

Hegseth: Uncle Sam is no 'Uncle Sucker'

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth issued a warning at NATO headquarters Thursday that falling short of White House demands for higher defense spending will put Washington's commitment to the alliance at risk.

Hegseth, speaking at the end of a defense ministerial meeting in Brussels, said President Donald Trump would not allow a military imbalance between the United States and Europe to continue when it comes to defending the Continent.

"This administration believes deeply in alliances, but make no mistake, President Trump will not allow anyone to turn Uncle Sam into Uncle Sucker," Hegseth said.

Trump has long argued that the failure of some NATO countries to meet defense spending commitments amounts to security freeloading.

In Brussels, Hegseth repeat-

edly hammered home the message of more defense spending during his NATO debut, saying that the current target of 2% of gross domestic product was no longer acceptable. He also said allies need to spend more time talking about military firepower.

"We can talk all we want about values. Values are important, but you can't shoot values," he said. "There is no replacement for hard power."

Across-the-board defense spending increases are needed, given "an urgent, real threat to the Continent" from Russia, he said.

Hegseth's comments came one day after he delivered a jolt to allies when he laid out parameters for anticipated peace talks that Trump expects to convene.

On Wednesday, Hegseth said any return to Ukraine's prewar borders is unrealistic, as is NATO membership for Kyiv. He also said an international

peacekeeping force, minus the U.S., could play a role in ensuring that fighting doesn't restart.

Such a force would function without NATO's collective security guarantee, he said.

Hegseth's statements that laid out conditions for formal talks amounted to a repudiation of the long-standing NATO mantra of being in it for the "long haul" with Ukraine, and that there would never be "discussions about Ukraine without Ukraine."

The idea of demanding that Ukraine give up large swaths of its territory as part of any peace has rattled some allies, especially on NATO's eastern flank.

"Today might go down in history as a dark day for Europe. It now depends on European leaders to finally recognize that we must take our fate into our own hands—right now," said Marko Mihkelson, chair of the Estonian parliament's foreign affairs committee, in a statement.

Estonia's defense minister,

Hanno Pevkur, appeared to take issue with Washington ruling out NATO membership and Hegseth's statement that restoring Ukraine's occupied territory was a nonstarter for negotiations.

Kaja Kallas, the European Union's foreign affairs chief, also said Europe should play a central role in any negotiation.

"Ukraine's independence and territorial integrity are unconditional," she said in a statement. "Our priority must now be strengthening Ukraine and providing robust security guarantees."

Hegseth also has delivered a blunt message to NATO allies, saying that European militaries will be expected to carry most of the security burden on the Continent given U.S. commitments elsewhere.

While the U.S. will remain "an active part of this alliance," NATO countries will need to spend significantly more to fill the defense gaps, he said.

GOP pushes for adding billions more to DOD funds

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Congressional Republicans are pushing for at least \$100 billion in additional defense spending during the next decade to boost the military's budget and advance President Donald Trump's agenda.

The two chambers are working on two different budget resolutions that will direct the House Armed Services Committee and the Senate Armed Services Committee to develop legislation detailing how the money will be spent.

The Senate Budget Committee's resolution calls for a \$150 billion increase in defense spending to expand the Navy, strengthen the defense industrial base,

build an integrated air and missile defense system and continue the modernization of strategic nuclear forces. About \$20 billion would also increase funding for the Coast Guard.

The House Budget Committee's fiscal blueprint proposes a \$100 billion spending cap for the military. The committee was to debate the measure Thursday, and the Senate Budget Committee began its deliberations Wednesday.

Both resolutions are part of a Republican effort to enact Trump's agenda, which includes tax cuts, securing the U.S. border with Mexico, increasing American energy independence and bolstering the military.

The House aims to tackle all those priorities in one large bill, and the Senate wants

to move the tax cuts into separate legislation.

The chairmen of the Senate and House Armed Services committees have stressed the need to raise defense spending to 5% of the U.S. gross domestic product to meet security challenges from China, Russia, North Korea and Iran.

"We must make the investments necessary to deter, and if necessary, defeat this new axis of aggressors," Rep. Mike Rogers, R-Ala., the chairman of the House panel, said Wednesday.

The annual defense budget, totaling more than \$800 billion, is now at about 3% of GDP, according to a report issued last year by Sen. Roger Wicker, R-Miss., the chairman of the Senate panel.

Aviators eject before Growler crash in Calif.

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Two crew members ejected from a Navy jet before it crashed Wednesday off the San Diego coast and were quickly rescued by a sportfishing boat, authorities said.

The two occupants of the E/A-18G Growler were first picked up by the Premier Sportfishing vessel and then transferred to a nearby Customs and Border Protection craft, Coast Guard spokesperson Petty Officer Christopher Sappey said.

The crash occurred during what is known as a “go-around maneuver,” in which the aircraft landed and was taking off again, according to Navy spokesperson Cmdr. Beth Teach.

The cause of the crash is under investigation.

On a webcam of San Diego harbor traffic,

someone aboard the Premier can be heard telling the Coast Guard that the crew members ejected right after takeoff.

“We’re on our way to help assist,” the man called in about 10:14 a.m.

