

Pentagon frustrated by vaccine rollback

The Washington Post

The Biden administration fumed as Congress acted to strip away the Defense Department's requirement that all military personnel be vaccinated against the coronavirus, upending a politically divisive policy that has led to the dismissal of nearly 8,500 service members and numerous lawsuits disputing its fairness.

The agreement, brokered as part of the Pentagon's next spending bill, was celebrated by Republicans as a victory for individual choice. It comes despite opposition from President Biden and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, who characterized the vaccine mandate as a way of protecting troops from COVID-19 and preventing sprawling outbreaks that sideline entire units, undermine the military's readiness and endanger national security.

The looming reversal — spurred by Republicans who had threatened to block passage of the \$858 billion spending bill if the mandate wasn't struck

down — creates a rat's nest for the Pentagon. Commanders whose job it was to enforce the mandate will face the onerous task of assessing whether — and how — to allow back into uniform those already separated from the military for refusing to follow orders. Managing overseas deployments, especially in countries that require visitors to be vaccinated, will create burdensome logistical headaches as well, officials said.

John Kirby, a White House spokesman, emphasized that the administration believes scrubbing the vaccine mandate is a "mistake" and castigated those in the GOP who pushed to end it.

Republicans, he said, "have obviously decided that they'd rather fight against the health and well-being of those troops rather than protecting them."

Privately, some Defense Department personnel were even more pointed.

One senior defense official said that when service members "inevitability get sick, and

if they should die, it will be on the Republicans who insisted upon this." The official, who like others spoke on the condition of anonymity, cited the sprawling coronavirus outbreak aboard the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt in spring 2020. The vessel — a major power-projection weapon — was sidelined for weeks through a cumbersome quarantine process with more than 1,200 cases in a crew of about 4,800, and one sailor died.

"How does this impact deployments? How does this impact overseas training assignments? How does this impact overseas assignments generally?" this official asked. "What are the downstream consequences of this shortsighted insistence in the new law?"

A Navy officer with more than 2,000 sailors under his command recalled standing before his entire crew and explaining why it was not only important to get vaccinated but essential to the Navy's mission readiness.

"I look like a clown now," the officer said, intimating that, by reversing the mandate, lawmakers had weakened the military's ability to enforce and maintain good order and discipline. "What happens when the next [unpopular directive] comes along, whether for vaccines or something else? I've lost my credibility to say 'Do this' when they know they can probably wait me out."

"I have been completely undercut in trying to uphold the standards dictated to me from on high," the officer added. "My sailors will have a hard time trusting me in the future when I say that some controversial policy must be complied with."

The Marine Corps commandant, Gen. David H. Berger, gave a careful answer when asked about the legislation, saying that as a military officer, he doesn't have to get into politics — "nor should I." He called the discussion "a political thing" but acknowledged he would continue to advocate that personnel get vaccinated.

NATO chief fears Ukraine war could widen

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — The head of NATO expressed worry that the fighting in Ukraine could spin out of control and become a war between Russia and NATO, according to an interview released Friday.

"If things go wrong, they can go horribly wrong," NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said in remarks to Norwegian broadcaster NRK.

Stoltenberg, a former prime minister of Norway, said in the interview that "there is no

doubt that a full-fledged war is a possibility," adding that it was important to avoid a conflict "that involves more countries in Europe and becomes a full-fledged war in Europe."

The Kremlin has repeatedly accused NATO allies of effectively becoming a party to the conflict by providing Ukraine with weapons, training its troops and feeding military intelligence to attack Russian forces.

Heavy fighting continued Friday in eastern and southern

Ukraine, mostly in regions that Russia illegally annexed in September.

Ukraine's presidential office said five civilians have been killed and another 13 have been wounded by Russian shelling in the last 24 hours.

Donetsk regional Gov. Pavlo Kyrylenko said the Russians were pressing an offensive on Bakhmut with daily attacks, despite taking heavy casualties.

"You can best describe those attacks as cannon fodder," Ky-

rylenko said in televised remarks. "They are mostly relying on infantry and less on armor, and they can't advance."

In neighboring Luhansk in eastern Ukraine, regional Gov. Serhiy Haidai said the Ukrainian military was pushing its counteroffensive toward Kremenna and Svatove.

He voiced hope Ukraine can reclaim control of Kremenna by year's end, and then by the end of winter reclaim areas in the region that were captured by Russia since the war began.

Parties play chicken with spending bill

CQ-Roll Call

WASHINGTON — Top Democrats are playing hardball on government funding with slightly more than a week before federal agencies run out of budget authority after next Friday night.

House Appropriations Chair Rosa DeLauro told reporters Thursday that she's not drafting any stopgap funding extension short of a full-year bill running to Sept. 30, 2023, and won't consider doing so unless Republicans come to the bargaining table on topline funding levels.

