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Obama asks for massive DOD budget hike

BY JON HARPER

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama is asking Congress for \$585.3 billion in defense spending for fiscal 2016, but doubts remain about whether actual Pentagon funding will come close to that level.

The president's budget request, released Monday, seeks \$534.3 billion in base funding for the military, plus \$50.9 billion in war funding and other supplemental programs. If enacted, base funding would jump \$38.2 billion — nearly 8 percent — while war funding would drop \$13.3 billion — about 21 percent — relative to fiscal 2015 levels.

But unless Congress changes the law and lifts spending caps, known as “sequestration,” the Department of Defense will only receive about \$499 billion in base funding for fiscal 2016.

War funding, which the Pentagon refers to as “Overseas Contingency Operations” or “OCO,” is not subject to sequestration caps.

The base budget pie would be divvied among the services: \$126.5 billion for the Army,

\$137 billion for the Navy, \$24 billion for the Marine Corps and \$152.9 billion for the Air Force.

The other \$94 billion would fund DOD-wide programs and activities.

There would be a reduction of 11,300 in total force military end strength from current levels. The Army would lose 15,000 active-duty soldiers. Air Force and Navy active-duty components would see modest increases in troop numbers, and Marine Corps active-duty end strength would remain about the same.

Modernization programs would receive \$177.5 billion across the department, including about \$11 billion for the Joint Strike Fighter, the Pentagon's most expensive acquisition program.

Lifting sequestration would require a budget deal between the White House and a Republican-controlled Congress. The two parties have been at loggerheads since Obama took office in 2009, and many political observers are skeptical that a deal can be reached.

While GOP leaders generally support giving the DOD budget relief, they are opposed to Obama's proposal to remove budget caps on domestic programs. Obama and other Democratic leaders have suggested that they would oppose efforts to cut domestic programs to pay for higher defense spending.

There “seems to be a broad consensus in both chambers and in the executive (branch) that defense spending, as it has been the last couple years, is too low, given the global threat environment,” Kathleen Hicks, a defense analyst at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, told reporters last week. “Trade-offs between defense and non-defense discretionary spending ... will really be the big questions because that's what's going to be required to increase defense

Monday, the Pentagon warned that “a return to sequester-level funding would be irresponsible and dangerous, resulting in a force too small and ill-equipped to respond to the full range of

potential threats to the nation.”

The war funding request remains high, despite the fact that U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan have been slashed to approximately 10,000. The \$50.9 billion of proposed OCO money would go toward the ongoing train-and-assist mission in Afghanistan; training and equipping forces battling the Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria; a Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund; a European Reassurance Initiative to address NATO allies' concerns about Russian activities in Eastern Europe; and other programs.

Politically sensitive cost-saving proposals include:

- Curbing the growth in personnel costs, including military pay and benefits.

- Retiring older weapon systems, such as the A-10 Thunderbolt aircraft.

- Eliminating excess infrastructure and facilities, including a request to initiate a new round of Base Realignment and Closure, also known as BRAC, in fiscal 2017.

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Pay raise sought for military, DOD civilians

BY JON HARPER

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama wants to give the uniformed military and federal workers a 1.3 percent pay raise for fiscal 2016.

The 1.3 percent increase would be more than the 1 percent pay bump given to troops and federal workers for the past two fiscal years. The Defense Department is proposing 65 and older through fiscal 2020.

- Consolidation of Tricare health care plans with increased deductibles and pharmacy copayments phased in during the next 10 years.

The DOD estimates that the proposed changes in military compensation would save the

department \$25.4 billion during the next five years. Military pay and benefits currently eat up 35.5 percent of the Pentagon's base budget.

Personnel costs “must be kept under control to allow the Department to fund the required balance of force size, modernization, and readiness and training needed to meet the needs of today and tomorrow,” the DOD said in a news release.

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Navy Yard workers back at site of killings

The Washington Post

They were to begin returning on Monday to the place where they hid beneath desks, barricaded themselves behind office doors, and fled down corridors as 12 colleagues were shot to death at the Washington Navy Yard.