“They’re in the water.”

Shortly afterward someone from the boat reported: “We have both pilots on board and safe.”

Brandon Viets, captain of the Premier, said he had taken a dozen passengers out by Point Loma on a fishing trip when he heard a jet taking off from the naval base that “seemed a little louder than normal.”

He turned and saw two people falling with parachutes. Viets immediately headed toward them in his boat.

The jet remained in the air for several minutes before diving into the water, he said.

“All I could see was a plume of water and mud and muck, 70 to 80 feet tall,” Viets said.

“Captain Brandon Viets and the crew of the Premier acted swiftly, and thanks to their professionalism, were able to bring these pilots to safety,” Frank Ursitti, general manager of boat owner H&M Landing, said in a statement.

The two men were taken to a hospital and were in stable condition, authorities said.

The Coast Guard deployed two vessels to safeguard the Growler wreckage in San Diego Harbor, Sappey said.

The Growler is a two-seater jet that specializes in electronic warfare.

A similar Navy aircraft crashed last October during a routine training flight in Washington state, killing its two crew members.

The wreckage was found in remote mountainous terrain.

USS Truman, cargo ship collide off coast of Egypt

BY CAITLYN BURCHETT
Stars and Stripes

The aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman and a merchant ship collided Wednesday while operating near Egypt’s Port Said, according to a Navy official.

The Truman was operating near the port on the Mediterranean Sea at about 11:46 p.m. when it was involved in a collision with the merchant vessel Besiktas-M, said Cmdr. Timothy Gorman, a spokesperson for the U.S. 6th Fleet.

The collision did not endanger the ship or the crew, Gorman said. There have been no reports of flooding or injuries. Additionally, the propulsion plants are unaffected and in a safe and stable condition.

The Besiktas-M is a bulk cargo carrier sailing under the flag of Panama.

The collision is under investigation.

The Truman deployed in Sep-

tember from Naval Station Norfolk, Va. In December, the ship arrived in the Middle East, where it has spent the past two months supporting strikes against the Houthi rebels in Yemen, the Navy said.

Those actions include attacks on Dec. 30 and 31 against a Houthi command hub, weapons production facility and storage facilities that included missiles and drones.

On Feb. 1, the carrier’s group conducted airstrikes against Islamic State in Somalia in support of Africa Command and in coordination with the Somali government, the Navy said. Those strikes killed multiple ISIS operatives, the Pentagon said at the time.

Following combat operations, the Truman sailed Feb. 7 to Naval Support Activity Souda Bay on the Greek island of Crete for a working port visit to allow for maintenance to be done and sailors to get a break.

Navy ships make a rare 2-day Taiwan Strait trip

BY ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

A pair of U.S. Navy ships made a rare, two-day trip through the Taiwan Strait this week, marking the first transit of the contentious waterway under the Trump administration.

The guided-missile destroyer USS Ralph Johnson and survey ship USNS Bowditch sailed southwest through the 110-mile-wide channel that separates mainland China from Taiwan between Monday and Wednesday, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command told Stars and Stripes on Thursday.

“The transit occurred through a corridor in the Taiwan Strait that is beyond any coastal state’s territorial seas,” wrote command spokesman Cmdr. Matthew Comer. “Within this corridor, all nations enjoy high-seas freedom of navigation, overflight, and other internationally lawful uses of the sea related to these freedoms.”

Transits of the strait typically last less than a day and are an-

nounced via news releases from INDOPACOM or the U.S. 7th Fleet. However, this week’s passage was not publicly announced by either command as of Thursday morning.

Comer did not address questions about the transit’s timing, length or why it wasn’t publicized.

Seventh Fleet spokeswoman Lt. j.g. Sarah Merrill, in an email Thursday, referred all questions about the transit to INDOPACOM.

The U.S. regularly sends warships and, less frequently, aircraft through the strait. This week’s transit marks the first since President Donald Trump was sworn into office on Jan. 20.

The 7th Fleet last announced a transit on Nov. 26 by a P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol and reconnaissance aircraft. The Navy typically describes the transits as a routine means of traveling between the East and South China seas, but Beijing views them as provocative and condemns them as support for Taiwan.

Trump closes federal worker buyout offer

The Washington Post

A judge on Wednesday lifted his pause on the federal government's deferred resignation program, prompting the Trump administration to swiftly declare victory as it closed the offer to any more workers who might still have been mulling it.

The program — which encouraged federal workers to resign with the promise of pay through September — had been halted since last Thursday, when U.S. District Judge George A. O'Toole Jr. temporarily stopped the Office of Personnel Management from moving ahead. Unions representing more than 800,000 federal workers had filed a lawsuit to stop the program, calling it an "arbitrary, unlawful, short-fused ultimatum."

In his ruling, O'Toole wrote that the unions' lawsuit could not succeed because they lacked standing to sue and because his court lacked jurisdiction. The unions, the judge said, were not directly impacted by the administration directive "but are challenging a policy that affects others, specifically executive branch employees."

The ruling left a serious question: How much time would federal employees who had not yet signed up have to throw their names in? None, it turned out. McLaurine Pinover, spokesperson for the Office of Personnel Management, said the program was closed as of 7 p.m. About 75,000 workers have already accepted the deal, Pinover said.

