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Report: Trump ordered Mueller fired in June

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump demanded the firing of special counsel Robert Mueller last June but backed down after White House lawyer Don McGahn threatened to resign, according to a New York Times report that Trump quickly dismissed Friday as “fake news.”

The newspaper reported that Trump demanded Mueller’s firing just weeks after the special counsel was first appointed by Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein.

Trump pushed back against the report, without addressing the specific allegation, as he arrived Friday at the site of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

“Fake news, folks. Fake news. Typical New York Times fake stories,” Trump told reporters.

McGahn said he would not deliver the order to the Justice Department, according to The Times, which cites four people familiar with the request by the president.

Trump argued at the time that Mueller could not be fair because of a dispute over fees that he said Mueller owed at a Trump golf club in Sterling, Va. The president also believed Mueller had a conflict of interest because he worked for the same law firm that was representing Trump’s son-in-law and adviser Jared Kushner.

Peter Carr, a spokesman for Mueller, did not immediately return a call for comment Thursday night. Ty Cobb, a White House lawyer working on the response to the Russia probe, declined comment Thursday night.

The response from Democrats was nearly immediate. Sen. Mark Warner, D-Va., vice chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, said that if the report in The Times is true, Trump has crossed a “red line.”

“Any attempt to remove the Special Counsel, pardon key witnesses or otherwise interfere in the investigation would be a gross abuse of power,” Warner said.

The report comes as Mueller moves ever closer to interviewing Trump himself. The president said Wednesday that he would gladly testify under oath — although a White House official quickly said afterward that Trump did not mean he was volunteering to testify.

Last June, when Trump was considering how to fire Mueller, the special counsel’s probe had not progressed far, at least not in public. At that time he had yet to call on any major witnesses to testify and had not yet issued any charges or signed any plea deals. But that would change just a few months later, when federal agents would arrest former Trump campaign adviser George Papadopoulos and ultimately turn him into a cooperating witness.

Since then, Trump has largely stopped talking about explicitly trying to fire Mueller, but has instead shifted to accusing Mueller and his team of being biased and unable to complete a fair investigation.

Turkey vows to take Syria offensive to Iraq border

Associated Press

ANKARA, Turkey — Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan vowed Friday to expand Ankara’s operation in a Kurdish enclave in northern Syria eastward, toward the frontier with Iraq.

His comments, during an address to local leaders of his ruling party in Ankara, appeared to be in defiance of the U.S., which has urged Turkey to keep its campaign in Syria “limited in scope and duration” and to focus on ending the war.

Erdogan said the Turkish forces’ push into Afrin would stretch farther east, to the Syrian Kurdish town of Manbij, and toward the border with Iraq “until no terrorist is left.”

Turkey considers the Syrian Kurdish forces, known as the People’s Protection Units or YPG, as a terrorist group because of their purported links to Kurdish insurgents within Turkey’s own border. Manbij is held by the Syrian Democratic Forces, which is dominated by the YPG. U.S. troops are not present in Afrin but are embedded with the SDF in other parts of Syria, where

they are working to prevent a resurgence of Islamic State.

“We will clear Manbij of terrorists ... No one should be disturbed by this because the real owners of Manbij are not these terrorists, they are our Arab brothers,” Erdogan said. “From Manbij, we will continue our struggle up to the border with Iraq, until no terrorist is left.”

Ankara’s push into Manbij would put Turkish troops in proximity to American soldiers there.

Erdogan’s remarks came on the seventh day of the Turkish incursion into Afrin, which started Saturday.

Meanwhile, Turkey’s Health Minister Ahmet Demircan said Friday the operation into Afrin had led to 14 deaths on the Turkish side. Three Turkish soldiers and 11 Syrian opposition fighters allied with them have been killed in fighting since Jan. 20, he said. Some 130 others have been wounded.

The SDF said the first week of Turkey’s incursion had left more than 100 civilians and fighters dead. The group said in a statement Friday that among the dead

are 59 civilians and 43 fighters, including eight female fighters. At least 134 civilians were wounded in the weeklong clashes, it added.

Turkey’s military said at least 343 “terrorists” have been “neutralized” during the campaign, a figure the Syrian Kurds dispute.

In his speech, Erdogan slammed the U.S. alliance with the Kurdish forces in Manbij and other parts of Syria.

“Our greatest sadness is to see these terrorist organizations run wild, holding U.S. flags, in this region,” Erdogan said.

Erdogan said President Donald Trump asked him “not to criticize us so much” during their telephone call on Wednesday.

“Okay,” said Erdogan, quoting what he allegedly told Trump in the conversation. “But how can a strategic partner do such a thing to its strategic partner?”

Erdogan also accused the Syrian Kurdish militia of using civilians as human shields in Afrin to try to slow the advance of the Turkish forces and of the Turkish-backed Syrian opposition fighters.

Afghanistan base sees surge in Reapers

BY CHAD GARLAND
Stars and Stripes

KANDAHAR AIR FIELD, Afghanistan — This expansive base has become home to the largest operational deployment of Air Force MQ-9 Reaper drones to one airfield, as the U.S.-led coalition works to gain momentum in the 16-year fight against a resilient Taliban insurgency.

The drones arrived recently to augment efforts to target the Taliban, who control or contest more territory now than since its regime was toppled in the 2001 U.S.-led invasion. U.S. and Afghan forces are also battling an Islamic State affiliate that has taken root in the east and the northwest.

