

Trump shows support for Pentagon pick

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President-elect Donald Trump on Friday offered a public show of support for Pete Hegseth, his embattled choice to lead the Defense Department, whose confirmation by the Senate is in doubt as he faces questions over allegations of excessive drinking, sexual assault and his views on women in combat.

“Pete Hegseth is doing very well,” Trump posted on his social media site. “He will be a fantastic, high energy, Secretary of Defense.” The president added that “Pete is a WINNER, and there is nothing that can be done to change that!!!”

Hegseth, a former Fox News Host, Army National Guard major and combat veteran, spent much of the week on Capitol Hill trying to salvage his Cabinet nomination and reassure Republican senators that he is fit to lead Trump’s Pentagon.

The effort has quickly become a test of Trump’s clout and of how far loyalty for the president-elect goes with Republican

senators who have concerns about his nominees.

Trump has already met some resistance. Two of his other choices have stepped aside as they faced intense scrutiny: former congressman Matt Gaetz, his first choice for attorney general; and Chad Chronister, a Florida sheriff who was Trump’s first choice to lead the Drug Enforcement Administration.

Vice President-elect JD Vance also made a show of support for Hegseth on Friday, part of a full-court press by members of Trump’s Make America Great Again movement.

“If you’re a GOP Senator who voted for Lloyd Austin, but criticize @PeteHegseth, then maybe you’re in the wrong political party!” Vance wrote on X.

Hegseth has promised not to drink on the job and told lawmakers he never engaged in sexual misconduct, even as his professional views on female troops have also come under intensifying scrutiny.

He said as recently as last

month that women “straight up” should not serve in combat.

Two female senators, Republican Joni Ernst of Iowa and Democrat Tammy Duckworth of Illinois, sit on the Armed Services Committee.

Both are combat veterans who served in the Iraq war, and Duckworth lost both legs when a Blackhawk helicopter she was piloting was hit by a rocket-propelled grenade.

Ernst, who is also a sexual assault survivor, stopped short of an endorsement after her meeting with Hegseth this week. She said she appreciates his military service and they “had a frank and thorough conversation.”

Hegseth has yet to meet with Duckworth.

Trump’s transition team has been looking at potential replacements if Hegseth’s nomination cannot move forward, including former Trump rival Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis.

DeSantis plans to attend the Army-Navy football game with Trump on Dec. 14, according to

a person familiar with the Florida governor’s plans who spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity to discuss them before a public announcement.

DeSantis and Trump had spoken about the defense secretary post when they saw each other Tuesday at a memorial service for sheriff deputies in West Palm Beach, Fla., according to people familiar with the matter who said Trump was interested in DeSantis for the post, and the governor was receptive.

DeSantis also is poised to select a replacement for the expected Senate vacancy to be created by Marco Rubio becoming secretary of state.

Trump’s daughter-in-law Lara Trump is seen as the preferred choice to fill the Senate seat by those in the president-elect’s orbit.

Hegseth is facing resistance from lawmakers as reports have emerged about his past, including the revelation that he made a settlement payment after being accused of a sexual assault that he denies.

Biden eyes preemptive pardons for officials, allies

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden is weighing whether to issue sweeping pardons for officials and allies who the White House fears could be unjustly targeted by President-elect Donald Trump’s administration, a preemptive move that would be a novel and risky use of the president’s extraordinary constitutional power.

The deliberations so far are largely at the level of White House lawyers. But Biden himself has discussed the topic with

some senior aides, according to two people familiar with the matter who spoke on condition of anonymity Thursday to discuss the sensitive subject. No decisions have been made, the people said, and it is possible Biden opts to do nothing at all.

Pardons are historically afforded to those accused of specific crimes — and usually those who have already been convicted of an offense — but Biden’s team is considering issuing them for those who have not even been investigated, let

alone charged. It fears that Trump and his allies, who have boasted of enemies lists and exacting “retribution,” could launch investigations that would be reputationally and financially costly for their targets even if they don’t result in prosecutions.

While the president’s pardon power is absolute, Biden’s use in this fashion would mark a significant expansion of how it is deployed, and some Biden aides fear it could lay the groundwork for an even more drastic usage

by Trump. They also worry that issuing pardons would feed into claims by Trump and his allies that the individuals committed acts that necessitated immunity.

Recipients could include infectious disease specialist Dr. Anthony Fauci, who was instrumental in combating the coronavirus pandemic and who has become a pariah to conservatives angry about mask mandates and vaccines. Others include witnesses in Trump’s criminal or civil trials.

US, Japan, Philippine forces jointly patrol in South China

Associated Press

MANILA, Philippines — The United States deployed a reconnaissance aircraft while Japan and the Philippines sent navy ships in a joint patrol in the disputed South China Sea on Friday, two days after the allied forces condemned actions by Chinese coast guard vessels against Philippine patrol ships.

The U.S. Indo-Pacific Command said the joint patrol was conducted in the Philippines' exclusive economic zone by allies and partners to "uphold the right to freedom of navigation and overflight" and "other lawful uses of the sea and international airspace."

Those phrases are used by the U.S., Japan and the Philippines to oppose China's increasingly aggressive actions in the disputed waters.