The decision out of the Massachusetts courthouse — and

the Trump administration's move immediately afterward — mark another milestone in a tumultuous period for federal workers, who have been left scrambling to make up their minds since the resignation offer, with the subject line "Fork in the Road," first landed in their inboxes Jan. 28. Some workers jumped at the chance to leave. Others urged colleagues to reject a deal they consider a trap that will be used to eliminate staff without payout.

The moves come as the Trump administration began initiating widespread layoffs across the federal government, starting Wednesday with probationary employees and with plans to extend deeper into the civilian federal workforce of 2.3 million. The drastic measures

are led by representatives of Elon Musk's U.S. DOGE Service, who are deployed with full oversight of the hiring process and one mission: to shrink the bureaucracy and align it with Trump's vision.

The unions had sought the right to sue by claiming the buyout program's rapid deadline, along with what they characterized as its confusing and chaotic rollout, impeded the unions' ability to carry out their missions of counseling and advocating for federal workers.

The deferred resignation was the administration's effort to lure workers into leaving before initiating the more direct reductions-in-force — which can pose legal challenges, especially when it comes to union-protected employees.

Musk calls for US to 'delete entire agencies'

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Elon Musk called on Thursday for the United States to "delete entire agencies" from the federal government as part of his push under President Donald Trump to radically cut spending and restructure its priorities.

Musk offered a wide-ranging survey via a videocall to the World Governments Summit in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, of what he described as the priorities of the Trump administration interspersed with multiple references to "thermonuclear warfare" and the dangers of artificial intelligence.

"We really have here rule of the bureaucracy as opposed to rule of the people — democracy," Musk said, wearing a black T-shirt that read: "Tech Support."

He also joked that he was the "White House's tech support," borrowing from his profile on

the social platform X, which he owns.

"I think we do need to delete entire agencies as opposed to leave a lot of them behind," Musk said. "If we don't remove the roots of the weed, then it's easy for the weed to grow back."

While Musk has spoken to the summit in the past, his appearance on Thursday comes as he has consolidated control over large swaths of the government with Trump's blessing since assuming leadership of the Department of Government Efficiency. That's included sidelining career officials, gaining access to sensitive databases and inviting a constitutional clash over the limits of presidential authority.

Musk's new role imbued his comments with more weight beyond being the world's wealthiest person through his investments in SpaceX and electric carmaker Tesla.

RFK Jr. confirmed as new health secretary

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Senate on Thursday confirmed Robert F. Kennedy Jr. as President Donald Trump's health secretary, putting the prominent vaccine skeptic in control of \$1.7 trillion in federal spending, vaccine recommendations and food safety as well as health insurance programs for roughly half the country.

Nearly all Republicans fell in line behind Trump despite hesitancy over Kennedy views on vaccines, voting 52-48 to elevate the scion of one of America's most storied political — and, historically, overwhelmingly Democratic — families to become the new secretary of the Health and Human Services Department.

Democrats unanimously opposed Kennedy.

Kentucky Sen. Mitch McConnell, who survived polio as a child, was the only "no" vote

among Republican senators, mirroring his stands against Trump's picks for the Pentagon chief and director of national intelligence.

The rest of the GOP, however, has embraced Kennedy's vision with a directive for the public health agencies to focus on chronic diseases such as obesity.

Kennedy, 71, whose name and family tragedies have put him in the national spotlight since he was a child, has earned a formidable following with his populist and sometimes extreme views on food, chemicals and vaccines.

With Trump's backing, Kennedy insisted he was "uniquely positioned" to revive trust in those public health agencies, which include the Food and Drug Administration, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institutes of Health.

Russians rejoice after Trump-Putin call

Associated Press

Russian officials and state media took a triumphant tone Thursday after President Donald Trump jettisoned three years of U.S. policy and announced he would likely meet soon with Russian President Vladimir Putin to negotiate a peace deal in the almost three-year war in Ukraine.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, meanwhile, said he would not accept any negotiations about Ukraine that do not include his country in the talks. European governments also demanded a seat at the table.

Trump's change of tack seemed to identify Putin as the only player that matters in ending the fighting and looked set to

sideline Zelenskyy, as well as European governments, in any peace negotiations. The Ukrainian leader recently described that prospect as "very dangerous."

Putin has been ostracized by the West since Russia's February 2022 invasion of its neighbor, and in 2023 the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for the Russian leader alleging war crimes.

Trump's announcement created a major diplomatic upheaval that could herald a watershed moment for Ukraine and Europe.

Russian officials and state-backed media appeared triumphant after Wednesday's call between Trump and Putin that lasted more than an hour.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Thursday that the "position of the current (U.S.) administration is much more appealing."

The deputy chair of Russia's National Security Council, Dmitry Medvedev, said in an online statement: "The presidents of Russia and the U.S. have talked at last. This is very important in and of itself."

Senior lawmaker Alexei Pushkov said the call "will go down in the history of world politics and diplomacy."

"I am sure that in Kyiv, Brussels, Paris and London they are now reading Trump's lengthy statement on his conversation with Putin with horror and cannot believe their eyes," Pushkov

wrote on his messaging app.