"We've got to ... break a logjam here," DeLauro said. "Otherwise, we're going to a year-long (continuing resolution) and that's for sure."

The Connecticut Democrat said she was working on certain "anomalies" to lessen the blow of a stopgap, which typically funds most agencies and programs at previous-year levels, that lasts the rest of fiscal 2023.

But that's still unlikely to meet the priorities of either side of the aisle in year-end spending talks. The two parties are arguing over whether the total discretionary topline should grow by either 9% or 10%, underscoring both sides' wish to counteract the effects of inflation running near 40-year highs.

While there's no divide over defense spending, domestic and foreign aid accounts have proven to be an intractable problem thus far; Republicans say the

difference is more than roughly \$25 billion, though Democrats dispute that figure.

And given both parties' commitment to a 22% boost for veterans medical care in any final deal, Democrats fear that GOP figures would squeeze other nondefense spending so it wouldn't actually keep pace with rampant inflation.

Speaker Nancy Pelosi told reporters Thursday that given the military and veterans' needs backed by both parties, Republicans weren't offering enough money to meet other priorities.

"We may just have to go to a CR, which would be most unfortunate, but we have to weigh it against how unfortunate it would be if they cannibalized

the domestic budget at the expense of the defense budget," Pelosi said. "We need them both."

Democratic aides said that point isn't lost on their members, particularly in the House. And that could affect votes for a bill that doesn't address inflationary pressures and top non-defense priorities — shared by Republicans — such as medical research, agricultural support and small-business aid.

Republicans, in turn, argue there's enough unnecessary spending in the nondefense category, such as increases Democrats have proposed for the IRS and climate initiatives, that could be cut to make room for shared priorities.

US sending \$275 million in military aid to Ukraine

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. is sending an additional \$275 million in military aid to Ukraine, including large amounts of ammunition and high-tech systems that can be used to detect and counter drones in its ongoing war with Russia, according to U.S. officials.

The total aid amount is smaller than most of the recent packages the U.S. has delivered, and it comes as many military officials and experts predict a reduction in attacks during the winter. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said Russia appears to be slowing its military activities to regroup and launch a new offensive when the weather warms.

The officials said the latest package of aid includes 80,000 rounds of ammunition for howitzers and an undisclosed

amount of ammunition for the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System, known as HIMARS. It also includes systems to counter drones and air defenses, along with more Humvees, generators and other combat equipment. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the aid package prior to its public release, which was expected Friday.

Drone attacks by both sides have been increasing, making detection of the unmanned explosives critical for Ukrainian forces. Russia bought hundreds of attack drones from Iran over the summer, and officials said this week that Moscow is looking to do more of the same.

Russian forces have increasingly targeted Ukraine's civilian infrastructure including power plants, leaving thousands without heat and electricity.

National Guard plays Santa for frosty Alaskan village

Associated Press

NUIQSUT, Alaska — Though the weather outside was frightful, schoolchildren in the northern Alaska Inupiat community of Nuiqsut were so delighted for a visit by Santa that they braved wind chills of 25 degrees below zero just to see him land on a snow-covered airstrip.

Once again, it was time for Operation Santa Claus in Alaska. And here in Nuiqsut, a roadless village of about 460 residents on Alaska's oil-rich North Slope, the temperatures may have been plunging but the children were warming quickly.

Never mind that Santa left Rudolph at home to catch a ride on an Alaska Air National Guard cargo plane to Nuiqsut, just 30 frosty miles south of the Arctic Ocean.

Here, just a reindeer skip and a hop from the North Pole, the

students were abuzz with good cheer.

"Some of them were out on the deck and they were jumping up and down, excited to see the plane coming in," said Principal Lee Karasiewicz of the Trapper School, as he kept watch over pupils from the 160-student K-12 facility privileged to get a pre-Christmas visit from the jolly, fat one.

When Santa and Mrs. Claus stepped off the hulking cargo plane, some of the children rushed to greet him with hugs, their beaming parents snapping photos on their phones.

Year after year across the decades the Alaska National Guard has delivered gifts, supplies and often Christmas itself to a few tiny rural Alaska communities, trying in particular to make things merry in villages hit by recent hardships.

Democratic Sen. Sinema switches to independent

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Democratic Sen. Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona announced Friday that she now has registered as an independent, but she does not plan to caucus with Republicans, ensuring Democrats will retain their narrow voting majority in the Senate.

Sinema has modeled her political approach on the renegade style of the late Republican Sen. John McCain of Arizona, and has frustrated Democratic colleagues at times with her overtures to Republicans and opposition to Democratic priorities. Rather than assailing the Democratic Party in her statement, she said she was “declaring my independence from the broken partisan system in Washington.”

At the White House, press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre

praised Sinema as a “key partner” in passing some of President Joe Biden’s priorities and said the switch “does not change the new Democratic majority control of the Senate. ... We have every reason to expect that we will continue to work successfully with her.”

