

## House OKs defense bill with pay boost

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA

*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — The House approved an \$895 billion defense policy bill Wednesday that will provide a historic pay raise for junior enlisted troops while also limiting treatment for transgender children of service members.

A provision barring Tricare — the military's health care program — from covering all gender-affirming care for minors had threatened to tank the annual National Defense Authorization Act, with Democrats voting en masse against it.

But the bill ultimately passed the Republican-controlled House in a 281-140 vote.

The legislation otherwise garnered widespread support for giving E-1 to E-4 troops a 14.5% pay raise and all other troops a 4.5% pay bump. The bill was also lauded for its investments in housing, child care, health care, spousal support and other quality-of-life improvements.

"No service member should have to live in squalid conditions. No military family should have to rely on food stamps to feed their children and no one serving in the military should have to wait to see a doctor. But that's exactly what many of our service members are experiencing, especially junior enlisted personnel," said Republican

Rep. Mike Rogers of Alabama, the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee. "This bill goes a long way to fixing that."

The bill now moves to the Senate, where it is also expected to pass, and is set to become law by the end of the year.

Lawmakers traditionally show bipartisan support for the must-pass authorization legislation, which sets policies for the Pentagon, but Democrats began withdrawing their endorsements earlier this week over the transgender provision.

The provision bars coverage of treatments "that could result in sterilization" for underage dependents who are suffering from gender dysphoria. An estimated 4,000 minor children of service members are receiving gender-affirming care.

Rep. Adam Smith of Washington, the top Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee, said he would oppose passage of the defense bill due to the provision, arguing it could be used to target access to puberty blockers and hormone treatment therapy.

He blamed House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., for forcing the provision into the defense bill in a move that he said upended congressional norms and politicized a typically bipartisan process.

"The inclusion of this harmful provision

puts the lives of children at risk and may force thousands of service members to make the choice of continuing their military service or leaving to ensure their child can get the health care they need," Smith said.

But Democrats succeeded in blocking other culture war provisions in the bill. Measures previously approved by the House to end the Pentagon's abortion travel policy, gut diversity, equity and inclusion offices and bar Tricare coverage of gender-transition procedures were all dropped.

The legislation retains a hiring freeze for diversity related positions at the Defense Department and bars military academies from teaching critical race theory, an academic concept that argues racism is systemic.

It also maintains the registration process for Selective Service without expanding it to women and does not expand access to in vitro fertilization for service members and their families.

The bill also allows military spouses to transfer professional licenses between states, authorizes the construction of more Defense Department schools and child care centers, and makes it easier for government service employees of the military to stay in their overseas jobs past a five-year term limit.

## Hegseth visits Alaska Sen. Collins seeking vote

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — Pete Hegseth, President-elect Donald Trump's nominee to lead the Defense Department, said he had a "wonderful conversation" with Maine Sen. Susan Collins on Wednesday as he pushed to win enough votes for confirmation. He said he will not back down after allegations of excessive drinking and sexual misconduct.

Collins said after the hourlong meeting that she questioned Hegseth about the allegations amid reports of drinking and the revelation that he made a settle-

ment payment after being accused of a sexual assault that he has denied. She said she had a "good, substantive" discussion with Hegseth and "covered a wide range of topics," including sexual assault in the military, Ukraine and NATO. But she said she would wait until a hearing, and notably a background check, to make a decision.

"I asked virtually every question under the sun," Collins told reporters as she left her office after the meeting. "I pressed him both on his position on military issues as well as the allegations

against him, so I don't think there was anything that we did not cover."

The meeting with Collins was closely watched as she is seen as more likely than most of her Republican Senate colleagues to vote against some of Trump's Cabinet picks. She and Alaska Sen. Lisa Murkowski, a fellow moderate Republican, did not shy from opposing Trump in his first term when they wanted to do so and sometimes supported President Joe Biden's nominees for the judicial and executive branches.

And Hegseth, an infantry combat veteran and former "Fox & Friends" weekend host, is working to gain as many votes as he can as some senators have expressed concerns about his personal history and lack of management experience.

"I'm certainly not going to assume anything about where the senator stands," Hegseth said as he left Collins' office.

Republicans will have a 53-49 majority next year, meaning Trump cannot lose more than three votes on any of his nominees.

# China's shipbuilding pace draws concern

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — The U.S. severely lags behind China in shipbuilding capacity, lawmakers and experts have warned, as the Biden administration tries to build up the country's ability to develop and produce weapons and other defense supplies to fend off war.

Speaking at a congressional hearing last week, Rep. John Moolenaar, the Republican chair of the House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party, said the country lacks the capacity to "deter and win a fight" with China and called for action.

"Bold policy changes and significant resources are now needed to restore deterrence and prevent a fight" with China, Moolenaar said.

China's navy is already the world's largest, and its shipbuilding capacity, estimated to be 230 times larger, dwarfs that of the U.S.