Russian state news agency RIA Novosti said in an opinion column: "The U.S. finally hurt Zelenskyy for real," adding that Trump had found "common ground" with Putin.

"This means that the formula 'nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine' — a sacred cow for Zelenskyy, the European Union and the previous U.S. administration — no longer exists. Moreover, the opinion of Kyiv and Brussels (the European Union) is of no interest to Trump at all," it added.

The pro-Kremlin Russian tabloid Komsomolskaya Pravda went even further and published a column stating in the headline that "Trump signed Zelenskyy's death sentence."

Hamis says it will free 3 more hostages as planned

Associated Press

CAIRO — Hamas said Thursday that it would release three more Israeli hostages as planned, paving the way toward resolving a major dispute over the ceasefire in the Gaza Strip.

Hamas had threatened to delay the next release of captives, accusing Israel of failing to meet its obligations to allow in tents and shelters, among other alleged violations of the truce. Israel, with the support of President Donald Trump, had threatened to renew its offensive if hostages were not freed.

There was no immediate

comment from Israel on Hamas' announcement, but it should allow the ceasefire to continue for now, though the future of the truce still remains in doubt.

Hamas said its delegation held talks in Cairo with Egyptian officials and was in contact with Qatar's prime minister about bringing into Gaza more shelters, medical supplies, fuel and heavy equipment for clearing rubble — its key demand in recent days. It said in a statement that the mediators had pledged to "remove all hurdles."

Shortly after the announcement, Hamas spokesman Abdul Latif al-Qanou confirmed to The Associated Press by phone that three hostages will be released Saturday.

Egypt's state-run Qahera TV, which is close to the country's security services, reported that Egypt and Qatar had succeeded in resolving the dispute. The two Arab countries have served as key mediators with Hamas and helped broker the ceasefire, which took effect in January, more than 15 months into the war.

Egyptian media also aired

footage showing trucks carrying temporary housing and bulldozers on the Egyptian side of the Rafah crossing with Gaza. They reported the trucks were heading to an Israeli inspection area before crossing into Gaza.

The truce faces a much bigger challenge in the coming weeks. The first phase is set to conclude at the beginning of March, and there have not yet been substantive negotiations over the second phase, in which Hamas would release dozens of remaining hostages in exchange for an end to the war.

California braces for floods; snow, ice set for Oregon

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Rain intensified Thursday in California, where the strongest atmospheric river of the season is expected to bring downpours, strong winds and flooding to areas ravaged by wildfires. Ahead of the storm's arrival, officials distributed sandbags, preposi-

tioned rescue swimmers and told residents to have go-bags ready.

Meanwhile, Portland, Ore., coated its streets with liquid anti-icer while officials in that state and Idaho opened emergency shelters to prepare for snow and ice Thursday.

Southern California could see

as much as 6 inches of rain in the mountains and 3 inches in coastal areas and valleys, according to Brent Bower, a hydrologist with the National Weather Service. Strong wind gusts could bring down trees, cause power outages and delay flights.

Evacuation warnings were issued in Mandeville Canyon and

other areas ravaged by the Palisades Fire, which was the most destructive in Los Angeles' history, over concerns about potential debris flows during the storm.

There were also warnings for Trabuco Canyon and other areas near the burn scar for an earlier wildfire.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Bayer backs broadened weedkiller liability effort

IA DES MOINES — A renewed and expanded effort from chemical giant Bayer to shield itself from lawsuits that claim its popular weedkiller Roundup causes cancer brought dozens of protesters to the Iowa Capitol building Monday begging lawmakers to reject it.

The legislation, pending in Iowa and at least seven other states, would protect pesticide companies from claims they failed to warn that their product causes cancer if the product label otherwise complies with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's regulations.

Similar efforts failed during 2024 legislative sessions in Iowa, Missouri and Idaho. But this year, Bayer and a coalition of agricultural groups are doubling down. A broader media campaign is highlighting the importance of glyphosate-based Roundup for American agriculture.

Opponents, including those who rallied Monday in Des Moines, say the bills would limit the rights of people to hold companies accountable if their products cause harm.

Bayer disputes the claims that Roundup causes cancer, but the company has been hit with about 177,000 lawsuits involving the weedkiller and has set aside \$16 billion to settle cases.

3 convicted of murder after men were drugged

NY NEW YORK — Three men were convicted of murder Monday in a conspiracy to rob men leaving

Manhattan nightclubs and bars late at night, plying them with potent and dangerous drugs and ultimately draining their bank accounts once they were incapacitated.

The 2022 deaths of Julio Ramirez, a 25-year-old social worker, and John Umberger, a 33-year-old political consultant, were the result of "drug-facilitated thefts" and homicides, according to the medical examiner's office. Ramirez died in a taxi of an overdose while Umberger was found dead a month later in a townhouse.

Lab tests showed both men had substances including fentanyl, cocaine and lidocaine in their systems when they died. Their families suspected foul play after discovering money missing from the men's bank accounts.

The defendants — Jayqwan Hamilton, 37, Robert Demaio, 36, and Jacob Barroso, 32 — were convicted of murder, conspiracy and robbery and face 25 years to life in prison. All three were convicted of the death of Ramirez while Demaio and Hamilton were convicted in Umberger's killing.

