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Trump relents, signs \$900B stimulus bill

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump unexpectedly capitulated Sunday night and signed the stimulus bill into law, releasing \$900 billion in emergency relief funds into the economy and averting a Tuesday government shutdown.

White House officials did not explain why the president decided to suddenly back down and sign into law a bill he had held up for nearly a week and had referred to as a "disgrace" just days earlier.

Trump signed the bill while vacationing in Florida and on a weekend when he had allowed unemployment benefits for 14 million Americans to expire.

He had demanded changes to the stimulus and spending package for a week, suggesting that he would refuse to sign it until these demands were met. This continued defiance caused lawmakers from both major political parties to panic over the weekend, worried about the implications of a government shutdown during a pandemic. It was unclear what prompted him to change his mind late Sunday, but he was under tremendous pressure from Republicans to acquiesce.

In a statement he issued after signing the law, Trump released a long list of false claims and grievances. He said he would be sending a "redlined" version of the bill back

to Congress "insisting that those funds be removed from the bill."

Trump has less than a month remaining in his presidency, and lawmakers probably will ignore any such request.

In the same statement, he said, "much more money is coming, and I will never give up my fight for the American people!"

After Trump signed the bill into law, Democrats criticized him and said his decision to drag the process out for days was harmful to many Americans.

"The President's pointless delay in approving the relief legislation cost millions of Americans a week's worth of pandemic-related unemployment assistance that they desperately need," House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Richard Neal, D-Mass., said. "His stalling only intensified anxiety and hardship for workers and families who are collateral damage in his political games. Now, people will need to wait even longer for direct payments and other vital assistance to arrive."

The government was to shut down Tuesday if Trump had not acted. In addition to containing money to fund government operations, the spending package includes emergency relief money that finances a new round of stimulus checks, unemployment aid, and small-business assistance, among other things.

Before he signed the bill, Trump hinted Sunday evening that there had been a development. He tweeted that there was "Good news on Covid Relief Bill. Information to follow!"

Congress overwhelmingly passed the bipartisan bill last week, and Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin praised it, something congressional leaders in both parties interpreted as a sign that Trump was supportive. But the president released a video on Tuesday demanding changes. He said, among other things, that the bill should have authorized stimulus checks of \$2,000 per person instead of the \$600 payments. Trump also wanted spending cuts to be included in the package, a concern he had not raised until after Congress passed the bill.

In the end, none of his demands were met. In the statement issued late Sunday, Trump tried to strike a triumphant tone insisting that Congress would still work to achieve some of his goals, but lawmakers have signaled they have no plans to act.

Before the video was posted, Mnuchin had said the stimulus checks could be sent as soon as this week. The \$600 payments had been Mnuchin's idea to begin with. It's unclear whether the roughly weeklong delay would push back the issuance of the payments, or whether they could still go out this week.

Navy challenges Vietnam's Con Dao Islands claims

By CAITLIN DOORNBOS

Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — The USS John S. McCain conducted a freedom-of-navigation operation in the South China Sea on Thursday, the second such mission in a week, according to the Navy's 7th Fleet.

The guided-missile destroyer was sent to challenge Vietnam's "excessive maritime claims" in the Con Dao Islands, about 150 miles south of Ho Chi Minh City, the 7th Fleet said in a statement the same day.

The Con Dao archipelago is made up of 16 islands, most of which are uninhabited, according to Vietnam-guide.com. The main island, Con Son, is home to several beach resorts and fishing villages.

"The ship conducted normal operations within Vietnam's claimed territorial seas to challenge excessive maritime claims and preserve access and navigational freedoms consistent with international law," the 7th Fleet said in the statement.

Vietnam asserts that its territorial waters extend to the Con Daos, but a 1983 State Department report stated that at more than 50 nautical miles away from mainland Vietnam, the islands are not close enough to be considered a baseline for its territorial waters.

International law recognizes a nation's territorial waters extend up to 12 nautical miles from its coasts.

The operation was also meant to "preserve

access and navigational freedoms consistent with international law," according to the statement.

The McCain on Dec. 22 had steamed through the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, another freedom-of-navigation operation. Vietnam lays claim to some of the Spratlys, along with China, the Philippines, Taiwan, Malaysia and Brunei.

The mission Thursday was at least the eighth time this year that the Navy has sent a warship to challenge maritime claims in the South and East China seas.

Most targeted Chinese claims in the region, which Secretary of State Mike Pompeo formally rejected as "completely unlawful" in July.

Workers get vaccine on bases in Bavaria

By JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

Frontline medical workers at three Army bases in Bavaria became the first in the U.S. military community in Europe to be vaccinated against the coronavirus Monday, officials said.

Military and civilian health care providers and first responders who work at clinics on Ansbach, Grafenwoehr and Vilseck received a first dose of the Moderna vaccine, developed by a Massachusetts biotech firm and awarded emergency use authorization by the Food and Drug Administration on Dec. 18.

They will receive a second dose in 28 days, said Alain M. Polynice, a spokesman for U.S. Medical Department Activity Bava-

ria.