“We’re going after the enemy, we’re going after the vehicles they use, we’re going after the buildings that they try to hide from us in,” Col. Stephen “Joker” Jones, an Air Force commander here who began flying unmanned aircraft in 2000, told *Stars and Stripes* on Tuesday.

Drones are the signature aircraft of the war in Afghanistan and perhaps the most controversial. They’ve been criticized for causing civilian casualties and for inspiring retaliatory terrorist plots.

The Obama administration embraced their use for targeted killings and covert assassinations. There’s no sign of an end to those practices under the Trump presidency. A suspected drone strike on Haqqani network leaders in Pakistan drew Islamabad’s ire this week, though the U.S. has denied its involvement.

Cheaper to operate than manned warplanes and able to loiter above the battlefield for long stretches, remotely piloted aircraft are critical for reducing civilian casualties, U.S. officials say.

Their “unblinking eye” lets commanders observe targets day and night to make decisions in a “relaxed, calculated fashion” about the best strike timing and weaponry to reduce unwanted damage, Jones said.

“In this type of warfare, we want — we need — our airstrikes to be as precise as possible, as well as not incurring any collateral damage,” Jones said, “specifically, no noncombatants.”

The nearly three squadrons of MQ-9s now based here — officials declined to give specific numbers — along with a newly deployed squadron of “Warthog” A-10 Thunderbolt IIs, will provide critical support to a first-of-its-kind Army brigade, said Maj. Gen. James Hecker, commander of all U.S. air power in Afghanistan.

The Army’s Fort Benning, Ga.-based 1st Security Forces Assistance Brigade, or SFAB, will put experienced combat advisers with conventional Afghan fighting units at the tactical level when it deploys here this spring.

“They’ll need both [intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance] as well as [close air support] to make sure that they can accomplish their mission successfully,” Hecker said.

The \$65 million Reaper, a successor to the Predator, has a suite of high-tech re-

connaissance and targeting sensors that serve as a “necessary precursor” to an A-10 raid, Jones said. It can conduct strikes itself using laser-guided GBU-12 Paveway II bombs and Hellfire missiles, as well as 560-pound, GPS-guided GBU-38 Joint Direct Attack Munitions, or JDAMs.

“My preference is always a Hellfire because it’s so accurate,” Jones said. “I can get that thing right into somebody’s chest if I needed.”

Jones was flying drones before they were armed. In the early days of the war, he piloted a Predator doing reconnaissance for B-2 JDAM strikes against this same airfield before the U.S. occupied it.

Teeming with more than 35,000 coalition troops, contractors and civilians at the height of the war, the base became a shadow of its former self with the withdrawal of most combat forces in 2014. Since then, it’s been the only airfield to host the Reapers, Jones said. Predators once based here and at other bases are now gone, though Army MQ-1C Grey Eagle drones remain.

About one-third of the base was handed over to Afghan forces. Some of the rest languished without maintenance, but Jones led a three-week scramble earlier this year to prepare it for dozens more warplanes.

The U.S. is increasing its aerial surveillance over Afghanistan by one-third, to levels approaching those at the height of the conflict, Hecker said. More over-the-horizon surveillance capabilities also will come online here soon.

Kissinger warns senators of ‘failure of world order’

BY CLAUDIA GRISALES
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Three former high-ranking State Department officials warned a Senate panel on Thursday that the U.S. is facing potentially catastrophic confrontations as global order erodes.

The U.S. is now in a national security race against time to prepare for the growing global destabilization, said the former secretaries, who have served under generations of presidents.

“The international situation facing the United States is unprecedented,” famed former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger said in testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee. This is “more than a coincidence of individual crisis across various geographies. Rather, it is a systemic failure of world order.”

Kissinger warned the U.S. is facing an urgent concern with North Korea’s nuclear weapons program, a more intermediate threat through entrenched and expanding conflicts in the Middle East and a rising challenge to the current state of world powers.

The testimony’s sobering look into the potential for future, violent U.S. conflicts could influence the development of the next National Defense Authorization Act. The most recent \$700 billion NDAA policy plan to help grow the military was signed into law last month, but has yet to get the funding necessary to surpass budget caps.

“Now, more than ever, the challenges of today’s world require strategic vision,” said Sen. Jim Inhofe, R-Okla. “We need to cast aside partisan politics and pass an appropriations bill finding a way to fix the defense spending caps that have (hurt) our military

in terms of readiness and modernization.”

Kissinger, 94, former Secretary of State George Shultz, 97, and former Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, 72, all warned the U.S. is already behind in developing future weapons, such as artificial intelligence, among other concerns.

For example, Shultz said the new National Defense Strategy, which was unveiled by Defense Secretary Jim Mattis last week, doesn’t go far enough.

“I am pretty impressed with what they laid out,” Shultz said. “But it doesn’t adequately address the fact of the huge change taking place in deglobalization and a new kind of weaponry that’s coming about. Those things need to be factored in.”

Armitage also warned that the depleted ranks at the State Department are another liability facing the U.S. today, hurting diplomacy efforts around the world.

Museum says Trump can have golden toilet instead

New York Daily News

NEW YORK — Not all that glitters is a toilet bowl.

When President Donald Trump and his wife, Melania, asked the Guggenheim to “borrow” a Vincent van Gogh painting for their private White House quarters, a curator responded that the museum unfortunately could not accommodate the request.

