

## DOD to cut programs, not overall budget

By JOHN VANDIVER  
*Stars and Stripes*

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said Thursday that he will immediately begin shifting billions of dollars away from non-lethal programs in connection with a broader reorganization of military priorities.

In a late-night video address to the force, Hegseth said 8%, or roughly \$50 billion, will be pulled from non-mission-essential programs in the current budget to direct the expenditures toward priorities at the top of the administration's agenda.

"That's not a cut," Hegseth said. "It's refocusing and reinvesting existing funds into building the force that protects you, the American people."

Hegseth's comments come on the heels of reports that the Pen-

tagon is looking to make sweeping reductions to its overall budget. The new Pentagon chief said that is not the case.

"In short, we want the biggest, most badass military on the planet, on God's green earth," he said.

Hegseth said the military is now working up plans to restructure the Pentagon budget. Funds redirected from programs deemed nonessential will go to supporting initiatives such as rebuilding the defense industrial base, border security and an array of weapons programs.

The Pentagon also is looking to trim overhead, beginning with a review of probationary employees, which generally refers to recent hires.

He said that jobs won't be

eliminated in an across-the-board manner and that performance will be considered.

"We're starting (cuts) with the poor performers among our probationary employees because it's common sense that you want the best and brightest," Hegseth said.

Federal employee probation typically lasts one or two years after hiring. Many of those employees haven't had a performance evaluation, which usually comes after a year on the job.

In other departments, such as the Department of Veterans Affairs, employees say they received termination notices for performance reasons shortly after going through orientation.

Hegseth added that the Defense Department will "be aggressive up and down the

chain" to ensure that "the best and brightest are promoted based on merit."

A hiring freeze also will be implemented to review employment practices in a manner that prioritizes top performers, he said.

Meanwhile, Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency is at work inside the Pentagon.

Hegseth said DOGE staff will be looking for signs of waste and redundancies and "the last vestiges" of diversity, equity and inclusion programs, as well as initiatives dealing with climate change.

DOGE also will look for cuts inside military headquarters and other "top-line stuff that allows us to reinvest elsewhere," Hegseth said.

## US envoy praises Zelenskyy following Trump spat

*Associated Press*

KYIV, Ukraine— President Donald Trump's envoy to Ukraine and Russia said on Friday that he had held "extensive and positive discussions" with Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy about the three-year war with Russia and praised the Ukrainian leader as an "embattled and courageous leader of a nation at war."

Retired U.S. Lt. Gen. Keith Kellogg — who traveled to Kyiv on Wednesday and whose planned news conference with Zelenskyy on Thursday was changed at the last minute to a simple photo opportunity — struck a positive tone after what he said on the social platform X was "a long and intense day" of talks with Ukraine's senior leadership.

His comments marked a departure from recent rebukes of Zelenskyy by Trump and other senior U.S. officials that appeared to indicate an abrupt deterioration of relations. Trump called Zelenskyy "a dictator without elections" and warned him that he'd "better move fast" to negotiate an end to the war or risk not having a nation to lead.

The possibility that vital U.S. military aid for Ukraine was in doubt darkened the mood in Kyiv as Ukrainian forces struggle to hold back Russia's bigger army on the battlefield.

European governments, uneasy about being sidelined so far in talks between U.S. and Russian officials, have jumped to shore up Zelenskyy and at the same time avoid a breakdown in transatlantic relations.

Polish President Andrzej Duda, whose country has been a vocal supporter of neighboring Ukraine, said Zelenskyy phoned him on Friday. Duda said he told Zelenskyy "to remain committed to the course of calm and constructive cooperation" with Trump.

"We consistently believe there is no other way to stop the bloodshed and achieve lasting peace in Ukraine except with the support of the United States," Duda said he also told Zelenskyy.

"I trust that goodwill and honesty form the foundation of the U.S. negotiation strategy," Duda said on X. "I have no doubt that President Trump is guided by a deep sense of responsibility for global stability and peace."

The European Union's top de-

fense official said Friday that the bloc plans to send a strong message of support to Ukraine next week with a new aid package to mark Monday's third anniversary of the war.

EU Defense Commissioner Andrius Kubilius said senior members of the bloc's executive branch are weighing how, "in a very urgent way, to send a very strong message to Ukrainians and to the world that we are standing together with Ukraine."

European policy commissioners, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and other top EU officials are traveling to Kyiv on Monday.

Russia has pressed on with its invasion even as talks with the U.S. take place, striking civilian targets almost daily.

# Navy fires Truman captain after collision

*Stars And Stripes*

NAPLES, Italy — The commanding officer of the aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman has been fired following a collision with a cargo ship near the Suez Canal, the Navy announced Thursday.

Capt. Dave Snowden was relieved of duty on Thursday due to a loss of confidence in his ability to command, the service said in a statement the same day.

Snowden, who had served as the aircraft carrier's commanding officer since December 2023, will be temporarily assigned to Naval Air Forces

Atlantic.

"The U.S. Navy holds commanding officers to the highest standard and takes action to hold them accountable when those standards are not met. Naval leaders are entrusted with significant responsibilities to their sailors and their ships," the Navy said.