The Moderna vaccine was found in a 30,000-person trial to be 94% effective at preventing the disease caused by the coronavirus, and 100% effective at preventing severe illness caused by the virus, the company said in a statement in November.

“As we work through vaccinating all of our health care personnel and first responders, we will also begin to look at our highly deployable forces here in Europe and our high-risk populations,” Brig. Gen. Mark Thompson, Regional Health Command Europe commanding general, said in a statement.

“After that, we’ll be able to focus on our healthy service members, civilians, families, retirees not part of the high-risk pop-

ulation, etc,” he said.

U.S.-based military health care workers began being inoculated earlier this month with the vaccine developed by German company BioNTech and U.S. pharmaceutical giant Pfizer against COVID-19, which, according to a tally kept by Johns Hopkins University has claimed the lives of 1.77 million people worldwide, including 333,239 Americans. That vaccine received emergency use authorization from the FDA a week before the Moderna vaccine.

Only those who consent to receive the vaccine will get it, military officials said, while recommending that people are inoculated.

Germany and other countries in Europe have begun mass vaccination campaigns.

Coronavirus vaccinations are underway at US bases in Japan

Stars and Stripes

TOKYO — A yearlong wait began to evaporate Monday as volunteers at U.S. military bases across Japan bared their arms for the first wave of inoculations of the Moderna vaccine against the coronavirus.

Health care professionals, security forces and emergency responders were first in line, the top of a three-phase plan by the Defense Department to get the vaccine to its personnel.

Clinics at Yokota Air Base, in western Tokyo, and Kadena Air Base, on Okinawa, were two of the installations administering the vaccine approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration on Dec. 18 for emergency use.

Yokota, headquarters of U.S. Forces Japan, along with Kadena and four other U.S. bases in Japan with medical facilities received the vaccine over the weekend, along with U.S. Forces Korea where inoculations are scheduled Tuesday.

“It feels like a flu shot, to be quite honest,” said Col. Jay Veeder, commander of the 18th Medical Group at Kadena. “Definitely not the worst immunization I’ve ever gotten. I’ve gotten some pretty gnarly ones. It’s not too bad.”

Veeder took his shot to a round of

applause then waited 15 minutes for adverse reactions but experienced none.

The vaccine is one of two approved this month by the FDA to combat the virus, which was first reported a year ago in China and reached pandemic proportions within four months. Both vaccines require two shots separated by about a month. Subjects must volunteer for the jab because it’s an emergency measure.

Leaders rolled up their sleeves to set the example for those expected to follow in coming months, said Capt. Alexander Tran, 29, of Denver, chief of in-patient pharmacy services for the 374th Medical Group at Yokota.

Medical group commander Col. Iris Reedom and deputy commander Col. Dane Campbell were first in line at Yokota on Monday.

“We still want to make sure we are immunizing the first responders, the health care workers, public health personnel, to include our defenders,” Tran said. “But we are also showing that our leadership is on board and, hopefully, it’s a way to encourage our personnel.”

The Moderna vaccine in trials was 94% effective in preventing COVID-19, the respiratory disease caused by the coronavirus, according to the FDA.

Pacific islands work to offset food shortages

Associated Press

JAKARTA, Indonesia — Coronavirus infections have barely touched many of the remote islands of the Pacific, but the pandemic’s fallout has been enormous, disrupting the supply chain that brings crucial food imports and sending prices soaring as tourism wanes.

With a food crisis looming, many governments have begun community initiatives to help alleviate shortages: extending fishing seasons, expanding indigenous food gathering lessons and bolstering seed distribution programs that allow residents greater self-reliance.

The project provides residents with vegetable seeds, saplings and basic farming equipment to help them grow their own home gardens.

When the pandemic hit, nearly all the countries in the region closed their borders. Shipping supply chains — including fertilizer for farms and food — were disrupted, causing prices to rise. In Suva, Fiji, the cost of some fresh fruits and vegetables rose by up to 75% during the first weeks.

NATO warplanes scrambled over 400 times this year

By JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

NATO warplanes had to scramble more than 400 times across Europe in 2020, mostly to check Russian aircraft flying unannounced near allied air space, the U.S.-led alliance said Monday.

“In recent years, we have seen an increased level of Russian military air activity close to the Alliance’s borders,” NATO spokeswoman Oana Lungescu said in a statement.

About 90% of the scrambles were connected to Russian military aircraft, marking a slight increase from the previous year, NATO said.

A frequent complaint from NATO is that the Russian military often fly without transponders or flight plans, which makes them invisible to civilian air traffic controllers and poses a risk to civilian airliners.

NATO officials have said in the past that many of the intercepts consist of routine checks on aircraft flying to and from the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad, sandwiched between Poland and Lithuania on the Baltic coast.

Generally, intercepts occur without in-

cident as NATO planes take off to identify the approaching aircraft and escort it out of the area. In August, however, NATO accused a Russian fighter jet that the alliance said took off from Kaliningrad of a “significant violation” when it followed a U.S. B-52 bomber into Danish airspace.