However, the curator wrote in an email, the Upper East Side museum could offer the presidential couple another piece: a used, fully functional toilet made of solid 18-karat gold titled “America.”

The shimmering art piece, created by Italian-born artist Maurizio Cattelan, is estimated to have cost more than \$1 million to make.

The Guggenheim curator, Nancy Spector, pitched the golden toilet bowl to the Trumps in a Sept. 15 email — first reported by The Washington Post — after a White House curator asked if the presidential couple could borrow van Gogh’s pastoral “Landscape with Snow” from 1888.

The email contents were confirmed to the New York Daily News by a museum spokeswoman.

Spector wrote back that van Gogh’s painting was a no-go, but pointed out that Cattelan’s interactive “America” piece was available after concluding a yearlong exhibit in a public bathroom on the museum’s fifth floor. The toilet had been used by visitors but was available “should the President and First Lady have any interest in installing it in the White House,” Spector wrote in the email.

The White House did not respond to emailed questions from the Daily News, and it was not immediately clear if the Trumps ever took the Guggenheim up on its offer.

Cattelan could not be reached Thursday afternoon but told The Washington Post that his offer to the Trumps is “a very delicate subject.”

Trump plan offers citizenship pathway for 1.8M immigrants

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The White House has unveiled a proposal that provides a pathway to citizenship for 1.8 million young immigrants living in the country illegally, in exchange for new restrictions on legal immigration and \$25 billion in border security.

The plan, announced Thursday, was applauded by some in Congress but blasted by conservative activists as “amnesty” and slammed by a slew of Democrats, who accused President Donald Trump of holding “Dreamers” hostage to his hard-line immigration agenda.

Senior White House officials cast the plan as a centrist compromise that could win support from both parties and enough votes to pass the Senate. But it comes with concessions that many Democrats, and also conservative Republicans, especially in the House, may find impossible to swallow.

The plan would provide a pathway to citizenship for the roughly 690,000 younger immigrants protected from deporta-

tion by the Obama-era Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program — as well as hundreds of thousands of others who independent estimates say qualify but never applied.

Trump announced last year he was doing away with the program but gave Congress until March to come up with a legislative fix.

The plan would not allow parents of those immigrants to seek lawful status, the officials said. In exchange, Trump’s plan would dramatically overhaul the legal immigration system. Immigrants would only be allowed to sponsor their spouses and underage children to join them in the U.S., and not their parents, adult children or siblings. The officials said it would only end new applications for visas. Still, immigration activists said the move could cut legal immigration in half.

It would also end a visa lottery aimed at diversity, which drew Trump’s attention after the New York City truck attack last year, redirecting the allotment to bringing down the existing backlog in visa

applications.

The officials spoke on the condition of anonymity.

On Wednesday, Trump said he was open to a pathway to citizenship for the younger immigrants. It was a reversal for the president, who had previously said he was opposed to a pathway to citizenship for Dreamer immigrants.

Under the plan, recipients could have their legal status revoked due to criminal behavior or national security threats, the officials said, and eventual citizenship would require still-unspecified work and education requirements — and a finding that the immigrants are of “good moral character.”

The nonpartisan Migration Policy Institute said it believes the largest share of the White House’s 1.8 million people who’d be eligible for citizenship — 1.3 million — are people who currently meet all of DACA’s eligibility requirements. These include years in the U.S., their ages now and when they entered this country, and whether they have a high school or equivalent education.

Infrastructure plan ignores trust fund woes

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — When President Donald Trump unveils his plan to beef up the nation’s infrastructure plan next month, it will include a crater-sized hole.

The trust fund that pays for most federal highway and transit aid is forecast to go broke in about three years unless the government significantly scales back its transportation spending or comes up with more money. But Trump’s infrastructure plan is silent on the looming problem, an administration official familiar with the plan told The Associated Press. The official wasn’t authorized to speak publicly

about the plan and spoke on condition of anonymity.

Fulfilling a campaign promise, Trump’s plan proposes to generate \$1 trillion in infrastructure spending over 10 years. But the plan seeks only \$200 billion in federal dollars, relying instead on state and local governments and private investors to come up with most of the rest of the money.

The administration views the plan as a supplement to current infrastructure spending. The money would be distributed through new types of programs that are designed to generate greater state and local government and private-sector spending. Also, there’s no guarantee how much of the money will go

to transportation projects since the administration is broadly defining infrastructure as everything from building water treatment plants to expanding high-speed Internet access to rural areas.

The administration is open to working with Congress to address the trust fund later, although those conversations haven’t yet begun, the official said.

GOP leaders have been waiting to see what Trump will propose. There is wide, bipartisan support for continuing, and even increasing, transportation spending. But most lawmakers have been unwilling to back tax increases or spending cuts to fund it.

Oldest son of captive children was on college's honor roll

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — The oldest son of the California siblings who authorities say were tortured by their parents, chained to their beds and so malnourished their growth was stunted, excelled at his community college and was named to the honor roll for two semesters, school officials said Thursday.

The son, who is in his 20s, attended Mt. San Jacinto College for several years. His mother would bring him to school and wait outside his classes for him, prosecutors said.

He did not earn a degree but was on the president's honor roll in fall 2015 and spring 2016, college spokeswoman Karin Marriott told The Asso-

ciated Press.

A transcript obtained by ABC News showed he attended classes from 2014 until at least 2016 and sometimes earned 15 credits per semester. He earned A's in many classes, including algebra, guitar, public speaking, English fundamentals and freshman composition, according to the transcript.