Some Navy Yard workers are looking forward to going back to Building 197 and regaining a sense of normalcy 17 months after the shooting rampage. Others are so traumatized that they can't bring themselves to re-enter their old workplace, where contractor Aaron Alexis stalked cubicles, hallways and stairwells with a sawed-off Remington shotgun on Sept. 16, 2013.

Beth Ann Cordova lost two co-workers that day — Michael Arnold and Richard “Mike” Ridgell. A third person she is

close to, Jennifer Bennett, was wounded.

Cordova, 55, an executive assistant and data manager, said she would steel herself to head to her new desk inside the renovated building. But there are certain parts of Building 197 that she would rather avoid, even after a tour several weeks ago designed to ease her fears.

“I did not wish to go anywhere near where Jennifer had been shot, and I still don't,” Cordova said. “He hurt my friend. I could have lost her.”

Cordova knows a group of people who refuse to go back to Building 197, the headquarters of the Naval Sea Systems Command. The Navy has accommodated their wishes by transferring them to other jobs in other buildings, said Vice Adm. William Hilarides, who leads NAVSEA.

Dozens of other workers have

retired rather than return, even as the Navy has completed a \$6.4 million renovation of the building to erase the worst memories of the mentally ill Alexis, 34, who was killed that day by police.

The overhaul of the building includes new offices, doors, windows, carpet and paint. Even the entrance, where Ridgell, 52, a security guard, was killed, has been moved. Outside, there are concrete steps, benches and windows where the entrance used to be.

“In fact, you can't find vestiges of it,” Hilarides said. “Several of our folks dragged Mike out after he had been shot and tried to save him in the parking garage. So there is a lot of emotion about that.”

About 2,800 workers were expected to return to the sprawling building on Monday. Inside the entry area, there is a space

dedicated to the 12 people who died in the shooting: Ridgell, Arnold, Martin Bodrog, Arthur Daniels Sr., Sylvia Frasier, Kathleen Nark Gaarde, John Roger Johnson, Mary Frances DeLorenzo Knight, Frank Kohler, Vishnu Pandit, Kenneth Bernard Proctor Sr. and Gerald Read. The memorial was unveiled Sunday to the victims' families.

The building has been re-named in honor of Joshua Humphreys, who designed the first Navy frigates. Hilarides said a new name was an important reminder of NAVSEA's resilience.

A task force of NAVSEA employees oversaw the renovation of the historic brick building, which had been used during World War II to assemble guns for battleships.

Punxsutawney Phil: 6 more weeks of winter

PUNXSUTAWNEY, Pa. — The handlers of Pennsylvania's most famous groundhog, Punxsutawney Phil, said Monday the furry rodent has forecast six more weeks of winter.

Members of the top hat-wearing Inner Circle announced the “prediction” Monday morning.

A German legend has it that if a furry rodent sees his shadow on Feb. 2, winter will last another six weeks. If not, spring comes early.

The forecast also was announced on Twitter, as was referenced in the official proclamation read by Jeff Lundy, the Fair Weatherman of the Inner Circle.

“Forecasts abound on the Internet, but, I, Punxsutawney Phil am still your best bet. Yes, a shadow I see, you can start to Twitter, hashtag: Six more weeks of winter!”

The forecast was delivered after a steady, predawn rain turned to snow as temperatures dropped from the high 30s to about freezing.

US heroin demand affects Mexican fields

The Associated Press

SIERRA MADRE DEL SUR, Mexico — Red and purple blossoms with fat, opium-filled bulbs blanket the remote creek sides and gorges of the Filo Mayor mountains in the southern state of Guerrero.

The multibillion-dollar Mexican opium trade starts here, with poppy farmers so poor they live in wood-plank, tin-roofed shacks with no indoor plumbing.

Mexican farmers from three villages interviewed by The Associated Press are feeding a growing addiction in the U.S., where heroin use has spread from back alleys to the cul-de-sacs of suburbia.