Capt. Christopher Hill, commanding officer of the aircraft carrier USS Dwight D. Eisenhower, will temporarily serve as Truman's interim commanding officer, the Navy said.

Hill led the Eisenhower during its nine-month extended deployment last year in the

Middle East.

The Eisenhower returned from its deployment in July and is currently undergoing scheduled maintenance at Norfolk Naval Shipyard in Virginia.

Snowden's dismissal comes after Truman was involved in a late-night collision on Feb. 12 with Panama-flagged *Besiktas-M* in a congested area near the Suez Canal.

The mishap left the carrier with scrapes and gashes along its right back end, including a small slash that penetrated its hull well above the waterline.

There were no injuries, and

there was no flooding. Truman's propulsion system was not damaged, the Navy said at the time.

But the collision, which is under investigation, damaged a line handling space, the fantail and a platform above a storage space.

The exterior walls of two storage rooms and a maintenance space also were included in initial damage assessments.

The ship, along with embarked Carrier Air Wing 1, remains at Naval Support Activity Souda Bay on the Greek island of Crete undergoing an extensive structural assessment.

## 'Fat Leonard' defendants seek details of misconduct

*The San Diego Union-Tribune*

Two former Navy captains who went to prison for taking bribes as part of the "Fat Leonard" corruption scandal have asked federal prosecutors to dismiss their felony convictions and instead allow them to plead guilty to misdemeanor crimes.

Retired Navy Capt. David Williams Haas and former Navy Capt. Jesús Vasquez Cantú, both of whom have finished their prison terms, have also requested that the San Diego-area U.S. Attorney's Office follow a request by the judge in the case to provide more specific details about the government misconduct that has marred the long-running prosecution of the Navy's worst-ever bribery and corruption scandal.

While government attorneys have admitted in court and in written filings to "serious issues" regarding government misconduct, prosecutors have only provided vague details of that misconduct and not a full reckoning either publicly or to defense attorneys. U.S. District Judge Janis Sammartino, who

previously told prosecutors she wanted "legal and factual specificity through briefing with supporting declarations," has ordered the government to respond by March 3 with arguments why it should not have to disclose those details as part of a discovery process.

Attorneys for Haas and Cantú argued in the recent filings that their clients are similarly situated to nine other Navy and Marine Corps officers whose felony convictions were reduced to misdemeanors or dismissed altogether, arguing the only difference was that their clients had already been sentenced. The attorneys argued that Haas and Cantú received disproportionate sentences from those nine defendants, none of whom were sentenced to prison, and that the "disparity raises significant questions about the selective application of justice" by federal prosecutors.

"The public deserves to know exactly what happened here," Chuck La Bella, who is representing Haas, told the *Union-Tribune*.

Haas and Cantú were among the three dozen people, most of them Navy officers, charged with taking bribes and committing other crimes as part of the corruption scandal centered around Leonard Glenn Francis, the Malaysian contractor known as "Fat Leonard" because of his enormous size. Francis, who plans to appeal the 15-year sentence he received in November, spent decades bribing a rotating cast of officers from the Navy's 7th Fleet in the Western Pacific with gourmet meals, five-star hotel rooms, premium liquor, prostitutes and cash.

Many officers in turn steered ships to the Southeast Asian ports controlled by Francis and his company, Glenn Defense Marine Asia. Francis then defrauded the U.S. government of at least \$35 million by charging heavily inflated prices for routine services such as security, tugboats, trash removal, food and water replenishment.

The corruption by Francis, who was arrested in 2013, reached the "highest levels of

the U.S. Navy ... to an extent that has never been seen before," an assistant U.S. attorney said during his sentencing.

Cantú admitted in his plea agreement that he accepted bribes — usually in the form of dinner, drinks, hotels and sex with prostitutes — on at least eight occasions between June 2012 and September 2013 while serving on the Blue Ridge, the 7th Fleet command ship from which Francis heavily recruited allies. He admitted that in return, he supplied Francis with proprietary Navy information and advocated inside the Navy on behalf of GDMA.

Haas admitted that while he was a captain on the Blue Ridge, he accepted bribes valued at nearly \$91,000, including multi-day parties in Indonesia and Tokyo, at least one of which included dinner, nightclub entertainment and the services of prostitutes. Haas admitted that in return, he used his influence to benefit GDMA, including ensuring that an aircraft carrier docked at one of Francis' ports in Malaysia.

# China warns airliners of live-fire exercises

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Airliners were over the Tasman Sea crossing between Australia and New Zealand when the Chinese navy warned they were flying over a secret live-fire exercise, Australian Defense Minister Richard Marles said on Friday.

Regulator Airservices Australia warned commercial pilots of a potential hazard in airspace between the countries as three Chinese warships conducted exercises off the Australian east coast.

But Marles said Australian authorities only learned about China's live-firing plans in international waters midway between Australia and New Zealand from the airlines.

"To be clear, we weren't notified by China," Marles told Australian Broadcasting Corp. radio in Perth.

