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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Taliban attacks government sites

By E.B. BOYD
AND ZUBAIR BABAKARKHAIL
Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — Taliban insurgents struck at government targets in three separate attacks around the country Tuesday, killing at least 31 people and injuring more than 90, officials said.

In Kabul, about 4 p.m., two bombs exploded in quick succession in front of an office belonging to the National Directorate of Security, a Kabul police commander said.

After a suicide bomber detonated his explosives, a vehicle

blew up when rescuers rushed to the scene, said Ahmad Wali Saboori, chief of Kabul's 7th Police District.

The Health Ministry said 30 people were killed and 80 wounded in those blasts, for which the Taliban claimed responsibility. A statement on the group's website said the attack was aimed against the intelligence agency.

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Earlier in the day, a suicide bomber detonated explosives in a building housing an NDS of-

fice in Lashkar Gah, the capital of southern Helmand province.

One person was killed and nine others injured in that blast, said Omar Zwak, a spokesman for the provincial governor.

In the evening, a blast at the governor's compound in Kandahar injured at least a dozen people, said a doctor at the city's central hospital who asked not to be named.

Among the injured were the governor, Humayoon Azizi, and an envoy from the United Arab Emirates, the doctor said. The UAE envoy was reportedly in town for a ceremony to kick off construction of a new school.

The bombings in Kabul occurred across the street from the American University of Afghanistan, which has been closed since a nighttime raid in August in which at least 13 people were killed and dozens wounded.

The Taliban have frequently targeted the intelligence service, which has conducted numerous successful operations against the group. Last April, the guerrillas mounted a massive attack against an intelligence training center in Kabul, killing 64 people and injuring more than 300.

Pentagon unleashes tiny drones to gather intel

By ERIK SLAVIN
Stars and Stripes

They're small, easily deployable and so quick that some of the best "60 Minutes" camera operators had a hard time keeping up with them.

The Pentagon's Strategic Capabilities Office unveiled the Perdix micro-drone swarm to millions of television viewers Sunday night on CBS in what military officials called "one of the most significant tests of autonomous systems under development," according to a statement Monday.

Three F/A-18 Super Hornets dropped a swarm of 103 of the Perdix drones, which share "one distributed brain for decision-making," SCO director William Roper said in the statement.

Each of the drones, now in their sixth generation of development, weighs less than a

pound, with a body measuring just over six inches. The Pentagon released a video in March to The Washington Post of a single drone deployment, but the footage obtained at China Lake, Calif., by the CBS crew in October displayed the swarm's flight pattern changes and autonomous communications.

The drones each have radios and send messages to one another many times per second that report what they're doing and where they are, Roper told "60 Minutes."

Perdix swarms fly at speeds greater than 68 mph and can be launched to collect low-altitude intelligence from the ground, air and at sea.

"Because every Perdix communicates and collaborates with every other Perdix, the swarm has no leader and can gracefully adapt to drones entering or exiting the team," Roper said in the Monday statement.

AF eases tattoo, medical policies for new recruits

By ALEX HORTON
Stars and Stripes

SAN ANTONIO — The Air Force made significant revisions to its tattoo and medical exemption policy for new recruits, aligning its rules closer to those of other branches of service, the Air Force said Tuesday.

"We are opening the aperture on certain medical accession criteria and tattoos while taking into account our needs for worldwide deployability and our commitment to the profession of arms," Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James said in a statement.

One of the most significant changes is the elimination of the so-called "25 percent rule," which barred recruits from tattoos covering more than one-quarter of their extremities, such as arms, legs and backs, said 1st Lt. Erin Ranaweera, a spokeswoman for Air Force recruiting.

The elimination of the rule will now allow for "sleeve" tattoos, which cover significant portions of arms and legs and are popular among young people the Air Force looks to target for recruitment.

Air Force officials hope the change will slow hemorrhaging of recruits to other services who sought more relaxed tattoo policies. The Army and Navy allow sleeve ink, though the Marines still have restrictive policies on the size of tattoos, Stars and Stripes reported in June.

The Air Force reviewed the tattoo policy, which had been in effect since 1998, in the last year and determined it was out of step with the other services, Ranaweera said.

"Ours was the most stringent," she said. "It kept us from recruiting folks, which meant we referred them to other services. It is great for them, but not great for the Air Force."

Sessions says he protects law and order

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Sen. Jeff Sessions cast himself as a strong protector of law and order at his confirmation hearing Tuesday, promising that as attorney general he would crack down on illegal immigration, gun violence and the “scourge of radical Islamic terrorism.”

Sessions, echoing rhetoric used on the campaign trail by President-elect Donald Trump, warned of a country struggling to combat illegal drugs flooding across the border, spikes in violent crime in American cities and low morale among police.

“These trends cannot continue. It is a fundamental civil right to be safe in your home and your community,” the Alabama Republican said in laying out conservative priorities for the Justice Department at the

opening of his Senate hearing.

Politics got its share of attention, too, with Sessions promising to recuse himself from any investigation there might be into Democrat Hillary Clinton because of comments he’d made during the campaign. Trump said previously that he would name a special prosecutor to look into Clinton’s use of a private email server, but has since backed away. The FBI and Justice Department declined to bring charges last year.