The heroin trade is a losing prospect for everyone except the Mexican cartels, who have found a new way to make money in the face of falling cocaine consumption and marijuana legalization in the United States. Once smaller-scale producers of low-grade black tar, Mexican drug traffickers are now

refining opium paste into high-grade white heroin and flooding the world's largest market for illegal drugs, using the distribution routes they built for marijuana and cocaine.

It is a business that even the farmers don't like. In a rare interview with reporters, the villagers told The Associated Press that it's too difficult to ship farm products on roads so rough that cars are in constant danger of tumbling off. They say the small plastic-wrapped bricks of gummy opium paste are the only thing that will guarantee them a cash income.

“Almost everyone thinks the people in these mountains are bad people, and that's not true,” said Humberto Nava Reyna, the head of the Supreme Council of the Towns of the Filo Mayor, a group that promotes development projects in the mountains. “They can't stop planting poppies as long as there is demand, and the government doesn't provide any help.”

Villagers granted the AP ac-

cess to their farms and agreed to interviews only if they were not identified, fearing government drug eradicators or vengeful traffickers. Residents say there are no local users. It all goes for export, a lucrative business mostly run by the Sinaloa Cartel.

According to the DEA's 2014 National Drug Threat Assessment, Mexico produces nearly half of the heroin found in the U.S., up from 39 percent in 2008. Mexican heroin has become cheaper and more powerful at a time when Americans hooked on pharmaceutical opiates are looking for an affordable alternative. Combined with dangerous additives like fentanyl, a synthetic opiate also produced in Mexico, it is blamed for a wave of new addictions and overdoses in the U.S. Heroin deaths doubled from 2011 to 2013, while deaths from cocaine and prescription opiates remained steady, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

Koepka rallies for first PGA Tour win

The Associated Press

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. — Brooks Koepka remembers the disappointment like it was yesterday instead of more than two years ago.

In his first shot at getting a PGA Tour card, he didn't get through the second stage of Q-school by two shots. He tied with a Texas teenager named Jordan Spieth.

Spieth chose to play the PGA Tour through sponsor exemptions or qualifying in the minor leagues, and it paid off quickly. He had PGA Tour status by May, won in July and played in the Presidents Cup in October.

Koepka got out his passport.

Having already won on Europe's secondary Challenge Tour, he at least had a place to play. It took him from Kenya to Kazakhstan, from South Africa to Scotland. He toiled in the remote outposts of golf, never losing sight that his power and work ethic would get him to where he wanted to be.

That's what made his victory Sunday in the Phoenix Open so satisfying.

"Going that route — going over to Europe — it toughened me," Koepka said after he closed with a 5-under 66 for a one-shot victory over Hideki Matsuyama, Masters champion Bubba Watson and Ryan Palmer. "It was a blessing in disguise. At the time, I was extremely disappointed, as I'm sure Jordan Spieth was, too. But that just toughens you up, your drive. It makes you want to get out

here that much more."

Koepka was lingering for 14 holes of the final round at the TPC Scottsdale. He fell behind by four shots early on the front nine, made a couple of birdies to get back in the mix, and still was largely ignored until two big moments over a final, wild hour in the Valley of the Sun.

On the par-5 15th, Koepka holed a 50-foot eagle putt from the fringe.

After reading the putt, he told caddie Rickie Elliott: "I'm finally going to get this one there."

"Everything was 2, 3 feet short, especially on the back nine," Koepka said. "I don't know why the speed control was off a little bit. Going through the fringe, uphill, just gave it a whack. And then it went in, thankfully."

That put him atop the leaderboard at 15 under, but only as long as it took Martin Laird to two-putt from 25 feet to tie him.

Two holes later, on the 322-yard 17th, Koepka thought he was doomed when his 3-wood landed on the green and rolled over the back.

"I thought it was in the water," he said.

Instead, it settled on the red hazard line, a foot from the water. Koepka hit a mediocre chip and missed the birdie putt, but he suddenly had the lead to himself when Laird hit into the gallery on the right, could only chip to the fat of the green and three-putted from about 50 feet for bogey.