While unusual for a sitting senator to switch party affiliation, the move does appear to hold more impact on Sinema’s own political brand than the operations of the Senate.

In a video explaining her decision, she said: “Registering as an independent and showing up to work with the title of independent is a reflection of who I’ve always been. ... Nothing’s going to change for me.”

The first-term senator wrote in *The Arizona Republic* that she came into office pledging “to be independent and work

with anyone to achieve lasting results. I committed I would not demonize people I disagreed with, engage in name-calling, or get distracted by political drama. I promised I would never bend to party pressure.”

She wrote that her approach “has upset partisans in both parties” but “has delivered lasting results for Arizona.” Sinema also said that she has “never fit perfectly in either national party.”

Before Sinema’s announcement, Democrats were set to hold a 51-49 edge in the new Senate come January after the victory Tuesday by Democratic Sen. Raphael Warnock in Georgia’s runoff election.

Until then, the Senate will remain even, with Vice President Kamala Harris the tie-breaking vote for Democrats.

Shooter’s ’21 case dropped for lack of cooperation

Associated Press

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. — The Colorado Springs gay nightclub shooter had charges dropped in a 2021 bomb threat case after family members who were terrorized in the incident refused to cooperate, according to the district attorney and court documents unsealed Thursday.

The charges were dropped despite authorities finding a “tub” full of bomb-making chemicals and later receiving warnings from relatives that suspect Anderson Lee Aldrich was sure to hurt or murder a set of grandparents if freed, the unsealed documents said.

In a letter last November to state District Court Judge Robin Chittum, the relatives described an isolated, violent person who did not have a job and was given \$30,000 that was spent largely on the purchase of 3D printers to make guns.

Aldrich tried to reclaim guns that were seized after the threat, but authorities did not return the weapons, El Paso County District Attorney Michael Allen said. Allen spoke hours after Chittum unsealed the case, which included allegations that Aldrich threatened to kill the grandparents and to become the “next mass killer” more than a year before the nightclub attack that killed five people.

The suspect’s mother and the grandparents derailed that earlier case by evading prosecutors’ efforts to serve them with a subpoena, leading to a dismissal of the charges after defense attorneys said speedy trial rules were at risk, Allen said.

Testifying at a hearing two months after the threat, the suspect’s mother and grandmother described Aldrich in court as a “loving” and “sweet” young person who did not deserve to be jailed, the prosecutor said.

After midterms, GOP reconsidering party’s antipathy to mail-in ballots

Associated Press

ATLANTA — In Georgia’s Senate runoff, Republicans once more met the realities of giving Democrats a head start they could not overcome.

According to tallies from the secretary of state, Democratic Sen. Raphael Warnock built a lead of more than 320,000 votes heading into Tuesday’s election. He topped Republican Herschel Walker by an almost 2-1 ratio in mailed ballots and had an advantage of more than 250,000 early, in-person votes over Walker.

So even with Walker gaining more votes on Election Day, the challenger lost by nearly 97,000 votes.

It was only the latest example of how Republicans have handed Democrats an advantage in balloting due to former President Donald Trump’s lies about the risks of mail voting. Conservative conspiracy theorists urged GOP voters to wait until Election Day before casting their ballots and spun tales about how such a strategy would prevent Democrats from rigging voting machines to steal the election.

Overall, Republican turnout was fairly robust in the midterms, suggesting the party did not have many problems getting its voters to the polls.

But the loss in Georgia, which enabled Democrats to

gain a Senate seat during an election where the GOP hoped to retake the chamber, was the last straw for several conservatives.

“We’ve got to put a priority on competing with Democrats from the start, beat them at their own game,” said Debbie Dooley, a Georgia tea party organizer who remains loyal to Trump but is critical of how he has talked about the U.S. election system.

In Washington, South Dakota Sen. John Thune, the second-ranking GOP leader, told reporters: “We’ve got to get better at turnout operations, especially in states that use mail-in balloting extensively.”

China struggles with COVID infections

Associated Press

BEIJING — A rash of COVID-19 cases in schools and businesses were reported Friday in areas across China after the ruling Communist Party loosened anti-virus rules as it tries to reverse a deepening economic slump.

While official data showed a fall in new cases, they no longer cover large parts of the population after the government on Wednesday ended mandatory testing for many people. That was part of dramatic changes aimed at gradually emerging from “zero COVID” restrictions that have confined millions of

people to their homes and sparked protests and demands for President Xi Jinping to resign.

“There’s very few people coming in because there’s so many cases,” said Gang Xueping, a waitress in Beijing. “The country’s just opened up. The first one or two months is definitely going to be serious. Nobody’s used to this yet.”

In other cities, social media users said coworkers or classmates were ill and some businesses had closed due to a lack of staff. It wasn’t clear from those accounts, many of which couldn’t be independently con-

firmed, how far above the official figure the total case numbers might be.