Moscow denied the accusation, saying its fighter remained in international airspace.

In Europe, there are roughly 40 air surveillance radars and reporting hubs, and about 60 jets of various member states are ready to serve as a quick-response force, NATO said. Air operations centers at Ramstein Air Base, Germany, and in Spain monitor all air movements across Europe.

The alliance launched its air policing mission in the Baltics in 2004 and has since set up similar missions in the Balkans and Iceland. Talks are under way to expand the mission to include North Macedonia, the alliance’s newest member, the statement said.

“NATO fighter jets are on duty around the clock, ready to scramble in case of suspicious or unannounced flights near the airspace of our Allies,” Lungescu said. “Air policing is an important way in which NATO provides security for our members.”

Nashville bombing suspect ID’d; officials now focus on motive

Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — With federal officials having identified the man believed to be behind Nashville’s Christmas Day bombing, authorities now turn to the monumental task of piecing together the motive behind the explosion that severely damaged dozens of downtown buildings and injured three people.

While officials on Sunday named Anthony Quinn Warner, 63, as the man behind the mysterious explosion in which he was killed, the motive has remained elusive.

“These answers won’t come quickly and will still require a lot of our team’s efforts,” FBI Special Agent Doug Korneski said at a Sunday news conference. “Though we may be able to answer some these questions as our investigation continues, none of those answers will be

enough by those affected by this event.”

Officials have not provided insight into why Warner selected the particular location for the bombing, which damaged an AT&T building and continued to wreak havoc on cellphone service and police and hospital communications in several Southern states as the company worked to restore service.

Forensic analysts were reviewing evidence collected from the blast site to try to identify the components of the explosives as well as information from the U.S. Bomb Data Center for intelligence and investigative leads, according to a law enforcement official who said investigators were examining Warner’s digital footprint and financial history, as well as a recent deed transfer of a suburban Nashville home they searched.

Four killed in attacks across Afghanistan

Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan — At least four people were killed in separate attacks across Afghanistan on Monday, officials said, raising further concerns about the fate of peace talks that have been suspended until at least next month.

No one claimed responsibility for the attacks, and a local Islamic State affiliate opposed to the peace process has continued to regularly target civilians and Afghan security forces. The ISIS militants have even clashed with the larger and more well-established Taliban.

The Taliban have halted their attacks on U.S. and international forces but continue to target Afghan security forces, even as the insurgents have held talks this year with the U.S.-backed government.

The Taliban attacked a police district headquarters in the western Farah province early Monday, killing one policeman and wounding three others, according to Mohibullah Mohib, a spokesman for the provincial police chief.

He said the attack began when a suicide bomber was shot by police. His vehicle exploded, however, and then gunmen opened fire. He said at least four insurgents were killed and eight others were wounded.

In the eastern Ghazni province, two employees of the provincial revenue agency were shot and killed, according to Ahmad Khan Serat, a spokesman for the provincial police chief.

In the eastern Khost province, a roadside bomb killed a member of the security forces and wounded two other people, including a provincial council member, according to Kafel Rayan, head of the provincial council.

In two explosions Monday in the capital Kabul, at least six people were wounded, according to Kabul police. One targeted employees of the National Statistics Authority, who were in a mini-bus in the Guzargah neighborhood. That blast wounded at least six people, said Ferdaws Faramarz, spokesman for the Kabul police chief. He said the bomb had been placed on a bicycle.

Earlier, a sticky bomb blew up a vehicle belonging to security forces in the Kolola Pushta area of the city, said Faramarz, but caused no casualties. He said investigations into both attacks had begun.

US taking hard look at new virus strain

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — U.S. health officials believe the coronavirus mutation that set off alarms in parts of Britain is no more apt to cause serious illness or be resistant to vaccines than the strain afflicting people in the United States, but it still must be taken “very seriously,” the government’s top infectious disease expert said Sunday.

Dr. Anthony Fauci endorsed the decision of U.S. officials to require negative COVID-19 tests before letting people from Britain enter the U.S. He declined, however, to weigh in on whether that step should have been taken sooner. He said the variant strain is something “to follow very carefully” and “we’re looking at it very intensively now.”

He said: “Does it make someone more ill? Is it a more serious virus in the sense of virulence? And the answer is, it doesn’t appear to be that way.” British officials are telling their U.S. colleagues it appears that the vaccines being rolled out will be strong enough to deal with the new variant but, Fauci said, “we’re going to be doing the studies ourselves.”

California

LOS ANGELES — State officials are expected to extend the strictest stay-at-home orders in central and Southern California as hospitals there are quickly running out of intensive care unit beds for coronavirus patients ahead of the presumed post-holiday surge.

The situation is already dire, and the worst is expected to come in the next few weeks after Christmas and New Year’s travelers return home. California hit 2 million confirmed coronavirus cases on Christmas Eve, becoming the first state to reach the grim milestone.