Governor sues over laws meant to weaken him

NC RALEIGH — New North Carolina Gov. Josh Stein says more recent laws enacted by state Republicans that erode some gubernatorial appointment powers are "partisan power grabs that thwart North Carolina voters' decisions at the ballot box."

The Democratic governor sued House Speaker Destin Hall and Senate leader Phil Berger in Wake County court last week, aiming to strike down

provisions within wide-ranging legislation that removed his power to fill court vacancies and name members of a commission that regulates companies that offer electricity, natural gas and other services. The Republican-controlled General Assembly enacted the omnibus legislation in December over then-Gov. Roy Cooper's veto.

Cooper, also a Democrat, and Stein had filed two similar lawsuits in December challenging other provisions in the omnibus legislation that took away powers to appoint State Board of Elections members and name a state Highway Patrol commander.

Judge won't order new election despite errors

GA ATLANTA — A Georgia state House member won't face a new election after a judge ruled there wasn't enough evidence to prove voters who received the wrong ballots swayed the race's outcome.

Senior Judge Gary McCorvey on Monday declined to order a new election in state House District 128, where Democratic incumbent Mack Jackson beat Republican challenger Tracy Wheeler by 48 votes out of a total of 27,804 votes cast in November.

Wheeler sued to force a new election, arguing some people who lived outside the district improperly got ballots for House District 128, while a smaller number of voters living inside the district didn't receive ballots.

McCorvey found that 58 voters got the wrong ballot. But the judge found there wasn't enough testimony indicating

whether each person in question voted in the House race, saying Wheeler hadn't met the high bar for overturning an election.

Fugitive dog recaptured after gaining fame on lam

LA NEW ORLEANS — A scruffy New Orleans rescue dog famed for evading a monthslong effort to recapture him using nets and tranquilizer rifles has finally been caught and returned to domestic life Tuesday.

Scrim, a 17-pound mutt who has become a Louisiana folk hero, first escaped from his adopted family in April and roamed the city for months until he was cornered and brought back home. Weeks later, in October, he leaped out of a second-story window in a moment recorded on video that got attention online.

During his months on the lam, Scrim survived a hurricane and freezing blizzard conditions. A posse of volunteers tracked his movements over 57 square miles using wildlife surveillance cameras and a crowd-sourced map of sightings.

The renowned fugitive was ultimately captured in a cat trap, said Michelle Cheramie, the owner of animal rescue nonprofit Zeus' Rescues who led the mission to find Scrim.

The elated Cheramie held Scrim in her arms Tuesday after giving him a bath. Cheramie has locked the doors and windows in her house as she waits to take Scrim to his long-term residence with a family she declined to name. Scrim has been outfitted with a new GPS collar and an AirTag tracking device.

— From wire reports

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Briscoe secures first Daytona 500 pole

Associated Press

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — Chase Briscoe led a banner night for Toyota in qualifying for the Daytona 500 by winning the pole for NASCAR's "Great American Race."

It is the first Daytona 500 pole for Briscoe, who moved to Joe Gibbs Racing this season when Stewart-Haas Racing closed at the end of 2024. His move to the No. 19 gave Toyota its first pole in NASCAR's biggest race of the season.

"A great way to start our season. Unbelievable way to start off the year. Unbelievable way to start off with Toyota," said Briscoe. "To be able to be the

guy to deliver them the first anything when they've already accomplished so much is pretty cool. To think I'm going to start on the front row or on the pole of the 'Great American Race' with ultimately the great American brand of (sponsor) Bass Pro Shops is unbelievable. Can't thank Coach Gibbs enough, the entire Joe Gibbs Racing organization."

Briscoe's lap of 182.745 mph held off a slew of Ford challengers. Former Daytona 500 winner Austin Cindric qualified second in a Ford for Team Penske, which started from the pole last year with Joey Logano, who closed the year as NASCAR

Cup Series champion.

Ford drivers claimed four of the top five spots in time trials, but only Briscoe and Cindric as the front row starters were locked in Wednesday night.

"A lot of fast Fords," said Cindric. "Pretty good to start on the front row with one of my good friends. All in all, a great box checked for the start of this week. I think every single part of this weekend is important to setting up with an opportunity to win this race on Sunday."

The only other drivers locked in during time trials were Toyota drivers Jimmie Johnson and Martin Truex Jr., who were not guaranteed entry but posted

speeds fast enough to claim two of the four "open" spots in the race.

The remainder of the starting order was set Thursday night in a pair of qualifying races.

There are nine drivers entered for four open spots, and Truex and Johnson claimed two of them in time trials. Johnson is a seven-time NASCAR champion, two-time Daytona 500 winner and member of the Hall of Fame. Truex is the 2017 Cup champion and in his first year of not racing NASCAR full-time.

"Both Jimmie and I were beneficiaries of their (Toyota's) hard work on their engines," Truex said.

Villanova edges No. 9 St. John's for third straight win

Associated Press

VILLANOVA, Pa. — Tyler Perkins hit a go-ahead 3-pointer with 8 seconds remaining and Villanova defeated No. 9 St. John's 73-71 on Wednesday night, ending the Red Storm's 10-game winning streak.