"What China did was put out a notification that it was intending to engage in live firing. By that, I mean a broadcast that

was picked up by airlines or literally ... commercial planes that were flying across the Tasman," Marles said.

"This was very disconcerting for the planes that were flying," he added.

Three flights from Sydney bound for Christchurch and Queenstown in New Zealand were in the air Friday morning before they were first warned by a Chinese warship of a live-fire exercise, media reported.

All changed course. The three airlines involved, Emirates, Qantas and Virgin Australia, did not comment.

Marles said the Australian navy would typically give 12 to 24 hours' notice of a live-firing exercise to allow airlines time to properly plan around it.

But he said all flights were able to divert and no one was put in danger.

The warships — frigate Hengyang, cruiser Zunyi and replenishment vessel Weishanhu — are exercising a freedom of navigation in international wa-

ters off the Australian east coast of a kind that angers Beijing when exercised by the Australian military in the disputed South China Sea.

During a regular Chinese foreign ministry briefing on Friday, spokesperson Guo Jiakun said China's military had organized its fleet to conduct high seas exercises.

"The drill was carried out in a safe, standard and professional manner in compliance with relevant international law and international practice" Guo said.

Australian defense officials were uncertain whether any live fire of weapons had occurred. The risk had since passed, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said.

"There was no imminent risk of danger to any Australian assets or New Zealand assets," Albanese told reporters, citing information from his Defense Ministry.

New Zealand's aviation regulator did not issue warnings. The Civil Aviation Authority

said it was "aware" of the Australian advice, according to a statement. The authority did not explain its decision.

Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong said she would discuss the air service disruption when she meets her Chinese counterpart Wang Yi at a G20 ministers meeting underway in South Africa.

Flight monitoring websites showed multiple flights had avoided an area between Australia and New Zealand.

Air New Zealand, the country's national carrier, said in a statement it had "modified flight paths as needed to avoid the area, with no impact on our operations."

Australian and New Zealand military ships and P-8 Poseidon surveillance planes have been monitoring the Chinese warships for days.

Chinese warships rarely venture so far south in a deployment regarded as a demonstration of the Chinese navy's growing size and capabilities.

## Brown heads to border to assess rapid military buildup

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Gen. CQ Brown, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, is visiting troops along the U.S.-Mexico border Friday to assess the military's progress in fortifying sections of the wall, coming as the Pentagon rapidly expands its border mission in line with President Donald Trump's efforts to combat illegal immigration.

The military in the past month has quickly surged troops and equipment to the border, is seeking expanded authority for cooperation with Mexican forces, has conducted scores of deportation flights and is readying the detention facilities at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, to possibly house as many as 30,000 migrants.

About 9,200 U.S. troops total

are at the southern border, including 4,200 deployed under federal orders and about 5,000 National Guard troops under the control of governors.

The military has conducted 26 deportation flights to return migrants to their home countries, including military air flights to Guatemala, El Salvador, Ecuador, India, Honduras, Peru and Panama. It also has carried out 13 flights to transport migrants to Guantánamo.

U.S. Northern Command has increased manned surveillance flights along the U.S.-Mexico border to monitor drug cartels and the movement of fentanyl and is increasing its intelligence sharing with Mexico from those flights, Gen. Gregory Guillot told senators last week.

There are also U.S. drones

conducting surveillance over Mexico's airspace, Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum told reporters Wednesday.

This week, Trump designated many of the gangs and cartels moving those drugs into the U.S. as foreign terrorist organizations, further increasing the pressure on their ability to move and providing law enforcement with what the State Department said are "additional tools to stop these groups."

Guillot also told senators that Northern Command would seek expanded authority from Congress to conduct "more advise-and-assist types of operations between our forces and the tier one Mexican forces," which are special forces units.

Securing the southern border is a top priority for the Trump

administration, so much so that in a directive released Wednesday ordering the military to find \$50 billion in program cuts by October, activities at the southern border were exempted.

"We've been defending other people's borders for a long time — time to defend ours," Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said last week in Germany. "So we're sealing that border."

Mexico agreed to send 10,000 of its troops to the border to stave off Trump's threat of imposing 25% tariffs. The Pentagon announced Wednesday the U.S. and Mexico had reached an agreement to conduct "coordinated patrols on their respective side of the border," increase information sharing and establish lines for immediate communications.



# Federal judge allows Trump's mass firings to move forward

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A federal judge in Washington has allowed President Donald Trump's mass firings of federal workers to move forward.

U.S. District Judge Christopher Cooper decided Thursday he could not grant a motion from unions representing the workers to temporarily block the layoffs.

He found that their complaint amounted to an employment dispute and must follow a different process outlined in federal employment law.

Cooper acknowledged that the Republican president's second term "has been defined by an onslaught of executive actions that have caused, some say by design, disruption and even chaos in widespread quarters of American society."

But Cooper, who was appointed by President Barack Obama, a Democrat, wrote that judges are "duty-bound to decide legal issues based on even-handed application of law and precedent — no matter the identity of the litigants or, regrettably at times, the consequences of their rulings for average people."