Sessions has solid support from the Senate’s Republican majority, but faces a challenge persuading skeptical Democrats that he’ll be fair and committed to civil rights as the country’s top law enforcement official. Sen. Dianne Feinstein hinted at those concerns, saying “there is so much fear in this country” particularly among blacks.

Sessions, whose 1986 judicial nomination was derailed by allegations of racially charged comments, sought to confront that concern by saying he “understands the history of civil rights and the horrendous impact that relentless and systemic discrimination and the denial of voting rights has had on our African-American brothers and sisters. I have witnessed it.”

“The office of the attorney general of the United States is not a political position, and anyone who holds it must have total fidelity to the laws and the Constitution of the United States,” he said.

At several points, anti-Sessions protesters disrupted the hearing, including two men wearing Ku Klux Klan costumes and a woman wearing a pink crown. They were quickly escorted out.

Sessions was asked by committee chairman Chuck Grassley if he could stand up to Trump if he disagreed with the president-elect’s actions. Yes, he said, adding that he would be prepared to resign if asked to do something that was “plainly unlawful.”

Democrats were using part of the two days of hearings to challenge Sessions’ commitment to civil rights, a chief priority of the Justice Department during the Obama administration. They were also likely to press him on his hard-line stance on immigration policy.

But Republicans have expressed strong support and are expected to secure more than enough votes needed to confirm him, including from some Democrats in conservative-leaning states.

Senate is urged to OK waiver for Mattis

BY TRAVIS J. TRITTEN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Expert witnesses on Tuesday advised the Senate to grant Gen. James “Mad Dog” Mattis a historic legal waiver so he can be considered as Donald Trump’s defense secretary.

The retired Marine general’s resume and character — as well as concerns over the incoming president — justify giving Mattis a one-time exemption from federal law, which requires any defense secretary to be at least seven years out of military service, according to a Johns Hopkins University professor and a program director at the non-partisan Center For Strategic and International Studies think tank in Washington.

Mattis, 66, has been retired since 2013 and would be the first general in 70 years to be exempted from the law designed to maintain civilian control of the military. The Senate Armed Services Committee called in the expert witnesses

as Congress weighs whether to approve the waiver and clear the way for Mattis’ confirmation when Trump takes office Jan. 20.

“I’ve known Gen. Mattis for well over a decade. He is probably the most widely read and reflective officer I know,” said Eliot A. Cohen, a professor of strategic studies at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. “More importantly than that, he’s shown himself to be a man of exceptional character judgment and exemplary commitment to legal and constitution norms.”

Mattis is known as a kind of warrior monk and gained a dedicated following among the rank-and-file military during a four-decade career that included commanding infantry troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Cohen, who was a Trump critic among concerned national security experts during the election, said Mattis could moderate some of the coming president’s tough stances, such as his support of waterboarding

and torture of terrorists and targeting of their families.

“That is outrageous and illegal and wildly immoral, and I think a Secretary Mattis would refuse to comply with that order,” he said.

The Senate Armed Services Committee could vote on the waiver Thursday when Mattis comes to testify in his confirmation hearing. Republicans hope to wrap up his confirmation so he can be put in charge of the Pentagon this month.

The House also could begin considering a waiver this week.

Mattis would be the first military officer to receive a waiver since Gen. George C. Marshall, who served as the Army chief of staff during World War II and was an architect of the post-war recovery of Europe.

“I am convinced that [Mattis] passes the standards set by Marshall,” said Kathleen Hicks, director of the international security program at the center.

Work may remain at Defense for a while

The Trump transition team is discussing keeping Deputy Defense Secretary Robert Work in his current position for at least three to six months in the new presidential administration as it builds a team of senior officials around defense secretary nominee James Mattis, according to three people familiar with the discussions.

The move would serve as a stopgap measure that creates continuity at the Pentagon, the people said, speaking on condition of anonymity. The decision is considered “all but a done deal,” according to one of the people familiar with the discussions. It also would keep Work in the job while the Pentagon prepares its first budget of the Trump administration.

Virtually all political appointees from the Obama administration are expected to leave their Pentagon jobs within days, including Army Secretary Eric Fanning, Navy Secretary Ray Mabus and Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James.

From The Washington Post

Immigration, border security likely focus in Kelly hearings

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Senators were expected to use Tuesday's confirmation hearing for John Kelly, Donald Trump's choice to head the Homeland Security Department, to raise questions about the president-elect's plans to build a border wall and take other steps to boost immigration security.

The confirmation of Kelly, a retired Marine general, is almost assured, but members of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee will likely use the hearing to debate the tough immigration and border security policies that were centerpieces of Trump's presidential campaign.

Kelly is one of several retired generals tapped for top positions by Trump. That has raised some concerns about undue military influence in his administration, weakening the American tradition of civilian control of government.

But Kelly is widely respected by Democrats and Republicans alike, and his military experience is applicable to his Homeland Security role. He's the former head of the military's Southern Command, based in South Florida, which routinely works with the Department of Homeland Security to combat human trafficking and drug smuggling. The military command also partnered with Immigration and Customs Enforcement, a part of Homeland Security, to help rescue unaccompanied child immigrants trying to make their way from Central America to the United States.

In a statement prepared for the Senate hearing, Republican Chairman Ron Johnson, of Wisconsin, praised Kelly as having a "deep knowledge and understanding of the grave security threats facing our nation and the sacrifices that are required to keep us safe."