Rep. Raja Krishnamoorthi, the ranking Democratic mem-

ber of the committee, told Fox News that "for every one ocean-going vessel that we can produce, China can produce 359 in one single year."

The U.S. government has come to see China as its "pacing challenge," and officials have warned that Beijing is pursuing the largest peacetime military buildup in history, raising concerns about how the U.S. would respond and ensure victory in case of a conflict in the Indo-Pacific, where tensions are high in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea.

Krishnamoorthi warned that a weak military industrial base could invite aggression and argued that strengthening it is necessary to avoid war with China.

"History tells us we need a healthy defense industrial base now to deter aggression and make sure the world's dictators think again before dragging the U.S. and the world into yet another disastrous conflict," Krishnamoorthi said.

National security adviser Jake

Sullivan called it a "generational project" to fix the problem after the "bottom fell out" of the American shipbuilding industry in the early 1980s.

"Part of it is we don't have the backbone of a healthy commercial shipbuilding base to rest our naval shipbuilding on top of," Sullivan said at the Aspen Security Forum in Washington. "And that's part of the fragility of what we're contending with and why this is going to be such a generational project to fix."

The challenge in shipbuilding has been "especially immense," stemming from the hollowing-out of the U.S. manufacturing base where its workforce shrank and suppliers left, Sullivan said.

And it is part of the broader problem of a weakened U.S. military industrial base, as manifested in the weeks after Russia invaded Ukraine, Sullivan said, when Kyiv in eight weeks "burned through a year's worth of U.S. 155-millimeter artillery production."

"Decades of underinvest-

ments and consolidation had seriously eroded our defense industrial base, and there was no way around it," Sullivan said.

The head of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, Adm. Samuel Papparo, warned last month that the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East were eating away at critical U.S. weapons stockpiles and could hamper the military's ability to respond to China should a conflict arise.

He said providing or selling billions of dollars worth of air defenses to both Ukraine and Israel were hampering U.S. ability to respond to threats in the Indo-Pacific.

"It's now eating into stocks, and to say otherwise would be dishonest," he told an audience at the Brookings Institution in Washington on Nov. 19.

Several researchers at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies said China's rapid military buildup could allow the country to prevail over the U.S., especially in case of a prolonged conflict.

## Air Force Academy is sued over admissions policies

*The Washington Post*

A group that opposes the use of racial preferences in college admissions has sued the U.S. Air Force Academy and the Defense Department, continuing its drive to end the practice at all institutions of higher education in the wake of a landmark Supreme Court ruling last year.

The group, Students for Fair Admissions, argues that the academy has no legal justification for its admissions policies.

The Air Force Academy "is one of the American military's premier institutions and the most prestigious source of commissioned officers in the Air Force," the group argues in its complaint, filed Tuesday in the

U.S. District Court for the District of Colorado. "It is also one of the last remaining universities to expressly consider race as a factor in admissions."

The lawsuit comes just days after a judge's ruling allowing the U.S. Naval Academy to continue to use race-conscious admissions policies.

In that case in U.S. District Court in Baltimore, also brought by SFFA, Senior District Judge Richard D. Bennett held that the Naval Academy's limited consideration of race "further the government's compelling national security interests."

The group has said it will file an appeal to an appellate court

and, if necessary, the Supreme Court.

Over the past few decades, SFFA President Edward Blum said, "the Air Force Academy and our other military academies have strayed from their former color-blind, merit-based admissions policies and now focus on race and ethnicity — factors that do not contribute to the qualifications of applicants."

Blum argued that because the Supreme Court ruling last year "expressly forbids all institutions of higher education from using race in admissions decisions, it must follow that the Air Force Academy must end their race-based policies as well."

Spokespeople for the Air

Force Academy and the Defense Department said Wednesday their organizations do not comment on pending litigation.

The Supreme Court rejected race-conscious affirmative action in college admissions this past year, ruling in cases brought by SFFA against Harvard and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. That ruling — which overturned decades of legal precedent — not only changed the way highly sought-after colleges consider applicants for admission but accelerated legal challenges to diversity programs at government agencies and private companies.

# President commutes 1,500 sentences and pardons 39 people

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden is commuting the sentences of roughly 1,500 people who were released from prison and placed on home confinement during the coronavirus pandemic and is pardoning 39 Americans convicted of non-violent crimes. It's the largest single-day act of clemency in modern history.

The commutations announced Thursday are for people who have served out home confinement sentences for at least one year after they were released.

Prisons were uniquely bad for spreading the virus and some inmates were released in part to stop the spread. At one point, 1 in 5 prisoners had COVID-19, according to a tally kept by The Associated Press.

Biden said he would be taking more steps in the weeks ahead and would continue to review clemency petitions. The second largest single-day act of clemency was by Barack Obama, with 330, shortly before leaving office in 2017.

"America was built on the promise of possibility and second chances," Biden said in a statement. "As president, I have the great privilege of extending mercy to people who have demonstrated remorse and rehabilitation, restoring opportunity for Americans to participate in daily life and contribute to their communities, and taking steps to remove sentencing disparities for non-violent offenders, especially those convicted of drug offenses."