The ruling comes as thousands of federal government employees have been shown the door during in the first month of Trump's second administration.

The administration argued in court the unions failed to show that they were facing the kind of irreparable, immediate harm that would justify an emergency order stopping layoffs.

The unions, representing hundreds of thousands of federal workers, maintain that

Trump's efforts to slash the federal workforce conflicts with Congress' power to shape the size and direction of agencies through funding decisions, as well as laws detailing how such layoffs must be carried out.

The president of the National Treasury Employees' Union, Doreen Greenwald, said that Cooper's decision was a temporary setback and that "federal employees will get their day in court to challenge the unlawful mass firings and other attacks on their jobs, their agencies, and their service to the country."

The lawsuit is among more than 80 challenging a range of actions Trump has undertaken with his blitz of executive orders. Unions also filed a separate suit challenging mass firings in California this week.

## Venezuelan migrants flown home from Gitmo

Associated Press

CARACAS, Venezuela — Nearly 200 Venezuelan immigrants to the U.S. were returned to their home country after being detained at Guantánamo Bay, in a flurry of flights that forged an unprecedented pathway for U.S. deportations.

U.S. and Venezuelan authorities confirmed the deportations relied on a stopover in Honduras, where 177 Venezuelans exited a U.S. Customs and Immigration Enforcement flight and boarded a Venezuelan plane bound for Caracas.

The government of President Nicolás Maduro said it had "requested the repatriation of a group" of Venezuelans "who were unjustly taken" to the U.S. naval base at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. With the request accepted, an aircraft with the state-owned airline Conviasa picked up the migrants from Honduras. ICE confirmed the transfer of "Venezuelan illegal aliens."

The administration of President Donald Trump has placed a high priority on deporting people who have exhausted all legal appeals to stay in the U.S. Nearly 1.5 million had final removal orders as of Nov. 24, according to ICE figures, including more than 22,000 Venezuelans.

In a court filing Thursday, federal authorities said that "Venezuela has historically resisted accepting repatriation of its citizens but has recently begun accepting removals following high-level political discussions and an investment of significant resources."

Last week, two Venezuelan flights carried 190 immigrants directly from the U.S. to Venezuela in a rare moment of coordination between the two countries that may be giving way to regular exchanges.

## Senate Republicans approve budget framework, pushing past objections

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Republican senators pushed a \$340 billion budget framework to passage early Friday, chugging through an all-night session and Democratic opposition in a step toward unleashing money the Trump administration says it needs for mass deportations and border security that top their agenda.

The hourslong "vote-a-rama" rambled along in a dreaded but crucial part of the budget process, as senators considered one amendment after another, largely from Democrats trying to halt it.

But Republicans used their majority power to muscle the package to approval on a largely party-line vote, 52-48, with all Democrats and one GOP sen-

ator opposing it.

"What we're doing today is jump-starting a process that will allow the Republican Party to meet President Trump's immigration agenda," Senate Budget Committee chair Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., said while opening the debate.

Graham said President Donald Trump's top immigration czar, Tom Homan, told senators that the administration's deportation operations are "out of money" and need more funding from Congress to detain and deport immigrants.

With little power in the minority to stop the onslaught, Democrats instead used the all-night debate to force GOP senators into potentially embarrassing votes — including the first one, on blocking tax breaks

to billionaires. It was turned back on procedural grounds. So were many others.

"This is going to be a long, drawn-out fight," Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer of New York warned.

Hours later, Schumer said it "was only the beginning" of what could become a months-long debate.

The package is what Republicans view as a down payment on Trump's agenda, part of a broader effort that will eventually include legislation to extend some \$4.5 trillion in tax breaks and other priorities.

That's being assembled by House Speaker Mike Johnson in a separate budget package that also seeks up to \$2 trillion in reductions to health care and other programs.

# Israel: Remains aren't those of hostage

Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel — The Israeli military said Friday it had positively identified the remains of two young hostages but another body released by Hamas under a ceasefire deal was not the boys' mother as the militant group had promised.

The revelation was a shocking twist in the saga surrounding the Bibas family, who have become symbols of the plight of Israeli hostages held by Hamas, and threw the future of the fragile ceasefire into question.

"This is a violation of utmost severity by the Hamas terrorist organization," the army said in a statement.

During the monthlong cease-

fire, Hamas has been releasing living hostages in exchange for hundreds of Palestinian prisoners. Thursday's release marked the first time the group has returned the remains of dead hostages.

Early in the day, Hamas had turned over four bodies to the Red Cross. Israel quickly confirmed one body was that of Od-ed Lifshitz, who was 83 when he was abducted during the Hamas attack that started the war on Oct. 7, 2023.

Hamas had said the other remains belonged to Shiri Bibas, and her two young boys, Ariel and Kfir. But the army said overnight that Israel's National Institute of Forensic Medicine

had identified the boys, but the final set of remains did not belong to their mother.

"This is an anonymous, unidentified body," it said. "We demand that Hamas return Shiri home along with all our hostages."