Kelly would be the fifth person to lead the department.

GOP's anxiety mounting over repeal of health care law

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Republican anxiety is mounting over voting to unravel the health care law without having an alternative in hand, fanned by words of encouragement from Donald Trump to a GOP senator who wants to simultaneously repeal and replace the statute.

GOP leaders have made dismantling President Barack Obama's treasured health care overhaul their premier 2017 priority. But even as the Republican-run Senate moves toward passing a budget that would make it harder for Democrats to protect Obama's law later, at least six GOP senators have expressed qualms about repeal without having a substitute — something Republicans have failed for years to produce.

"We should start immediately to repeal, reform and replace Obamacare, and it shouldn't be finally repealed until we have a replacement ready," Senate

Health Committee Chairman Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., whose panel will be at the center of this year's battle, said in a brief interview.

Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., who wants repeal and replace together, said the president-elect telephoned him Friday to voice support for that timing. Trump voiced that opinion shortly after his November election, but he called Paul as GOP congressional leaders have moved in a different direction: a quick repeal vote, followed by work on an alternative that could take months or years to craft.

"He's aware of my arguments for doing replacement at the same time, and he agreed," Paul said.

Even if Congress passed repeal rapidly, Republicans say they would phase it in, perhaps over two or three years. Republicans don't want to abruptly end coverage for 20 million Americans who've received coverage

under the 2010 law, and don't want to be vulnerable to Democrats already accusing them of preparing to tear down the statute without knowing how or if they'll replace it.

"Turn back before it's too late," Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said on the Senate floor just short of midnight as Democrats, before leaving for the night, lambasted Republicans with 5½ hours of speeches. "It will damage your party," Schumer said, "and it will hurt millions of Americans, far more importantly."

Highlighting GOP indecision, Steve Bannon, who will be White House senior adviser after Trump is sworn in Jan. 20, said, "We're still thinking that through" when asked by reporters after a meeting in the Capitol if repeal and replace should happen together.

Orlando police searching for suspect who fatally shot officer

Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. — Law enforcement officers in Orlando were engaged in a massive manhunt early Tuesday for a man accused of fatally shooting a police officer who approached him outside a Wal-Mart.

The manhunt led to the death of a sheriff's deputy in a traffic accident and the injury of another officer.

Master Sgt. Debra Clayton, 42, was killed outside the Wal-Mart store in northwest Orlando early Monday, and Orange County Sheriff's Office Deputy 1st Class Norman Lewis was killed more than two hours later in a crash while responding to a manhunt for Markeith Loyd, 41.

Another Orlando police officer was involved in a crash while responding to the shooting but had only minor injuries.

The deaths left Orlando's law enforcement community in mourning. Clayton's patrol SUV was displayed in front of Orlando Police headquarters Tuesday morning. The police department also started an online fund to raise money

for her family.

Authorities said Loyd previously was a suspect in the killing of his pregnant ex-girlfriend in December. A massive manhunt involving hundreds of officers was conducted all day Monday as they searched for Loyd in dozens of homes, displacing some residents of a northwest Orlando apartment complex and tying up traffic.

"He should be considered armed and dangerous," Police Chief John Mina said. Later in the day, the chief said: "It doesn't matter where he is. We will track him down to the ends of the Earth."

Orange County Sheriff Jerry Demings said deputies had been searching unsuccessfully for Loyd for several weeks since the fatal shooting of his ex-girlfriend and believe he was receiving help from someone.

Mina lauded Clayton, a 17-year veteran of the force, as a committed officer and a hero who gave her life to the community she loves. The Orlando Police Department said in a tweet that Clayton always had a smile and a high five for every child she came across.

Calif., Nev. brace for more storms

Associated Press

FORESTVILLE, Calif. — Northern California and Nevada braced for another powerful storm after getting lashed by downpours that flooded roads, homes and vineyards and toppled a storied giant sequoia.

Parts of Northern California were soaked by more than a foot of rain over a 72-hour period that ended early Monday, forcing hundreds of people to evacuate and leaving thousands without power.

Another strong storm was bearing down on the region and was expected to hit Tuesday.

Emergency crews in rescue boats and helicopters took advantage of a one-day respite from the rains later Monday to rescue stranded people and assess damage after a weekend of stormy weather that authorities called the heaviest rain in a decade.

In the Sierra Nevada mountains, a winter storm warning was in effect until Thursday morning with the potential for blizzard and white-out conditions, said Scott McGuire, a forecaster for the National Weather Service based in Reno, Nevada.

Four to 8 feet of snow are forecast through Thursday above 7,000 feet, and the Lake Tahoe area could get between 2 and 5 feet of snow, he said.

"People need to avoid traveling if at all possible," said McGuire. Avalanche concerns kept some California ski areas closed for a second day Monday in the Sierra Nevada.

In the San Francisco Bay Area, a coastal flood advisory was in effect from Tuesday through Friday, with a forecast for up to 7-foot "king tides" that could pose a flooding risk for coastal roadways, said Steve Anderson, a National Weather Service forecaster in Monterey, Calif.

Flood warnings and a high-wind watch were also in effect Tuesday for the Russian River, which rose to its highest level since 2006 and spilled over its

banks early Monday, flooding roads and vineyards and forcing schools to close across the area.