Two Philippine security officials said the patrol was staged about 40 nautical miles from Scarborough Shoal, a fishing area disputed by Beijing and Manila off the northwestern Philippines. The two officials spoke on condition of anonymity.

China claims the South China Sea virtually in its entirety and has guarded it assertively with its coast guard, navy and suspected militia fleets. They have confronted forces from rival claimant states including the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei.

Indonesia also has had face-offs with Chinese coast guard ships escorting fishermen in the gas-rich Natuna waters in the southern fringes of the South China Sea.

The joint naval patrol, the latest in recent months by the Philippines, the U.S. and their security partners, was delayed by several typhoons that battered the region and was not in reaction to a confrontation on Wednesday that involved Chinese and Philippine ships off Scarborough Shoal, the two Philippine officials said.

The Philippine coast guard said Chinese coast guard vessels, backed by navy ships, fired powerful water cannons and blocked and sideswiped a much smaller Philippine bureau of fisheries vessel escorted by

coast guard ships off Scarborough Shoal.

The Philippine vessels were delivering fuel, food and other aid to Filipino fishermen in the shoal, which has been closely guarded by the Chinese coast guard since a tense 2012 territorial standoff with Philippine ships.

The Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs protested the Chinese actions.

The Chinese coast guard provided another account of the incident. It said the Philippine vessels encroached on China's territory, prompting it to take action. It said, without offering proof, that a Philippine vessel maneuvered in a way that led to a collision.

The United States, Japan, the European Union and other Western allies expressed alarm over the hostilities, which have increased in frequency since last year.

The U.S. has warned that it is obligated to defend the Philippines, a treaty ally, if Filipino forces come under attack in the South China Sea.

S. Korea's ruling party head backs suspension

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korea's governing party chief expressed support Friday for suspending the constitutional powers of President Yoon Suk Yeol for imposing martial law this week, in a bombshell reversal that makes Yoon's impeachment more likely.

Opposition parties are pushing for a parliamentary vote on Yoon's impeachment on Saturday, calling his short-lived martial law declaration an "unconstitutional, illegal rebellion or coup." But they need support from some members of the president's People Power Party to get the two-thirds majority required to pass the impeachment motion.

The turmoil resulting from Yoon's nighttime martial law decree has frozen South Korean politics and caused worry among neighbors, including fellow democracy Japan, and Seoul's top ally, the United States, as one of the strongest democracies in Asia faces a political crisis that could unseat its leader.

During a party meeting, PPP leader Han Dong-hun stressed the need to suspend Yoon's presidential duties and power swiftly, saying he poses a "significant risk of extreme actions, like reattempting to impose martial law, which could potentially put the Republic of Korea and its citizens in great danger."

Han said he had received intelligence that Yoon had ordered the country's defense counterintelligence commander to arrest and detain unspecified key politicians based on accusations of "antistate activities" when martial law was in force.

Chinese vessel hijacked off Somali coast

Associated Press

MOGADISHU, Somalia — A Chinese-owned fishing vessel with 18 crew members aboard was hijacked last week off the northeastern coast of Somalia, local authorities said Friday.

An official in Xaafuun district in the semiautonomous state of Puntland, where the vessel is being held, told journalists that the hijackers include the ship's security guards.

The European Union's antipi-

racy naval force, Eunavfor Atalanta, brought global attention to the incident after issuing a statement on Thursday that confirmed the local maritime authorities had notified it and investigations revealed that armed men were in control.

"Regarding the crewmembers, there are up to 18 people. None has been injured. After investigation, the event has been classified as armed robbery at sea," the statement read in part.

A local businessman familiar with the incident, who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisal by the government, said that at the time of hijacking, the ship had two guards aboard.

Unverified reports from the area suggest that the hijackers initially demanded a \$5 million ransom but were offered \$1 million, which they allegedly refused.

Somali authorities have not confirmed these claims.

Musk, Ramaswamy take DOGE to Capitol

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Billionaire Elon Musk and fellow entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy spent several hours Thursday swapping ideas with lawmakers about President-elect Donald Trump's DOGE initiative to dismantle parts of the federal government.

Meeting behind closed doors at the Capitol, Musk told the mostly Republican lawmakers they would be keeping a "naughty and nice" list of those who join in the budget slashing proposals and those who don't, according to lawmakers who attended.

"We're going to see a lot of change around here in Washington," said House Speaker Mike Johnson, as Musk, with his young son on his shoulders, breezed by and into the private meeting.

Trump tapped the two business titans to head his Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE, a nongovernmental task force assigned to find

ways to fire federal workers, cut programs and slash federal regulations — all part of what he calls his "Save America" agenda for a second term in the White House.

Washington has seen this before, with ambitious efforts to reduce the size and scope of the federal government that historically have run into resistance when the public is confronted with cuts to trusted programs that millions of Americans depend on for jobs, health care, military security and everyday needs.

But this time Trump is staffing his administration with battle-tested architects of sweeping proposals, some outlined in Project 2025, to severely reduce and reshape the government. Musk and Ramaswamy have said they plan to work alongside the White House's Office of Management and Budget, headed by Trump's nominee Russ Vought, a mastermind of past cuts.

"DOGE has a historic oppor-

tunity for structural reductions in the federal government," Musk and Ramaswamy wrote in an op-ed in The Wall Street Journal. "We are prepared for the onslaught."