It said the army had notified their family, including Yarden Bibas, Shiri's husband and father of the two boys, who was released early this month as part of the ceasefire deal.

Hamas has claimed all four of the hostages returned Thursday were killed in Israeli airstrikes. But Israel said the testing had found the two boys and Lifshitz were killed by their captors.

Hamas did not immediately

respond to Israel's announcement that the body was not that of the boys' mother.

A top U.S. official issued a stark warning for Hamas after the Israeli military said the militant group released an "anonymous" body and not that of a slain Israeli hostage.

It is unclear whether the next scheduled swap, set for Saturday, will take place. It also is not clear whether the truce will be extended when the current phase expires in early March.

In another potential blow to the deal, a series of explosions Thursday on three parked buses rattled central Israel.

There were no injuries and no claim of responsibility.

## Administration stalls medical evacuations for USAID staffers, spouses, lawsuits say

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A pair of court orders have had only limited effect in slowing the Trump administration's dismantling of the U.S. Agency for International Development and have left some USAID workers stationed worldwide in precarious situations, staffers assert.

The Trump administration has stalled medical evacuations for as many as 25 USAID staffers and spouses in the later stages of high-risk pregnancies overseas, according to testimony in lawsuits and a person familiar with the cases. The person was not authorized to speak publicly so spoke on condition of anonymity.

USAID "will undertake all measures as appropriate to ensure the safety and security of

current employees," deputy administrator Pete Marocco said in a court filing Thursday asking a judge to let him move forward with a plan to pull all but a fraction of employees off the job worldwide.

The administration says it is taking all required care of staffers as it terminates USAID programs and aims to recall thousands of workers and their families abroad.

Multiple lawsuits from groups representing USAID workers and nonprofits and businesses are challenging President Donald Trump's freeze on foreign assistance, USAID job cuts and the sudden shutdown of the agency overall. Court orders have temporarily blocked the halt to funding and removal of thousands of work-

ers from their posts, with a judge set to decide Friday whether to keep the staffing moves on hold.

The administration has accused USAID's programs of being wasteful and promoting a liberal agenda.

Meanwhile, American women and their spouses say they have been left in substandard medical care in posts in unstable countries, fearing for their lives.

"Everyone says I need to wait and see what happens" with Trump administration decisions, said a USAID staffer, whose pregnancy is complicated by high blood pressure, in a court filing from her posting in an undisclosed country in Africa.

## McConnell won't seek reelection

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Republican Sen. Mitch McConnell announced Thursday that he won't seek reelection next year, ending a decadeslong tenure as a power broker who championed conservative causes but ultimately ceded ground to the fierce GOP populism of President Donald Trump.

McConnell chose his 83rd birthday to share his decision not to run for another term in Kentucky and to retire when his current term ends.

McConnell's looming departure reflects the changing dynamics of the Trump-led GOP. He's seen his power diminish on a parallel track with both his health and his relationship with Trump, who once praised him as an ally but has taken to criticizing him in caustic terms.

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# Canada beats US 3-2 in 4 Nations Face-Off

Associated Press

BOSTON — When they played “O Canada” for the second time, there were no American fans left in the arena to boo.

Instead, the Canadian team stood at the blue line, arm in arm, player and coach, wearing their championship hats while the maple leaf flag was lowered behind the 4 Nations Face-Off trophy and the national anthem reverberated across the Americans’ home ice.

The fans who remained, many of them in their red Team Canada jerseys, sang along.

Connor McDavid scored at 8:18 of overtime to give Canada a 3-2 victory over the United States on Thursday night as the North American rivals turned what had been a tune-up for the 2026 Olympics into a geopolitical brawl over anthems and annexation as much as international hockey supremacy.

Or, to put it another way: It was the 51st U.S. state 3, Canada’s 11th province 2.

“You can’t take our country — and you can’t take our game,” Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau posted on X in a cross-border callback to President Donald Trump’s chatter about turning one of the United States’ closest allies into the 51st state.

“A lot of stuff going on with

Canada and the USA right now, and us playing against each other was kind of a perfect storm for our sport,” said Nathan MacKinnon, who was selected the MVP of the new tournament with four goals in four games. “It was much more popular than even we would have imagined. It was getting so much attention from our whole continent.”

Jordan Binnington stopped 31 shots — including the last 20 in a row — on the same ice where he helped the St. Louis Blues win the Stanley Cup as a rookie five years ago.

MacKinnon and Sam Bennett also scored for Canada, which made it 2-2 in the second period and then played a scoreless third.

After a flurry of saves by Binnington early in the overtime, Canada gained a faceoff in the U.S. zone and Mitch Marner got the puck along the boards before popping it into the center to McDavid for the winner.

The Canadians poured over the boards to celebrate, shook hands with the vanquished Americans, and then took turns skating with the never-before-awarded trophy.

“Just to see the reaction. Just to know what it means to us. I know it’s just a quick tournament, and it’s not an Olympic

gold medal or anything like that, but it means the world to our group, as you can see,” McDavid said.