Parts of California's wine country in Sonoma County were among the hardest hit, with up to 13 inches of rain from Friday through early Monday. Rolling hills and vineyards along the scenic route known as River Road were submerged Monday, with just the tips of the vines visible in completely flooded fields.

Melba Martinelli, who lives in the Russian River town of Guerneville, was wading through her yard Monday in knee-high rain boots, surrounded by flooded streets.

In nearby Forestville, rescuers launched rafts and used a helicopter to search for people cut off by rising water. Authorities said the mostly dry conditions Monday were a relief.

Such gaps between storms are "what saves us from the big water," Forestville Fire Chief Max Ming said. "People hunker down and wait for it to get past."

To the south near Los Angeles, commuters were warned of possible highway flooding and mudslides in hilly areas.

The back-to-back storms that hit California and Nevada since last week are part of an "atmospheric river" weather system that draws precipitation from the Pacific Ocean as far west as Hawaii. That kind of system, also known as the "pineapple express," poses catastrophic risks for areas hit by the heaviest rain.

Despite the bad weather in some parts, Yosemite National Park was forecasting a return to normal. The park planned to reopen the valley floor to visitors Tuesday morning after it was closed through the weekend and Monday because of a storm-swollen river, park spokesman Scott Gediman said. Park workers were checking the extent of damage from the storm to water and sewer systems, he said.

Winds, rain topple famous 'tunnel tree'

The (San Jose, Calif.) Mercury News

SAN JOSE, Calif. — For 2,000 years, the "Pioneer Cabin Tree" grew in peaceful grandeur in a land not yet California — reaching ever taller as the Miwoks hunted, the Aztecs mined gold, Chinese perfected silk, Romans expanded their empire and waves of new immigrants arrived in America.

Sunday, with the stunning finality of a beheading, it fell.

The aging giant sequoia — known for an immense cabin-shaped hole in its trunk — was pronounced dead at 3:30 p.m. Sunday, toppled by fierce winds and 8 inches of rain in its home in the North Grove of Calaveras Big Trees State Park in Arnold, northeast of Stockton.

No one saw it fall because the trail was closed due to rising creek waters. An astonished park docent discovered the shattered tree on an afternoon walk, then called authorities.

"It's sad from the perspective of human history — how many generations of families have walked through this beautiful tree," delighting in the huge hole excavated in its trunk, said supervising park ranger Tony Tealdi.

By Monday morning, more than 2,100 people had commented on the Calaveras Big Trees Association's Facebook post, some sharing stories about their visits over the years.

Truth be told, the tree had been ailing.

"It wasn't doing very well," said Tealdi, adding that it suffered from trunk and root decay. "There was only one limb alive on it. With the hole cut into it, it was not able to fend off fires and could no longer support the growth at the top of the tree."

Indeed, the hole — carved out in 1881 when the tree was privately owned — appears to have been created after Mother Nature already inflicted a major wound. Old photos show a gaping hole in the trunk caused by lightning strikes in the 1800s. Lightning later knocked off its crown and opened up its side.

Even in death, the tree will remain a marvel — and a critical contributor to the forest ecosystem, said Tealdi.

"That tree will be food and home and shelter for animals for generations to come," said Tealdi. As it decays, "it is nature going back into the forest."

Mom accused in slaying was child welfare worker

Associated Press

EASTON, Pa. — A woman charged with killing and dismembering her adoptive daughter as part of a rape-murder fantasy she and her boyfriend shared had previously worked as an adoption supervisor for a children's welfare agency, authorities said Monday.

Sara Packer worked as a supervisor for the Northampton County Children, Youth and Families Division for adoptions from 2003 to 2010, when she was suspended, the county said.

Packer was arraigned Sunday on charges including criminal homicide, rape and abuse of a corpse. Her boyfriend, Jacob Sullivan, was arraigned on similar charges. Packer and Sullivan didn't enter pleas and were denied bail.

Officials say Grace Packer, 14, was beaten, was raped as her mother watched, was poisoned and hours later was strangled in a stifling attic in July.

Sara Packer had previously been charged with child endangerment and obstruction.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Sheriff puts self behind bars to learn about jail

MI MASON — A new Michigan sheriff has put himself behind bars to help learn more about how his county jail works.

Ingham County Sheriff Scott Wriggelsworth and Under-sheriff Andrew Bouck checked themselves into the Ingham County Jail in Mason on Sunday evening.

In a statement, the sheriff's office said they were booked into the jail, given jumpsuits and are currently lodged at the facility. They planned to stay there until Tuesday morning and, until that time, they were expected to be treated like other jail inmates.

50-pound dumbbell hurts driver on turnpike

NJ OLDMANS TOWNSHIP — State police said a motorist was injured when a 50-pound dumbbell crashed through his windshield on the New Jersey Turnpike.

The accident occurred Monday morning in the southbound lanes in Oldmans Township.

The 75-year-old was flown to a hospital. He was in serious condition Monday afternoon.

State troopers are trying to determine where the dumbbell came from.

Snowplow gives woman in labor lift to hospital

VA CHESAPEAKE — A North Carolina man was mighty glad to see a snowplow as he tried to get his pregnant wife to a hospital in Chesapeake during the weekend storm.