“I’m really speechless. Half of the company’s people are out sick, but they still won’t let us all stay home,” said a post signed Tunnel Mouth on the popular Sina Weibo platform. The user gave no name and didn’t respond to questions sent through the account, which said the user was in Beijing.

The reports echo the experience of the United States, Europe and other countries that have struggled with outbreaks while trying to restore business activity. But they are a jarring

change for China, where “zero COVID,” which aims to isolate every case, disrupted daily life and depressed economic activity but kept infection rates low.

Xi’s government began to loosen controls Nov. 11 after promising to reduce their cost and disruption. Imports tumbled 10.9% from a year ago in November in a sign of weak demand. Auto sales fell 26.5% in October.

The changes suggest the ruling party is easing off its goal of preventing virus transmission, the basis of “zero COVID,” but officials say that strategy still is in effect.

FTC sues to prevent a \$69B video game merger

Associated Press

The Federal Trade Commission on Thursday sued to block Microsoft’s planned \$69 billion takeover of video game company Activision Blizzard, saying it could suppress competitors to Microsoft’s Xbox game console and its growing games subscription business.

The FTC’s challenge could be a test case for President Joe Biden’s mandate to scrutinize big tech mergers. The commission voted 3-1 to issue the complaint after a meeting, with the three Democratic commissioners voting in favor and the sole Republican voting against.

The complaint points to Microsoft’s previous game acquisitions, especially of well-known developer Bethesda Softworks and its parent company ZeniMax, as an example of where Microsoft is making some upcoming game titles exclusive to Xbox despite assuring European regulators it had no intention to do so.

“Microsoft has already shown that it can and will withhold content from its gaming ri-

vals,” said a prepared statement from Holly Vedova, director of the FTC’s Bureau of Competition. “Today we seek to stop Microsoft from gaining control over a leading independent game studio and using it to harm competition in multiple dynamic and fast-growing gaming markets.”

The FTC said it was filing the complaint through its administrative process rather than taking the case to a federal court. An administrative law judge it set to hear evidence but not until August 2023, according to the complaint.

Microsoft’s president, Brad Smith, signaled in a statement Thursday that it is likely to challenge the FTC’s action.

Microsoft announced the merger deal in January but has faced months of resistance from Sony, which makes the competing PlayStation console and has raised concerns with antitrust watchdogs around the world about losing access to popular Activision Blizzard game franchises such as the military shooter game Call of Duty.

Awash in illegal weed, Ore. eyes tougher laws

Associated Press

SALEM, Ore. — In 2014, Oregon voters approved a ballot measure legalizing recreational marijuana after being told it would eliminate problems caused by “uncontrolled manufacture” of the drug. Illegal production of marijuana has instead exploded.

Oregon lawmakers, who have heard complaints from police, legal growers and others, are now looking at toughening laws against the outlaw growers. Oregon, one of the first states to legalize recreational marijuana, can be an object lesson for other states, including Maryland and Missouri, where voters legalized weed on Nov. 8. That raised the number of states that have approved marijuana’s recreational use to 21.

So far this year, police have seized over 105 tons of illegally grown marijuana in Oregon, according to the Oregon-Idaho High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area task force. That’s up from at least 9 tons in 2019.

The indoor and outdoor

grows use massive amounts of water in drought-stricken areas, contaminate the environment and employ migrant laborers who live in squalid conditions.

A draft bill for Oregon’s legislative session that begins Jan. 17 would double the maximum prison sentence and fine — to 10 years in prison and \$250,000 — for unlawful manufacture involving more than 100 plants and possession in excess of 32 times the legal limits. Personal possession limits in Oregon are 2 ounces of marijuana in a public place and 8 ounces in a home.

The measure also holds people accountable for environmental damage and prohibits use of water at locations not licensed for growing marijuana. Addressing immigrant labor, the draft bill makes it a crime for managers of an illegal grow site to confiscate a passport or immigration document, to threaten to report a person to a government agency for arrest or deportation, or withhold wages without lawful justification.

Coins reveal path of pirate who hid in RI

Associated Press

WARWICK, R.I. — One tarnished silver coin at a time, the ground is yielding new evidence that in the late 1600s, one of the world's most ruthless pirates wandered the American colonies with impunity.

Newly surfaced documents also strengthen the case that English buccaneer Henry Every — the target of the first worldwide manhunt — hid out in New England before sailing for Ireland and vanishing into the wind.

"At this point, the amount of evidence is overwhelming and indisputable," said historian and metal detectorist Jim Bailey, who's devoted years to solving the mystery. "Every was undoubtedly on the run in the colonies."

In 2014, after unearthing an unusual coin engraved with an Arabic inscription at a pick-your-own-fruit orchard in Middletown, R.I., Bailey began retracing Every's steps.

