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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Pakistan: Taliban ready to reduce violence

The Washington Post

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan — American and Taliban negotiators appear to be making progress in Qatar, where the two sides are meeting to see about restarting peace negotiations, Pakistan's foreign minister said Thursday.

Shah Mahmood Qureshi said "a good development" occurred Thursday and that the "Taliban have showed their readiness to accept the demand for reduction in violence." Speaking in a video statement released by the Foreign Ministry, Qureshi added, "I believe that this is a step forward towards the peace agreement."

Separately, The Associated Press reported that Taliban officials said the group gave the U.S. envoy in the talks "a document outlining their offer for a temporary cease-fire in Afghanistan that would last between seven and 10 days."

The U.S. demand for a reduction in violence had stalled the resumption of formal peace talks for months. Both sides had appeared just days away from signing a peace deal in September before the nearly year-long diplomatic effort was called off by President Donald Trump in a surprise tweet.

Trump said he made the decision following a Taliban attack that killed a U.S. service member.

Since then, the U.S. special representative for Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, has been looking for a way to restart negotiations, first by facilitating a prisoner exchange and now by demanding a reduction in violence.

Talks restarted in November after a surprise Trump visit to Afghanistan on Thanksgiving, but they were "paused" in December following a brazen Taliban attack on a highly fortified U.S. base.

Another Taliban attack this month claimed the lives of two U.S. service members when their vehicle hit a roadside bomb. A Taliban spokesman, Zabiullah Mujahid, touted the attack on Twitter, saying the blast shredded the vehicle and killed the "invaders."

The office of Afghanistan's president has demanded that the Taliban agree to a cease-fire and described the announced "reduction in violence" as inadequate, according to presidential spokesman Sediq Sediqqi.

Former intelligence chief Amrullah Saleh, a close ally of Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, criticized the terminology "reduction in violence" as too vague. "We don't have [reduction in violence] in the dictionary of war & peace," he said in a Twitter post Thursday.

"Here is how the Talibs interpret it," he wrote. "We kill some people instead of more people. We do one urban bomb-

ing per week instead of several.' CEASEFIRE exists in all cultures. STOP KILLING HUMANS. Simple."

A peace agreement between the U.S. and the Taliban would pave the way for the withdrawal of thousands of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, a key campaign promise that Trump wants to keep. But drawing down the troops also will increase pressure on Afghan government forces, who continue to struggle to carry out operations without close U.S. support.

The U.S. military command in Kabul has already begun reducing troops despite the stalled peace efforts. In October, Gen. Austin "Scott" Miller, commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, said the number of troops in the country had been reduced by 2,000, calling the move "part of our optimization." His spokesman said it was not part of any drawdown.

US military resumes operations against ISIS militants

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. military is resuming operations against Islamic State militants in Iraq and is working to soon restart training Iraqi forces, U.S. officials said Wednesday, despite deep divisions over the American drone strike that killed a senior Iranian commander in Baghdad and the resulting missile attacks by Iran on Iraqi bases.

One official said some joint operations between U.S. and Iraqi forces have already begun, but there are not yet as many as before. The official said details are being worked out to restore the training of Iraqi forces, but that could happen relatively soon.

Relations with Iraq were fractured after the U.S. launched a drone strike near Baghdad's international airport on Jan. 3 that killed Iranian Maj. Gen. Qassem Solei-

mani. The Parliament later voted to expel U.S. forces from the country and Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi asked Washington to work out a road map for troop withdrawal. The U.S. flatly rejected that request and has not moved to pull out the more than 5,000 troops.

Officials spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss decisions not yet made public.

One official said military leaders have discussed the resumption of operations with the Iraqis, but it's not clear who was involved in those talks or whether Iraqi government leaders are publicly endorsing the move.

Iraqi leaders were angry about the American drone strike and the retaliatory attacks by Iran. Iranian missiles struck al Asad Air Base last week and hit near another base, but warnings sounded and no one was killed or injured.

Iraq officials, however, called the U.S.

strike that killed Soleimani an unacceptable breach of Iraqi sovereignty. That strike also killed Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the deputy commander of Iran-backed militias known as the Popular Mobilization Forces. And thousands of anti-government protesters turned out in Baghdad and southern Iraq, with many calling for the U.S. and Iran to leave their country.

U.S. officials, including Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, dismissed the calls for American troops to leave, saying the forces are critical to the fight against ISIS.