One hole from victory, Koepka drilled his tee shot 331 yards down the middle.

Matsuyama, the 22-year-old rising star from Japan, had the last chance to catch him. Matsuyama took the lead on the 13th hole, but then made his first bogey in 44 holes when he three-putted the 14th. He never made another birdie, and his 18-foot chance on the 18th turned away quickly to the right.

Matsuyama, who holed out for eagle from the fairway on the first hole, closed with a 67. He tied for second with Watson, who didn't make a birdie over the last five holes and shot 65; and Ryan Palmer, who failed to make birdie over the last three holes and shot 66.

Laird, who began the final round with a three-shot lead, followed his bogey on the 17th with a tee shot into the water on the 18th for double bogey. He shot 72 and tied for fifth with Arizona State junior Jon Rahm.

Spieth, meanwhile, got within two shots of the lead until he ran out of holes, and made bogey on the last for a 65. He tied for seventh.

"It's unbelievable," said Koepka, who finished at 15-under 269. "I didn't think I would work my way up this quickly, but playing the Challenge and European tours led to this. And especially the failure I've had. I can't tell you how much I learned from that."

Manziel in rehab

The Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Johnny Manziel has sought help to change his off-field lifestyle.

Following a rough rookie season in the NFL, Manziel has entered a treatment program for unspecified reasons, an adviser for the Browns quarterback said in a statement released by the team on Monday.

"Johnny knows there are areas he needs to improve on to help him be a better family member, friend and teammate, so he decided to take this step in his life during the offseason," Manziel adviser Brad Beckworth said. Beckworth said the former Heisman Trophy winner entered the unnamed facility last week. He said Manziel's family is asking for privacy until he rejoins the team.

Beckworth's statement did not indicate reasons for Manziel needing treatment. However, the 22-year-old QB's penchant for partying followed him from college into the pros and Manziel's nightlife has been well-chronicled by both social and mainstream media.

Browns general manager Ray Farmer said in a statement that the team fully supports Manziel and respects his initiative in entering treatment. The team will respect Manziel's privacy during treatment, he said.

"Our players' health and well-being will always be of the utmost importance..." he said. "We continually strive to create a supportive environment and provide the appropriate resources, with our foremost focus being on the individual and not just the football player."

Blues overcome Ovechkin, Capitals

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The St. Louis Blues are rolling. Against the Washington Capitals, an injury, an ejection and Alex Ovechkin's two goals weren't enough to stop them.

Alexander Steen had two goals and an assist, Brian Elliot stopped 33 shots and the Blues beat the Capitals 4-3 on Sunday.

"This was a real gutsy win. You lose one of your top defensemen second shift into the game. Your captain goes out," coach Ken Hitchcock said. "We didn't (just) hang on, we played really well. There's wins and then there's really impressive wins. This was a very impressive win."

Defenseman Kevin Shattenkirk left with a first-period injury, forward and captain David Backes was ejected and the Blues still won their fifth straight game and third in four days.

Dmitrij Jaskin and Vladimir Tarasenko also scored for St. Louis and T.J. Oshie had three

assists.

Ovechkin, who has 15 goals in his last 15 games, added an assist and his two scores gave him a NHL-leading 31 goals. He became the fifth player in NHL history to start his career with 10 30-goal seasons.

Washington is 1-4-2 in its last seven after dropping back-to-back games over the weekend.

Backes was booted for boarding Karl Alzner early in the second. The game turned, but not in the Capitals' favor.

St. Louis killed off the 5-minute penalty, limiting the league's fourth best power-play unit to two shots.

Hitchcock called it the key to the game. "We took the energy out of the building, we took the energy out of their team," he said.

Predators 4, Penguins 0: Carter Hutton made 21 saves for this second career shutout in Nashville's first regulation victory in Pittsburgh in 11 years.

Gabriel Bourque, Roman Josi, Eric Nystrom and Mike Fisher scored.

Hutton improved to 3-1-2 while temporarily filling in as Nashville's No. 1 goalie while All-Star Pekka Rinne recovers with a sprained knee that will sideline him for at least another week.