He and his 12 siblings were rescued on Jan. 14 when their 17-year-old sister climbed out a window of their home about 60 miles southeast of Los Angeles and called 911. Authorities said they found the siblings in the family's filthy home in the city of Perris, three of them were shackled to beds.

Their parents, David and Louise Turpin, were arrested

and accused of abusing the siblings — ranging in age from 2 to 29. They have pleaded not guilty to torture and other charges.

The AP is not naming the siblings because of the severity of abuse allegations, which are still under investigation. The AP also has not been able to talk to the children or anyone who can speak on their behalf.

Joe Chermak, who attended a musical performance at the school in May 2016, said he remembered seeing the Turpin family in the audience. They were all wearing matching outfits — blue shirts and tan pants, he said.

"I noticed that one girl was skinny from her arm and pale," he told the Associated Press.

Casey Affleck won't be at Oscars

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — In an apparent consequence of the #MeToo movement, last year's best actor Oscar winner, Casey Affleck, will not be presenting at or attending the 90th Academy Awards.

Affleck's publicist said Thursday that the actor would not be at the ceremony on March 4 where, traditionally, he would have been expected to present the award for best actress, as the reigning best actor winner. A film academy spokesperson said they "appreciate the decision to keep the ... great work of this year."

The "Manchester by the Sea" actor faced sexual harassment allegations in 2010 in two public civil suits during the production of the mockumentary "I'm Still Here." The suits were settled for undisclosed sums, and Affleck said the terms of the settlement prevent him from discussing the matter.

While the lawsuits were covered in the press at the time, the allegations gained attention in 2016 following the ruination of "Birth of a Nation" director and star Nate Parker's award chances after past rape allegations surfaced against him. Many wondered if there was a racially related double standard that would allow Affleck, despite past allegations, to go on to win the best actor award at the Oscars. Actress Brie Larson famously did not clap when presenting Affleck with the award at the 2017 ceremony.

When the #MeToo movement exploded in October and the film academy revoked Harvey Weinstein's membership, the spotlight turned back to Affleck and other academy members who have been accused of misconduct.

Classes resume after school shooting

Associated Press

BENTON, Ky. — Students returned Friday to the rural Kentucky high school where a classmate went on a shooting rampage, killing two teenagers and injuring multiple others.

The first school day at Marshall County High School since the attack Tuesday began with an assembly in the gymnasium.

The school reopened after Kentucky State Police said they had finished processing the scene at the school.

The 15-year-old boy accused of gunning down classmates has been ordered held on murder and assault charges as the shaken community where it happened strained to cope with the devastation.

On Thursday, a juvenile court judge found probable cause to detain the teen as authorities gather evidence to support trying him as an adult, Assistant Marshall County Attorney Jason Darnall said. Authorities are hoping to discover why he allegedly turned a handgun on a crowd of students as they waited for the morning bell Tuesday.

As the legal process began for the suspect, others in the small, rural community sought to overcome the shock of Tuesday's shooting that left two people dead and 21 injured with a show of solidarity. Hundreds gathered amid flickering candles after nightfall Thursday to honor the victims.

Nearly 300 people thronged a park as firefighters raised a large American flag in the crisp night air. Many teens, cupping candles in their palms, hugged and looked on somberly. One girl's candle

shook in her hands as she sobbed, and others cried when another girl sang "Amazing Grace."

Earlier, Vicki Jo Reed painted a "Marshall Strong" sign on a storefront, and reflected on her grandson's close call.

"This is one of the hardest things for me to ever have to paint," she said. "Had a grandson that was in the commons area through the whole thing, and he, like all the other kids, is not handling it very good."

The mother of Bailey Nicole Holt, who died at the scene, said she got a call from her daughter's phone but couldn't hear her.

"She called me, and all I could hear was voices and chaos in the background, and she couldn't say anything," Secret Holt told WKRN-TV in Nashville.

Thursday's closed-door hearing for the suspect began a journey through the criminal justice system that is slightly more complicated than it would be if the suspect were an adult charged with the same crimes. After an initial series of hearings in juvenile court, the case will be presented to a grand jury that next meets on Feb. 13.

If the grand jury returns an indictment, the case will move to circuit court and the prosecution would proceed like an ordinary criminal trial. But the boy will have some protections: The law requires he remain at a juvenile jail, not in the general population of a county facility. And if he's found guilty at trial, he will not face the state's most severe sentences.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Lawyer: Hotel valet gave Ferrari to wrong man

FL ST. PETERSBURG — The owner of a \$300,000 Ferrari is suing Marriott International, saying a hotel valet gave his keys to a young man who was trying to impress a woman.

The Tampa Bay Times reported that attorney James “Skip” Fowler, 73, parked his yellow 458 Italia Spider outside the Vinoy Renaissance Resort & Golf Club on July 27 while attending a lawyers convention in St. Petersburg.

Levi Miles, then 28, said he told the woman it was his and demanded the keys, telling the valet that the ticket was in the car, and he’d bring it back. The two sat in the car for “quite a while,” according to a St. Petersburg police report.

Miles drove off with Chloe Rimmer in the passenger seat until an officer stopped him for driving without taillights. The police report noted that the driver had “difficulty” handling the car, that cocaine was found on the center console, and that Rimmer had marijuana in her purse.

Fowler is accusing the hotel and valet, 717 Parking Enterprises, of negligence.