"We are happy to continue the conversation with the Iraqis about what the right structure is," Pompeo said during a White House appearance last week.

U.S. officials have said they believe Iraq is also interested in resuming the training, which has been going on since 2015 after ISIS began taking control of large swaths of Iraq and Syria.

Impeachment proceedings begin in Senate

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Senate opened the impeachment trial of President Donald Trump on Thursday, with House Democrats reading the formal charges in the chamber ahead of the swearing in of all 100 senators as jurors for only the third trial to remove a president in U.S. history.

"Hear ye, hear ye, hear ye!" said the Senate's sergeant at arms, calling the proceedings to order.

Seven lawmakers prosecuting the charges, led by Rep. Adam Schiff of the Intelligence Committee and Rep. Jerrold Nadler of the Judiciary Committee, made the solemn walk across the Capitol for a second day.

Senators filled the chamber, sitting silently at their seats

under strict trial rules that prohibit talking or cellphones, as the ceremonial protocol shifted the proceedings out of Speaker Nancy Pelosi's Democratic-run House to the Republican-majority Senate.

"With the permission of the Senate, I will now read the articles of impeachment," said Schiff, standing at a lectern in the well of the chamber, a space usually reserved for senators.

"House Resolution 755 Impeaching Donald John Trump, president of the United States, for high crimes and misdemeanors," he began, reading the nine pages.

Later in the afternoon, Chief Justice John Roberts was to administer the jurors' oath to senators who swear to deliver "impartial justice."

The events, unfolding dur-

ing an election year as Trump seeks another term, will be a test not only of his presidency but also of the nation's three branches of power and its system of checks and balances.

Several senators are running for the Democratic Party's nomination to challenge Trump in November.

The president calls the impeachment a "hoax," even as new information emerges about his actions toward Ukraine that led to the charges against him.

Pelosi said new allegations from an indicted associate of Trump lawyer Rudy Giuliani, Lev Parnas, only reinforces the need for the Senate to consider further testimony about the president's actions toward Ukraine.

Pelosi noted that typically a special prosecutor would in-

vestigate but she doubted that would happen.

"This is an example of all of the president's henchmen," Pelosi said, "and I hope that the senators do not become part of the president's henchmen."

Trump faces a charge that he abused his presidential power by pressuring Ukraine to investigate Democratic rival Joe Biden, using military aid to the country as leverage. Trump was also charged with obstructing Congress' ensuing probe.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell opened the chamber Thursday decrying Pelosi's decision to hand out "souvenir pens" after she signed the resolution to transmit the charges the day before.

Opening arguments are to begin Tuesday after the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday.

Watchdog: Trump, White House violated law in freezing aid to Ukraine

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The White House violated federal law in withholding security assistance to Ukraine, an action at the center of President Donald Trump's impeachment, a federal watchdog agency said Thursday.

The Government Accountability Office said in a report that the Office of Management and Budget violated the law in holding up the aid, saying "the President is not vested with the power to ignore or amend any such duly enacted law."

The independent agency said OMB violated the Impoundment Control Act in delaying the security assistance Congress authorized for Ukraine for "policy reasons," rather than technical budgetary needs.

"Faithful execution of the law

does not permit the President to substitute his own policy priorities for those that Congress has enacted into law," wrote the agency's general counsel, Thomas Armstrong, in the report.

"Congress makes funding decisions, and the Trump Administration's illegal impoundment of these vital national security funds was a brazen assault on the checks and balances inherent to our democracy," said House Appropriations Committee Chairwoman Nita Lowey, D-N.Y.

"We disagree with GAO's opinion. OMB uses its apportionment authority to ensure taxpayer dollars are properly spent consistent with the President's priorities and with the law," said OMB spokeswoman Rachel Semmel.

Giuliani associate: Trump knew of Ukraine pressure

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A close associate of President Donald Trump's personal lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, is claiming that Trump was directly involved in the effort to pressure Ukraine to investigate Democratic rival Joe Biden.

Lev Parnas says he delivered an ultimatum in May, at Giuliani's behest, to the incoming president of Ukraine that no senior U.S. officials would attend his inauguration and vital American security aid would be withheld if an investigation into Biden wasn't announced.

He said Trump was aware of Giuliani's efforts to secure an investigation and the president was briefed regularly.

"President Trump knew exactly what was going on," said Parnas, a Soviet-born Florida businessman facing a raft of criminal charges related to campaign finance violations.