The stay-at-home orders for the San Joaquin Valley and Southern California were set to expire Monday — they were first imposed three weeks ago — but Gov. Gavin Newsom has signaled they would not be allowed to lapse. State officials said Sunday afternoon that the orders were likely to be extended, but did not make a definitive ruling.

The state’s total confirmed cases rose by more than 50,000 — an increase of 2.4% — over the previous day, data shows. Some of the cases reflect two days of data from Los Angeles County, which had an internet service interruption Friday that caused delays in reporting.

Iowa

IOWA CITY — It has been nearly 10 months since Neil Bennett, of Iowa City, became Iowa’s first person hospitalized for the coronavirus, and the 74-year-old is still dealing with the impact.

Bennett was admitted to a hospital in early March, the Cedar Rapids Gazette reported. Though he long ago returned home, Bennett still uses a cane and walker and undergoes physical therapy and pulmonary rehabilitation to build up strength in his body and lungs.

Bennett said he sometimes becomes impatient with his progress and craves a sense of normalcy — even if it’s just getting up on a ladder and changing a light bulb.

He was admitted in early March to the intensive care unit at the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics and was soon placed on a ventilator, which was required for several weeks. Bennett spent about five months in health care facilities before he was finally allowed to go home in August.

New York

NEW YORK — New York state officials are working with the medical community to increase hospital capacity as the number of residents hospitalized with COVID-19 reaches the highest level since mid-May, Gov. Andrew Cuomo said Sunday.

Officials said 7,183 people were hospitalized with the virus as of Saturday, an increase of nearly 300 over the previous day.

The state on Sunday also reported 115 new deaths attributable to COVID-19, bringing the state’s official death tally to 29,511.

A single-day spike of 18 deaths was reported in Onondaga County, which includes Syracuse. The Finger Lakes region reached a seven-day average positivity rate of 8.12%, surpassing the state seven-day average of 5.66, according to the new data.

Rhode Island

PROVIDENCE — An effort to administer the coronavirus vaccine to about 7,500 residents and 10,000 workers at nursing homes across Rhode Island was set to start Monday.

It may take several weeks before everyone eligible receives their first dose of the vaccine, being administered by CVS and Walgreens pharmacies in conjunction with state health officials, authorities said.

The effort will start in long-term care fa-

cilities in some of the state’s hardest-hit communities.

More than half the facilities in Providence, Pawtucket and Central Falls will get the vaccine in the first week, state Health Department spokesman Joseph Wendelken said Sunday. About 1,500 first doses will be administered Monday, he said. The Pfizer vaccine requires two doses.

About 70% of Rhode Island’s more than 1,700 coronavirus deaths were in residents of nursing homes or assisted living centers, according to state statistics.

Texas

DALLAS — Dennis Bonnen, the outgoing speaker of the Texas House of Representatives, said Sunday that he has tested positive for COVID-19, as coronavirus hospitalizations in the state hovered just below their summer peak.

Bonnen, 48, wrote on Facebook that he was diagnosed with the disease this weekend after his wife tested positive last week. The Republican said his symptoms have so far been mild and that his family is quarantined.

The speaker announced his illness on a day when state health officials said there were 10,886 people hospitalized in Texas with confirmed cases of COVID-19, less than 10 patients below the record high in July. Intensive care units in several parts of Texas were full or nearly full, according to the Texas Department of State Health Services.

On Sunday, the health department reported 6,105 new confirmed cases of COVID-19, another 1,452 probable cases and 51 new deaths.

Wisconsin

MILWAUKEE — Wisconsin health officials on Sunday reported 2,287 positive tests for the coronavirus in the last day, lifting the total number of confirmed cases to 470,818.

The new cases accounted for 46.7% of the 4,902 tests that were processed in the last 24 hours. The overall positivity rate since the start of the pandemic stands at about 10%.

The COVID Tracking Project reports that the rolling average number of daily cases in Wisconsin over the past two weeks has decreased by 45.3%. The state ranks 34th in the country for new cases per capita. One in every 379 people in Wisconsin tested positive in the past week.

The state reported nine new deaths since Saturday, for a total of 4,692 fatalities.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Gingerbread monolith charms on Christmas Day, then collapses

CA SAN FRANCISCO — In true pop-up art fashion, a nearly 7-foot-tall monolith made of gingerbread mysteriously appeared on a San Francisco hilltop on Christmas Day and collapsed the next day.

The three-sided tower, held together by icing and decorated with a few gumdrops, delighted the city when word spread about its existence.

People trekked to the park throughout the day, even as light rain fell on the ephemeral, edible art object. In one video posted online, someone took a bite of the gingerbread.

Soup kitchen gets large food donation after truck crashes

AK ANCHORAGE — An official at an Anchorage soup kitchen said she received a donation of at least 30,000 pounds of food on Christmas Eve from a local towing company after a truck carrying the produce crashed.

Bean's Cafe and Children's Lunchbox CEO Lisa Sauder said the towing company offered her the food after they recovered it from a semitruck that crashed into a ditch. No one was injured in the crash. The companies that were scheduled to receive the food decided that they could no longer sell the groceries, KTUU-TV reported.