Trump said Thursday that he would also name venture capitalist and former PayPal executive David Sacks to be the "White House A.I. & Crypto Czar" and lead the Presidential Council of Advisors for Science and Technology. Trump said in a social media post that Sacks would help "steer us away from Big Tech bias and censorship."

Sacks visited Mar-a-Lago earlier Thursday, according to an investor who held an event at Trump's Florida club. The longtime conservative was key to introducing Vice President-elect JD Vance to donors, helping him prove he could raise money. Sacks hosted a fundraiser for Trump and Vance at his San Francisco home.

Musk and Ramaswamy faced a first test as they sat on a auditorium stage in the Capitol

basement, as House and Senate lawmakers, almost exclusively Republicans, lined up at the microphones to share ideas for ways to address the nation's budget imbalances.

Rep. Virginia Foxx, R-N.C., the chair of the Education and Workforce Committee, brought up the Department of Education as a good place to cut. Rep. Derrick Van Orden, R-Wis., said to look at office space and how little of it is being used. Others talked about workers returning to their offices.

Afterward, Johnson declined to say if Medicare, Social Security or other popular programs were off limits for cuts, describing this first meeting as a "brainstorming" session with more to come.

"They said everything has to be looked at," said Rep. Aaron Bean, R-Fla., who joined with Rep. Pete Sessions, R-Texas, in launching what they are calling the DOGE caucus in the House, with more than 50 Republicans and two Democratic members.

Ex-senator nominated to be ambassador to China

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President-elect Donald Trump has selected former Sen. David Perdue of Georgia to be the U.S. ambassador to China, leaning on a former business executive-turned-politician to serve as the administration's envoy to America's most potent economic and military adversary.

Trump said in a social media post Thursday that Perdue "brings valuable expertise to help build our relationship with China."

Perdue lost his Senate seat to Democrat Jon Ossoff four years ago and ran unsuccessfully in a 2022 primary against Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp. Perdue pushed Trump's debunked lies

about electoral fraud during his failed bid for Georgia governor.

During his time in the Senate, Perdue was labeled as "anti-China" in a 2019 Chinese think tank report. The former Georgia lawmaker advocated for a more robust naval force to cope with threats, including from China.

Economic tensions will be a big part of the U.S.-China picture for the new administration.

Trump has threatened to impose sweeping new tariffs on Mexico, Canada and China as soon as he takes office as part of his effort to crack down on illegal immigration and drugs. He said he would impose a 10% tariff on goods from China, as one of his first executive orders.

Trump talks up election, transition at Fox awards

Associated Press

GREENVALE, N.Y. — Not yet even in office, Donald Trump said Thursday he's already accomplished more than President Joe Biden did in his entire term.

Trump, who has been largely ensconced at his Mar-a-Lago club in recent weeks as he's worked to staff his new administration, made the comment as he ventured to New York's Long Island to be honored as part of Fox Nation's annual Patriot Awards on Fox's streaming platform.

"I think you have seen more happen in the last two weeks than you have in the last four years," Trump told the crowd at the Tilles Center for the Per-

forming Arts.

"It was a tremendous day, a tremendous night," he said, recalling his election victory in a 10-minute acceptance speech that sounded like a highlight reel of his campaign rally speeches.

The speech came complete with a live performance of "God Bless the USA" by the singer Lee Greenwood, calls to "get the criminals out of our country" and an embrace of all-paper election ballots and mandatory voter ID.

The annual awards "honor and recognize America's finest patriots, including military veterans, first responders and other inspirational everyday heroes," according to Fox.

Appeals court upholds law forcing sale or ban of TikTok

The Washington Post

A Washington federal appeals court has turned away a challenge to a fast-approaching nationwide ban of short-video app TikTok unless it divests from Chinese ownership by Jan. 19, affirming the law as constitutional.

The U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit on Friday sided with the Justice Department, which argued that the U.S. government has the authority to ban TikTok based on the national security risk that the wildly popular social media platform could be pressured by the Chinese government to expose Americans' data or influence what they see. TikTok's parent, ByteDance, is based in China.

TikTok had argued to the three-judge panel, unsuccessfully, that the ban must be struck down for infringement on the free speech rights of the app's users and owners under the First Amendment of the Constitution.

"The Government has offered persuasive evidence demonstrating that the Act is narrowly tailored to protect national security," the court wrote in its opinion.

TikTok is expected to ask the Supreme Court to take up the case.

The court also said yearslong bipartisan investigations into the app, and the government's willingness to consider TikTok's alternatives, weighed in favor of the law.

However, the judges said they rejected the government's "ambitious argument" that the law did not "implicate the First Amendment at all," saying that it would impose a "disproportionate burden on TikTok, an entity engaged in expressive activity." The government had suggested that TikTok's ownership by a foreign company left it without First Amendment rights, despite it having roughly 170 million U.S. accounts.

The decision sets up a poten-

tial showdown with President-elect Donald Trump. Having backed a ban during his first term in the White House, he said on the campaign trail that he would try to "save TikTok," though many of his choices for key posts in his administration are China hawks who have supported outlawing U.S. access to the platform.