The clemency follows a broad pardon for his son Hunter, who was prosecuted for gun and tax crimes.

Biden is under pressure from advocacy groups to pardon broad swaths of people, including those on federal death row, before the Trump administration takes over in January.

He's also weighing whether to issue preemptive pardons to those who investigated Trump's effort to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election and are facing possible retribution when he takes office.

Clemency is the term for the power the president has to pardon, in which a person is relieved of guilt and punishment, or to commute a sentence, which reduces or eliminates the punishment but doesn't exonerate the wrongdoing. It's customary for a president to grant mercy at the end of his term, using the power of the office to wipe away records or end prison terms.

Those pardoned Thursday had been convicted of nonviolent crimes such as drug offenses and turned their lives around, White House lawyers said.

They include a woman who led emergency response teams during natural disasters; a church deacon who has worked as an addiction counselor and youth counselor; a doctoral student in molecular biosciences; and a decorated military veteran.

The president had previously issued 122 commutations and 21 other pardons.

He's also broadly pardoned those convicted of use and simple possession of marijuana on federal lands and in the District of Columbia, and pardoned former U.S. service members convicted of violating a now-repealed military ban on consensual gay sex.

# FBI director to resign before inauguration day

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — FBI Director Christopher Wray told bureau workers Wednesday that he plans to resign at the end of President Joe Biden's term in January, an announcement that came a week and a half after President-elect Donald Trump said he would nominate loyalist Kash Patel for the job.

Wray said at a town hall meeting that he would be stepping down "after weeks of careful thought," roughly three years short of the completion of a 10-year term during which he tried to keep the FBI out of politics even as the bureau found itself entangled in a string of explosive investigations, including two that led to separate indictments of Trump last year as well as inquiries into Biden and his son.

"My goal is to keep the focus on our mission — the indispensable work you're doing on behalf of the American people every day," Wray told agency employees. "In my view, this is the

best way to avoid dragging the bureau deeper into the fray, while reinforcing the values and principles that are so important to how we do our work."

The intended resignation was not unexpected considering that Trump had settled on Patel to be director and had repeatedly aired his ire at Wray, whom he appointed during his first term.

But his departure is nonetheless a reflection of how Trump's norm-breaking style has reshaped Washington, with the president-elect yet again flouting tradition by moving to replace an FBI director well before his term was up and Wray resigning to avert a collision with the incoming administration.

"It should go without saying, but I'll say it anyway — this is not easy for me," Wray said. "I love this place, I love our mission, and I love our people — but my focus is, and always has been, on us and doing what's right for the FBI."

# President-elect is named Time's Person of the Year

*Associated Press*

NEW YORK — President-elect Donald Trump rang the opening bell Thursday at the New York Stock Exchange after being recognized for the second time by Time magazine as its person of the year.

The honors for the businessman-turned-politician are a measure of Trump's remarkable comeback from an ostracized former president who refused to accept his election loss four years ago to a president-elect who won the White House decisively in November.

Before he rang the opening bell, a first for him, Trump spoke at the exchange and called it "a tremendous honor."

"Time Magazine, getting this honor for the second time, I think it like it better this time actually," he said.

Sam Jacobs, Time's editor in chief, announced on NBC's "Today" show that Trump was Time's 2024 Person of the Year. Jacobs said Trump was someone who "for better or for worse, had the most influence on the news in 2024."

"This is someone who made an historic comeback, who reshaped the American presidency and who's reordering American politics," Jacobs said. "It's hard to argue with the fact that the person who's moving into the Oval Office is the most influential person in news."



# Yoon defends martial law amid impeachment calls

By DAVID CHOI  
*Stars and Stripes*

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol on Thursday defended his failed attempt 10 days ago to impose martial law, just as a poll shows most of his country's citizens favor his impeachment.

Yoon declared martial law Dec. 3, he said in a televised speech Thursday, to "protect the nation" from the main opposition Democratic Party, a group he called "a monster that destroys the constitutional order of free democracy."

Yoon survived an impeachment vote Saturday when members of his People Power Party, the ruling conservatives, boycotted a parliamentary vote.

Another vote is scheduled this coming Saturday, and the party chair voiced his support Thursday for removing Yoon from office.

Nearly 80% of respondents surveyed Tuesday said they agreed with impeaching Yoon while 20% said they were against removing him from office, according to a poll by the Seoul-based Embrain Public polling agency for South Korean media outlet News1. The results were released Thursday.

The poll consisted of 1,005 South Korean adults and had a margin of error of 3.1%, according to the agency's filings with the National Election Survey Deliberation Commission.

Nearly 70% said Yoon should be immediately arrested and investigated, 13% said a potential arrest should come after an investigation and 10% said an investigation is unnecessary, the results said.

Only 13% of respondents said they believed Yoon should complete his five-year term that began May 10, 2022. Fifty-seven percent said the National Assembly ought to pursue impeachment charges against the president and 20% said he should resign on his own accord.