Sauder said the donation from Vulcan Towing came at a time when demand at the soup kitchen has never been higher because of hardships from the coronavirus pandemic.

Part-time Vegas resident wins jackpot of \$15.5 million

NV LAS VEGAS — A part-time Las Vegas resident won a \$15.5 million Megabucks slot machine jackpot.

The winner, identified only as Kevin by the Las Vegas Review-Journal, gambled \$40 on Christmas Eve and won the state's largest slot machine jackpot in eight years.

Kevin splits his time between Las Vegas and Alaska. He had made a Christmas Eve visit to the Boyd Gaming casino. He said that he plans on using his winnings to support his business and promised to "pay it forward" with the money.

State set to clean up and recycle unused crab traps early next year

MS BILOXI — The Mississippi Department of Marine Resources said volunteers will remove unused crab traps from state waters early next year.

The department said the cleanup is for waters within a half-mile of Deer Island and the mainland shoreline from the Alabama/Mississippi border to the Mississippi/Louisiana border.

From Jan. 21-27, all commercial and recreational crab fishermen must remove their own traps from closure areas in Mississippi waters. The department said it is illegal to remove traps licensed to another person outside the approved trap removal dates.

From Jan. 28-30, all traps remaining in the water will be considered derelict and will be removed and recycled. Volunteers may remove remaining traps and drop them for recycling at Point Park in Pascagoula, Ocean Springs Harbor and Pleasure Street Boat Launch in Bay St. Louis. Beginning Jan. 31, active traps may be returned to Mississippi territorial waters and crab fishing may resume.

Woman spreads cheer by sending about 700 cards, receiving 500

MO OZARK — A southwestern Missouri woman who said she loves Christmas has spread cheer by mailing about 700 holiday cards and has received more than 500 in return.

Angela Grogan, of Ozark, said that her initial goal when she started mailing cards on Nov. 1 was to send one to each of the 50 states, the Springfield News-Leader reports. But it wasn't long before she surpassed that. She's gotten cards in return from every state and

nine countries.

The COVID-19 pandemic spurred her to her new holiday tradition.

Prehistoric remains of humans found along park shoreline

MI EMPIRE — Officials are communicating with Native American groups in order to help decide what to do next with prehistoric human remains found along a Michigan Lake shoreline in a northwestern Michigan park.

A visitor found the remains in Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore three years ago, took them out of the park and then returned them a year later, Scott Tucker, the park's superintendent, told MLive.com.

Examinations at a medical examiner's office and further analysis of the bones at Western Michigan University helped identify them as prehistoric remains most likely tied to prehistoric Native American populations.

Feds charge 10 in drug bust tied to white supremacist prison gang

OK MUSKOGEE — Federal prosecutors said they've charged 10 people and broken up a drug distribution ring in eastern Oklahoma involving a white supremacist prison gang.

The U.S. Attorney's Office in Muskogee announced indictments against the defendants that include inmates at two state prisons and a former prison worker. All 10 were indicted for their roles in what prosecutors said was a conspiracy to distribute heroin and methamphetamine.

Among those charged were Randall Brent Cook, 41, an inmate at North Fork Correctional Center in Sayre, and Jason Nathaniel Holland, 39, an inmate at the Oklahoma State Penitentiary in McAlester, who prosecutors said were members of the Universal Aryan Brotherhood prison gang. Prosecutors say Paul Casey Craig, 46, a former prison worker at OSP, aided the conspiracy by smuggling drugs and other contraband into the prison.

— From The Associated Press

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and Military News

Playoff picture clearing up somewhat

Associated Press

If they're singing anything in Kansas City, Pittsburgh and Seattle, it could be "I Can See Clearly Now." All three took some big steps Sunday.

As for the appropriate song in the AFC South and NFC East, try "Purple Haze." Or "Land Of Confusion."

The playoff picture came into focus in some places and got more muddled elsewhere. The folks at NFL headquarters must love having such big-time quarterbacks as Patrick Mahomes, Ben Roethlisberger, Russell Wilson, Aaron Rodgers and Drew Brees already in the field. And they must be thrilled that at least 10 Week 17 matchups will have some playoff significance.

"Cherish these moments," linebacker K.J. Wright, the longest-tenured Seahawks player, told teammates in the locker room after a 20-9 victory over the Rams.

"It's been a while since we've been NFC West champs. And this team, especially our brotherhood, our togetherness, brought us to this moment."

At this moment, here's how things stand — and what might be ahead on the first Sunday of 2021.

AFC EAST

Buffalo (11-3), which takes on struggling New England on Monday night, owns the division crown and will get the No. 2 seed behind Kansas City by winning out.

Miami (10-5), with one of the most impressive two-season turnarounds in recent memory, gets a wild-card berth by winning at the Bills next weekend — a huge challenge. But the Dolphins have met lots of challenges this year.

"I think we have a special team," Dolphins quarterback Ryan Fitzpatrick said after engineering a last-minute drive to beat Las Ve-

gas on Saturday night. "I think this team all year long has fought."