Wooga Poplar scored 22 points and Eric Dixon added 17 in a critical victory for the Wildcats (15-10, 8-6 Big East), who have won three in a row.

Aaron Scott led four players in double figures with 22 points for St. John's (21-4, 12-2), which leads the Big East by one game over No. 24 Creighton.

The Red Storm will meet the Bluejays on Sunday at Madison Square Garden.

Kadary Richmond had 17 points and 10 assists for St. John's. Simeon Wilcher and RJ Luis Jr. scored 12 apiece.

No. 4 Duke 78, California 57: Cooper Flagg scored 27 points and the Blue Devils extended their home winning streak to 14 games with a victory over the Golden Bears.

Tyrese Proctor scored 18 points and Khaman Maluach added 10 points and 12 rebounds for Duke (21-3, 13-1 Atlantic Coast Conference), which rebounded from Saturday's loss to Clemson that snapped a 16-game winning streak.

Jeremiah Wilkinson scored 21 points, Rytis Petraitis added 11 points and Andrej Stojakovic had 10 points for California (12-13, 5-9).

Flagg shot 8 for 14 from the field and was perfect on nine free throws for the Blue Devils, who led 19-9 less than 9½ minutes in the

game. Flagg scored 13 points in the first half, helping Duke to a 38-23 lead at the break.

Back-to-back possessions with 3-pointers from 7-foot-2 center Maluach and Flagg pushed the Blue Devils to a 28-15 lead. The margin never dipped to single digits the rest of the way.

No. 12 Texas Tech 111, Arizona St. 106 (2OT): JT Toppin had a career-high 41 points and 15 rebounds as the host Red Raiders outlasted the Sun Devils.

Darriion Williams scored 27 for Texas Tech, making a steal and two free throws with 1:49 left in the second OT to put them ahead to stay.

Toppin added a dunk in the final minute off a pass from Williams, whose jumper with 25 seconds remaining in the first overtime made it 96-all. The Red Raiders (19-5, 10-3 Big 12) finished with their most points in a Big 12 game.

Adam Miller's 22 points led five players in double figures for Arizona State (12-12, 3-10), which has lost four in a row. BJ Freeman added 21 points, while Amier Ali scored 18, Alston Mason had 16 and Shawn Phillips had 15.

Miller's short floater with 10 seconds left in regulation put the Sun Devils up 90-88, right after he retrieved his own inbound pass. Texas Tech forced overtime on a putback with 0.8 seconds to go by Chance McMillian, who had 14 points.

No. 19 Mississippi 72, South Carolina 68: Malik Dia hit a 3-pointer with just over two minutes remaining that put the Rebels ahead

to stay and finished with 18 points as visiting Mississippi beat the Gamecocks.

The Rebels (19-6, 8-4 Southeastern Conference) squandered a 12-point lead in the second half before Dia led a comeback.

Dia had 12 of his points in the final six minutes, including a three-point play that moved Ole Miss back in front after South Carolina led 58-57.

The Gamecocks had a last chance to move in front in the final minute, but Collin Murray-Boyles fumbled the ball on a drive and Dre Davis picked it up for Ole Miss.

It was the latest heartbreaker for South Carolina (10-14, 0-11), which has lost 11 straight games to start SEC play.

No. 21 Missouri 82, Oklahoma 58: Mark Mitchell scored 19 points in the first half and finished with a career-high 25 to help the host Tigers rout the Sooners.

Caleb Grill had 15 points, and Tony Perkins added 12 for Missouri (18-6, 7-4 Southeastern Conference), which snapped a two-game skid.

Mitchell shot 6 of 12 from the field, 13 for 18 at the free-throw line and grabbed a team-best seven rebounds.

Duke Miles scored 18 points and Jalon Moore added 10 points and seven rebounds for Oklahoma (16-8, 3-8), which lost its third straight.

The Tigers never trailed in the first half and pulled away on a 10-0 run after Moore hit two free throws that cut the Sooners' deficit to 13-11 with 13:50 remaining in the first half.

Murray drops career-high 55 on Blazers

Associated Press

DENVER — The only thing hotter than Jamal Murray's jumper on Wednesday night might have been his temper.

The Denver guard was still carrying a grudge against the Portland Trail Blazers over being ejected for some trash talking Monday. Facing them again two days later, Murray let his play do his chirping with a career-best 55 points the Nuggets' 132-121 victory.

"They (the Trail Blazers) shouldn't have done that," Denver forward Zeke Nnaji said about the trash talk. "When he's mad, there's no one in the world that can stop him."

Murray conjured up visions of "Playoff Murray" in the Nuggets' last game before the All-Star break. He was difficult to guard when he helped lead Denver to its first NBA championship in 2023.

He was difficult to contain Wednesday, too, hitting one

long-range shot after another on his way to a 30-point first half. When Portland changed its tactics in the second half, Murray adjusted, too, and attacked the rim.

Murray finished 20-for-36 from the floor, including seven 3-pointers. It's the third-most points in the franchise's NBA history, trailing only David Thompson's 73-point game on April 9, 1978, and Jokic's 56-point effort Dec. 7. In the ABA, Spencer Haywood had a 59-point game for the then-Denver Rockets on April 15, 1970.