“I hope (the new fans) love it,” he said. “It’s a great game, it’s a great sport and I hope we put on a good show these last couple days and gained some fans, ultimately. You can’t ask for a better show than that.”

Brady Tkachuk and Jake Sanderson scored for the Americans, and Connor Hellebuyck stopped 22 shots in regulation and three more in OT.

The U.S. has lost all but one game against Canada in best-on-best international play dating to the preliminaries of the 2010 Vancouver Olympics.

The lone victory was in the 4 Nations round-robin, a game so good it turned Thursday’s sequel into one of the most anticipated international hockey events in decades.

“I think guys that are at home watching this, I’m hoping they’re wanting a piece of it,” U.S. forward Dylan Larkin said. “This grew the game really well, but I hope it pushes guys to want a piece of this and then the next generation that got to watch this, they’re going to watch the Olympics next year and hopefully there’s a different outcome.”

The already ripe rivalry between the two North American

hockey powers took on an added intensity during the tournament following Trump’s tariff threats and talk of making Canada the 51st U.S. state.

Trump called the American team Thursday morning to wish it well, then turned to Truth Social to take a poke at “Governor Trudeau.”

The political backdrop combined with the quality of the round-robin game, which the United States won 3-1 on Saturday, to bring the atmosphere of a Stanley Cup Final or Olympic gold medal game to the TD Garden.

Fans in their team jerseys waved flags, shouted for their countrymen and continued the ritual booing of the opposing national anthem that has become a nightly undercard for a tournament that returned the NHL’s stars to the international scene after missing the last two Winter Games.

But Canada was the team that came away with the win.

“We wanted this one,” Canada forward Mark Stone said. “You’ve got 40 million Canadians, sitting at home, and you feel the energy. Anytime you have the chance to play for our country, or the flag on our chest, it’s a special, special feeling. ... It brings us together. And just glad we got to get this one.”

## Wembanyama to miss rest of season after diagnosis

Associated Press

San Antonio star Victor Wembanyama’s season is over after he was diagnosed with a blood clot in his right shoulder, a condition that will sideline one of the league’s brightest stars and is the second massive health-related hit for the Spurs in a matter of months.

Wembanyama is beginning treatment immediately and the Spurs are working under the expectation that the 7-foot-3 cen-

ter from France will fully recover, a person with knowledge of the situation said Thursday, speaking to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because those details were not released publicly.

It may even be possible for Wembanyama — the NBA’s leading shot-blocker this season and a first-time All-Star — to play this summer for France in the European championships if he chooses, the person said.

“You can’t replace Vic,” Spurs guard Chris Paul said. “I can’t stand on a guy’s shoulders and block every shot that comes to the rim. Aside from his basketball ability, his charisma and what he brings into the locker room, I think, is what we’ll miss the most.”

Wembanyama’s condition — deep vein thrombosis — was diagnosed this week after he returned from the All-Star Game, the Spurs said Thursday.

It is almost always treated with blood-thinning medication, and more evaluation will be needed.

Wembanyama’s diagnosis comes about 3½ months after Spurs coach Gregg Popovich had a stroke, with Johnson — one of his assistants — serving as acting coach since.

The Spurs have said Popovich’s condition is improving, but there is no timetable for his return to the bench.



# Player 1, umpire 0 after 1st ABS challenge

Associated Press

GLENDAL, Ariz. — Chicago Cubs pitcher Cody Poteet believed the 95 mph fastball he threw to Los Angeles Dodgers slugger Max Muncy was in the strike zone. Plate umpire Tony Randazzo disagreed and called it a ball.

Instead of arguing, Poteet simply patted the top of his cap, signifying he wanted to challenge the call.

After a few seconds, the verdict was ready on the video board in right-center field. Poteet was correct — the pitch was a strike, just catching the bottom of the zone.

"I felt like there was a good, high-percentage chance it was a strike," Poteet said. "And every strike matters."

The first test of the Automated Ball-Strike System went off without a hitch Thursday, with Randazzo quickly reversing the call. Instead of a 1-1 count for Muncy, the batter was in an 0-2 hole and struck out three pitches later.

Poteet played in Triple-A for

part of last season, which is where the ABS system was tested, so he was used to the process and laughed at his minor place in baseball history.

"Using it a little last year, it felt more normal," the pitcher said. "It's cool to be the one to fire away."

Muncy couldn't blame Poteet for challenging the umpire's call. He thought it was a strike, too.

"I look out and the pitcher seemed very excited to challenge that one," Muncy said, grinning. "When he challenged it, I knew it would be overturned and was like 'Aw, man, I'm going to be the first one.'"

Robot umpires have arrived in the big leagues, at least in exhibition games. The Cubs and World Series champion Dodgers opened the spring training schedule with an added wrinkle: Camelback Ranch is among the test sites for the ABS, which could be used in big league regular-season games as soon as 2026.

Human umpires still call ev-

ery pitch, but each team has the ability to challenge two calls per game, with no additions for extra innings. A team retains its challenge if successful, similar to the regulations for big league teams with video reviews, which were first used for home run calls in August 2008 and widely expanded to many calls for the 2014 season.