Trump is expected to try to halt the TikTok ban, people familiar with his views on the matter told *The Washington Post* in early November, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss private conversations.

Alan Rozenshtein, a former national security adviser to the Justice Department, said Trump could take any of three actions to help TikTok fend off the ban: persuading Congress to repeal the law, directing his new attorney general not to enforce it, or declaring that ByteDance has satisfied the statute by performing a "qualified divestiture" of TikTok.

Syrian insurgents advance on Homs

Associated Press

BEIRUT — Thousands of people fled the central Syrian city of Homs, the country's third largest, as insurgents seized two towns on the outskirts Friday, positioning themselves for an assault on a potentially major prize in their march against President Bashar Assad.

The move, reported by pro-government media and an opposition war monitor, was the latest in the stunning advances by opposition fighters over the past week that have so far met little resistance from Assad's forces. A day earlier, fighters captured the central city of Hama, Syria's fourth largest, after the army said it withdrew to avoid fighting inside the city and spare the lives of civilians.

The insurgents, led by the jihadist Hayat Tahrir al-Sham group, have vowed to march to Homs and the capital, Damascus, Assad's seat of power. Videos circulating online showed a highway jammed with cars full of people fleeing Homs, a city with a large population belonging to Assad's Alawite sect, seen as his core supporters.

If Assad's military loses Homs, it could be a crippling blow. The city, parts of which were controlled by insurgents until 2014, is at an important intersection between Damascus and Syria's coastal provinces of Latakia and Tartus, where Assad enjoys wide support. Homs province borders Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan.

The foreign ministers of Iran, Iraq and Syria — three close allies — gathered Friday to consult on the war. Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein expressed "deep concern," saying his government is closely following the situation in Syria.

Romania's top court annuls first round of presidential vote after intel release

Associated Press

BUCHAREST, Romania — A top Romanian court on Friday annulled the first round of the country's presidential election, days after allegations that Russia ran a coordinated online campaign to promote the far-right outsider who won the first round.

The Constitutional Court's unprecedented decision — which is final — came after President Klaus Iohannis declassified intelligence on Wednesday that alleged Russia ran a sprawling campaign comprising thousands of social media accounts to promote

Calin Georgescu across platforms such as TikTok and Telegram.

The intelligence files were from the Romanian Intelligence Service, the Foreign Intelligence Service, the Special Telecommunication Service and the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

Despite being an outsider who declared zero campaign spending, Georgescu emerged as the front-runner on Nov. 24. He was due to face reformist Elena Lasconi of the Save Romania Union party in a runoff on Sunday.

A new date will now be set to

rerun the vote from scratch. Some 951 voting stations had already opened abroad on Friday for the runoff for Romania's large diaspora but had to be halted.

Lasconi strongly condemned the court's decision, saying it was "illegal, immoral and crushes the very essence of democracy."

Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu said in a statement the annulment was "the only correct solution" following the intelligence drop which revealed the "Romanian people's vote was flagrantly distorted as a result of Russian interference."

Campbell's gambles lead to win for Lions

Associated Press

DETROIT — Dan Campbell's gambles paid off.

Detroit went for it on fourth down for a fifth time to set up Jake Bates' 35-yard field goal as time expired, Jared Goff threw three touchdown passes and the Lions clinched a playoff spot with a 34-31 victory over the Green Bay Packers on Thursday night.

Campbell has been perhaps the NFL's most aggressive coach since taking over what was a league laughingstock in 2021, but he turned it up a notch against the Packers with a short-handed defense that he wanted to keep off the field.

"That was how I wanted to play that team with where we are at," Campbell said.

The NFC-best Lions (12-1) broke a franchise record with their 11th straight win — including two over the Packers (9-4) — to stay ahead of Minnesota (10-2) in the highly competitive NFC North.

"This will be one of those you'll never forget," Campbell said.

Campbell kept his offense on the field on a fourth-and-1 at the Green Bay 21 with 43 seconds left.

David Montgomery ran for 7 yards, barely getting a handoff from Goff after the quarterback got his feet tangled up and was falling toward the turf.

"It's a bad feeling," Goff said.

The play ensured the Lions could try a field goal without giving Green Bay the ball back, and Bates hit his third game-winning kick this season.

"I just felt like we needed to end it on offense," Campbell said. "I did not want to give the ball back and I believed we could convert. I trust the O-line. I trust David."

Goff threw two touchdown passes on fourth-and-goal, one to Tim Patrick, who had two TD catches. He also threw an interception in the third quarter to set up one of Josh Jacobs' ca-

reer-high-matching three TD runs.

Goff found Jahmyr Gibbs open in the end zone for a 2-yard pass on a fourth down with 11 seconds left in the first half to put Detroit ahead 17-7. Goff later connected with Patrick on a go-ahead, 1-yard touchdown pass midway through the fourth quarter.

Green Bay took advantage of the only time Campbell's aggressiveness didn't pan out, denying Gibbs on a fourth-down run late in the third quarter from the Detroit 31.

Jacobs scored for a third time on a 3-yard run on the ensuing drive.

"The risk was there," Campbell said.

Brandon McManus made a 32-yard field goal with 3:38 left to pull the Packers into a 31-all tie in a game that had four lead changes earlier in the second half.