Research confirmed that the exotic coin was minted in 1693 in Yemen. Bailey then discovered that it was consistent with millions of dollars' worth of coins and other valuables seized by Every and his men in

their brazen Sept. 7, 1695, sacking of the Ganj-i-Sawai, an armed royal vessel owned by Indian emperor Aurangzeb.

Historical accounts say Every's band tortured and killed passengers aboard the Indian ship and raped many of the women before escaping to the Bahamas, a haven for pirates.

But word quickly spread of their crimes, and English King William III — under enormous pressure from a scandalized India and the influential East India Company trading giant — put a large bounty on their heads.

Detectorists and archaeologists have since located 26 similar coins stretching from Maine to the Carolinas. All but three coins turned up in New England, and none can be dated later than when the Indian ship was captured.

"When I first heard about it, I thought, 'Wait a minute, this can't be true,'" said Steve Album, a rare coin specialist based in Santa Rosa, Calif., who helped identify all of the silver Arabic coins found in New England.

"But these coins have been found legitimately and in a few instances archaeolog-

ically, and every single one predates the sacking of the ship," said Album, who has lived in Iran and has traveled widely in the Middle East.

Detectorists have also unearthed a gold nugget from a potato field perched on a hilltop in seaside Little Compton, R.I.

There's no documented evidence that naturally occurring gold has ever been found in the state. Bailey and other experts believe that the nugget likely originated somewhere along Africa's Gold Coast, a center for the slave trade in the late 17th and early 18th centuries.

Adding to the intrigue, two silver Arabic coins were recovered not far from the nugget, and Every is known to have seized a considerable amount of gold while sailing off the coast of West Africa.

Every's exploits have inspired Steven Johnson's book "Enemy of All Mankind," and the final installment of PlayStation's popular "Uncharted" video game franchise.

Earlier this year, Sony Pictures released a movie adaptation starring Tom Holland, Mark Wahlberg and Antonio Banderas.

Senate votes to ban cub petting, ownership of big cats

Tampa Bay Times

TAMPA, Fla. — In their years of animal welfare work, Carole and Howard Baskin of Tampa's Big Cat Rescue found that most customers who paid to cuddle with tiger cubs at zoos never knew the misery they were creating.

Owners of pay-to-play businesses pulled cubs from their mothers after birth, forced them to interact with the public and often confined them to tiny concrete cages when they got too large to handle.

The breeding has been a leading driver of the overpopulation

of captive big cats in the U.S. as animals who outgrew the photo stage were passed to roadside zoos and private homes.

A decade after it was first introduced, the U.S. Senate on Tuesday passed a bill to outlaw cub petting and the private ownership of big cats. The Big Cat Public Safety Act now goes to President Joe Biden for a signature.

"I'd tell someone there are thousands of tigers in backyards all over the country and the phrase we'd hear the most on our tours is 'I had no idea,'" Howard Baskin said.

Sanctuaries, zoos and universities would still be able to own big cats under the law.

Individuals who currently own big cats would be grandfathered in but required to register their pets so local authorities are aware that exotic animals live in their communities.

Carole Baskin has been pushing to end cub petting and private ownership for 30 years. It was introduced every year since 2012 but didn't pass the House until 2020 after the release of Netflix's "Tiger King" series, which focused unprecedented attention on the exploi-

tation of big cats in America.

"Tiger King" followed the antics of Joseph Maldonado-Passage, an Oklahoma zookeeper who was one of the most egregious actors in the pay-to-play industry.

The show featured Maldonado-Passage's disdain for Baskin as she raised the alarm on his abuse.

Maldonado-Passage was sentenced in 2020 to 22 years in prison for wildlife crimes that included killing five tigers to make room for new animals at his zoo, as well as plotting to have Baskin murdered.

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Croatia beats Brazil on penalty kicks

The Washington Post

Croatia, the reigning kings of World Cup penalty kicks, has done it again, this time eliminating Brazil from the competition.

After a 117th-minute goal by Bruno Petkovic saved the heavy underdogs and tied the score, Croatian goalkeeper Dominik Livakovic stopped the first Brazilian penalty kick while his countrymen did not miss.

The resulting 4-2 victory in the penalty-kick session sent Croatia to the World Cup semifinals for the second straight tournament.

Croatia has gone to penalty kicks four times in its World Cup history and has ad-

vanced each time.

Petkovic stopped all but one impossible Neymar goal the entire game.

Brazil had 11 shots on target through 120 minutes, and Neymar's extra-time goal — which tied him with the great Pelé for first on Brazil's all-time scoring list — looked to be enough to get the heavy favorites through.

But about three minutes before the final whistle of the second extra period, Petkovic worked himself into position and sent a shot that was deflected past Brazilian goalkeeper Alisson.

Brazil benefited from the return of in-

jured star Neymar in its round-of-16 game against South Korea, and he scored an incredible goal in extra time Friday that seemed likely to send the world's top-ranked team through to the semifinals. But Petkovic answered for Croatia, which prevailed in penalties.