Coyotes 3, Canadiens 2: Lauri Korpikoski scored two power-play goals for visiting Arizona as Montreal-area native Louis Domingue made 18 saves to win in his first NHL start.

The 22-year-old Domingue helped end the Canadiens' five-game winning streak.

Wild 4, Canucks 2: Devan Dubnyk stopped 35 shots to help visiting Minnesota beat Vancouver.

Zach Parise, Jared Spurgeon, Thomas Vanek and Jason Zucker scored for the Wild. Zucker sealed it with an empty-net goal with 55 seconds left.

Ronalds Kenins and Daniel Sedin scored for the Canucks.

Anthony helps Knicks cruise by Lakers

The Associated Press

NEW YORK — Carmelo Anthony scored 18 of his 31 points in the third quarter and the New York Knicks beat the Los Angeles Lakers 92-80 on Sunday.

With Kobe Bryant out for the season and both teams among the worst in the NBA, it was anything but a Super Sunday, where the national TV audience that was originally scheduled to see it missed the Lakers shooting 35.5 percent from the field.

Anthony stood out above the ugliness, soaring to dunk an alley-oop pass in the second quarter before turning mostly to his jumper in the third to help New York pull away. He shot 13

of 25 and grabbed eight rebounds. Langston Galloway added 13 points for the Knicks, who have won five of seven.

Carlos Boozer had 19 points and 10 rebounds for the Lakers, who lost for the 10th time in 11 games.

Heat 83, Celtics 75: Hassan Whiteside scored half of his 20 points during a stretch spanning the third and fourth quarters and Miami held off host Boston to snap a two-game slide.

Whiteside also had nine rebounds and blocked three shots. Chris Bosh added 18 points, and Tyler Johnson had 13, helping overcome the absences of Dwyane Wade and Luol Deng. Wade missed his second game in a row with a strained right hamstring, while Deng sat out his third straight with a strained calf.



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Late INT helps Patriots win Super Bowl

The Associated Press

GLENDALE, Ariz. — The final 125 seconds included a perfect possession by Tom Brady for the go-ahead points, a juggling catch that could have been the play of the year, and a victory-clinching, end-zone interception on a pass — not run — from the 1.

A Super Bowl that got off to a slow start wound up with a “Whoa!” finish, a lot like the New England Patriots’ entire season.

Brady threw two of his four touchdown passes in the final quarter to erase a double-digit deficit, rookie Malcolm Butler picked off Russell Wilson’s short throw while Marshawn Lynch watched, and the Patriots ended a decade drought without an NFL title by beating the defending champion Seattle Seahawks 28-24 in a taut classic Sunday night.

“Every team has a journey,” said Brady, who was voted Super Bowl MVP for a record-tying third time, “and a lot of people lost faith in us early. But we held strong. We held together.”

He was talking about the preceding months, not minutes. But either made sense. After all, back in late September, when New England lost 41-14 at the Kansas City Chiefs to fall to 2-2, there was a lot of talk about whether Brady was done, whether the Patriots were simply no longer a powerhouse.

Yet Sunday night, when coach Bill Belichick was asked when he knew he had a special team, he pointed to half-time of that poor performance against the Chiefs.

“We weren’t having a good day, but we kept fighting,” Belichick said. “To me, if there was ever a time that we

were not going to compete as hard, that would have been it. ...

“The fight and the competitiveness was there, and that gave me a lot of confidence going into the next week’s game. That was a key point in our season.”

And so perhaps these Patriots were prepared to weather the scrutiny that came with an NFL investigation into whether they deliberately deflated footballs in the AFC championship game two weeks ago.

They compartmentalized that and focused on the Super Bowl.

Perhaps they were prepared to set aside Brady’s two interceptions that helped dig a 24-14 hole in the fourth quarter.

They moved into the lead after Brady connected with Danny Amendola from 4 yards out for one score with about 8 minutes left, then hit Julian Edelman from 3 yards for another TD with 2:02 remaining.