"That's exactly the kind of game we expected," Green Bay

coach Matt LaFleur said. "It was tough and it went back and forth. There were just a couple plays that didn't go our way."

The Lions' final drive began with Goff's 19-yard pass to Jameson Williams. He also connected with Amon-Ra St. Brown for 16 yards on the decisive possession.

Goff finished 32 of 41 for 283 yards, and six Lions had at least five receptions, the first time that's happened in NFL history, according to OptaSTATS.

"They have great playmakers and they just get them the ball," LaFleur said. "Jared Goff is an excellent quarterback and we gave him time to throw."

Jordan Love was 12 of 20 for 206 yards with a touchdown pass to Tucker Kraft early in the third quarter.

"They have a really good offense, but so do we," Love said. "I don't think there was any extra pressure on us. We just got off to a slow start."

North Carolina interviews Belichick for coaching job

Associated Press

North Carolina has interviewed former New England Patriots coach and six-time Super Bowl champion Bill Belichick for its head coaching position, two people with knowledge of the situation said Thursday.

Both people spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because the school isn't commenting on its search.

Belichick's interview, first reported by Inside Carolina, comes a week after the school fired its winningest coach in College Football Hall of Famer

Mack Brown. The school announced Nov. 26 that Brown wouldn't return for a seventh season in his second stint at the school, with Brown staying on to coach last weekend's rivalry loss to N.C. State.

Former Cleveland Browns coach Freddie Kitchens is working as the interim coach for an upcoming bowl game as UNC conducts its search.

Moving on from the 73-year-old Brown to hire the 72-year-old Belichick would mean UNC is turning to a coach who has never worked at the college lev-

el, yet had incredible NFL success alongside quarterback Tom Brady throughout most of his 24-year tenure with the Patriots that ended last season.

UNC's opening comes at a time of rapid changes in college athletics with free player movement through the transfer portal and players able to cash in on their athletic fame with endorsement opportunities.

There's also the impending arrival of revenue sharing, part of a \$2.8 billion antitrust settlement proposal that gained preliminary approval by a judge in

October.

"I think it's a great time for me to get out," Brown said after Saturday's loss to the Wolfpack. "This isn't the game that I signed up for. It's changed so much."

In a UNC-produced podcast earlier this week, athletic director Bubba Cunningham said all the coaches the school is talking with about its job "are playing," with college football having reached its conference title games before unveiling the 12-team College Football Playoff and bowl assignments.

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Pride, big bucks at stake in final rankings

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — There's more than just school pride and bragging rights to all that bellying over who might be in and who might be out of college football's first 12-team playoff.

Try the more than \$115 million that will be spread across the conferences at the end of the season, all depending on who gets in and which teams go the farthest.

According to the College Football Playoff website, the 12 teams simply making the bracket earn their conferences \$4 million each. Another \$4 million goes to conferences whose teams get into the quarterfinals. Then, there's \$6 million more for teams that make the semifinals and another \$6 million for those who play for the title.

Most of this bonanza comes courtesy of ESPN, which is forking over \$1.3 billion a year to televise the new postseason. A lot of that money is already ear-

marked — more goes to the Big Ten and Southeastern Conference than the Big 12 or Atlantic Coast — but a lot is up for grabs in the 11 games that will play out between the opening round on Dec. 20 and the final on Jan. 20.

In all, the teams that make the title game will bring \$20 million to their conferences, all of which distribute that money, along with billions in TV revenue and other sources, in different ways. In fiscal 2022-23, the Big Ten, for instance, reported revenue of nearly \$880 million and distributed about \$60.5 million to most of its members.

The massive stakes might help explain the unabashed lobbying coming from some corners of the football world, as the tension grows in advance of Sunday's final rankings, which will set the bracket.

Earlier this week, Big 12 commissioner Brett Yormark lit into the selection committee. The Big 12 doesn't have a single

team ranked higher than 15.

That does two things: It positions the Big 12 as a one-bid league, and also threatens to make its champion — either Arizona State or Iowa State — the fifth-best among conference titlists that get automatic bids. Only the top four of those get byes, which could cost the Big 12 a spot in the quarterfinals — or \$4 million.

"The committee continues to show time and time again that they are paying attention to logos versus résumés," Yormark said this week, while slamming the idea of teams with two losses in his conference being ranked worse than teams with three in the SEC.

The ACC is also staring at a one-bid season with only No. 8 SMU inside the cut line of this week's projected bracket. Miami's loss last week all but bumped the Hurricanes out of the playoffs, a snub that ACC commissioner Jim Phillips said

left him "incredibly shocked and disappointed."

"As we look ahead to the final rankings, we hope the committee will reconsider and put a deserving Miami in the field," Phillips said in a statement.

The lobbying and bickering filters down to the campuses that feel the impact. And, of course, to social media.

One of the most entertaining episodes came this week when athletic directors at Iowa State and SMU went back and forth about whose team was more deserving.

There are a few stray millions that the selection committee cannot really influence, including a \$3 million payment to conferences that make the playoff.

In a reminder that all these kids are going to school, the conferences get \$300,000 per football team that meets academic requirements to participate in the postseason. (That's basically everyone).