Livakovic was the star against Japan in the round of 16, and he came through again against Brazil. The goaltender made 11 saves, and Brazil missed two penalties to send Croatia to the World Cup semifinals for the third time.

Croatia will play either the Netherlands or Argentina in the semifinals on Tuesday.

Ronaldo, Portugal look to end Morocco's run

Associated Press

DOHA, Qatar — These really are pinch-yourself times for Morocco: A first-ever spot in the quarterfinals of a World Cup — the first to take place in the Arab world, no less — and now a meeting with Portugal and its superstar striker, Cristiano Ronaldo.

Well, maybe.

Because Ronaldo has again managed to steal the spotlight in his inimitable way, even bumping Morocco's historic run to the last eight off the top of the agenda before Saturday's narrative-laden match.

Will he start, or won't he? That's the big question being asked about Ronaldo after he was dropped by Portugal coach Fernando Santos for the 6-1 win over Switzerland in the round of 16 on Tuesday.

Not only was the five-time world player of the year relegated to the bench, his replacement — 21-year-old Gonçalo Ramos — scored a hat trick to leave Santos with quite the selection dilemma.

"I hope he won't (play)," Morocco coach Walid Regragui said Friday of Ronaldo. "As a coach I know he's one of the best players in history and so I'd be delighted if he didn't play."

The announcement of Portu-

gal's team about 90 minutes before the game at Al Thumama Stadium is keenly awaited as Ronaldo prepares to play in the quarterfinals of the World Cup for just the second time in his glittering career.

Santos declined to share selection thoughts Friday for what he said would be a different kind of game to the one against Switzerland, while noting that "90% of the questions" are about Ronaldo at Portugal's pregame news conferences.

One inevitable question Santos faced was about reports that Ronaldo threatened to leave the World Cup after being told he was benched. Not true, the coach said.

"He has never told me that he wanted to leave the national team," Santos said through an interpreter. "Cristiano obviously wasn't very happy about it. He told me 'Do you really think it's a good idea?'"

Portugal is at this stage for only the third time after 1966 and 2006, perhaps surprising given the talent to have come from the country down the years.

Four years ago, Portugal lost in the round of 16 to Uruguay, though a group-stage game against Morocco was "possibly the most difficult match" the team faced, Santos said Friday.

"We won 1-0 but we had to suffer a lot to win that match," he said. "My players know that."

As for Morocco, the nation is in uncharted territory after becoming only the fourth African country to reach the quarterfinals at soccer's biggest tournament, after Cameroon (1990), Senegal (2002) and Ghana (2010). None of them reached the semifinals.

Morocco is also the only team from outside Europe or South America to make it to the last eight in Qatar.

The team's penalty-shootout victory over Spain in the last 16 sparked wild celebrations not just among its many fans in Qatar and at home.

The excitement extended to the Moroccan diaspora of around 5 million people spread mostly around Europe, which has united behind the World Cup run of the team nicknamed the "Atlas Lions." Morocco fans poured into the streets of European cities to celebrate the team's passage to the quarterfinals, which came after Morocco advanced from a group containing second-ranked Belgium and 2018 runner-up Croatia.

"We haven't got carried away by the euphoria," Regragui said.

"We've just surprised a few people and surprised a few algorithms who expected Belgium to get through ... and expected Spain to get through. We are not satisfied with where we have come so far."

Regragui, who was born in France, and 14 of the 26 players in the squad were born abroad — the highest proportion for any team at a World Cup being held in the Middle East for the first time in the tournament's 92-year history.

The Arab world's standard bearer, Morocco is in the quarterfinals on merit, too. The team has only conceded one goal — and that was an own-goal against Canada — and is proving so well-organized, with a sturdy back four headlined by Achraf Hakimi, a dedicated midfield anchored by Sofyan Amrabat, two mercurial wingers in Hakim Ziyech and Sofiane Boufal, and a striker in Youssef En-Nesyri, who occupies defenses with his relentless work rate.

Even if he is among the substitutes again, Ronaldo — playing in what is likely his last World Cup — is expected to see some time on the field. Given the drama constantly surrounding him, he's sure to be a talking point whatever happens.

Raiders blow double-digit halftime lead

Associated Press

INGLEWOOD, Calif. — A season of painful defeats for the Las Vegas Raiders just got worse.

Last month, they lost to a team whose coach was an ESPN analyst six days earlier. And on Thursday night, they allowed the opposing quarterback to direct two touchdown drives in the final four minutes after being picked up on waivers two days before the game.

Las Vegas' 17-16 loss to the Los Angeles Rams made the Raiders the first team to blow four double-digit halftime leads in a season, according to Sport-Radar, whose records go back to 1930. Seven teams had squandered three halftime leads of 10 points or more, most recently the 2020 Los Angeles Chargers.