The incident has spurred calls for his impeachment, waves of resignations from government officials and suspensions of high-ranking military officers.

People Power Party leader Han Dong-hoon said he would back the impeachment effort after listening to the president's speech Thursday.

Yoon must be suspended "through impeachment" to "protect the democratic republic," Han told reporters at a press conference in Seoul.

Yoon loyalists jeered Han at a party meeting after he called Yoon's televised statement "a confession of rebellion," according to The Associated Press.

At least 200 votes are required from the 300-member parliament to suspend Yoon's duties until South Korea's Constitutional Court determines the validity of his presidency.

## Cooler weather to help in California blaze fight

*Associated Press*

MALIBU, Calif. — Cooler temperatures, calmer winds and a chance of rainfall in Southern California this week are forecast to help firefighters as they battle a wind-driven blaze in steep, rugged terrain that's driven thousands from their homes in Malibu.

The weather improved so much Wednesday that meteorologists said all red flag warnings, which indicate conditions for high fire danger and the notorious Santa Ana winds, were discontinued. The conditions allowed firefighters to have "a lot of success" despite the nearly inaccessible terrain, CalFire Assistant Chief Dusty Martin said.

Still, some 20,000 residents remained under evacuation orders and warnings Wednesday evening from the blaze, dubbed the Franklin Fire, which was only 7% contained over 6 square miles.

It's unclear how the blaze started. Officials said nine

structures had been destroyed and at least six others had been damaged, though crews had only surveyed about 25% of the affected area, said Deputy Chief Albert Yanagisawa of the Los Angeles County Fire Department.

Much of the devastation occurred in Malibu, a community of about 10,000 people on the western edge of Los Angeles known for its stunning bluffs and Zuma Beach, which features in many Hollywood films.

Flames burned near horse farms, celebrities' seaside mansions and Pepperdine University, where students were forced to shelter in place on campus for a second night Tuesday.

Faculty members are determining how best to complete the semester, which ends at Pepperdine this week. Final exams were postponed or canceled, depending on the class, university spokesperson Michael Friel said. An early analysis showed little to no damage to structures on campus, the university said.

## Storm on East Coast brings strong winds, deluge of rain

*Associated Press*

PORTLAND, Maine — Colder weather began to return Thursday after a storm that swept up the East Coast delivered a blow to New England, packing powerful gusts that knocked out power along with a deluge of rain and warming temperatures that washed away snow and dampened ski resorts.

An atmospheric river transported moisture northward from the tropics and brought heavy rain Wednesday.

The city of Portland, Maine, got 2.33 inches of rain Wednesday, breaking a record of 2.01 inches for the date set in 1887, the National Weather Service said.

Utility workers were deployed to handle power outages after winds peaked Wednesday night into Thursday. Nearly 90,000 customers in Maine had lost power as of Thursday morning, according to poweroutage.us.

A deepening low pressure system was responsible for winds that lashed the region, said Derek Schroeter, a forecaster with the National Weather Service. Some

areas in Maine had wind gusts of over 50 mph.

Forecasters were concerned about bombogenesis, or a "bomb cyclone," marked by a rapid intensification over a 24-hour period.

"Is that what they're calling it?" said Jen Roberts, co-owner of On-ion River Outdoors sporting goods store in Montpelier, Vt. She lamented that a five-day stretch of snowfall which lured ski customers into the store was being washed away, underscoring the region's fickle weather. "But you know, this is New England. We know this is what happens."

New England wasn't the only region experiencing wild weather. Heavy lake-effect snow was expected through Thursday in parts of Michigan, along the Lake Michigan shoreline, and dangerous cold enveloped parts of the Upper Midwest. In New York, Gov. Kathy Hochul on Wednesday declared a state of emergency in several counties in anticipation of heavy snowfall expected off of Lake Erie and Lake Ontario into Thursday.

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

### Furry fugitive gains fame eluding dart guns

**LA** NEW ORLEANS — A scruffy little fugitive is on the lam again, gaining fame as he outwits a tenacious band of citizens armed with night-vision binoculars, nets and a tranquilizer rifle.

Scrim, a 17-pound mutt that's mostly terrier, has become a folk hero, inspiring tattoos, T-shirts and even a ballad as he eludes capture from the posse of volunteers.

And like any antihero, Scrim has a backstory: Rescued from semi-feral life at a trailer park and adopted from a shelter, the dog broke loose in April and scurried around the city until he was cornered in October and brought to a new home. Weeks later, he'd had enough. Scrim leaped out of a second-story window, a desperate act recorded in a now-viral video. Since then, despite a stream of daily sightings, he's roamed free.

Leading the recapture effort is Michelle Cheramie, a former information technology professional. She lost everything — home, car, possessions — in Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and in the aftermath, found her calling rescuing pets.

Scrim's repeated escapades have prompted near-daily local media coverage and a devoted online following.