AFC NORTH

Pittsburgh (12-3) broke a three-game slide with a monstrous second half to beat Indianapolis. That gave the Steelers the division title.

"It's a fine line between drinking wine and squashing grapes and sometimes it was very subtle," coach Mike Tomlin said.

The grapes are tasting pretty sweet for Baltimore and rancid for Cleveland.

The Ravens (10-5) won a fourth consecutive game, beating the Giants, and will head to the postseason with a victory over Cincinnati.

The Browns, trying to end the NFL's longest playoff absence — last appearance 2002 — were severely short-handed by COVID-19 issues and fell to the Jets. They'll need to defeat the archrival Steelers, and wouldn't Pittsburgh enjoy keeping that drought going?

AFC SOUTH

Indianapolis' collapse at Pittsburgh spiraled the Colts (10-5) out of a playoff spot. To get back in as a wild card, they must take care of inept Jacksonville (1-14, whose win was opening day against Indy) and have either Baltimore, Cleveland or Miami lose.

Or if Tennessee (10-5 after a loss at Green Bay) loses at woeful Houston next Sunday and the Colts win, they get the division crown and the Titans likely will be out. Or not.

AFC WEST

All Kansas City (14-1), despite a tight win over weak Atlanta on Sunday. The reigning league champions own the AFC's only post-season bye.

"If you look at the history of that bye week,

usually it's a good thing for the teams trying to make a championship run," Mahomes said. "But at the end of the day, we've got to find a way to win a football game whenever we get there."

NFC WEST

All Seattle's, and the Seahawks (11-4) have a shot at the conference bye. With their loss at Seattle, the Rams (9-6) need a home victory against Arizona (8-7) to ensure a wild card. A loss would lift the Cardinals in and, if Chicago beats Green Bay, give the Bears a berth, too, sending LA packing.

NFC NORTH

All Green Bay's, as will be the NFC bye with a win at Soldier Field next Sunday. The Packers (12-3) need to avoid a three-way tie with Seattle and New Orleans at 12-4, which would give the bye to the Saints.

Chicago has gone from 5-1 to 5-7 to 8-7. A victory and the Bears are playoffs-bound.

NFC SOUTH

All settled, with New Orleans (11-4) on top and Tampa Bay, with that 43-year-old newcomer quarterback — a guy named Brady — guaranteed a wild card at 10-5.

NFC EAST

All unsettled — except for Philadelphia (4-10-1), which saw its chances disappear by losing at Dallas (6-9). Pay attention for this one:

A Washington victory at Philly on Sunday night gives Ron Rivera's team the division at 7-9 no matter what the Cowboys do at the Giants (5-10) in the afternoon. Washington swept Dallas this season.

However, an Eagles win then means whoever emerges from the Cowboys-Giants matchup at the Meadowlands — barring a tie — heads to the playoffs.

Seahawks defeat Rams, wrap up NFC West title

Associated Press

SEATTLE — As he finished talking about winning a division title for the first time in his career, Jamal Adams grabbed the cigar lying on the edge of the podium and flicked the lighter in his hand.

It was celebration time for Adams and the Seattle Seahawks.

"Damn right, I haven't been here before," Adams said, his voice rising. "So damn it, it

feels good. It feels great!"

The Seahawks claimed the NFC West title on Sunday with a 20-9 victory over the Los Angeles Rams, carried by a revitalized defense and some clutch play from Russell Wilson.

Wilson scored on a 4-yard run on the opening drive of the second half and clinched the division crown with a 13-yard TD pass to Jacob Hollister with 2:51 remaining.

It's the first division title since 2016 for Seattle (11-4) and the fifth since Pete Carroll arrived in 2010. Carroll had linebacker K.J. Wright — the longest-tenured Seahawks player — speak in the locker room after the game.

The final drive was Wilson at his best: He was 5 of 5 for 59 yards, hitting four different receivers.

Wilson finished 20 of 32 for 225 yards.

Steelers end skid, lock up division

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — Their once-promising season on the brink of a full-out collapse, the Pittsburgh Steelers headed to the locker room for halftime at Heinz Field on Sunday still searching for the team that began the season with 11 straight victories.

Ben Roethlisberger believed it was still in there somewhere. Even as the losses in December piled up. Even as the offense spent weeks stuck in neutral. Even as attrition pecked away at one of the NFL's best defenses.

And even as the Steelers spent the first half against Indianapolis seemingly in a full-out sprint to get to the offseason as quickly as possible.

"Sometimes you need a little shock to yourself to believe again," Roethlisberger said.

One 39-yard rope from the player who has symbolized the team's erratic play perhaps more than any other provided that jolt. It revived Pittsburgh's floundering season and delivered the Steelers the AFC North title.

Listless and lifeless for the better part of a month, Roethlisberger threw three second-half touchdowns — starting with a third-quarter strike to a fully horizontal Diontae Johnson — as Pittsburgh rallied past

stunned Indianapolis 28-24 to win its first division title since 2017.