Only a batter, pitcher or catcher may challenge a call, signaling with the tap of a helmet or cap. Assistance from the dugout is not allowed. A challenge must be made within 2 seconds, and the graphic of the pitch and strike zone will be shown on the scoreboard and broadcast feed. The umpire then announces the updated count.

MLB estimates the process averages 17 seconds.

The Cubs and Dodgers opened this year's spring training schedule earlier than the other 28 teams because they're playing each other in Tokyo to open the regular season on March 18-19. There will be five

games on Friday before all teams get started this weekend.

The Dodgers played a few of their regulars in the opener, including shortstop Mookie Betts, third baseman Max Muncy and right fielder Teoscar Hernández. Yoshinobu Yamamoto started on the mound as he prepares to start the opener in Tokyo.

Yamamoto threw 1 2/3 scoreless innings, giving up three hits and striking out two. He threw 19 of 27 pitches for strikes.

Japanese two-way star Shohei Ohtani was not in the lineup as he continues to recover from offseason surgery on a partially torn labrum in his left (non-throwing) shoulder, an injury sustained during the World Series. He's expected to get some Cactus League at-bats and be ready to hit by the regular season but likely won't pitch until May.

MLB has installed the ABS system in 13 spring training ballparks that are home to 19 teams — 10 in Arizona and nine in Florida.

## ESPN, MLB to end national television deal after 2025

Associated Press

ESPN's coverage of Major League Baseball games — at least in its current form — will conclude at the end of the 2025 season.

ESPN chairman Jimmy Pitaro informed baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred on Thursday that the network was opting out of the final three years of its contract, two people said on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to discuss financial matters.

ESPN and MLB both made statements confirming the end of the current rights deal.

There was a March 1 deadline for MLB and ESPN to opt out of the final three years of their contract. The sides agreed to a seven-year deal in 2021 that av-

eraged \$550 million per season.

"We have had a long and mutually beneficial partnership with ESPN that dates back to its first MLB game in 1990," MLB said in a statement. "Unfortunately in recent years, we have seen ESPN scale back their baseball coverage and investment in a way that is not consistent with the sport's appeal or performance on their platform."

Manfred wrote in a memo to owners obtained by The Associated Press that MLB and ESPN "mutually agreed to terminate our agreement."

ESPN has carried MLB games since 1990, but the network cut back its coverage in the current contract to 30 regular-season games — mostly on

Sunday night — and the Wild Card postseason series. ESPN also had the Home Run Derby and 10 spring training games.

The previous eight-year deal, which ran from 2014 through 2021, saw ESPN broadcast up to 90 regular-season games. It also stopped airing the daily "Baseball Tonight" highlights and news show in 2017.

"In making this decision, we applied the same discipline and fiscal responsibility that has built ESPN's industry-leading live events portfolio as we continue to grow our audience across linear, digital and social platforms," ESPN said in a statement.

ESPN has had the rights to all four U.S. major professional sports leagues since getting

back the National Hockey League in 2021. It will pay an average of \$1.4 billion when the new 11-year agreement with the NBA begins next season and pays an average of \$2.7 billion per season on its NFL deal, which runs through 2032.

Major League Baseball receives an average of \$729 million from Fox and \$470 million from Turner Sports per year under deals which expire after the 2028 season.

ESPN is still open to pursuing a deal with a reduced rights fee after seeing deals struck with Apple and Roku. Apple pays \$85 million per season for a Friday night package it has aired since 2022, while Roku's deal for Sunday afternoon games is worth \$10 million per year.

# Pritchard, Tatum power Celtics past 76ers

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Payton Pritchard made eight 3-pointers and scored 28 points, Jayson Tatum finished with his fourth career triple-double, and the Boston Celtics beat the Philadelphia 76ers 124-104 on Thursday night.

Tatum had 15 points, 11 rebounds and 10 assists. Jaylen Brown added 20 points, Kristaps Porzingis scored 17, and Derrick White had 16 points and 10 rebounds for the Celtics, who have won eight of nine.

Paul George scored 17 points to lead the 76ers. Tyrese Maxey and Kelly Oubre Jr. had 16 apiece. The Sixers have lost six straight and eight of nine, falling a season-worst 15 games under .500.

**Pacers 127, Grizzlies 113:** Tyrese Haliburton scored 22 points and Myles Turner had 17 points, 10 rebounds and a season-high seven blocks to help Indiana pull away from Memphis.

Indiana missed its first seven shots and first eight 3-pointers in its first game since the All-Star break and still managed to score a season-high 78 points in the first half. Seven Pacers scored in double digits and Haliburton had nine assists.

Desmond Bane led the Grizzlies with 23 points and seven assists. Jaren Jackson Jr. had 18 points and seven rebounds, while Ja Morant had 12 points for Memphis. Former Purdue star Zach Edey, the two-time NCAA Player of the Year, had five points and 11 rebounds in his first NBA game in Indiana.

Memphis took a 20-7 lead midway through the first quarter, but the Pacers charged back fast in the second, taking their first lead at 48-46 before Turner scored the first 12 points in a 23-4 run that staked Indiana to a 78-50 halftime lead.