"He was just ultra-aggressive tonight," Nuggets coach Michael Malone said. "As a coach, obviously watching one of your players have that type of game, just so proud of him and happy for him. He's been playing at a high level for us. And tonight was his best game ever from a numbers standpoint."

The Blazers drew his ire in Denver's 146-117 victory Mon-

day. Murray picked up a technical in the third quarter and another in the fourth for some talking after finishing a three-point play with a free throw.

It led to his ejection — and to his fuel for Wednesday.

"It's just all competitive spirit," Murray explained. "I came ready to play. Especially just being used to the playoffs and playing the same team over and over and they know your plays and things get chippy and you have to see them again. So I think just that kind of factor made me ready to go. I was truly prepared today."

For his efforts, he received the game ball signed by all of his teammates. He brought it with him to the postgame news conference.

"It's just years of chemistry with those guys," Murray said. "They know me. I know them, and tonight was just them looking out for me. I know I shot the ball well, but I brought the ball up here just because I couldn't

do it without them. That's why we're such a good team."

His scoring spree overshadowed another stellar performance by Nikola Jokic, who had 26 points, 15 rebounds and 10 assists for his 25th triple-double of the season.

Murray had a little bit of everything going, including his explosiveness despite dealing with nagging injuries this season such as left knee and hamstring inflammation and a sprained right ankle.

"I feel the same," he said. "I've been the same person, same player, for years now. ... I came in ready to go today. I was hopping before the game started, and that's just because of the last game."

Anfernee Simons led Portland with 26 points, and Donovan Clingan had 17 points and 20 rebounds. The Trail Blazers were without Deandre Ayton (strained calf), Scoot Henderson (sprained ankle) and Jerami Grant (sore knee).

Towns scores 40 in 2nd straight as Knicks win in OT

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Karl-Anthony Towns had scored 40 points in consecutive games for the first time in his career and was worried he might have thrown away the chance for it to come in a victory.

His turnover on an inbounds pass under the basket had contributed to the New York Knicks blowing a six-point lead with 10 seconds left in regulation, and suddenly they were headed to overtime against the Atlanta Hawks on Wednesday night.

"I would have needed a therapist if that had ended up in an 'L,' I'm not going to lie to you," Towns said.

It didn't, with Jalen Brunson hitting the go-ahead jumper with 11.1 seconds left as the Knicks pulled out a 149-148

victory. New York improved to 36-18, its most wins before the All-Star break since 1972-73, its last championship season.

Now the biggest worry for Towns might be having to stop playing when he's really rolling.

He heads to San Francisco as an All-Star starter after scoring 40 points Tuesday in a victory at Indiana, followed by 44 more along with 10 rebounds Wednesday. He made seven 3-pointers, the most in his first season with the Knicks.

Playing that like, who wants to stop now?

"I'm just happy we got ourselves going into the break with momentum," Towns said. "But it is true, it's the worst time, right, to have something working right now."

Towns had struggled a bit

recently after injuring the thumb on his shooting hand, but seems back on track. The consecutive nights with at least 40 points and 10 rebounds gave him five this season, second-most by a New York player behind only Hall of Famer Patrick Ewing's eight in 1989-90.

Towns joined Ewing, along with Bernard King, Carmelo Anthony and Brunson, who did it at the end of last season, as Knicks with at least 40 points in consecutive games.

Brunson scored 36 on Wednesday and it appeared early on like he would be the player who would carry New York after scoring 16 on 6-of-7 shooting in the first quarter. But then Towns took over the load from there, scoring 15 of the Knicks' first 17 points in the second quarter, then scor-

ing 15 more in the third.

Brunson, also an All-Star starter, then had six of New York's 12 in overtime. But he said there was no plan to keep feeding Towns when he was hot and go then back to himself later.

"There's no set time of whose turn it is or what. I mean, we don't really play like that," Brunson said. "I just think that we were reading, we're playing and reacting, and just whatever it takes to win."

Towns joked that he wanted to get in the scoring fun after Anthony Edwards, his former teammate in Minnesota, scored in 40 in three consecutive games.

"But no," he said, "I'm just happy that those kind of nights resulted in wins."

Tatum has 32; Celtics top Spurs in OT

Associated Press

BOSTON — Jayson Tatum had 32 points and 14 rebounds and the Boston Celtics beat the San Antonio Spurs 116-103 on Wednesday night for their third straight victory and seventh in eight games.

Kristaps Porzingis added 29 points for Boston and Derrick White had 19 points, nine assists and seven rebounds in the final game for both teams before the All-Star break.

The Spurs cut a 19-point half-time deficit to 93-85 early in the fourth quarter. Boston outscored San Antonio 23-18 the rest of the way.

De'Aaron Fox had 23 points in his fifth game with the Spurs since being traded by Sacramento. Victor Wembanyama added 17 points, 13 rebounds, four assists and two blocks.

Magic 102, Hornets 86: Paolo Banchero had 24 points and eight rebounds as Orlando shook off a cold-shooting first half to beat visiting Charlotte.