The 38-year-old Roethlisberger, who looked every bit his age and then some during the Steelers' recent slide, snapped out of it while completing 34 of 49 passes for 342 yards. He ditched the dink-and-dunk approach that had worked early in the season but became far too predictable during his team's December swoon.

The reward is at least one home playoff game. Pittsburgh (12-3) sported T-shirts that read "Won Not Done" during a celebration fueled equally by joy and relief. The swag had been at the ready for a few weeks only to be shelved as losses to Washington, Buffalo and, shockingly, Cincinnati piled up.

Yet head coach Mike Tomlin stressed there was no time to panic, believing his team was close.

"It's a fine line between drinking wine and squashing grapes and sometimes it was very subtle," Tomlin said.

Maybe, but the difference between the team that went into the locker room bullied and the one that outscored the Colts 21-0 over the final 18:16 was not. The defense kept Philip Rivers, rookie running back Jonathan Taylor and Indianapolis out of the end zone in the second half. Johnson, who

leads the NFL in drops this season, sparked the rally with a diving grab as he sailed across the goal line.

"We've all had our struggles of late," Tomlin said. "This is a fighter's business. This is a competitor's business. I expect all to smile in the face of adversity and he did."

Pittsburgh scored on its next two possessions, a 5-yard flip from Roethlisberger to Eric Ebron and a 25-yard dart in between two defenders from Roethlisberger to JuJu Smith-Schuster.

Indianapolis, so dominant during a first half in which it outgained the Steelers 206-28, had two chances to reclaim the lead. The first drive ended with Rivers throwing an interception deep in Pittsburgh territory. The second ended with Rivers' heave to Zach Pascal sailing high on fourth down.

Indianapolis could not have clinched a playoff berth with a victory anyway after Miami and Baltimore won. Still, it would have made the path significantly easier. Now, not so much.

"We gave them (the Steelers) life," Rivers said. "We've been on the other side of those. They were the aggressor as it got to be a 10-point game, a 3-point game and I don't mean that from a play-calling standpoint, it just had that feel like 'oh boy,' and we were trying to hang on."

Jets deal big blow to Browns' playoff chances

Associated Press

EAST RUTHERFORD, N.J. — Baker Mayfield coughed up the ball — and the Cleveland Browns' chances to wrap up a playoff spot.

After a 23-16 loss to the New York Jets on Sunday, the Browns will need to beat the Pittsburgh Steelers at home next Sunday if they're going to end the NFL's longest playoff drought.

"I failed this team," said Mayfield, who answered one question during his postgame Zoom call and left. "I put three balls on the ground, two of them that they recovered and the other on fourth down — just hold onto the damn ball. Plain and simple. I have to hold onto the damn ball."

On fourth-and-1 with short-handed Cleveland (10-5) driving for the potential tying score, Mayfield tried to push forward for the first down but lost the ball when Tarell Basham smacked into him. Kareem Hunt recovered, but by rule, Mayfield was the on-

ly one who could advance the ball — and the quarterback was short of the first down.

The call was upheld by video review, and the Jets (2-13) got the ball with 1:18 left and sealed their second straight victory after an 0-13 start.

"This one's on me," Mayfield reiterated. "But here's the thing: This one is going to sting for a day or two. But we've got the Steelers to win and get in."

It was a rough week for the Browns, who haven't been in the postseason since 2002 and entered without seven players because of COVID-19 issues — including Jarvis Landry and three other wide receivers, and rookie left tackle Jedrick Wills. Cleveland had to call up several players from the practice squad and coach Kevin Stefanski ran a walk-through in a parking lot near the team's hotel to get players up to speed on the game plan.

"It's pretty much 2020 — all in 24 hours," Mayfield said. "It's not an excuse."

Cleveland nearly erased a 20-3 deficit. But the Jets were able to hang on.

"It had nothing to do with the guys we didn't have," Stefanski said. "We got flat-out beat, flat-out outcoached with the players we had, myself included."

Earlier in the fourth quarter, Cleveland had third-and-6 from its 15 when Basham sacked Mayfield and knocked the ball out and John Franklin-Myers recovered. Sam Ficken's 34-yard field goal with 2:52 remaining gave New York a 23-16 lead.

Ficken sent the ensuing kickoff out of bounds, giving Cleveland the ball at the 40. The Browns got down to the 16, until the defense came up big again to end it.

"This team doesn't have any quit in them," Jets center Connor McGovern said.

Jamison Crowder caught a touchdown pass and threw one to Braxton Berrios, and Sam Darnold was 16 of 32 for 175 yards, including TD passes to Crowder and Chris Herndon.

NBA ROUNDUP

Mavs start fast in rout of Clippers

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES—Luka Dončić scored 24 points and the Dallas Mavericks led by a NBA-record 50 points at halftime in a 124-73 rout of the Los Angeles Clippers on Sunday.

Josh Richardson added 21 points and Tim Hardaway Jr. had 18 points for the Mavericks.

The Clippers trailed 77-27 at halftime, with their 50-point deficit being the largest at the break in the shot-clock era, which began in 1954-55.