Police: Worker beans supervisor with burrito

SC SPARTANBURG — Police said a fast-food worker upset at having to work a morning shift has given new meaning to a burrito to go, slinging a hot one at his Taco Bell supervisor.

Police in South Carolina said officers were called to the Spartanburg eatery Monday, where a supervisor reported telling the worker to “stop being a crybaby” — just before being beaned with the food-filled projectile.

According to the police report, the supervisor had turned away when melted cheese from the airborne burrito splattered her left arm, side and leg. Goopy stuff also “made a mess of the entire kitchen,” police said.

Police said they were told the worker took off his headset, broke it on his knee and “stormed out.”

No arrests have been made.

DMV unveils license plate for old team

CT HARTFORD — The Hartford Whalers left Connecticut 20 years ago, but their logo will appear on vehicles gliding on the state’s highways.

The Department of Motor Vehicles on Tuesday unveiled a new commemorative license plate that bears the former professional hockey team’s green-and-blue insignia. Forty-five dollars from the sale of each plate will benefit a new infusion and dialysis center at the Connecticut Children’s Medical Center in Hartford.

Rep. Kurt Vail, a Republican who worked to pass legislation last year creating the plate, said the bipartisan support for the license plate concept indicates how much enthusiasm remains for the team, which became the Carolina Hurricanes in 1997. Vail credited the work of the team’s booster club, which proposed the idea about two-and-a-half years ago.

Woman gets a marching band for 100th birthday

OH YOUNGSTOWN — An Ohio woman kid-dingly told people she wanted a marching band for her 100th birthday.

Margaret LoCicero got exactly that Tuesday at the assisted living facility where she lives near Youngstown in

northeast Ohio.

Friends, family and staff had gathered to celebrate LoCicero’s centennial when a stranger introduced himself. Tom Ruggieri told her they had something in common. She once worked in the Boardman schools where he’s employed — as band director.

Dozens of Boardman High School band members then filled a hallway with music and arrived at the party to play “Happy Birthday” and a few other songs for LoCicero. She described the surprise as “wonderful.”

Skating teen suspected of groping women

CA IRVINE — Authorities said police arrested a Southern California high school student on suspicion of groping female joggers while riding a skateboard and pushing one woman to the ground during an assault.

Officials in Orange County said Wednesday that Keenan Al-Sayed Ahmad, 18, was taken into custody Jan. 19 after a woman reported a skateboarder grabbed her buttocks while she jogged in Irvine.

Police said Ahmad could face charges including felony assault with intent to commit rape and sexual battery.

According to police, in one alleged attack a jogger was shoved to the ground by a man on a skateboard. The woman said he covered her mouth with his hand and then groped her before fleeing.

Stripper poles, raptor go up for auction

FL MIAMI — Looking for stripper poles, a coffin with cherry red lining and a velociraptor? You might want to check out the upcoming auction of gaudy items that decorated

two mansions once owned by a former developer in South Florida.

The Miami Herald reported the former estate of Thomas Kramer will be sold in one package to the highest bidder on Feb. 14.

The auction followed the seizure of Kramer’s Star Island mansions following a judgment his former in-laws obtained against him. Kramer’s extravagant South Beach lifestyle was fueled by the millions given him by father-in-law Siegfried Otto, a now-deceased German businessman.

Later, a battle ensued over whether it was a gift or loan. Kramer lost the case, his home and possessions. Kramer, now living in Europe, is only allowed to keep his personal photos.

Police: Suspect took a cab to rob a bank

WV CHARLES TOWN — Police in West Virginia said a suspected bank robber was captured after taking a cab to the heist.

Media outlets reported Ryan Michael Stepanian, 25, was arrested in Monday’s robbery of a Charles Town bank and another bank heist Friday in nearby Ranson.

Cab driver George Lyon said he took Stepanian from an apartment complex to the Charles Town bank for what Stepanian said was a routine matter. Afterward Lyon dropped him off at a park.

Lyon said he then recognized Stepanian’s photo on social media from the earlier robbery and notified police. Stepanian was later arrested. Charles Town police said in a news release he had an undisclosed amount of cash and a bank-robbery note.

Stepanian was being held on two counts of bank robbery.

From wire reports

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STARS AND STRIPES®

Australian Open

Federer wins semifinal when Chung quits

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — It took just over an hour for Roger Federer to fix one anomalous statistic in his extraordinary career.

Defending champion Federer, who was leading Hyeon Chung 6-1, 5-2 when the Korean retired in the second set of their Australian Open semifinal on Friday night, is within one win of a 20th Grand Slam singles title.

Going into the match against Chung, Federer had a below-par semifinals record at Melbourne Park, only six wins out of 13.

After 1 hour and 2 minutes under the closed roof on Rod Laver Arena, he's on par, 7-7 (but still well below his marks at the other majors: 11-1 at Wimbledon, 7-3 at the U.S. Open, and 5-2 at Roland Garros).

It wasn't how Federer expected to advance.

"You do take the faster matches whenever you can because there's enough wear and tear on the body," he said. "The thought process is not like 'What would have been better?'"

"That's why this one feels bittersweet. I'm incredibly happy to be in the finals, but not like this."

Chung tried everything to disguise the pain of the raw patches on his left foot which, his agent explained, were "blisters under blisters under blisters."

Federer knows the feeling. He also sensed something wrong with Chung's movement.