Perhaps they were prepared to not let the game get away when Seahawks receiver Jermaine Kearse made a falling, juggling, bouncing reception on his back for a 33-yard gain that set up first-and-goal from the 5 with 66 seconds to go. It was Butler who was in coverage on that play, although there was nothing more he really could have done.

Perhaps they were prepared for a shotgun pass by Wilson two plays later from the 1, rather than a run by the barrel-chested Lynch, who tied for the league lead in touchdown runs this season with 13.

Butler sure was ready, and his pick sealed the ultimate outcome, even if everyone had to wait while the officials cleared up a field-wide brawl.

“When they passed the ball, I was kind of surprised by it,” Patriots nose tackle Vince Wilfork said. “But at the same time, we made the play.”

Lynch gained 102 yards on 24 carries and scored an earlier TD, leaving many mystified as to why Seattle wouldn’t have handed off to him in that vital situation.

Even some of the Seahawks were bewildered.

“I don’t understand how you don’t give it to the best back in the league,” linebacker Bruce Irvin said. “We were on the half-yard-line and we throw a slant. I don’t know what the offense had going on, what they saw.”

With the retractable roof open on a cloudless evening, the Patriots (15-4) won the fourth Lombardi Trophy of the Brady-Belichick partnership, adding to those from the Super Bowls played in 2002, ‘04 and ‘05. They lost their last two trips to the big game, though, in 2008 and 2012, both times against the New York Giants.

This time, though, Brady and New England pulled it out — and in the process, prevented Seattle (14-5) from the ninth set of back-to-back Super Bowl championships.

At age 37, Brady went 37 for 50 for 328 yards and matched his childhood idol, Pro Football Hall of Famer Joe Montana, for most Super Bowl MVP awards. Brady also broke Montana’s Super Bowl record for most career touchdown passes, getting to 13.

On the drive that resulted in the winning points, Brady went 8 for 8 for 65 yards.

“He’s so calm and collected,” Amendola said about his quarterback. “He’s the best. He gets everybody to play at a higher level. He’s our leader emotionally.”

Brady ties Montana with third MVP win

The Associated Press

GLENDALE, Ariz. — As a kid, years before he became a pretty good quarterback in his own right, Tom Brady idolized Joe Montana.

Now, at age 37, Brady owns just as many Super Bowl championships — and just as many Super Bowl MVP awards — as the Pro Football Hall of Famer.

And no QB in history has more.

Brady completed 37 of 50 passes for 328 yards with four touchdown passes, each to a different receiver, including an 8-for-8, 65-yard bit of perfection on the drive that led to the go-ahead score with about 2 minutes left Sunday night.

That performance, and a victory-clinching interception by rookie cornerback Malcolm Butler, lifted the New England Patriots to a 28-24 comeback victory over the defending champion Seattle Seahawks.

This was not Brady at his best throughout. He threw two interceptions, including one deep in Seattle territory in the first quarter, and another in the third that led to points for the Seahawks.

That’s part of why the Patriots trailed 24-14 in the fourth quarter, before Brady got the rally going.

“It wasn’t the way we drew it up. Certainly, throwing a couple of picks didn’t help,” said Brady, who broke Peyton Manning’s Super Bowl record of 34 completions set last year. “It was a lot of mental toughness. Our team has had it all year. We never doubted each other, so that’s what it took. That was a great football team we beat. I’m just so happy for our team.”

And to think, back in late September, folks were writing off Brady, saying his best days were long behind him, especially right after a 41-14 loss at Kansas City that dropped the Patriots to 2-2.

Decades ago, sitting in his family’s

season-ticket seats at San Francisco’s Candlestick Park while growing up, Brady would wear a No. 16 jersey, just like Montana, and cheer for his favorite player’s team.

Brady did a fairly good impression of Joe Cool against Seattle. He connected with Danny Amendola for a 4-yard touchdown with about 8 minutes left. That gave him 12 TD passes in Super Bowls, breaking Montana’s mark. Then, with 2:02 to go, Brady hit Julian Edelman from 3 yards for Super Bowl TD No. 13 — and, more importantly, the lead.