### Faulty gas fitting causes chocolate factory blast

**PA** WEST READING — Cascading failures involving a corroded steam pipe and a defective natural gas fitting caused a powerful explosion in 2023 at a Pennsylvania

chocolate factory, killing seven workers when the company failed to evacuate, a federal safety board said.

About 70 production workers and 35 office staff at R.M. Palmer Co. were working in two adjacent buildings at the time of the blast. Employees in both buildings told federal investigators they could smell gas before the explosion. Workers at the plant have accused the company of ignoring warnings of a natural gas leak, saying the plant, in a small town 60 miles northwest of Philadelphia, should have been evacuated.

The National Transportation Safety Board said the factory failed to have natural gas emergency procedures in place that could have resulted in an immediate evacuation. The explosion leveled one building and heavily damaged another, sending flames more than 40 feet into the air and causing \$42 million in property damage.

### Kayaker who faked death now in custody

**WI** GREEN LAKE — A Wisconsin man who faked his own drowning and left his wife and three children to go to Eastern Europe is in police custody, online records showed.

Ryan Borgwardt, 45, was booked into the Green Lake County Jail, according to the Victim Information and Notification Everyday system, a service that provides information to crime victims such as a person's jail custody status. No charges were listed.

Borgwardt told authorities that he faked his death because of "personal matters," the Green Lake County Sheriff

Mark Podoll said. He told them that in mid-August he traveled about 50 miles from his home in Watertown to Green Lake, where he overturned his kayak, dumped his phone and then paddled an inflatable boat to shore. He said he picked that lake because it's the deepest in Wisconsin.

### Man who attacked judge is sentenced

**NV** LAS VEGAS — A man who was captured on video attacking a judge in a Las Vegas courtroom after vaulting over her bench and desk has been sentenced to decades in prison.

Deobra Redden was ordered to serve 26 to 65 years in prison for the attack on Clark County District Court Judge Mary Kay Holthus, KLAS-TV in Las Vegas reported.

Redden, 31, pleaded guilty but mentally ill in September to attempted murder and other charges, ending his trial shortly after Holthus had testified that she feared for her life when Redden vaulted over her 4-foot-high bench and landed on her.

The attack happened Jan. 3 as Holthus was about to deliver Redden's sentence in a separate felony battery case.

Redden's defense lawyer Carl Arnold has said his client was not taking his prescribed medication to control his diagnosed schizophrenia at the time of the attack.

### Party switch gives supermajority to GOP

**FL** WEST PALM BEACH — If last month's election wasn't painful

enough for Florida Democrats, they're losing another state House seat after one of their members announced that she's switching parties.

State Rep. Susan Valdés, a former school board member who was reelected as a Democrat last month, said on X that she is "tired of being the party of protesting."

Valdés ran to be chairperson for her local county's Democratic executive committee earlier this month.

Republicans have controlled the governor's office and both branches of the Legislature since 1999. Republicans now have an 86-34 majority in the House.

### Monarch butterflies to be listed as threatened

**WI** MADISON — U.S. wildlife officials are extending federal protections to monarch butterflies after years of warnings from environmentalists that populations are shrinking and the beloved pollinator may not survive climate change.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service plans to add the butterfly to the threatened species list by the end of next year following an extensive public comment period.

In the monarch's case, the listing would generally prohibit anyone from killing or transporting the insect. People could continue to remove milkweed, a key food source for monarch caterpillars, from their gardens and fields but would be prohibited from changing the land to make it permanently unusable for the species.

— From Associated Press

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# Army, Navy not looking ahead

Associated Press

LANDOVER, Md. — Army and Navy have combined to win 19 of 23 games this season and re-emerged as nationally relevant college football programs. For the first time since 2017, the two military academies are both going to a bowl game.

None of that matters much to players and coaches — not with the 125th rendition of the Army-Navy game on deck Saturday.

“It’s a game and a season really all of its own,” Army coach Jeff Monken said Tuesday. “We’ve had a good year. You make it a great year by winning this game coming up on Saturday. Frankly, that’s just the way it goes around here.”

The Black Knights are ranked 19th in the country after routing Tulane to win the American Athletic Conference. They’re 11-1, unbeaten in the AAC in their first season in it and their only loss came to College Football Playoff-bound Notre Dame. Marshall awaits in the Independence Bowl.

Navy will face Oklahoma in the Armed Forces Bowl to cap its first winning season since

2019. Still, there’s no way the Midshipmen are looking past this rivalry to the Sooners.

“Oklahoma’s not on our mind right now because it’s all Army-Navy,” linebacker Colin Ramos said. “This is our No. 1 goal, and then after that, we’ll have about a week and a half, two weeks — whatever it is — to prepare. Right now, it’s Army-Navy.”

Ramos said beating Army would define Navy’s season even more than the previous eight victories. Fellow senior captain Daba Fofana notices that importance when he feels the intensity of each practice leading up to this game.

“It’s definitely amped up,” Fofana said. “We put a lot of emphasis on it naturally, but our mentality to deal with the big stage and just to play like we do, it’s another game. We’ve played this since we were young kids.”