"He was aware of all my movements. I wouldn't do anything without the consent of Rudy Giuliani or the President."

Parnas made several potentially explosive claims in a televised interview on Wednesday night with MSNBC's Rachel Maddow. The day after Parnas said he delivered the message, the State Department announced that Vice President Mike Pence would no longer be attending the inauguration of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

A House committee chairman said Wednesday his panel will investigate what he says are "profoundly alarming" text messages among the newly disclosed materials that have raised questions about the possible surveillance of former Ambassador to Ukraine Marie Yovanovitch before she was ousted by the Trump administration last spring.

Cadet sought donations for porn star date

Associated Press

A West Point cadet briefly tried to raise money online to cover travel and lodging costs for an adult film star to be his date for a formal banquet at the storied academy.

The GoFundMe page was offline Wednesday, but the military news website Task & Purpose said the page titled “Help Me Bring Diamond Foxxx To YWW” was launched this past weekend and had listed \$370 in donations. Foxxx is a veteran adult movie actress and “YWW” refers to the upcoming Yearling Winter Weekend. West Point sophomores

are called yearlings.

The cadet wrote that he had no money and asked: “Please help a young boy’s dream come true.”

The U.S. Military Academy said Wednesday the cadet had removed the page from the site.

“Federal law prohibits members of the military from using their official positions for personal gain,” the academy said in a prepared statement. “This prohibition extends to using or appearing to use one’s military status to solicit gifts of money.”

Foxxx, replying to questions from The Associated Press on her Instagram account, said

the cadet was “very polite and respectful” and that she was “honored” by the invitation as someone from a military family. She had told him she would attend if he covered the bill for her hotel and a flight from Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

She would not identify the cadet, nor did West Point.

“My only concern is that he doesn’t get in trouble,” she wrote.

There was no additional comment from West Point, which has been stressing a culture of dignity and respect as the military tackles the persistent problems of sexual assault and harassment.

It was not clear if the cadet, who used a pseudonym on the GoFundMe page, will face any discipline.

Cadets have attracted critical attention on the web and social media for their behavior several times in recent years.

Last month, some West Point cadets and U.S. Naval Academy midshipmen were scrutinized for flashing what looked like a sideways OK finger gesture during a live television broadcast of the Army-Navy football game. Military investigators concluded the gestures were part of a game and not a “white power” sign, as some people suggested online.

Navy review backs Nevada bombing range expansion

Associated Press

RENO, Nev. — The U.S. Navy has concluded no significant environmental harm would come from its proposed tripling of the size of a Nevada bombing training range, a massive expansion opposed by neighboring tribes, conservationists and at least one Democratic presidential candidate.

Adding more than 1,000 square miles to the range at Naval Air Station Fallon 65 miles east of Reno is critical to meeting combat training needs for modern aircraft and weapons systems that have outgrown training capabilities over the past two decades, the Navy says.

Critics say that in addition to adversely impacting fish and wildlife, the expansion would restrict access to public land for hunters, ATV riders and back-country explorers, including at a national wildlife refuge.

The expanded range would cover an area half the size of the state of Delaware.

The Navy’s final environmental impact statement issued Friday says the preferred alternative would have no sig-

nificant impacts on cultural or biological resources, including only “minimal” impacts on the imperiled greater sage grouse.

However, it acknowledged the Nevada Department of Wildlife’s concerns about potential impacts of increased low-level overflights on grouse, so it’s proposing to fund a study by the department to monitor the bird’s mating behavior during flights.

The Navy scheduled an informational meeting on the plans Jan. 28 at the Fallon Convention Center. A formal record of decision is expected later this year.

“Expanding the (range) for the first time in two generations is absolutely essential to our national security, enabling our country’s sailors and Marines to prepare for today’s threats,” said Lucien Niemeyer, the Navy’s acting secretary of energy, installations and environment.

Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., who has campaigned for president multiple times in Nevada, said the Navy has failed to meaningfully consult with the Fallon Paiute-Shoshone Tribe about expansion concerns.

Air Force general Cooley relieved of command

By STEVE BEYNON

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Maj. Gen. William Cooley, the two-star commander of the Air Force Research Lab at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio, was relieved of command Wednesday over allegations of misconduct.

Gen. Arnold W. Bunch Jr., who leads Air Force Materiel Command, also based at Wright-Patterson, said he fired Cooley due to “a loss of confidence in his ability to lead, related to alleged misconduct.” He also said “new leadership” was necessary to ensure “good order and discipline.”