NBA returning to China for pair of preseason games

Associated Press

The NBA is returning to China, striking a deal to play preseason games there more than five years after the league was effectively banned over Commissioner Adam Silver not punishing Daryl Morey for tweeting support of anti-government protesters in Hong Kong.

The Brooklyn Nets and the Phoenix Suns will play in China's gambling hub of Macao on Oct. 10, 2025, and again two days later, the NBA announced on Friday. A person with knowledge of the matter told The Associated Press that there are plans for two more preseason games in China in 2026.

The Nets and Suns will play at Macao's Venetian Arena, which is owned by the Las Vegas Sands Corp. — which is a casino operator there as well. Sands president and chief operating

officer Patrick Dumont became governor of the Dallas Mavericks late last year after his family acquired the team.

"We're incredibly excited to be partnering with Sands to bring NBA games back to Macao beginning next year," NBA deputy commissioner Mark Tatum said in Macao, adding that the agreement is "a significant milestone in the continued global growth of basketball."

The Nets are owned by Joe Tsai, the chairman of Chinese tech giant Alibaba.

To essentially kick off the return of NBA games to China, there will be a celebrity game in Macao on Saturday. Basketball Hall of Famers Tony Parker, Ray Allen and Tracy McGrady, along with former NBA standouts Stephon Marbury, DeMarcus Cousins and Cuttino Mobley are the headline attractions. All

took part in Friday's event to announce the Suns-Nets games.

Friday's announcement caps a long series of moves toward some sort of return to normalcy between China and the league. The NBA, on some level, has been welcomed back for a while: Miami's Jimmy Butler, who has an endorsement deal with Chinese apparel company Li-Ning, has toured the country and drawn large crowds, while Golden State's Stephen Curry and Sacramento's De'Aaron Fox drew enormous crowds when they visited in September.

Then in October, Silver said he thought the league would "bring games back to China at some point."

"NBA basketball is a global sport that attracts people of different ages, backgrounds and cultures. It creates exciting experiences that connect people

while playing a positive role in communities," Dumont said. "Sands is honored to bring The NBA China Games to Macao so that the most elite level of basketball can be experienced directly by the fans who are so passionate about it."

The geopolitical rift between China and the league started in October 2019 when Morey, then the general manager of the Houston Rockets and now GM of the Philadelphia 76ers, tweeted support for anti-government protesters in Hong Kong. The tweet was deleted quickly, but the fallout lasted years and Beijing was clearly displeased by Silver supporting Morey's right to speak out on the issue.

"If that's the consequences of us adhering to our values, we still feel it's critically important we adhere to those values," Silver said at the time.

Cavaliers overpower Nuggets 126-114

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Donovan Mitchell scored 28 points, Darius Garland added 24 and the Cleveland Cavaliers improved to 13-1 at home with a 126-114 victory Thursday night over the Denver Nuggets, who wasted a triple-double by Nikola Jokic.

The Cavs made a season-high 22 3-pointers and extended their streak of making at least 10 3s to a club record 28 games dating to last season.

Cleveland outscored Denver 66-18 from behind the arc.

Jokic had 27 points, 20 rebounds and 11 assists, giving him his 139th career triple-double — one more than Hall of Famer Magic Johnson. Jokic only trails Oscar Robertson (181) and teammate Russell Westbrook (200) on the career list.

Caris LeVert added 21 points off the bench, Evan Mobley scored 20 and Jarrett Allen had 15 rebounds for Cleveland, which improved to 5-0 against Western Conference teams.

Michael Porter Jr. scored 24 and Jamal Murray 19 for the Nuggets.

■ **Mavericks 137, Wizards 101:** Luka Dončić had 21 points, 10 assists and 10 rebounds and Kyrie Irving added 25 points to lead Dallas to a victory over Washington, their 16th straight loss.

Washington tied a franchise record for consecutive defeats and fell to 2-18. It's the second straight season the Wizards have had a 16-game skid.

Dallas made 11 of its first 16 shots from 3-point range and finished 20 of 38 from beyond the arc for its sixth win in a row.

Malcolm Brogdon scored 16 for the Wizards, who were without Kyle Kuzma (left rib sprain) and Corey Kispert (left ankle sprain).

It was the 78th triple-double for Dončić, moving him into a tie for seventh on the career list with Wilt Chamberlain and

James Harden. Next on the list is Dallas coach Jason Kidd at 107.

■ **Thunder 129, Raptors 92:** Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 30 points, Jalen Williams had 20 and Oklahoma City routed Toronto for their sixth win in seven games.

Isaiah Joe scored 16 points and Isaiah Hartenstein had 16 rebounds as the Western Conference-leading Thunder improved to 8-3 on the road.

The Thunder had nine blocks and nine steals in the first half and finished with 11 blocks and 14 steals.

RJ Barrett had 17 points and 12 rebounds, and Scottie Barnes added 12 points and 12 rebounds but the Raptors lost by their biggest margin this season, eclipsing a 30-point loss to Cleveland on opening night.

Toronto shot 11 for 45 from 3-point range (24.4%), its lowest percentage of the season.

■ **Knicks 125, Hornets 101:** OG Anunoby scored 15 of his 25 points during a third quarter in which he also blocked consecutive 3-point shots on opposite sides of the floor, helping New York pull away to beat Charlotte.