Monken, in his 11th year at West Point, refuses to apologize for making the Army-Navy game a talking point 365 days a year. He ends some conversations with the phrase, “Beat Navy.”

Army would love to beat Marshall, too, but standout quarterback Bryson Daily has been proud of how he and his teammates have avoided getting ahead of themselves in recent months. He expects nothing less in the most anticipated showdown of the year.

“You come here to play in this game: the biggest stage possible, millions of people watching and a sold-out NFL stadium,” said Daily, whose 29 touchdowns are tied for the most in the NCAA’s Football Bowl Subdivision with Boise State Heisman Trophy finalist Ashton Jeanty. “Records don’t matter. Rankings don’t matter. All that goes out the window for the Army-Navy game.”

Army is a 6½-point favorite on BetMGM Sportsbook for the game at the Washington Commanders’ stadium in Landover, Md., a few miles outside the nation’s capital. All the success so far has not prevented Army athletic director Mike Buddie from feeling nervous about this weekend.

“Thrilled that we’ve had the season that we’ve had, but the

beauty of this game is this is the one that matters,” he said. “They know that this is big game, and our guys know this is a big game. We’re hoping we can stay focused the way we’ve been able to do so far and make Saturday really special, but it won’t be easy.”

Navy coach Brian Newberry called this “the most complete, well-rounded Army football team, the best Army football team” he has seen since arriving in Annapolis in 2019 as defensive coordinator. After a few games he’d like to have back, including a lopsided loss to Notre Dame, this is still a winner-take-all chance to capture the Commander In Chief’s Trophy that has gone to Army and Air Force in recent years.

“Winning the Commander In Chief’s Trophy, this game, is our most important goal in our program,” Newberry said. Facing a talented SEC opponent like Oklahoma in a bowl game in the fertile recruiting ground of Texas is important, too, but he added without hesitation, “We’ll worry about that on Monday.”

## Belichick agrees to become coach of Tar Heels

Associated Press

Bill Belichick had seemingly been waiting for the right opportunity to return to an NFL sideline. Instead, the six-time Super Bowl-winning head coach is headed to the college ranks to take over at North Carolina.

The school announced that it had reached a five-year deal with Belichick on Wednesday night, roughly a week after Belichick’s name surfaced as an unlikely candidate to replace the program’s winningest coach in Mack Brown. The deal requires approval by UNC trustees as well as the UNC public system’s governors; an

introductory news conference has yet to be scheduled.

Moving on from Brown, 73, to hire Belichick, 72, means UNC is turning to a coach who has never worked at the college level, yet had incredible success in the NFL alongside quarterback Tom Brady throughout most of his 24-year tenure with the Patriots, which ended last season.

There’s also at least a small family tie to the UNC program for Belichick; his late father, Steve, was an assistant coach for the Tar Heels from 1953-55.

“I am excited for the opportunity at UNC-Chapel Hill,” Belichick said in a statement.

“I grew up around college football with my dad and treasured those times. I have always wanted to coach in college and now I look forward to building the football program in Chapel Hill.”

He’s arriving on campus at a time of rapid changes in college athletics, from free player movement through the transfer portal and athletes’ ability to cash in on endorsements to the looming arrival of revenue sharing. The hiring represents a novel approach by the school to rethinking how it will approach those challenges, led by someone known for success at the highest level of the sport.

“We know that college athletics is changing, and those changes require new and innovative thinking,” UNC athletics director Bubba Cunningham said in a statement.

“Bill Belichick is a football legend, and hiring him to lead our program represents a new approach that will ensure Carolina football can evolve, compete and win — today and in the future.”

Belichick is the second coach to win a Super Bowl and then later become a college head coach; Bill Walsh won three Super Bowls with the San Francisco 49ers and went 17-17 at Stanford from 1992-94.



# Red Sox get Crochet in deal with White Sox

Associated Press

DALLAS — Garrett Crochet was acquired by the Boston Red Sox from the White Sox on Wednesday for four prospects, giving Chicago a better deal for the All-Star left-hander than available at the trade deadline in July.

For Boston, which is still seeking more pitching, it was a quick pivot after losing out on free agent lefty Max Fried to the rival New York Yankees.

“Feel like we got a legitimate No. 1 starter in Garrett, left-handed, ton of swing and miss, you know, massive strikeouts and feel like the best is still in front of him,” Red Sox chief baseball officer Craig Breslow said. “Adding him to the rotation, it adds depth, it adds quality.”

The White Sox got back catcher Kyle Teel, infielder Chase Meidroth, right-hander Wikelman Gonzalez and outfielder Braden Montgomery in the

trade announced during the winter meetings.

Crochet was 6-12 with a 3.58 ERA in 32 starts for a Chicago team that went 41-121, the most losses for any club since 1900. The 25-year-old was picked for the AL All-Star team in his first season as a starter.

“What he did this past season was nothing short of excellent,” White Sox general manager Chris Getz said. “But you look at, you know, the long-term health of the organization and to inject the type of talent that we just did in this trade is really exciting for us.”