Paul George led the Kawhi Leonard-less Clippers with 15 points before sitting out the second half. Serge Ibaka added 13 points and nine rebounds over three quarters of the team's first loss. The Clippers opened with victories over the defending NBA champion Lakers and Denver.

Warriors 129, Bulls 128: Damion Lee hit a three-pointer with 1.7 seconds remaining and Stephen Curry scored 36 points, sending visiting Golden State past Chicago for its first victory of the season.

With the Bulls defense focused on the sharp-shooting Curry, Lee took a handoff after the Warriors inbounded the ball with 5 seconds left and fired from a few feet beyond the top of the three-point arc. Lee finished

with 12 points on 4-for-5 shooting on threes.

Lakers 127, Timberwolves 91: Kyle Kuzma scored 20 points in the first half while starting in Anthony Davis' place, and LeBron James added 18 points in host Los Angeles' win over Minnesota.

Star big men Davis and Karl-Anthony Towns sat out.

Cavaliers 118, 76ers 94: Andre Drummond had 24 points, 14 rebounds and three steals to help host Cleveland beat Philadelphia for its third straight victory to start the season.

Collin Sexton added 22 points and Darius Garland had 14 points and seven assists for the Cavaliers, who had the second-worst record in the NBA last season at 19-46. Cleveland is 3-0 for the first time since winning six in a row to begin 2016-17.

Pacers 108, Celtics 107: Domantas Sabonis scored on a layup with 8.4 seconds left and had 19 points and 10 rebounds for his 100th double-double, helping host Indiana beat Boston.

Malcolm Brogdon scored a season-high 25 points as the Pacers improved to 3-0 for the first time since the 2013-14 season.

Magic 120, Wizards 113: Markelle Fultz and Terrence Ross each scored 26 points and Orlando rallied to win at Washington

for its first 3-0 start since 2009-10.

Nikola Vučević scored in the post to give the Magic a 114-113 lead with 25.1 seconds as they scored the final 10 points in beating the Wizards for the sixth straight game.

Knicks 130, Bucks 110: Tom Thibodeau's first victory as Knicks coach came surprisingly easy against a top opponent, as host New York routed Milwaukee.

Julius Randle had 29 points, 14 rebounds and seven assists, Elfrid Payton scored 27 points in his best game as a Knick.

Pelicans 98, Spurs 95: Brandon Ingram had 28 points and 11 rebounds and host New Orleans held off San Antonio.

The Spurs had a chance to tie it after Steven Adams, whose put-back dunk put the Pelicans up 97-91 with two minutes left, missed a pair of free throws with 11 seconds to go.

Suns 116, Kings 100: Mikal Bridges scored 22 points, Cameron Johnson had 21 in 21 minutes and Phoenix pulled away to win at Sacramento. Devin Booker added 20 points, five rebounds and five assists and Deandre Ayton had 11 points and 15 rebounds for the Suns.

Hornets 106, Nets 104: Gordon Hayward had 28 points, seven assists and six rebounds and host Charlotte handed Brooklyn its first loss of the season.

Niekro, Hall of Fame knuckleballer, dies at 81

Associated Press

ATLANTA — Phil Niekro threw a pitch that baffled hitters and catchers.

Heck, he didn't even know where it was going most of the time.

But the knuckleball carried Niekro to more than 300 wins, earned him a spot in the Baseball Hall of Fame and gave him a nickname that stuck for the rest of his life. Knucksie.

The longtime stalwart of the Atlanta Braves rotation died after a lengthy fight with cancer, the team announced Sunday. He was 81.

The Braves said Niekro died Saturday night in his sleep. He lived in the Atlanta suburb of Flowery Branch, where a main thoroughfare bears his name.

He was the seventh Hall of Famer to die

this year, the most sitting members to pass away in a calendar year, according to spokesman Jon Shestakofsky. The others were Lou Brock, Whitey Ford, Bob Gibson, Al Kaline, Joe Morgan and Tom Seaver.

"These names, and these men, will be remembered forever in Cooperstown," Shestakofsky said.

Niekro won 318 games over his 24-year career, which finally ended in 1987 at age 48 after he made one final start for the Braves. The right-hander was a five-time All-Star who had three 20-win seasons with Atlanta.

Dale Murphy, who won two straight NL MVP awards as a teammate of Niekro's, was among those who mourned his death.

"Knucksie was one of a kind," Murphy wrote on Twitter.

"Friend, teammate, father and husband.

Our hearts go out to Nancy Niekro, the kids and grandkids. So thankful for our memories and time together. We'll miss you, Knucksie."

Braves first baseman Freddie Freeman, this year's NL MVP, described himself as "heartbroken."

"An amazing pitcher but an even better man!" Freeman said on Twitter. "Thanks you Phil for all the laughs and wonderful memories over the years."

Niekro also pitched for the New York Yankees, Cleveland Indians and Toronto Blue Jays late in his career.

Incredibly, he had 121 wins after his 40th birthday.

A statue of Niekro delivering his trademark pitch is located outside of Truist Park, the Braves' stadium.