**Cavaliers 110, Nets 97:** Donovan Mitchell scored 26 points and three Cleveland teammates scored in double figures as they

beat Brooklyn.

Darius Garland scored 18 points, Evan Mobley added 18 points and 13 rebounds and Jarrett Allen finished with 16 points and 20 rebounds for Eastern Conference-leading Cleveland, which improved to 45-10.

Cam Johnson led Brooklyn with 18 points. Keon Johnson scored 16 points, Trendon Watford finished with 13 points off the bench and Ziaire Williams and Jalen Wilson each scored 10.

**Magic 114, Hawks 108:** Paolo Banchero had 36 points, 10 rebounds and five assists as Orlando rallied from an early 19-point deficit to beat Atlanta.

Franz Wagner scored 25 points and Cole Anthony had 17 for the Magic, who are seventh in the Eastern Conference — two spots ahead of the Hawks.

Banchero now has 47 games with at least 20 points, five rebounds and five assists, the third most by a player before his 23rd birthday behind LeBron James and Giannis Antetokounmpo.

Trae Young scored 38 points for the Hawks, and rookie Zacharie Risacher had his first double-double with 11 points and 12 rebounds.

The Magic overcame a poor shooting night from 3-point range, connecting on just 6 of 25 (24%).

**Bucks 116, Clippers 110:** Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 23 points in his return after missing six games with a strained calf and Milwaukee rallied for a victory over Los Angeles.

Antetokounmpo was on a minutes restriction and played just under 24 minutes, leaving just 6:27 remaining as the Bucks trailed 101-96. Milwaukee then completed its comeback from a 13-point, fourth-quarter deficit with Antetokounmpo on the bench.

Brook Lopez scored 22 points and put the Bucks ahead for good by converting a three-point play with 3:02 remaining.

Kawhi Leonard had 25 points, James Harden added 24 and Ivica Zubac had 20 points and 15 rebounds for the Clippers.

**Knicks 113, Bulls 111, OT:** Karl-Anthony Towns had 32 points and 18 rebounds, Jalen Brunson added 22 points and 12 assists and New York edged Chicago in overtime.

Miles McBride finished with 22 points, while Mikal Bridges had 13 points and 10 rebounds for the short-handed Knicks, who improved to 36-18 in their first game following the All-Star break.

New York, which has won three straight and nine of 11, was without Josh Hart, who was held out due to pain in his right kneecap. OG Anunoby missed his sixth consecutive game because of a sprained right foot.

Josh Giddey had 27 points and 16 rebounds and Nikola Vucevic had 21 points for the Bulls, who have lost their last five games.

Vucevic had a chance to win with 2 seconds left in the fourth quarter, but had his shot blocked by Bridges under the basket.

Giddey opened overtime with a 3-pointer before the Knicks responded with a 9-0 run, highlighted by three consecutive baskets from Towns.

Chicago cut it to 113-111 with two baskets from Colby White and had a chance to send the game into a second overtime when Vucevic missed an 8-foot jumper over Landry Shamet as time expired.

**Nuggets 129, Hornets 115:** Jamal Murray scored 34 points, Nikola Jokic finished an assist shy of his 26th triple-double of the season and Denver extended their winning streak to nine games by holding off depleted Charlotte.

Jokic finished with 29 points, 17 rebounds and nine assists.

Murray picked right up where he left off before the All-Star break when he erupted for 55 points. Against Charlotte,

Murray was 12 of 18 from the floor, including seven 3-pointers.

A 17½-point favorite, the Nuggets didn't put away the Hornets until a late spurt. The win, coupled with a loss by Memphis, moved the Nuggets into second place in the Western Conference.

**Spurs 120, Suns 109:** De'Aaron Fox scored 11 straight points in the final three minutes and finished with 26 as San Antonio beat Phoenix, hours after learning Spurs star Victor Wembanyama was done for the season due to a blood clot in his right shoulder.

Fox added nine rebounds, seven assists, two steals and two blocks as the Spurs won the opener of a two-game set in Austin, a city they covet as part of a mega-region that they've been cultivating for years.

Keldon Johnson and Julian Champagnie each scored 15 points for San Antonio. Stephon Castle had 10 rebounds and Chris Paul 10 assists.

**Lakers 110, Trail Blazers 102:** LeBron James scored 40 points, including eight straight in a fourth-quarter surge, and Austin Reaves had 32 as Los Angeles beat Portland.

Deni Avdija led Portland with 28 points.

After Portland tied it at 81 in the fourth quarter, Reaves gave the Lakers the lead again with a scoop shot. James then kicked things into a higher gear.

After an empty possession for Portland, James made a 3-pointer to give the Lakers an 86-81 lead. He hit another 3 moments later to make it 89-81. James then made a fadeaway jumper to cap a run of eight straight points — part of a 10-3 Lakers stretch that forced the Blazers to call a timeout.

After Portland's timeout, James hit another jumper to make it 95-86. Reaves made three free throws to push the lead back to double digits at 99-89.