Getz said plenty of teams were interested in Crochet and there were about five he thought could get a deal done. Many, including Boston, had inquired about the hard-throwing lefty over the summer.

“Discussions really heated up last night with the Red Sox and we took that into the morning, and, you know, it was very clear

that they were motivated,” Getz said. “We wanted to get something done. And, you know, we made a match. ... Both clubs should feel really good about the return.”

The trade came a day after Fried agreed to join the Yankees for a \$218 million, eight-year contract, the largest ever for a left-hander.

“We came here a few days ago thinking we needed to improve our rotation,” Breslow said. “If we exclusively looked down one path, we would be closed off from other options. I think that’s still the case. There’s still really good players, really good starting pitchers, left on the free agent market, and there are still conversations we’re having with teams as trade targets.”

Before the trade, Boston’s projected rotation had five starters: Tanner Houck, Kutter Crawford, Brayan Bello, Garrett Whitlock and Lucas Giolito.

Crochet is eligible for arbitration this offseason and next after having an \$800,000 salary this year. He can become a free agent after the 2027 World Series.

Selected 11th overall by Chicago in the 2020 amateur draft, Crochet made his big league debut that September. He had a 2.82 ERA in 2021 while striking out 65 in 54⅓ innings, then had Tommy John surgery April 5, 2022. He didn’t return to the major leagues until May 18, 2023.

Crochet’s sinker averaged 97.9 mph this season and his four-seam fastball 97.2. He also throws a cutter, sweeper and changeup.

Teel was rated the Red Sox’s No. 4 prospect by MLB.com, Meidroth No. 11, Gonzalez 14th and Montgomery 54th.

“Talk about accelerating a rebuild,” Getz said. “This was a deal that we feel like can do that.”

## Butler won’t focus on future despite trade speculation

Associated Press

Jimmy Butler knows there are tons of questions about his future with the Miami Heat. He might get traded, he might leave as a free agent next summer, he might exercise a \$52.4 million option to return to the Heat or he might get an entirely new contract.

“Who knows?” Butler asked.

Evidently, even he doesn’t have answers.

The Miami forward — who has led the team to a pair of NBA Finals trips in his Heat tenure — spoke out about trade speculation Wednesday, telling reporters after practice that he doesn’t mind his name being in the rumor mill. ESPN reported earlier in the week that Miami is open to receiving trade offers; that wouldn’t be surprising, given Butler’s contract status and the possibility that he might leave with the Heat getting nothing in return next summer.

“I actually like it,” said Butler, who is averaging 19 points per game this season. “It’s good to be talked about. I don’t think

there’s such a thing as bad publicity — to a point.”

Butler’s future in Miami has been a talking point for some time now.

The Heat could have offered an extension last summer and chose not to, presumably for a variety of reasons including Butler’s age — he’s 35 — and the fact that he missed 26% of Miami’s games over his first five seasons with the team.

He still clearly impacts winning: the Heat are 8-2 this season when he scores at least 18 points. And Miami isn’t new to trade speculation; Tyler Herro has been the centerpiece of rumors in each of the last three summers. He is still with the Heat, playing at an All-Star level and is the reigning Eastern Conference player of the week.

“Any other narrative, I don’t care. Nobody should because most of this stuff has just been all a bunch of gibberish,” Miami coach Erik Spoelstra said this week.

Butler said Wednesday that money doesn’t really matter to him at this point. He stopped short of saying that he wants to absolutely remain with the Heat — “I’m

pretty sure y’all are going to get a report that’s going to say otherwise anyways, so there’s no sense in me answering that question,” he said — and that he’s not fixated on extensions or trades.

“My kids matter, my happiness matters, my well-being matters and my family matters,” Butler said. “Right now, it’s all about competing, staying healthy, playing some great basketball. I think I’ve done that so far, so we’ll see what we got.”

It has been social media fodder for a few days, with some even suggesting that Butler’s hair dye in recent weeks — sometimes yellow, sometimes blue, sometimes red — has matched the teams some of the trade speculation links him to like Golden State, Dallas and Houston.

That said, he has insisted since arriving in Miami that he wants to bring the team another championship. That stance has not changed.

“We’re going to continue to win and I’m proud of the guys,” Butler said. “You see everybody out here working and we know what we’re capable of.”

# Barkley a big test for Steelers defense

*Associated Press*

PITTSBURGH — Mike Tomlin started going down the checklist of the myriad ways Saquon Barkley can beat you. It took the Pittsburgh Steelers coach a while — by his usually measured standards anyway — to get to the end.

“He’s got top-end speed,” Tomlin said of the Philadelphia Eagles star and NFL’s leading rusher. “He can hit the home run ... He’s good in tight spaces. He can get downhill. He can lower his pads. He’s got good lateral abilities. He can make people miss. He’s just a really complete player.”