“The Air Force takes any misconduct allegation seriously,” Bunch said in a prepared statement. “I expect our leadership to uphold the highest standards and live up to the Air Force’s core values.”

Derek Kaufman, an Air Force spokesman, declined to characterize the nature of the allegations against Cooley, but he said the Air Force Office of Special Investigations was conducting the probe.

Cooley entered the Air Force

in 1988 through the ROTC program after graduating from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, N.Y., with a degree in mechanical engineering, according to military records. Some of his awards include the Legion of Merit, the Bronze Star and the Air Force Commendation Medal.

He has been temporarily assigned as a special assistant to Bunch until the investigation is complete, Kaufman said.

Brig. Gen. Evan Dertien has been appointed as the commander of the Air Force’s \$7.5 billion research arm. He most recently served as director of air, space and cyberspace operations for Air Force Materiel Command headquarters.

Dertien received his commission from the U.S. Air Force Academy in 1993, according to military records. He served as an operational F-15 pilot and completed three combat deployments. He also worked as an F-15, F-16 and F-22 test pilot in various assignments. He was also assigned as an initial cadre instructor pilot for the first operational F-22 unit at Langley Air Force Base in Virginia.

Warren to Sanders: 'You called me a liar'

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Elizabeth Warren accused Bernie Sanders of calling her a liar before a national television audience during a tense, post-debate exchange in which she refused to shake his outstretched hand, according to audio released by CNN.

The Democratic presidential rivals are strong progressives who had steadfastly refused to attack each other for more than a year on the campaign trail. But that changed Monday, when Warren said that, during a private meeting between the two in 2018, he disagreed with her that a woman could win the presidency.

Sanders, a senator from Vermont, has denied that, and did so again during Tuesday night's presidential debate, which was

hosted by CNN and the Des Moines Register and held in Iowa, whose first-in-the-nation caucuses are Feb. 3.

Warren stood by her account and said it was time to confront the larger issues of sexism in politics.

That exchange lasted only a few minutes. But after the debate was over, Warren, a Massachusetts senator, approached Sanders, who put out his hand for her to shake. Instead, she confronted him, and the two talked briefly in tense tones.

Neither campaign would confirm what was said Tuesday night, but CNN released the audio Wednesday. As she is refusing his extended hand, Warren repeats, "I think you called me a liar on national TV." Sanders gently brushes her with his hand, then says, "Let's not do it right now."

"You want to have that discussion?" he continues. "We'll have that discussion." Warren replies, "Anytime."

Sanders then adds, "You called me a liar," before concluding, "All right, let's not do it now."

The exchange was interrupted by fellow candidate and environmentalist Tom Steyer, who said, "I don't want to get in the middle of it" and greeted Sanders as the senator walked away. In Las Vegas on Wednesday, Steyer said his attempt to offer a greeting and thanks to both senators turned awkward.

"Look, what goes on between those two senators is between them. You know, that's really a private matter, which is why I wouldn't comment on it before. I honestly think it's between them," he said.

Police: Teen in ROTC mistakenly shot friend

Associated Press

HOUSTON — A 16-year-old student mistakenly shot his friend in their Houston-area high school's ROTC room before fleeing and being arrested several hours later, officials said Wednesday.

The two were in a room at Bellaire High School with four other students but no adult Tuesday afternoon when the 16-year-old took a semi-automatic pistol out of his waistband and pulled the trigger, killing Cesar Cortes, 19, said Lt. Greg Bartlett.

The suspect, whose name wasn't released, fled the scene after the shooting and was arrested about 3½ hours later, authorities said. He was charged as a minor with manslaughter, according to the Harris County District Attorney's Office.

District Attorney Kim Ogg said that based on evidence gathered so far, the shooting does not appear to have been intentional. She said the students were part of the school's ROTC program and that there's no indication that they'd been fighting before the shooting.

"They were friendly. They were friends," Ogg said. "Pulling a trigger on a gun, whether you know if it's loaded or not, is an intentional act. But he did not, based on the evidence we have right now, intend to kill his friend."

Bartlett said that the shooter confessed to other students but has not admitted guilt to the police nor helped in their investigation.

Authorities are still looking for the gun,

which Bartlett said the student brought from home. It was not school property nor issued by the ROTC, he said.

"This is a regular kid, evidently, who is now a violent offender," Ogg said of the shooter. "Whether he meant to be violent or not, he killed somebody. And that somebody was a son, and a student, and a friend, and it's our community's collective loss."