The Virginian-Pilot of Norfolk reported that Hugh Dawson, of Moyock, N.C., headed to

a hospital with his wife, Stephanie, around 3:30 a.m. Sunday.

As they were driving, Stephanie realized they were not going to make it to the Virginia Beach hospital they planned to use.

They headed toward the closest hospital, Chesapeake Regional Medical Center. Their truck died on an exit ramp, and Hugh flagged down a snowplow and persuaded the driver to get them to the hospital. Brayden was born about 15 minutes after they arrived. He weighed 6 pounds and 13 ounces and is doing fine.

Black woman's selection for space station a first

NY SYRACUSE — NASA has selected a central New York woman for a mission to space that will make her the first black woman to live on the International Space Station as a crewmember.

Syracuse native Jeanette Epps will serve as a flight engineer for a mission that's scheduled to launch from Kazakhstan in May 2018. She'll be the first black woman to be a resident of the space station, which other black women have visited.

The Corcoran High School graduate has been working toward traveling to space since she became one of just nine people chosen for NASA's 20th astronaut class from a pool of 3,500 applicants in 2009.

Police say handcuffed suspect shot himself

TX AUSTIN — A Texas man who pulled a handgun from his waistband and shot himself in the head while handcuffed in the back of a police patrol car died Monday, one day after the shooting.

Austin police confirmed that Zachary Khabir Anam, 19, died at University Medical

Center-Brackenridge.

Anam was taken into custody Sunday at the Barton Creek Square shopping mall, where private security officers had detained him on suspicion of shoplifting and carrying a controlled substance.

Interim police Chief Brian Manley said Anam was handcuffed and placed in the back seat of a patrol car. Anam managed to reach his manacled hands round his right side, grabbed a handgun hidden in a rear waistband, and pointed the weapon at his own head with threats to shoot himself, Manley said.

The officer, who was not identified, stopped the car, got out and ordered Anam to drop the gun. Six minutes later, Anam shot himself, Manley said.

The confrontation was recorded on the dashboard camera of a police patrol car trailing the one containing Anam, Manley said.

Man barricades himself over sandwich dispute

MD DUNDALK — A Maryland man was arrested following an hourslong standoff with law enforcement that police say began when a family member took a bite from his grilled cheese sandwich.

Baltimore County police spokesman Shawn Vinson said the dispute began about 5 p.m. Sunday at a Dundalk home. He said the man was eating with his wife and daughter and became angry when one of them took a bite from his sandwich, prompting him to fire a shot.

The wife and daughter were able to safely leave the house, but the man barricaded himself inside. He surrendered peacefully shortly before 9 p.m.

Police said Monday that Daniel Blackwell, 55, has been charged with attempted mur-

der and other offenses

Whale watchers see rare orca pod, calf

CA NEWPORT BEACH — Whale watchers in Southern California were recently treated to a rare sight: a pod of orcas, including a calf, swimming about a mile off shore.

The Orange County Register reported that the five orcas, also known as killer whales, were seen near Point Vicente on Saturday afternoon. California Killer Whale Project researcher Alisa Schulman-Janiger said the orcas were first spotted by a group of volunteers with ACES/LA Gray Whale Census and Behavior Project.

Schulman-Janiger said it is extremely rare to see the Eastern Tropical Pacific killer whales in Orange County or further north. She said it is her first time seeing them in 35 years of research.

Spotify has a playlist position for Obama

NY NEW YORK — If President Barack Obama is looking for a new job after Jan. 20, Spotify has a position that seems made just for him.

The streaming music service has posted a "President of Playlists" position on its career opportunities webpage.

Requirements for the position include "at least eight years experience running a highly-regarded nation" and a Nobel Peace Prize. Some of the responsibilities for the job are to "provide world-class leadership to our playlist editors and supporting staff" and use "all available intelligence" to analyze playlist data.

From wire reports

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Clemson wins rematch with Alabama

Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — College football's first national championship rematch was even better than the original, with an incredible twist at the end.

Deshaun Watson and Clemson dethroned the champs and became the first team to beat Nick Saban's Alabama dynasty in a national title game, taking down the top-ranked Crimson Tide 35-31 Monday night in the College Football Playoff.

Watson found Hunter Renfrow for a 2-yard touchdown pass with a second remaining to give the Tigers their first national championship since 1981. A year after Alabama won its fourth title under Saban with a 45-40 classic in Arizona, Clemson closed the deal and denied the Tide an unprecedented fifth championship in eight seasons.

"That has to be one of the greatest games of all time," Clemson coach Dabo Swinney said.

The lead changed hands three times in the fourth quarter, but Watson got the ball last. Playing in his final college game, the junior quarterback threw for 420 yards and three touchdowns. In two games

against Alabama and the most ferocious defense in college football, Watson has thrown for 825 yards and accounted for eight touchdowns. He was sacked four times and took some cringe-inducing shots from All-Americans Jonathan Allen and Reuben Foster.

"You know, I never got the sense that he was rattled," Allen said about Watson.

Swinney, the native Alabamian and former Crimson Tide walk-on receiver, has built an elite program at Clemson that was missing only one thing. Now the Tigers can check that box, too.

"Eight years ago we set out to put Clemson back on top," said Swinney, who can turn post-game interviews into a rousing sermon. "We came up a little short last year, but today on top of the mountain, the Clemson flag is flying."