Franz Wagner added 16 points and seven rebounds and Anthony Black came off the bench to score 18 points.

Miles Bridges led the injury-plagued Hornets with 19 points and eight rebounds. Josh Green and Damion Baugh added 16 points each for Charlotte.

Pacers 134, Wizards 130 (OT): Obi Toppin had season

highs of 31 points and 10 rebounds, and visiting Indiana rallied from a 19-point deficit to beat NBA-worst Washington in overtime.

Bennedict Mathurin scored 28 points and Tyrese Haliburton added 20 for the Pacers.

Jordan Poole, who scored 42 points for the Wizards, missed a step-back 3-point attempt at the regulation buzzer.

Nets 100, 76ers 96: D'Angelo Russell had 22 points, five rebounds and four assists, and Brooklyn beat visiting Philadelphia in the teams' last game before the All-Star break.

Nic Claxton had 13 points, 11 rebounds and five blocks, and Cam Johnson added 16 points and six rebounds. Trendon Watford scored 18 points off the bench for Brooklyn, which won its third straight.

Cavaliers 131, Raptors 108: Donovan Mitchell scored 21 points and East-leading Cleveland beat host Toronto for its fourth straight victory and eighth in the past nine games.

Tempers flared at the final buzzer after Cleveland's Tristan Thompson dunked with four seconds left. Toronto's Scottie Barnes confronted Thompson near center court for an exchange of words.

Pistons 128, Bulls 110: Cade Cunningham scored 29 points and visiting Detroit beat

Chicago after dominating them the previous night.

Tobias Harris and Ausar Thompson scored 19, and Jalen Duren added 16 points and 14 rebounds.

Bucks 103, Timberwolves 101: Kyle Kuzma had 19 points and 13 rebounds and visiting Milwaukee won without All-Stars Giannis Antetokounmpo and Damian Lillard.

Anthony Edwards' jumper in the final seconds was off for Minnesota and Kuzma — playing his fourth game for Milwaukee after being acquired from Washington — came down with the rebound.

Kings 119, Pelicans 111: Keon Ellis hit seven 3-pointers during a 27-point performance, Zach LaVine scored 20 of his 23 points in the second half, and Sacramento won at New Orleans.

Domantas Sabonis had 16 points and 15 rebounds — his 48th double-double in 51 games this season — for Sacramento.

Thunder 115, Heat 101: Shai Gilgeous-Alexander had 32 points and nine assists, and Oklahoma City rallied from a 21-point deficit to defeat visiting Miami.

Jalen Williams scored 18 points and Lu Dort added 17 for the Thunder, who won their seventh straight and improved to a league-best 44-9.

Rockets 119, Suns 111: Amen Thompson had 18 points, 11 assists and 10 rebounds for his fourth career triple-double and host Houston used a big run late to get a win over Phoenix.

Kevin Durant had 37 points for the short-handed Suns, who were missing Devin Booker.

Jazz 131, Lakers 119: Lauri Markkanen scored 32 points and had a season-high three steals to lead Utah to a victory over visiting Los Angeles.

LeBron James finished with 18 points, seven assists and six rebounds for Los Angeles.

Mavericks 111, Warriors 107: Kyrie Irving scored 42 points and took a charge in the closing seconds, Klay Thompson added 17 against his former team, and undersized Dallas beat visiting Golden State.

Naji Marshall hit a 6-foot floater in the lane to give Dallas a 109-107 lead with 25.6 seconds left after Steph Curry, the NBA's leading free-throw shooter at 93.1%, missed the second of two to leave the score tied.

Then, Jimmy Butler's driving basket was disallowed for a charge into Irving.

Clippers 128, Grizzlies 114: Kawhi Leonard scored 25 points, James Harden and Norman Powell each had 18 and Los Angeles beat visiting Memphis.

Leonard played a season-high 34 minutes.

Bregman, Red Sox agree to \$120 million, 3-year deal

Associated Press

Alex Bregman and the Boston Red Sox have agreed to a \$120 million, three-year contract, a person familiar with the deal told The Associated Press on Wednesday night.

The person spoke to the AP on the condition of anonymity because the agreement was subject to a successful physical.

Bregman can opt out after the 2026 and 2027 seasons to

become a free agent again. He might need to shift from third base to second with the Red Sox, who already have All-Star slugger Rafael Devers at the hot corner.

A two-time All-Star and two-time World Series champion during nine years with the Houston Astros, the 30-year-old Bregman is coming off one of his poorest offensive seasons. He hit .260 with 26 homers and

75 RBIs in the final season of a \$100 million, five-year contract, also winning his first Gold Glove.

Bregman has 19 postseason home runs, tied for sixth in major league history. He was selected by Houston with the second overall pick in the 2015 amateur draft, made his big league debut a year later and hit .284 with 19 homers, 71 RBIs and 17 stolen bases in 2017.

He had four homers and 10 RBIs in the postseason as the Astros won their first World Series title, a championship marred when a Major League Baseball investigation revealed the team used banned electronics to steal opponents' signs.

Bregman was fifth in AL MVP voting in 2018 and second to Mike Trout in 2019, Bregman's two most productive years at the plate.