"I've played with blisters in the past a lot, and it hurts a lot. And at one point, it's just too much and you can't take it anymore — you can't go on," he said. "He's played such a wonderful tournament, so credit to him for playing so hard again today."

Federer's conversion rate

for finals in Australia is much better — the only time he lost a championship match was in 2009 against Rafael Nadal.

So he's well poised for Sunday's match against No. 6-seeded Marin Cilic. Cilic has had an extra day of rest but Federer was hardly taxed on Friday night, and occupied for only an hour.

The final will be Federer's record seventh at the Australian Open and 30th at a Grand Slam.

Cilic was hampered by blisters when he lost to Federer in last year's Wimbledon final, but he has made a relatively pain-free run through the other half of the draw, including a quarterfinal win over an injured Nadal.

Even if Chung had been fit, he was trying to reach his first ATP final against a player who has won 95 titles, 19 of them Grand Slams.

Chung had an incredible run at Melbourne Park, becoming

the first Korean to reach a semifinal at a tennis major and attracting plenty of attention for beating No. 4-seeded Alexander Zverev in the third round and six-time Australian Open champion Novak Djokovic in the fourth.

But it took a toll. He needed a pain-killing injection before the match, and a medical timeout to re-tape his left foot after going down a break in the second set. He played only two more games before he quit.

"I did right thing. If I play bad on the court, it's not good for the fans and audience as well," he said. "I really hurt. I can't walk no more."

With the victory, 36-year-old Federer ensured one of the so-called Big Four — with Nadal, Djokovic, Andy Murray — has featured in the final since 2005. Stan Wawrinka's win over Nadal in 2014 was the only final since 2008 that didn't feature two of the Big Four.

Senior Bowl

UTSA defensive end Davenport drawing NFL interest

Associated Press

MOBILE, Ala. — Marcus Davenport didn't arrive at UTSA as a big-time prospect, or even a particularly big one.

Then a slender 198-pound defensive end who had played some wide receiver in high school, Davenport has since gained 60 pounds and considerable interest from NFL teams.

The 6-foot-6, 259-pounder is one of the top NFL prospects at the Senior Bowl this week, rated as a potential first-rounder and maybe even a Top 10 pick.

"It wasn't so long ago that this wasn't even a thought or on my radar," Davenport said.

He has definitely been on NFL teams' radar. Davenport, who says he first realized NFL scouts were interested in him late in his junior season, was

rated as the 10th-best prospect for the April draft by NFL.com's Daniel Jeremiah.

The Conference USA defensive player of the year made his biggest weight gain before his senior season with a simple strategy: "See food, eat food."

As a player, his biggest strength has been see quarterback, get quarterback.

Davenport set school records with 17.5 tackles for loss and 8.5 sacks as a senior. He also returned a fumble for a touchdown and forced three.

But outside of NFL circles and C-USA, Davenport wasn't a big name.

"He's probably the player in this game that is not well known but by the time we get to Saturday, he's going to be the talk of the game, perhaps,"

Senior Bowl executive director Phil Savage predicted.

Davenport seems bemused by some of the attention, or at least the questions asked by reporters and NFL team officials alike.

He assures coaches and scouts that he didn't end up at his hometown team in San Antonio, Texas, because of problems with his grades or off-the-field issues.

The explanation, he assures them, is simply that it was his last official visit and he liked the people.

"I always find it funny, like what would you guys expect? What answer would you guess?" Davenport said.

He also didn't get a wealth of experience against Power 5 competition before this week.

Davenport did have 11 tackles, a sack and a fumble recovery against Texas A&M as a junior.

Does he think film from those games can help his status with NFL teams?

"I've heard people say that it does but honestly I don't care," Davenport said. "You can put on almost all my film and I go hard. There's not really a dropoff in production."

His situation has drawn some comparisons to 2013 Senior Bowl defensive end Ziggy Ansah, then a raw talent who was drafted fifth overall by the Detroit Lions.

Davenport said his best attribute is his work ethic and he did put it on display last fall. During the season, he loaded up with 18 credit hours in order to graduate.

UConn under investigation by NCAA

Associated Press

STORRS, Conn. — The University of Connecticut is the target of an NCAA investigation into its men's basketball program.

University President Susan Herbst said in a statement Friday the school will cooperate in a "thorough and transparent manner reflective of the model athletic and academic institution we continually strive to be."

The university did not specify the allegations and said it

would have no further comment, but would "address and respond appropriately as the inquiry moves forward."

Hearst Connecticut Media, which first reported the investigation, cited unidentified sources saying the inquiry was related to recruiting.

The school said it had begun an internal investigation after learning of allegations in the fall. It has retained a law firm — Lightfoot, Franklin and White — that specializes in athletics compliance and will assist in responding to NCAA

questions.

This is not the first time UConn has been under NCAA scrutiny.

Then-coach Jim Calhoun was forced to sit out three games during the 2011-12 basketball season and the school was put on three years of probation after the NCAA found violations dating to 2008. Those included improper phone calls, text messages and inducements provided by an agent who was a former team manager.

The school did not receive a postseason ban, but then failed

to meet NCAA academic qualifications for the 2013 NCAA Tournament. The Huskies won their fourth NCAA championship the next season.

Coach Kevin Ollie is now in his sixth season as coach and in the second year of a five-year, \$17.9 million contract that can be voided for "just cause," including NCAA violations.