Police said they received a call about the shooting at around 4 p.m. and that the victim died later at a hospital.

The district canceled classes Wednesday, but they will resume Thursday with additional police officers patrolling campus, Grenita Lathan, the interim superintendent of the Houston Independent School District, said in a statement.

Putin secures power as Duma votes for new PM

Associated Press

MOSCOW — Mikhail Mishustin never had any political ambitions as a career bureaucrat and his name didn't come up as a top candidate to become Russia's next prime minister.

But Mishustin, 53, the longtime chief of Russia's tax service, was tapped for the post by President Vladimir Putin. The lower house of Russia's parliament, the Duma, quickly appointed Mishustin as prime minister on Thursday.

Putin put Mishustin's candidacy forward on Wednesday night, several hours after

Dmitry Medvedev resigned along with the whole Cabinet. Just before that, Putin proposed sweeping changes to the constitution that could keep him in power well past the end of his term in 2024.

Mishustin, who has been in charge of Russia's taxes for the past 10 years, has always kept a low profile and stayed away from politics. He doesn't belong to a political party and in rare interviews prefers to talk about innovations in tax administration.

The move sent shockwaves through Russia's political elite and left them pondering about future Cabinet appointments.

Mishustin has been hailed for modern-

izing Russia's rigid tax administration system and boosting tax collection rates. Government officials and businessmen describe him as a professional and effective manager who understands the economy well, which makes him a good fit for the Cabinet during a time when Russia's economy is weakened.

"The main tasks for the new prime minister will come from the necessity to modernize the economy," Abbas Gallyamov, a former Kremlin speech writer turned independent political analyst, wrote in a Facebook post. "Mishustin has a reputation of a person who has this experience."

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Rats close park where homeless camp

CO DENVER — A park across from the state Capitol where homeless people have been camping was shut down because officials say it has become infested with rats.

Over 30 tents lined the edge of the park. Footage from KDVR-TV showed police officers going from tent to tent to let people know they need to leave.

Hundreds of rats are living in Liberty Park and could spread diseases, Tammy Vigil, a spokeswoman for the Denver Department of Public Health and Environment told The Denver Post.

Woman caught driving meth through state

KS WICHITA — A 46-year-old woman from Los Angeles is awaiting sentencing after she admitted that she drove 60 pounds of methamphetamine through Kansas.

Maria Alvarez-Buenrostro pleaded guilty in federal court to one count of possession with intent to distribute methamphetamine.

A Kansas Highway Patrol trooper stopped her on Feb. 12, 2019, in Ellis County for a lane violation. The trooper found the methamphetamine in 33 heat-sealed bags in a rear quarter panel and in both rear doors, according to the plea agreement.

She admitted she was taking the drugs to a dealer to sell, according to the agreement.

Worker finds woman in trash compactor

SC ROCK HILL — A sanitation worker's routine trash pickup in South

Carolina turned into an investigation when he heard screaming coming from the compactor.

A city worker collecting trash from outside an elementary school found a woman inside the garbage truck's compactor, The Rock Hill Herald reported.

Rock Hill police said the man activated the compactor, heard screams and stopped. Police Lt. Michael Chavis said the woman freed herself and fled on foot.

Woman stopped before lighting explosive

FL TAMPA — A woman tried to build an explosive device inside a Walmart store in Florida, authorities said.

Emily Stallard was charged with attempted arson of a structure, fire bombing, contributing to the delinquency of a minor, child abuse and battery on an officer, the Hillsborough County Sheriff's office said.

A security guard at the store noticed Stallard opening unpaid items including flammable materials, projectiles and matches as she roamed the store for more than an hour, according to an arrest report. She had a child with her, police said.

The security guard called the sheriff's office and also notified a Florida Fish and Wildlife officer who happened to be in the store. The two men stopped Stallard just before she lit a wick, according to the report.

Reports: Razor blades affixed to cars

CA TEMECULA — Authorities in southern California have started an investigation into multiple reports of razor blades being found on cars in Temecula, including blades affixed to vehicle door handles.

The razor blades were placed in a manner likely to cause injury with two blades pointed up and two pointed down, investigators said.

Man seeks sword battle with ex-wife

IA HARLAN — A Kansas man asked an Iowa judge to let him engage in a sword fight with his ex-wife and her attorney so that he can "rend their souls" from their bodies.