So complete that Tomlin used the honorific “Mr. Barkley” when describing the challenge that awaits the first-place Steelers (10-3) when they visit the NFC East-leading Eagles (11-2) on Sunday.

“He’s been dominant,” Tomlin said. “Eye-opening at times.” Physics defying, too. It’s one

of the reasons Tomlin isn’t worried about his team getting too caught up in the big picture as Pittsburgh begins a stretch of three games in 11 days that starts in Philadelphia, ends with Kansas City on Christmas and features a trip to AFC North rival Baltimore in between.

The way Tomlin figures, get caught looking down the road and you’ll likely just end up as another hapless victim on Barkley’s highlight reel.

“If you don’t minimize him in some way, you’re not even going to position yourself to have a chance to be successful,” Tomlin said.

Most teams haven’t this season, though the Steelers and the NFL’s fourth-ranked rush defense believe they have the tools to be the exception. Tools like inside linebacker Elandon Roberts, who has carved out a niche as an old-school run stopper over the last decade, or “tooth chipper,” as Tomlin put it

earlier this season.

Tomlin saw it nearly a decade ago when he was scouting Roberts out of Houston. There was something about Roberts’ willingness to stick his 6-foot-1 frame into uncomfortable places that stuck with Tomlin, so much so that when Roberts hit free agency in the spring of 2023, the Steelers practically sprinted to the bargaining table.

Roberts has been just as advertised, a veteran who welcomes the dirty work his job entails. Against Dallas earlier this season, that meant vaulting over the line of scrimmage to stop Cowboys running back Rico Dowdle in his tracks, leading to a fumble that Dallas quarterback Dak Prescott had to fall on.

When asked what’s made him so effective through the years, Roberts simply shrugged.

“I just think when you’re good at something, you know, you hone in on it,” he said.

He’s hardly the only one on a defense that has slowed down Lamar Jackson, Derrick Henry, Nick Chubb and J.K. Dobbins among others this season.

Longtime defensive tackle Cam Heyward is playing some of the best football of his career at 35. Second-year defensive lineman Keanu Benton is starting to come into his own. Patrick Queen, signed in the offseason to play alongside Roberts, is Pittsburgh’s best three-down linebacker since Ryan Shazier’s career ended with a spinal injury in December 2017.

Queen is well aware the Steelers will need all 11 players on the field — whomever it might be on a given down — to work in tandem to keep Barkley from taking over.

“Everybody’s got to do their job,” Queen said. “That’s really all it comes to. I think some teams are just unaware of how good Saquon is. You’ve got to keep your focus.”

## Mahomes: Three games in 11 days ‘not a good feeling’

*Associated Press*

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — You can count Kansas City Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes among those who are not exactly thrilled about the NFL forcing the two-time defending Super Bowl champions to play three times over an 11-day span in the coming weeks.

The Chiefs are among four teams — the Texans, Steelers and Ravens are the others — who were picked to play on Christmas Day this year. But with the holiday falling on Wednesday, when the NFL has rarely played, those four will also have to play the prior Saturday to give them at least some rest. And the result is two short weeks following their games Sunday.

“It’s not a good feeling,” Mahomes acknowledged Wednesday.

“You never want to play this amount of games in this short of time. It’s not great for your body. But at the end of the day it’s your job, your profession, you have to come to work and do it.”

Kansas City visits Cleveland on Sunday, while Baltimore visits the Giants, Pittsburgh visits Philadelphia and Houston hosts Miami.

On Dec. 21, the Texans head to the Chiefs and the Steelers visit the Ravens, before the Christmas Day doubleheader that begins with Kansas City heading to Pittsburgh and ends with Baltimore in Houston.

Mahomes was asked whether he has ever had three games in such a short span, he replied: “I haven’t in football.”

“All you can do is focus on the game. The practice you have

that day,” Mahomes said. “I try to prepare my body all year long for this stretch. That’s tailoring my workouts, tailoring how you practice and prepare, and the coaches do a great job of taking care of us on the practice field. We practice as hard as anybody, but they know how to dial it back when needed.”

The NFL has played on Wednesday, but it’s rare. In 2020, the Steelers and Ravens had their game pushed back because of a COVID-19 outbreak.

In 2012, the NFL’s opener between the Giants and Cowboys took place on a Wednesday so the TV networks could broadcast Barack Obama’s speech at the Democratic National Convention.

But prior to those games, the NFL had not had a Wednesday game since the Lions and Rams

played Sept. 22, 1948.

“It’s a unique situation. You just have to manage it,” said Chiefs coach Andy Reid, whose team will have played on every day of the week but Tuesday this season. “It is what it is. You make the best of it.”

It’s not as if the games involved in the Christmas stretch are throwaways, either. Each has significant playoff ramifications.

The Chiefs have already clinched the AFC West, but they are trying to fend off the Bills and Steelers for the No. 1 seed and a first-round playoff bye. Pittsburgh is two games ahead of the Ravens in the AFC North heading into this weekend, and could clinch a playoff berth if things fall their way, while the Texans are two games up on the Colts in the AFC South.