“Tom’s the best ever,” Edelman said.

Brady turned to New England’s sideline, pointed, then raised his right fist, his white jersey stained green from the turf.

Only after Butler grabbed Russell Wilson’s pass from the 1-yard line in the final half-minute could Brady really begin to celebrate, leaping up and down on the sideline and embracing coach Bill Belichick.

Now Brady, Montana and Terry Bradshaw of the Pittsburgh Steelers are the only starting quarterbacks to earn four Super Bowl rings.

At the outset of Brady’s career after being a sixth-round draft pick, he and Belichick combined to win three championships in a four-year span, in the 2002, 2004 and 2005 Super Bowls. Brady was the MVP in the first two of those.

But Sunday’s victory ended a decade title drought, after losses in the big games in 2008 and 2012, both times against the New York Giants.

“Well, it’s been a long journey. I’ve been at it for 15 years and we’ve had a couple of tough losses in this game,” Brady said. “This one came down to the end, and this time, we made the plays.”

For Pete’s sake: Carroll takes blame for pass call

The Associated Press

GLENDALE, Ariz. — Because they didn’t go into Beast Mode, the Seattle Seahawks found themselves in Spin Mode.

They were left to explain why they turned Marshawn Lynch — the running back known as “The Beast” — into a decoy with the game on the line and chose instead to pass the ball on second-and-goal from the 1.

Malcolm Butler intercepted that pass with 20 seconds left to preserve New England’s 28-24 Super Bowl victory.

Within moments, the second-guessing had begun on what will surely be one of the most debated calls in NFL history.

“I made the decision. I said, ‘Throw the ball,’” coach Pete Carroll said. “Nobody to blame but me.”

But there was plenty of blame to go around. It started with offensive coordinator Darrell Bevell, who may have gotten too cute and, as a result, found his name was a top trend on Twitter.

And the receiver, Ricardo Lockette, who Bevell said, “could have done a better job staying strong on the ball.”

Quarterback Russell Wilson wishes he had that pass back.

“I thought it was going to be a touchdown,” Wilson said. “But I put the blame on me. I’m the one who threw it.”

He also gave lots of credit to Butler, the rookie free agent out of West Alabama who made New England’s roster, then saved the Super Bowl.

“The guy made a great play,” Wilson said.

But this one was hard to explain away. Seattle had a timeout left with the clock ticking down when Wilson fired into a cluster of blue and white shirts. Butler dug inside of Lockette and made his first career interception.

“I had a feeling I was going to make a big play today,” Butler said. “But not that big.”

Give credit where it’s due.

But about that play call again:

“Dumbest play call in the HISTORY of NFL football,” tweeted former 49ers receiver Dwight Clark, who made a pretty good grab himself: The Catch.

And this from NFL career rushing leader Emmitt Smith: “Worst play call I’ve seen in the history of football.”

It left them speechless in Seattle, too. Well, practically.

“We’ve got Marshawn Lynch, one of the best running backs in the league, and everybody makes their decisions and unfortunately, we didn’t give him the ball,” Seahawks linebacker Bobby Wagner said.

Carroll’s explanation: He saw the Patriots bring in a goal-line formation with eight big guys and three cornerbacks and didn’t think Lynch, who tied for the league lead with 13 touchdowns rushing this season, would be able to bull it in against that defense.

“It’s not a great matchup for us to run the football, so we were going to throw the ball, really to waste a play,” Carroll said. “If we score, we do, if we don’t, we’ll run it in on third or fourth down.”

Butler saw the stacked receivers on the right side of the field and said Wilson’s eyes tipped him off. He ducked inside of Lockette and made the play.

Quite a moment for a player who wasn’t drafted, wasn’t even signed to a contract right after the draft. He was an “invited tryout” player — offered a chance to show what he could do in May.

A long shot to make the roster, though Patriots cornerback Brandon Browner said he’s been proving he belongs all year.

Browner, a former Seahawk, said Butler leads the team in interceptions during practice.

On Sunday, he made the only one that mattered.