David Ostrom, 40, of Paola, Kan., said in a Jan. 3 court filing that his former wife, Bridgette Ostrom, 38, of Harlan and her attorney, Matthew Hudson, had "destroyed (him) legally."

The judge has the power to let the parties "resolve our disputes on the field of battle, legally," David Ostrom said, adding in his filing that trial by combat "has never been explicitly banned or restricted as a right in these United States."

He also asked the judge for 12 weeks' time so he could secure Japanese samurai swords.

Judge Craig Dreismeier said in his filing that he won't be issuing a decision anytime soon.

Hay tainted by toxic beetles kills horses

WI MAUSTON — Hay tainted by a toxic beetle is blamed for the deaths of 14 horses and illnesses to dozens of others on a Wisconsin ranch.

Steady rain and flooding this past summer left the hay in fields at Red Ridge Riding Stable in Mauston unusable. So, the owners, Cindy Kanarowski-Peterson and her husband, Lyle Peterson, purchased six semi loads of hay and alfalfa from farms in South Dakota and Wyoming to feed their horses.

A blister beetle that releases

a toxin when crushed during harvest is blamed for the horses' deaths and for sickening another 100 horses on the ranch. Veterinarian Dave Kolb said the toxin irritates the linings of the horses' stomachs and intestines.

Firefighters to get \$1.7M to fix pay error

WV CHARLESTON — Union firefighters in Charleston will receive \$1.7 million in back pay for being incorrectly compensated for holiday work since 2012, officials announced.

Charleston Mayor Amy Shuler Goodwin said the settlement with firefighters Local 317 comes after a conflict between state and city law that caused incorrect payments.

The city council must still approve the settlement at their next set meeting Tuesday, with the payments scheduled to go out by the end of the month.

Transit audit leads to changes at garages

DC WASHINGTON — Unsafe and filthy conditions at Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority parking garages have prompted changes in how the structures are cleaned.

Feces, bottles of urine, used condoms, overflowing trash and other unsanitary conditions were found at several Metrorail station garages, the transit authority's Office of the Inspector General said in a summary of its report.

The transit authority spent \$2.2 million on contracted cleaning services, according to the inspector general. The audit found that the employees weren't doing their job properly 84% of the time.

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Packers' Rodgers makes good on promise

Associated Press

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — When Aaron Rodgers greeted Jimmy Garoppolo following the least productive start of his sterling career, he had a simple message for the San Francisco 49ers quarterback: "We'll see you later on."

Less than two months after that lopsided loss, the Green Bay Packers quarterback has proven prophetic. For the eighth time in the past 25 seasons, Green Bay and San Francisco are squaring off in the postseason, this time with a berth in the Super Bowl on the line.

"We know it will be different," 49ers coach Kyle Shanahan said. "That game got away from them early. That's definitely not the team we'll see this week. Everyone knows how good Green Bay is, how good their coaching staff is, how good their players are, how good their quarterback is. ... That game really holds zero relevance to what's going to happen this Sunday."

The Packers (14-3) looked

nothing like a Super Bowl contender back on Nov. 24 when they were completely overwhelmed by the 49ers (14-3) from the start. Rodgers was strip-sacked by Fred Warner on the opening drive and Nick Bosa returned the fumble to the 2, setting up Tevin Coleman's TD run.

The Niners added a couple of field goals and got a fourth-down stop against Aaron Jones before breaking that game open at the end of the first half with a 42-yard TD pass from Garoppolo to Deebo Samuel and a third field goal from Chase McLaughlin in the final 65 seconds of the half to make it 23-0.

Rodgers threw a TD pass in the third quarter to Davante Adams only to have the Niners answer two plays later on a 61-yard pass to George Kittle, and the rout was on. The 37-8 final was the second-most lopsided loss in Rodgers' career in a game he didn't get injured.

"I'd like to think we've improved through the course of the season, especially the

last six weeks or whatever it's been," coach Matt LaFleur said Monday. "Certainly I don't think we played our best that day. You got to give them a lot of credit, there's probably a reason for that. That's a really talented football team. We know that. But in order to compete with them, in order to have a chance to beat them, we're going to have to be at our best."

Rodgers finished the game 20 for 33-for-104 yards and had a career low with only 3.15 yards per attempt. He was also sacked five times for 38 yards, with right tackle Bryan Bulaga leaving early in the first quarter with a knee injury. The 1.9 net yards per pass play were the lowest for the Packers since 1991, the year before Brett Favre arrived.