While Indianapolis' 25-20 victory on Nov. 13 in Jeff Saturday's coaching debut was

shocking, Baker Mayfield leading an eight-play, 98-yard drive, including a 23-yard touchdown pass to Van Jefferson with 10 seconds remaining, was just as stupefying.

According to the Elias Sports Bureau, it was the longest go-ahead TD drive that began in the final two minutes over the past 45 seasons.

"It's tough. There's really cool stories and cool moments for some guys. I'm sure Baker will have that moment for the rest of his life," Raiders quarterback Derek Carr said. "It's frustrating, but it's not something that we are talking about like, 'Hey, this is a big opportunity,' because of this."

The Raiders scored on their first three drives and gained 177 yards to take a 13-3 lead before things went south. On its final six possessions, Las Vegas mustered only a field goal, turned the ball over twice and

went three-and-out three times.

Las Vegas was driving for a score late in the first half before Carr was picked off by Ernest Jones in the end zone.

"I don't know if I got tripped, but something happened," Carr said. "Mack (Hollins) was open in the back of the end zone and I was trying to get him the ball. That's a tough feeling because we were close to having a touchdown, and everyone's feeling better about today."

Carr was 11 of 20 for 137 yards and two interceptions. His 36.9 passer rating was the lowest of his nine-year career.

Davante Adams — who had eight receptions for 177 yards and two touchdowns in a 27-20 win over the Chargers four days earlier — had only three catches for 71 yards against the Rams, with none coming in the second half.

The offense wasn't the only thing that self-destructed. Cle-

lin Ferrell lined up offside on a Rams punt to give LA a first down and new life. The Rams took advantage as Cam Akers scored a 1-yard touchdown 14 plays later to get them within 16-10.

On the Rams' game-winning drive, defensive tackle Jerry Tillery was called for unsportsmanlike conduct after Mayfield was sacked at the Los Angeles 13 on first-and-10. On the next play, Mayfield hit Ben Skowronek for a 32-yard gain to reach Raiders territory with under a minute remaining.

"We didn't finish the game. The bottom line is, until we figure out how to stop losing games with mistakes that we do to ourselves, then it makes it very difficult to win," coach Josh McDaniels said.

"You can't really win until you stop from losing. Penalties and turnovers contribute to that."

Report: Snyder had role in 'toxic' Commanders culture

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Washington Commanders created a "toxic work culture" for more than two decades, "ignoring and downplaying sexual misconduct" and what former female employees described as hundreds of instances of sexual harassment by men at the top levels of the organization, according to a report published Thursday by the House Committee on Oversight and Reform.

The misconduct included Commanders owner Dan Snyder, who is accused of inappropriately touching a former employee at a dinner, having staffers produce a video "of sexually suggestive footage of cheerleaders" and ordering that women auditioning to be cheerleaders walk on the field "while he and his friends gawked from his suite through binoculars,"

according to the report.

The House committee opened its investigation in October 2021 after the NFL did not release a written report of its review of the team's workplace culture. The league's independent review by attorney Beth Wilkinson was completed in summer 2021 and resulted in a \$10 million fine to the team.

Drawing from hearings, interviews and depositions, the House report concluded Snyder interfered in its investigation and Wilkinson's review, which stemmed in 2020 from former employees alleging rampant sexual harassment by team executives.

The team owner interfered with the House committee's investigation by "intimidating witnesses," "refusing to release former employees from their confidentiality obligations" and using a "secret" agreement with

the NFL to block access to more than 40,000 documents collected during Wilkinson's review, according to the report.

Snyder also conducted a separate shadow investigation, which the report said was used by his lawyers to "cast him as the victim of a defamation campaign ... and deflect responsibility for the team's toxic work culture."

The House committee said Snyder was evasive, misleading and said more than 100 times he did not recall things during his deposition.

The NFL was not shielded from criticism in the committee's report, which said the league "misled the public about its handling of the Wilkinson investigation" and "has not sought true accountability for those responsible." The report also said the NFL doesn't ensure "that its own workplaces are free from

discrimination and harassment," citing the fact that the NFL does not require teams to report confidentiality and non-disclosure agreements to league headquarters.

The NFL defended its cooperation with the House investigation in a statement on Thursday, saying it produced "nearly a half million pages of documents," responded to written inquiries and "voluntarily participated" in the June 22 public hearing where NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell answered questions.

The NFL also said the Commanders had put in place recommendations that Wilkinson suggested.

The league said it is committed to ensuring all employees work in an environment "that is free from discrimination, harassment or other forms of illegal or unprofessional conduct."

Trea Turner, Phillies finalize 11-year contract for \$300M

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Bryce Harper lobbed Philadelphia's first recruiting pitch over the summer when the injured All-Star used a guest stint in the broadcast booth to advocate for the future free agent and his former Washington teammate.