Neither Ollie nor anyone else in the program mentioned the investigation following UConn's 63-52 win over SMU on Thursday night. The Huskies are 11-9 this season.

College basketball roundup

No. 3 Purdue extends its winning streak to 16 games

Associated Press

WEST LAFAYETTE, Ind. — Purdue's Isaac Haas stood his ground Thursday night.

If he saw one defender in the post, the 7-foot-2 center went straight to the rim. If he was double-teamed, he let teammates make the plays. The strategy worked perfectly, again.

Vincent Edwards scored a career-high 30 points, Haas added 24 and No. 3 Purdue used one late charge to finally get past No. 25 Michigan 92-88 for a school record-tying 16th consecutive win.

"I knew going into the game that Michigan wasn't going to try to double that much because we have too many good shooters and I figured they'd take their chances going one-on-one in the paint," Haas said after celebrating the milestone with Edwards near midcourt. "I capitalized on it a lot today."

Meanwhile, Purdue (20-2, 9-0 Big Ten) just keeps stacking its résumé.

For the first time in 30 years and the fourth time overall, the Boilermakers have won 16 in a row.

The defending Big Ten champs extended their home-court winning streak to 20 and

their winning streak over conference foes to 11. They are 9-0 in league play for the first time in the NCAA Tournament era and completed their first regular-season sweep of the Wolverines (17-6, 6-4) in 10 years.

No. 11 Arizona 80, Colorado 71: Allonzo Trier scored 23 points, Deandre Ayton added 20 and the host Wildcats avenged their lone loss of the Pac-12 season.

The 7-foot-1 Ayton, expected to be at or near the top of the NBA Draft this year, was 12-for-12 at the foul line as the Buffaloes tried to get physical with the big rookie, without much success.

Dusan Ristic added 15 points on 7-for-8 shooting for the Wildcats (17-4, 7-1 Pac-12). George King scored 22 points for Colorado (12-9, 4-5).

Penn State 82, No. 13 Ohio State 79: Tony Carr hit a three-pointer at the buzzer to give the visiting Nittany Lions an upset victory and the Buckeyes their first Big Ten loss.

Carr had 28 points and was 4-for-5 from three-point range for the Nittany Lions (14-8, 4-5 Big Ten). They were 11-for-14 from beyond the arc in beating a Top 25 team for the first time this season.

Keita Bates-Diop led Ohio

State (18-5, 9-1) with 25 points. He had three three-pointers in the last 2:07, tying it with the last with 5 seconds left.

No. 15 Gonzaga 95, Portland 79: Killian Tillie had 27 points and seven rebounds, and the visiting Bulldogs cruised to a victory over the Pilots.

Corey Kispert added a season-high 23 points and 10 rebounds for Gonzaga (18-4, 8-1 West Coast Conference), which won its 20th straight conference road game.

It was Gonzaga's 10th straight win over Portland (8-14, 2-7). The Bulldogs are 27-2 against the Pilots under coach Mark Few.

Freshman Marcus Shaver Jr. had 16 points for Portland (8-14, 2-7), which trailed by as many as 28 points in the second half.

No. 16 Saint Mary's 75, BYU 62: Jock Landale had 32 points and 14 rebounds and the host Gaels pulled away in the second half to beat BYU, extending their winning streak to 15.

The 15-game winning streak matches the longest in Saint Mary's history. The Gaels also won 15 straight in 2008-09.

Emmett Naar added 13 points and 12 assists and Evan Fitzner made a key three-pointer late to

help the Gaels (20-2, 9-0 West Coast Conference) hold on for their fifth consecutive win over the Cougars (17-5, 6-3).

No. 17 Wichita State 81, Central Florida 62: Shaquille Morris scored 19 points to lead the host Shockers.

Morris, demoted from his starting spot, was 8-for-10 from the floor in 21 minutes. Darral Willis had 12 points and nine rebounds for Wichita State (16-4, 6-2 American Athletic Conference).

Dayon Griffin scored 15 points for Central Florida (13-7, 4-4).

Utah 80, No. 21 Arizona State 77 (OT): Sedrick Barefield scored 17 points and hit the tying three-pointer with 1.8 seconds left in regulation, helping the visiting Utes knock off the Sun Devils in overtime.

Utah (13-7, 5-4 Pac-12) led 79-77 late in overtime and had a chance to stretch it, but David Collette missed two free throws with 20.9 seconds left.

Arizona State (15-5, 3-5) missed two shots on the next possession and Barefield hit 1 of 2 free throws. The Sun Devils' final shot, a running three-pointer by Tra Holder at the buzzer, was nowhere close.

Holder led Arizona State with 23 points.

Roundup

Westbrook, Thunder top Wiz

Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY — Russell Westbrook scored a season-high 46 points, and the Oklahoma City Thunder beat the Washington Wizards 121-112 on Thursday night for their sixth straight victory.

Westbrook made 19 of 29 field goals in one of his most efficient shooting performances of the season. Paul George scored 18 points and Steven Adams added 12 points and 10 rebounds for Oklahoma City, which has won 20 of 28 after an 8-12 start. The Thunder shot 52 percent from the field.

Bradley Beal scored 41 points and Markieff Morris added 20 for the Wizards, who committed 23 turnovers.

Warriors 126, Timberwolves 113: Kevin Durant had 28 points, 11 assists and

10 rebounds, and Golden State made a season-high 21 three-pointers in a victory over visiting Minnesota.