Karl-Anthony Towns had 27 points and 16 rebounds in the Knicks' fourth straight victory. Jalen Brunson scored 24 points, 19 in the first quarter.

Anunoby's scoring broke open what was a one-point game early in the second half, and his back-to-back blocks late in the third had fans chanting "OG! OG!" after a 28-6 spurt gave New York a 93-70 advantage.

Brandon Miller scored 26 points in the Hornets' seventh straight loss.

■ **Pelicans 126, Suns 124:** Brandon Ingram scored 29 points in his return from a five-game absence, Herb Jones capped off his first game back from a shoulder injury by blocking Devin Booker's last-second

shot, and New Orleans snapped a nine-game losing streak with a victory over Phoenix.

CJ McCollum scored 25 points, but missed a free throw with 3 seconds left, allowing the Suns a final shot for the win or tie.

When Booker, who had 28 points, received an inbound pass at the 3-point line, he rose for a shot and had the ball swatted away by Jones, who hadn't played in 18 games.

Jones had one of this four steals with 2:02 left and made a left corner 3 about 13 seconds later to give New Orleans a 121-117 lead. He finished with 12 points.

Trey Murphy scored 19 points, Dejounte Murray scored 17 and rookie center Yves Missi had 12 rebounds for the Pelicans,

Bradley Beal scored 24 points for Phoenix.

■ **Bulls 139, Spurs 124:** Nikola Vucevic had a season-high 39 points, Ayo Dosunmu had 27 points, 11 assists and 10 rebounds and Chicago beat San Antonio with Victor Wembanyama sidelined with a back injury.

Dosunmu had season highs in points, assists and rebounds in collecting the first triple-double of his four-year career.

Keldon Johnson had a season-high 28 points and Devin Vassell added 17 points for San Antonio, which lost for the third time in its past four games.

Wembanyama is day-to-day with a sore lower back he suffered in Tuesday's loss to Phoenix.

Chicago never trailed and had a season-high point total. Chicago matched a season-high with 73 points in the first half in taking a 73-57 lead.

Talen Horton-Tucker had 13 points for Chicago, which had six players score in double figures.

Chris Paul had 12 points and nine assists for San Antonio.

■ **Grizzlies 115, Kings 110:** Marcus Smart scored 18 points — the last two on clinching free throws with 2.9 seconds left — as Memphis defeated Sacramento.

Desmond Bane also had 18 points along with seven assists. Jaren Jackson Jr. and Santi Aldama scored 15 points each, with Aldama grabbing 10 rebounds as Memphis won its seventh straight at home.

DeMar DeRozan led the Kings with 26 points. Malik Monk had 23 points, De'Aaron Fox added 18 and Domantas Sabonis had 17 points and 13 rebounds. They have lost seven of nine.

There were 20 lead changes and 11 ties.

Memphis took its final lead with 4:29 left on a drive by Jake LaRavia.

Sacramento would get within two points in the closing minutes, but never overtook Memphis.

■ **Warriors 99, Rockets 93:** Jonathan Kuminga scored a career-high 33 points and made two crucial layups over the final 1:04, and Golden State snapped a five-game losing streak by beating Houston.

Andrew Wiggins added 23 points and Brandin Podziemski grabbed 12 rebounds for the Warriors in the opening game of a home back-to-back.

Golden State was missing starters Stephen Curry and Draymond Green because of injuries — Curry out to manage his painful knees and Green nursing tightness in his left calf. Both are likely to return Friday.

Wiggins had been questionable with an impingement in his right ankle.

Alperen Sengun had 16 points and eight rebounds to lead Houston.

Warriors nemesis Dillon Brooks started 1 for 6 and missed his initial four 3-point attempts before finishing with 15 points.

Reinhart's late goal lifts Panthers past Flyers

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Sam Reinhart scored the go-ahead power-play goal with 1:59 left in the game to help the Florida Panthers overcome a blown three-goal lead and beat the Philadelphia Flyers 7-5 on Thursday night.

Matthew Tkachuk added an empty-netter in the final seconds to seal the win.

The Flyers got rolling when Owen Tippett scored consecutive goals and Garnet Hathaway pounced on a rebound in the crease to give them a 5-4 lead. Gustav Forsling tied the game at 5 with just over five minutes left after the Panthers wasted 3-0 and 4-2 leads.

Evan Rodrigues and Niko Mikkola scored in the first period, and Aleksander Barkov scored a power-play goal three minutes into the second for the 3-0 lead.

Flyers coach John Tortorella pulled goalie Ivan Fedotov after he gave up two goals on seven shots in the first and replaced him with Aleksei Kolosov. Kolosov saved 16 of the 20 shots.

Tyson Foerster and Nick Seeler, who stole a pass and fired one from the circle, cut the lead to 3-2 in the second, but Carter Verhaeghe answered for Florida and made it 4-2.

■ Lightning 8, Sharks 1: Brayden Point had four assists and Brandon Hagel scored twice to lead Tampa Bay to a victory against San Jose.

Jake Guentzel, Conor Geekie and Cam Atkinson each scored a goal and assist. Anthony Cirelli, Nick Perbix and Nicholas Paul scored the Lightning's other goals.