After three quarters of vicious hits and tight defense, Tigers-Tide II ended up looking a lot like the first meeting when the teams combined for 40 points in the fourth quarter.

Watson found Mike Williams for a 4-yard touchdown a minute into the fourth quarter to make it 24-21.

The Tigers took a 28-24 lead with 4:38 left in the fourth quarter when Wayne Gallman surged in from a yard out.

The Tide's offense, which had gone dormant for most of the second half, came to life with the help of a sweet call from newly promoted offensive coordinator Steve Sarkisian. Receiver ArDarius Stewart took a backward pass from Jalen Hurts and fired a strike to O.J. Howard for 24 yards.

On the next play, Hurts broke free from a collapsing pocket and weaved his way through defenders for a 30-yard touchdown run to make it 31-28 with 2:07 left.

More than enough time for Watson.

"I was calm," Watson said. He said he thought about Vince Young's last-second touchdown for Texas that derailed Southern California's championship run in the 2005 championship game at the Rose Bowl. He told his team: "Let's go be great."

Watson hooked up with Williams and Jordan Leggett, who made great catches for big gains to get to first-and-goal with 14 seconds left.

A pass interference on Alabama made it first-and-goal

at the 2 with six seconds left. Time for one more play to avoid a game-tying kick and potential overtime. Renfrow slipped away from the defense at the goal line with the help of some traffic created by his teammates — or maybe it was an illegal pick? — and was alone for an easy toss. It was the walk-on receiver's second TD catch of the night, adding to the two he had last season against Alabama.

When it ended, Clemson's 315-pound defensive lineman Christian Wilkins did a cartwheel and Ben Boulware, one of the toughest linebackers in the country, was in tears.

"Don't call it an upset," Swinney said. "We expected to win this game."

The Tigers had snapped Alabama's 26-game winning streak and beaten a No. 1 team for the first time ever.

Alabama was 4-0 in national championship games under Saban. It was 106-6 in games it led at half and 96-0 when entering the fourth quarter with a double-digit lead as the Tide did Monday night. Clemson overcame all those odds.

Sarkisian directs late TD drive, but it's not enough

Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — Steve Sarkisian dialed up a timely trick play, a pass that worked to perfection and plenty of hand-offs to Bo Scarbrough.

The combination nearly added up to a triumphant debut for Sarkisian as Alabama's offensive coordinator — on the biggest stage in college football. Almost.

Eight days after jumping into the job, his offense struggled mightily in the second half but produced a go-ahead touchdown with 2:07 left that wasn't quite enough in Monday night's 35-31 loss to Clemson in the national championship game.

"I knew the game wasn't over, and it wasn't," freshman

quarterback Jalen Hurts said.

For a change, the nation's top defense couldn't overcome the Tide's offensive deficiencies. Deshaun Watson hit Hunter Renfrow for the winning 2-yard touchdown with 1 second left and Alabama's 26-game winning streak ended.

Sarkisian, a former USC and Washington head coach, was given the reins of the Tide offense a day after the Peach Bowl when coach Nick Saban ushered Lane Kiffin on to his new job at Florida Atlantic. That three-year pairing ended one game earlier than expected.

"I think the players handled it very well," Saban said. "I think we scored 31 points in the game, which I think was pret-

ty good against a pretty good defense that actually shut out Ohio State last week. I think we had some drops. I think we had some tipped balls.

"I think there was things that we could have done better. But I thought the preparation was good. I thought the organization was good, and I thought we gave our players a chance in this game to have success."

One thing the Crimson Tide could have done better was convert third-down conversions. The Tide finished 2-for-15 on third downs, and all the three-and-outs led to 99 offensive plays by Clemson and a tired Alabama defense late in the game.

Mostly, though, Alabama

stuck to the same offensive script — good and bad — as it had under Kiffin.

Hurts, the Southeastern Conference offensive player of the year, struggled to complete anything more than short passes most of the game. But only Scarbrough had much consistent success before going down with a right leg injury late in the third quarter.

Alabama players insisted the 11th-hour change didn't affect the offense.

"Everything was smooth the whole week of practice," receiver Gehrig Dieter said. "We knew going into the game what was going to happen. Sark's been here the whole season. It was a smooth transition."

Jags hire Marrone, bring back Coughlin

Associated Press

Jacksonville's coaching search landed someone from its past and present.

The Jaguars can only hope the old-school combination leads to better results in the future.

Owner Shad Khan hired Doug Marrone as head coach Monday and brought back Tom Coughlin to oversee football operations. Marrone replaces Gus Bradley, who was fired in late November after going 14-48 in three-plus seasons.

The Jaguars (3-13) also gave general manager Dave Caldwell a two-year contract extension. So Marrone, Coughlin and Caldwell are now signed through 2019, giving the new regime a three-year window to, at the very least, make Jacksonville relevant in the AFC South.

"I have confidence that one day soon we'll look back on today's news as the moment that inspired and ultimately established the Jacksonville

Jaguars as a football team that wins, week to week and season to season," Khan said in a statement. "The results will speak for themselves in time, but with Tom coming in to join Dave and Doug, there is no question the Jacksonville Jaguars are a stronger football team today."

Marrone and Caldwell will report to Coughlin, meaning Jacksonville's first coach is now in charge and will have final say in personnel decisions.

