, with the exception of games at nearby New Jersey and Philadelphia.

TOP 25 MEN'S BASKETBALL ROUNDUP

No. 13 Creighton deals first defeat to No. 22 Xavier

Associated Press

OMAHA, Neb. — Antwann Jones and Denzel Mahoney scored 13 points each to lead No. 13 Creighton to a 66-61 win over 22nd-ranked Xavier on Wednesday, handling the Musketeers their first loss of the season.

The Bluejays (7-2, 3-1 Big East) used an 8-0 run to start the second half to open up a 44-34 lead before Xavier (8-1, 1-1) cut it to 64-61 with 10 seconds left on Paul Scruggs' three-pointer. Adam Kunkel then got a steal and had a chance to tie the game, but his three-pointer with a second left rimmed out.

Neither team shot well in the second half as the Musketeers were 2-for-16 from behind the arc and Creighton 3-for-13 in the final 20 minutes.

The difference was at the free-throw line, where the Bluejays made 11 of 14 down the stretch. Xavier leading scorer Zach Freeman was held to seven points on 3-for-9 shooting.

He fouled out with 2:38 remaining in the game. Nate Johnson led Xavier with 12 points.

No. 23 Ohio State 80, No. 11 Rutgers 68: Duane Washington Jr. scored 22 points and the host Buckeyes rallied from a 16-point second-half deficit to beat the Scarlet Knights.

E.J. Liddell had 21 points and Kyle Young added 17 points and 12 rebounds for Ohio State (7-1, 1-1 Big Ten), which trailed 48-32 with 15 minutes left in the game. The Buckeyes went on a 20-1 run late in the second half to seize control and hand Rutgers (6-1, 2-1) its first loss.

Ron Harper Jr. had 20 points, Montez Mathis scored 16 and Jacob Young added 12 for the Scarlet Knights.

No. 5 Villanova 85, Marquette 68: Collin Gillespie scored 22 points and sank six three-pointers as the No. 5 Wildcats routed the Golden Eagles on the road for their sixth consecutive victory.

Jeremiah Robinson-Earl and Justin Moore had 13 points each and Caleb Daniels added 10 to help Villanova (8-1, 3-0 Big East) overpower Marquette (5-5, 1-3), which lost its third straight. Gillespie shot 6-for-11 from three-point range.

The Golden Eagles were seeking to beat a top-10 team for the third time this season. Jamal Cain scored 15 to lead them. D.J. Carlton and Theo John added 10 points each.

No. 8 Tennessee 80, South Carolina Upstate 60: Victor Bailey scored 18 points and the host Vols struggled before beating the winless Spartans.

It wasn't until a 12-2 run midway through the second half that Tennessee (6-0) finally pulled away, Bailey had four points in that burst. Josiah-Jordan James added 11 points and eight rebounds. John Fulkerson scored 10. South Carolina Upstate (0-8) was led by Tommy Brunner with 18 points. Everette Hammond scored 13 points.

No. 18 Illinois 98, Penn State 81: Ayo Dosunmu scored 21 of his 30 points in the second half to lead the Illini to a road win.

Kofi Cockburn added 23 points and Andre Curbelo had 15 points and eight assists for Illinois (6-3, 2-1 Big Ten).

The Nittany Lions (3-3, 0-2) opened up a 19-4 lead over the first five minutes. The Illini used the remainder of the half to claw back, tying the game at 43 at halftime.