Alex Wennberg scored for San Jose, while Vitek Vanecsek took the loss after allowing five goals on 12 shots before being replaced by Mackenzie Blackwood to start the second period. Blackwood made 21 saves.

After Tampa Bay took a 2-0 lead in the first period, Hagel scored two goals 23 seconds

apart to make it 4-0. It's the third-fastest time the same player scored two goals in Lightning history, behind Steve Downie (11 seconds on Feb. 12, 2012) and Jason Wiemer (15 seconds, October 3, 1997).

■ Canadiens 3, Predators 0: Sam Montembeault stopped 29 shots and Patrik Laine scored his second goal in two games to lead Montreal past Nashville.

Jake Evans scored a short-handed goal and Joel Armia added an empty-netter for Montreal.

Evans opened the scoring in the first period after intercepting a turnover from Jonathan Marchessault and beating Justus Annunen short-side. Annunen made 27 saves in his first start for Nashville.

Laine doubled the lead 1:14 into the third. The Finnish sharpshooter ripped a shot over Annunen's shoulder on a 5-on-3 power play. He returned on Tuesday after missing nearly a year because of injury and mental health concerns.

■ Hurricanes 5, Avalanche 3: Martin Necas had a goal and an assist as Carolina beat Colorado to snap a season-high three-game losing streak.

Andrei Svechnikov had a goal and three assists for his first career four-point game, and Eric Robinson, Seth Jarvis and Jack Roslovic also scored for the Hurricanes. Pyotr Kochetkov had 17 saves for his first victory since Nov. 20.

Valeri Nichushkin had two goals and Artturi Lehkonen also scored for Colorado. Cale Makar had two assists and Scott Wedgewood stopped 29 shots in his first start with the Avalanche.

Necas, who leads the NHL in points, had a power-play goal with 2:11 remaining to push Carolina's lead to 4-2.

After Nichushkin's second goal of the night pulled Colorado back within one 24 seconds later, Svechnikov sealed the win

with an empty-netter with 16 seconds to go.

■ Kraken 5, Islanders 2: Vince Dunn had a goal and two assists, Joey Daccord stopped 27 shots, and Seattle beat New York.

Tye Kartye, Oliver Bjorkstrand, Shane Wright and Jaden Schwartz also scored for the Kraken, who have won two straight.

Noah Dobson and Maxim Tysplakov scored in the third period for New York. Ilya Sorokin made nine saves on 13 shots through two periods as the Islanders lost for the eighth time in 10 games (2-5-3). Marcus Hogberg made his season debut when he replaced Sorokin to begin the third period and made 10 saves in relief.

Karte redirected Dunn's shot past Sorokin to give the Kraken a lead less than 3 minutes in. Bjorkstrand extended his point streak to seven games with a power-play goal late in the first period to make it 2-0.

Dunn and Wright scored in the second period to push the lead to 4-0.

Dobson got the Islanders on the scoreboard with 8:03 remaining, and Tysplakov cut the lead to two 3:40 later.

■ Jets 3, Sabres 2: Adam Lowry scored 3:59 into overtime to end Winnipeg's four-game losing streak in a win against Buffalo.

Gabriel Vilardi and Kyle Connor also scored for Winnipeg, and Connor Hellebuyck made 28 saves. The Jets' losing streak was their longest this season, and Winnipeg is 4-7-0 after starting the season 15-1-0.

Tage Thompson and Dylan Cozens scored for the Sabres, who are winless in their past five games (0-3-2). Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen also made 28 saves.

Lowry's winning goal came on a rebound from defenseman Josh Morrissey's shot that slid to the left of Luukkonen in the crease.

■ Senators 2, Red Wings 1: Josh Norris scored his second goal of the game with 41.6 seconds remaining to give Ottawa a win over Detroit.

Linus Ullmark stopped 19 shots for the Senators, who had allowed at least three goals in each of their previous nine games.

Ottawa (10-12-2) controlled play for long stretches but struggled to beat Ville Husso, who made 30 saves for Detroit (10-11-4).

The Senators opened the scoring at 12:14 of the first period when Norris was able to get his own rebound and put it past a sprawled Husso.

Detroit tied it at 6:15 of the third on a 4-on-3 advantage. Alex DeBrincat caught Ullmark moving for his 11th goal of the season.

■ Oilers 6, Blue Jackets 3: Leon Draisaitl and Zach Hyman each scored twice and Connor McDavid had four assists as Edmonton rolled to a victory over Columbus.

Mattias Ekholm and Jeff Skinner also scored for the Oilers, who have won four of five. Draisaitl moved into a tie for the NHL lead with 19 goals, while McDavid became the third player in Edmonton history with 10 career four-assist games, joining Wayne Gretzky (51) and Jari Kurri (10).

Kevin Lablanc, Damon Severson and Cole Sillinger scored for the Blue Jackets, who have lost two straight following a 6-1-1 stretch.

■ Blues 4, Flames 3, OT: Colton Parayko scored the overtime winner on a rebound and St. Louis beat Calgary.

Robert Thomas had a goal and two assists, Zack Bolduc and Pavel Buchnevich scored and Philip Broberg had two assists for the Blues.

Jakob Pelletier, Matt Coronato and MacKenzie Weegar scored for the Flames, whose six-game win streak at home ended.