Marrone is the fifth head coach in franchise history, following Coughlin (1995-2002), Jack Del Rio (2003-11), Mike Mularkey (2012) and Bradley (2013-16).

"I think Doug has earned the respect of the offensive players, and I'm excited for him to get this opportunity and the direction of this team," quarterback Blake Bortles told AP in a text message.

Coughlin, a winner of two Super Bowls in 12 seasons with the New York Giants, will serve as executive vice president of football operations. Coughlin,

who led the Jaguars to four playoff appearances in his first five years, will have final say in the NFL Draft and in free agency. Caldwell has been the primary decision maker in all personnel moves the last four years.

"I am honored to welcome Tom Coughlin back to Jacksonville, where winning was customary under his leadership," Khan said. "I know he expects the same in his return to head our football operations, and that's good news for us and Jaguars fans everywhere. The extension of Dave Caldwell's contract speaks to his excellent work thus far and the continued importance of complementing our talented and promising roster."

Khan, who hired Jed Hughes of Korn Ferry International to help with the search, also interviewed Atlanta offensive coordinator Kyle Shanahan, Tampa Bay defensive coordinator Mike Smith, New England offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels and Arizona offensive

coordinator Harold Goodwin for the head coaching job.

He ended up keeping Marrone, who served as Jacksonville's interim coach for the final two games. The Jaguars won one and blew a late lead in the season finale at Indianapolis. Players seemed to rally around him, but after the loss to the Colts, rookie cornerback Jalen Ramsey said a "complete flip will serve us good."

Marrone and Coughlin could provide that. They surely will bring a different vibe, a much more disciplined approach that will put more emphasis on winning games than Bradley did.

"I can see what they're doing," veteran tight end Mercedes Lewis told AP. "These are good moves for a young team, a team that needs to be held to a certain standard. Marrone's a good man. He's good for the culture."

"It's not like we're bringing in a brand new coach and he's going to wipe the face of the earth of everything we've built."

Many ranked teams to face off in college basketball

Associated Press

PHOENIX — The start of conference season usually means plenty of match-ups between AP Top 25 teams.

This week is overloaded with ranked-on-ranked games with nine.

It started Tuesday night when newly top-ranked Baylor played at No. 10 West Virginia.

The Bears have gone from afterthought early in the season — no votes in the first two AP polls — to their first No. 1 ranking this week.

Baylor (12-0) and No. 5 Gonzaga (15-0) are the only undefeated teams left in the poll, but the Bears' reign at the top will get tested right away with a game against the tough-to-play Mountaineers. West Virginia dropped three spots in this week's poll after losing to Texas Tech last Tuesday.

"It's great to be No. 1, but it's kind of hard to really appreciate knowing we have to go to West Virginia," Baylor junior forward Terry Maston said.

It doesn't get any easier for Baylor. On Saturday, the Bears head to the Little Apple to face No. 25 Kansas State, which entered the poll this week after beating Oklahoma and playing rival Kansas close in Lawrence.

Also Tuesday, No. 3 Villanova got a stiff test in its first game since being knocked from No. 1, facing No. 15 Xavier, and No. 7 Duke played at No. 9 Florida State.

Wednesday has No. 8 Creighton playing at No. 12 Butler.

Saturday has four other games involving two ranked teams besides Baylor-Kansas State: No. 5 Gonzaga at No. 21 Saint Mary's, No. 7 Duke at No. 14 Louisville, No. 9 Florida

State at No. 11 North Carolina and No. 12 Butler at No. 15 Xavier.

Villanova's fall: Villanova had an impressive run to start the season in defense of its national championship, sitting atop the poll for five weeks while stretching its winning streak to 20 combined games.

The Wildcats suffered their first setback last Wednesday, when Butler bogged the game down and beat them 66-58.

Villanova bounced back (15-1, 3-1 Big East) nicely on Saturday, rolling over Marquette 93-81. The Wildcats will face St. John's at Madison Square Garden Saturday after Tuesday's game against Xavier.

Zags' test: Gonzaga may have coach Mark Few's best team of his 17 seasons in Spokane and have played like it, beating No. 15 Arizona, No. 23 Florida and blowing out most

everyone else.

The Zags get a big test on Saturday when they play their main rival in the West Coast Conference, No. 21 Saint Mary's.

The Gaels (14-1, 4-0 WCC) suffered a surprising loss to Texas-Arlington on Dec. 8, but have since reeled off eight straight wins.

Watch list: Seton Hall (12-3, 2-1 Big East) was the top team receiving votes in this week's poll and could move into the top 25 next week with a couple of wins. The Pirates play at Marquette on Wednesday, then at Providence on Saturday.

Indiana (11-5, 1-2 Big Ten) has been a hard one to figure out, going from as high as No. 3 in the AP Top 25 to out of the poll this week. The Hoosiers have wins over Kansas and North Carolina, but lost to Fort Wayne.

Davis dominates, Rose AWOL

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Anthony Davis dominated the Knicks until they finally knocked him out of the game with a hard foul.

New York was more concerned with Derrick Rose than Davis.

Davis had 40 points and 18 rebounds before leaving with a left hip injury in the New Orleans Pelicans' 110-96 victory over the Knicks, who started the game without Rose and lost Carmelo Anthony to an ejection.