"We've got to play a lot better, obviously," Rodgers said. "They're a great football team, have a great front, obviously get after the passer and don't need to rush a lot of guys to do that. (They have an) excellent pass rush, really good on the back end, smart."

The Packers haven't lost since, winning the final five games of the regular season and then the playoff opener over Seattle 28-23 on Sunday to set up the rematch. San Francisco beat Minnesota 27-10 on Saturday.

Green Bay should have Bulaga back even though he missed Sunday's game with an illness. The Niners also are healthier with edge rusher Dee Ford, left tackle Joe Staley, linebacker Kwon Alexander and running back Matt Brieda all back after missing that game.

But regular-season blowouts don't always repeat when the teams meet again in the playoffs. There have been 23 times in the Super Bowl era, excluding one replacement player game in 1987, that a team lost a regular-season game by at least 28 points to a team it met again in the playoffs.

In nine of those cases, the team that got blown out earlier in the year came back to win in the playoffs, and in six other games the team lost by a touchdown or less.

Chiefs rolled the dice by signing Clark, Mathieu

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Tyrann Mathieu and Frank Clark were watching the AFC championship game on television a year ago, their teams knocked out of the playoffs, never thinking for a moment what the following 12 months might bring them.

Or more accurately, where it might bring them.

But after the Chiefs watched their defense fold in overtime against the Patriots, costing them a chance to reach the Super Bowl for the first time in nearly five decades, coach Andy Reid embarked on a massive overhaul of the unit. He replaced longtime coordinator Bob Sutton with Steve Spagnuolo, jettisoned aging and unproductive players, then asked general manager Brett Veach

to bring in some legitimate playmakers to better fit their new scheme.

That's how Mathieu and Clark wound up in Kansas City.

The Chiefs signed the ball-hawking safety to a \$42 million, three-year deal to bring his talent and swagger to the back end of their defense. A month later, they traded a package of draft picks to the Seahawks for Clark, then signed him to a \$105.5 million, five-year contract before the bruising pass rusher had even played a down for them.

Now, the pair not only reside in Kansas City, they're playing for an AFC championship there.

"A great opportunity to play in Kansas City and in front of the world," Mathieu said Wednesday, before their first

practice to prepare for Sunday's game against Tennessee. "To be on this stage is everything you work for, especially myself, being in my seventh year, going through what I've gone through in my career. To be in this position is a blessing."

Mathieu is making more money per year than in any other season of his career, and Clark is now among the highest-paid defensive players in the league, yet they both seem like wise investments for a club with a lousy history of big contracts.

Eric Berry never lived up to the \$78 million, six-year deal the safety signed in 2017, playing three games total over the next two seasons due to injuries. Justin Houston appeared in only 32 games over three seasons after signing a \$101

million, six-year contract in 2015, at the time the second richest for a defensive player in NFL history. Wide receiver Dwayne Bowe had 117 catches but just five touchdowns in two seasons after his \$56 million, five-year contract in 2013, and quarterback Matt Cassel went a mere 19-28 in four years as the starter after his \$63 million, six-year deal in 2009.

No wonder the Chiefs are so happy with the production Mathieu and Clark have provided.

Yet their road to Kansas City — and all those riches — was fraught with obstacles.

Mathieu was a standout safety at LSU before a series of drug arrests torpedoed his college career. At one point, after an arrest in 2012, he told an Arizona television station that he contemplated suicide.

College basketball roundup

Alabama hands Auburn its first loss

Associated Press

TUSCALOOSA, Ala. — Nate Oats and Alabama had two achievements to celebrate: a huge win and knocking rival Auburn from the dwindling ranks of the unbeaten.

Kira Lewis Jr. scored 25 points and the Crimson Tide easily handled the fourth-ranked Tigers with an 83-64 rout on Wednesday night.

"We've been needing this signature win," said Oats, the Tide's first-year coach. "We were close a few times. If we're going to make a run and try to play in the NCAA Tournament, you've got to get these signature wins.

"It's good to get that monkey off our back."

All the better when it comes against your much-hyped in-state rival.

Alabama (9-7, 2-2 Southeastern Conference) led wire-to-wire. Auburn (15-1, 3-1) had a miserable shooting night and left No. 7 San Diego State (18-0) as the nation's last unbeaten team.

"To be able to beat a good team in Alabama on their floor you've got to be very good, and we didn't even come close," Tigers coach Bruce Pearl said.