Stephen Curry and Klay Thompson each added 25 points for the Warriors, who matched their previous season high of 18 three-pointers by the end of the third quarter. They made 57 percent from behind the arc in the game, with Thompson hitting seven, Durant adding six and Curry connecting on five.

Durant hit two threes and Curry added a third in a 67-second span late in the third quarter, during which the Warriors (39-10) went 8-for-11 on three-pointers, leading Minnesota coach Tom Thibodeau to throw up his arms in frustration.

Karl-Anthony Towns led Minnesota with 31 points and 11 rebounds. Jamal Crawford

added 21 points and Jeff Teague had 17 points and seven assists for Minnesota.

Kings 89, Heat 88: De'Aaron Fox's rebound dunk with 3 seconds left capped a huge comeback by Sacramento, which rallied from a 12-point, fourth-quarter deficit to beat host Miami.

The Kings outscored the Heat 17-4 in the final 5:46, winning at Miami for the first time since 2001.

Nuggets 130, Knicks 118: Gary Harris scored 23 points, Trey Lyles had 21 and Denver beat visiting New York.

Jamal Murray and Nikola Jokic added 18 points apiece for the Nuggets, who defeated the Knicks for the 10th time in a row in Denver. New York hasn't won in the Mile High City since 2006.

James reunites with Kyrie in All-Star draft

NEW YORK — LeBron James got Kevin Durant and reunited with Kyrie Irving in the NBA's first All-Star draft.

Stephen Curry picked James Harden and Giannis Antetokounmpo, the NBA's top two scorers, on Thursday.

James and Curry will be the captains Feb. 18 in Los Angeles for the first NBA All-Star Game that doesn't use the Eastern Conference vs. Western Conference format.

James took Oklahoma City's Russell Westbrook, and the New Orleans duo of Anthony Davis and DeMarcus Cousins. His other reserves are Cleveland teammate Kevin Love, Washington guards John Wall and Bradley Beal, LaMarcus Aldridge of San Antonio, Indiana's Victor Oladipo and Kristaps Porzingis of New York.

After taking starters Joel Embiid of Philadelphia and DeMar DeRozan of Toronto, Curry rounded out his roster with Warriors teammates Klay Thompson and Draymond Green, Minnesota's Jimmy Butler and Karl-Anthony Towns, Toronto's Kyle Lowry, Portland's Damian Lillard, and Boston's Al Horford.

— Associated Press

NHL roundup

Ovechkin's 30th goal helps Caps end 3-game skid

Associated Press

SUNRISE, Fla. — Alex Ovechkin scored his 30th goal of the season and got his 500th career assist to help the Washington Capitals snap a three-game skid with a 4-2 win over the Florida Panthers on Thursday night.

Ovechkin is the sixth player in NHL history with at least 30 goals in 13 or more consecutive seasons at any point in his career.

Brett Connolly, John Carlson and Nicklas Backstrom also scored for the Capitals. Braden Holtby stopped 32 shots.

Denis Malgin scored both goals for Florida, which has lost three straight. Harri Sateri made 42 saves in his second NHL start.

The Panthers killed off a 5-on-3 for a full two minutes early in the third period, with Sateri blocking seven shots.

Lightning 5, Flyers 1: Brayden Point, Yanni Gourde and Ryan Callahan each scored in the second period to lead their team past Philadelphia, helping visiting Tampa Bay head into the All-Star break with the best record in the NHL.

Penguins 6, Wild 3: Evgeni Malkin scored two power-play goals and Sidney Crosby had three assists to reach another career milestone as host Pittsburgh topped Minnesota.

Sabres 4, Canucks 0: Robin Lehner made 30 saves for his second straight shutout and visiting Buffalo blanked Vancouver.

Oilers 4, Flames 3 (SO): Connor McDavid scored in the third round of the shootout to help host Edmonton salvage a win over Calgary.

Blackhawks 5, Red Wings 1: Alex DeBrincat had his second hat trick of an impressive rookie season and visiting Chicago chased goalie Jimmy Howard in the first period on its way to a victory over Detroit.

Predators 3, Devils 0: All-Star defenseman P.K. Subban scored in his third straight game and Pekka Rinne made 23 saves for his fourth shutout in leading visiting Nashville past slumping New Jersey.

Bruins 3, Senators 2: Jake DeBrusk scored with 8:41 left to lift visiting Boston over Ottawa for its fifth straight win.

Islanders 2, Golden Knights 1: Ross

Johnston scored the first goal of his NHL career, helping visiting New York defeat Vegas.

Hurricanes 6, Canadiens 5: Teuvo Teravainen scored twice and added an assist as visiting Carolina beat Montreal.

Blues 3, Avalanche 1: Brayden Schenn scored in his fourth straight game, Paul Stastny also had a goal and host St. Louis beat Colorado.

Maple Leafs 4, Stars 1: Curtis McElhinney made 39 saves while playing for the first time in more than a month, helping visiting Toronto beat Dallas.

Ducks 4, Jets 3 (SO): Adam Henrique scored a goal, added an assist and got the shootout winner as host Anaheim ended Winnipeg's three-game winning streak.

Blue Jackets 2, Coyotes 1: Cam Atkinson scored with 3:03 left to give visiting Columbus a victory over Arizona.

Rangers 6, Sharks 5: Ryan McDonagh scored his first two goals of the season and Brady Skjei added a short-handed tally that helped visiting New York salvage the final game of a four-game road trip by beating San Jose.