Rose was absent for reasons that remained unclear. Knicks coach Jeff Hornacek said it was too soon to discuss the issue until the team had heard from its point guard.

Rose practiced with the team during its morning shootaround, and Hornacek gave no indication before the game that the point guard would not be available.

"Everything will become clear later on," Hornacek said. "We want to respect whatever he's going through and we're just not going to comment about it."

Joakim Noah said he spoke to Rose, his long-time teammate in Chicago, after the game. He wouldn't discuss the conversation other than to say Rose was OK.

"Obviously, Derrick's one of our better players and when he's not here it's tough, but just happy that everything is OK with him," Noah said.

Anthony was back in the locker room late in

the third quarter after getting thrown out for arguing with the officials. He left without speaking to reporters.

Davis played only 29 minutes and blocked three shots.

"I know where we are as a team, what we are trying to do as a team and I just tried to come out aggressive," he said. "That was it."

He left the game when he was flagrantly fouled by Kyle O'Quinn, ejected for swinging his arm down hard on Davis, who was dribbling up the floor on a fast break and ended up being knocked into the front row of fans behind the baseline.

X-rays were negative. Davis said he had a bruised hip and expects to receive plenty of treatment before the Pelicans play again Thursday in Brooklyn.

Thunder 109, Bulls 94: At Chicago, Russell Westbrook had 21 points, 14 assists and nine rebounds to help Oklahoma City pull away for an easy victory.

Steven Adams scored 22 points and Enes Kanter had 20 points and 11 rebounds, leading a dominant performance inside for Oklahoma City.

Dwyane Wade led Chicago, which had won three in a row and five of seven.

Timberwolves 101, Mavericks 92: Karl-Anthony Towns had 34 points and 11 rebounds while Ricky Rubio added 13 points and a season-high 15 assists as host Minnesota ended a four-game losing streak with victory over Dallas.

Ovechkin ties Richard with 544th

Associated Press

MONTREAL — Alex Ovechkin knows Maurice "Rocket" Richard's name, mainly from the six times he won the trophy named after the Montreal Canadiens great as the top NHL goal-scorer of the year.

The name came up again Monday night when the Washington star scored career goal 544, tying Richard's total late in the Capitals' 4-1 victory over the Canadiens.

"It's nice to be in history, it's nice to be tied with the legend," Ovechkin said. "Still, I have lots of years to go and I'm going to try to do my best."

Richard retired in 1960 as the league's all-time goals leader and his total ranks only 29th now, but the Ovechkin looks like he has plenty of seasons left to add to his total. Next targets up are Michel Goulet at 548 and Ron Francis' 549.

"It means I'm getting older," Ovechkin said. "I remember my first year, my first game, like it was five minutes ago."

"Time moves forward and time moves quick, so you just have to enjoy every second and every moment and, when you have an opportunity, try to do something special."

Ovechkin got his special moment with 3:24 left in the third period when, on a power play, he whipped a wrist shot to the top corner past Carey Price from just beyond the top of the left face-off circle.

Panthers 3, Devils 0: Roberto Luongo made 28 saves for his 73rd career shutout to lead Florida past host New Jersey.

Jets 2, Flames 0: Connor Hellebuyck made 28 saves for his third shutout of the season as host Winnipeg won for the third time in four games.

Stars 6, Kings 4: Jiri Hudler scored the tiebreaking goal with 12:16 to play as Dallas blew a late two-goal lead before hanging on for a wild win in Los Angeles.

Sources: Edwards won't race in '17

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — In a stunning decision, NASCAR driver Carl Edwards is walking away from the final year of his contract with Joe Gibbs Racing less than two months after nearly winning his first Cup championship, two people with knowledge of the situation told The Associated Press on Tuesday.

Joe Gibbs Racing scheduled a pair of news conferences Wednesday in which Edwards is expected to announce he will not drive the No. 19 Toyota next season. The second announcement is that reigning Xfinity Series champion Daniel Suarez will replace Edwards in the Cup Series. The two people spoke to AP on condition of anonymity.

The 37-year-old Edwards informed team owner Joe Gibbs right before Christmas that he

no longer wanted to compete, the people told AP, confirming a decision first reported by Fox Sports.

"This is comparable to Barry Sanders' retirement back in 1999, shocking and with loads of ability and time left in a very successful career," said Texas Motor Speedway President Eddie Gossage. Edwards was a four-time winner at Texas in the Cup Series.

"I talked to Carl about a month ago and he didn't give any indication that he was considering this," Gossage said. "It is a shock that just doesn't seem real."

Edwards may not be done for good: He could simply be sitting out one year of competition to see what other lucrative jobs open in 2018. Tony Stewart has retired and has a four-car lineup that is moving this year

to Ford, where Edwards was closely aligned before he spent the last two seasons driving for Gibbs.

Also, concerns about Dale Earnhardt Jr.'s concussion history, plus underperformance by Kasey Kahne, could open seats in the future at Hendrick Motorsports.

Edwards did not reply to a request for comment from the AP.

Edwards came so close to winning his first Cup championship in November. He was leading all contenders with 10 laps remaining at Homestead-Miami Speedway until a caution set up a restart that bunched the field. Edwards tried to block Joey Logano's attempt to take the lead, and it caused a crash that ended Edwards' title bid.