"Trea Turner, he's my favorite player in the league," Harper said. "Not even close."

Harper and Turner have been reunited by the National League champion Phillies for the upcoming season and well beyond. Turner's \$300 million, 11-year contract with the Phillies was finalized Thursday, a deal that'll take the 29-year-old shortstop and 2021 NL batting champion into his 40s.

A long-term risk, perhaps, for the Phillies, but one owner John Middleton and president Dave Dombrowski were willing to take with the Phillies' championship window open for the next few seasons. Harper still has nine years left on his \$330 million, 11-year free-agent deal, though he could miss at least two months as he recovers from elbow surgery.

Turner can certainly help steady a lineup that lost a combined no-hitter to the Houston Astros in the World Series and

lost in six games — and likely from the top of the order, knocking free-swinging NL home run champ Kyle Schwarber down a spot or two.

Schwarber, who struck out 200 times, did steal a career-high 10 bases. Turner, though, has led the league in steals twice and had 27 last season.

"He stole a lot of bases last year. He's kind of coming around there," Turner said with a laugh. "I don't know if I want to kick him out of there."

Turner hit .298 with 21 homers and a career-high 100 RBIs this year in his first full season with the Los Angeles Dodgers. He also scored 101 runs.

"We pictured playing with Bryce and Schwarber and a lot of those guys on the team now," Turner said at Citizens Bank Park. "It just seemed like a lot of things added up and pointed us in this direction."

A lot of things. Like money. Turner gets salaries of \$27,272,727 in each of the next 10 seasons and \$27,272,730 in 2033. He also will make a \$100,000 annual contribution to Phillies charities. His deal includes a full no-trade provision.

Turner and his family met with Dombrowski, general

manager Sam Fuld and manager Rob Thomson last month in Florida. Turner had other suitors and turned down at least one richer offer to sign with Philadelphia.

"This place is fun to play," Turner said. "I watched a lot of playoff games and this place was rocking."

Dombrowski downplayed the decision to spend so much money on Turner, especially deep into his 30s, when players are traditionally on the downside of their careers.

"I do think sometimes you have to differentiate between a normal big league player and an elite athlete," Dombrowski said. "I do think there are some differences in that regard, too. We have done a lot of research in that regard. An elite athlete can last longer at the performance level than, say, other individuals can."

Bigger bases and restrictions on defensive positioning coming to the game next year likely enhanced the free-agent market for Turner, because those are two changes that make his athleticism and defensive versatility more valuable.

He turned down a \$19.65 million qualifying offer from the Dodgers in November.

\$162M deal keeps Nimmo with Mets, source says

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Center fielder Brandon Nimmo is staying with the free-spending New York Mets, agreeing to a \$162 million, eight-year contract, according to a person familiar with the deal.

The person spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity Thursday night because the agreement is subject to a successful physical and no announcement had been made.

"Glad to be back! Let's go!" Nimmo posted Thursday night on Twitter.

A quality leadoff hitter with an excellent eye and a .385 career on-base percentage, Nimmo became a free agent last month for the first time. He was a key performer as the Mets returned to the playoffs this year for the first time since 2016.

Known for his constant hustle and big smile, Nimmo batted .274 with 16 homers and a team-high 102 runs, a career best. Hampered by injuries in the past, the left-handed hitter also set career highs with 64 RBIs and 151 games played. His seven triples tied for most in the National League.

"He's a good player. He's established himself," Mets manager Buck Showalter said Tuesday at the winter meetings in San Diego. "He had a post-up, good physical year where he, for whatever reason he seemed to get through a lot of things that have been a challenge in the past, that didn't snowball into something where he had to sit out a lot of games."

Bringing back the affable Nimmo means New York is poised to return its entire everyday lineup intact from a team that tied for fifth in the majors in runs and won 101 regular-season games — second-most in franchise history.

Red Sox sign reliever to \$17.5M deal

Associated Press

BOSTON — Right-handed reliever Chris Martin and the Boston Red Sox finalized a \$17.5 million, two-year contract on Thursday.

Martin gets a \$4 million signing bonus, of which \$1 million is payable this month, \$1.5 million next June and \$1.5 million in June 2024. He has salaries of \$6 million next season and \$7.5

million in 2024.

The 36-year-old went 4-1 with two saves and a 3.05 ERA for the Chicago Cubs and Los Angeles Dodgers last season. In his career, he is 9-16 with a 3.84 ERA in 269 relief appearances for six teams, winning the World Series with Atlanta in 2021.

He joins Hall of Famer Dennis Eckersley as the only pitchers since 1900 who have had

more than one season with at least 50 innings pitched and five walks or fewer.

The Red Sox first signed Martin as a free agent in 2011 and he pitched three seasons in the system before he was traded to the Colorado Rockies in 2013.

As part of the deal, Martin will make a charitable contribution not to exceed 1% of his contract.