It was the Tide's first win over a Top 5 team since a 79-57 home defeat of then-No. 5 Texas A&M on Dec. 30, 2017. This one was largely one-sided, too.

Lewis scored 17 points in the second half for Alabama. He was 8-for-14 from the field and made 8 of 9 free throws.

Herbert Jones had 14 points and 12 rebounds. Alex Reese scored 13 points and James Bolden had 11 for the Tide.

Auburn, which had won 27 of 28 games dating back to last season's Final Four run, gave up a season high in points while scoring its season low.

Isaac Okoro led the Tigers with 13 points. Austin Wiley had 10 points and 13 rebounds and Jamal Johnson also scored 10.

Auburn closed within 50-47 on back-to-back three-pointers from Johnson midway through the second half, but the comeback attempt fizzled from there.

No. 2 Baylor 68, Iowa State 55: Davion Mitchell had 17 points as the host Bears beat the Cyclones to stretch their winning streak to 13 games.

No. 18 Seton Hall 78, No. 5 Butler 70: Myles Powell scored 19 of his 29 points in the second half and Romaro Gill matched his career high with 17 points to lead the visiting Pirates back from a 10-point halftime deficit for a victory over the Bulldogs.

No. 9 Florida State 54, Virginia 50: Devin Vassell scored 18 points, including a three-pointer and a pair of free throws in the final seconds, and the host Seminoles beat Virginia.

South Carolina 81, No. 10 Kentucky 78: Freshman Jermaine Couisnard hit a three-pointer as the buzzer sounded and the host Gamecocks rallied from 14 points down in the second half to stun the Wildcats.

Temple 65, No. 16 Wichita State 53: Quinton Rose scored 19 points and the host Owls used a strong defensive performance to upset the Shockers.

Georgetown 83, No. 25 Creighton 80: Omer Yurtseven had 20 points and 13 rebounds, Mac McClung scored 19 points and the host Hoyas beat the Bluejays. Georgetown (12-6, 2-3 Big East) went on a 13-2 run early.

Navy 88, Lehigh 83: Daniel Deaver had a season-high 25 points as the visiting Midshipmen narrowly beat the Mountain Hawks.

Sean Yoder had 19 points for Navy (9-7, 3-2 Patriot League). Luke Loehr added 14 points. Cam Davis had 12 points.

The Midshipmen totaled 50 points in the second half, a season best for the team.

Jordan Cohen scored a season-high 28 points and had eight assists for Lehigh (5-12, 2-3). Marques Wilson scored a season-high 21 points and had eight rebounds. Nic Lynch had 16 points.

Air Force 85, Boise State 78: Lavelle Scottie had 21 points as the host Falcons defeated the Broncos.

Scottie hit 9 of 12 shots.

A.J. Walker had 18 points for Air Force (9-9, 3-3 Mountain West Conference). Ryan Swan added 17 points and three assists. Sid Tomes had 11 points for the Falcons.

Abu Kigab had 20 points for Boise State (11-8, 3-4). Derrick Alston Jr. added 16 points. Alex Hobbs had 13 points.

Muted McGregor: Irishman not fiery ahead of UFC 246

The Washington Post

Conor McGregor arrived roughly 15 minutes early for the start of his pre-fight news conference Wednesday in Las Vegas, where the fiery Irishman is set to face Donald "Cowboy" Cerrone Saturday in the headline bout of UFC 246.

Such a prompt showing may have been the first indication this was not going to be the circus atmosphere McGregor (21-4 MMA, 9-2 UFC) so often has courted during his rapid ascent to becoming one of the most recognized figures in mixed martial arts.

The former two-division

champion known as much for verbal sparring as his decorated combat sports resume then proceeded to heap praise on his opponent, speaking virtually expletive-free.

"I'm very, very grateful and just very honored and happy to be here on U.S. soil, back on United States soil, back here in Las Vegas," McGregor said. "I've had so many amazing moments here in America, you know, and I'm very grateful for this country, and I'm very honored to be here and to perform for the people."

Circumstances inside and outside the octagon certainly may have compelled McGregor,

31, to take a far more muted approach heading into his first MMA fight since October 2018, when he lost via submission in the fourth round to Khabib Nurmagomedov, which preceded a retirement announcement in March of 2019.

That humbling result followed what was billed as "The Biggest Fight in Combat Sports History" matching McGregor against Floyd Mayweather Jr., the undefeated boxing champion, in a boxing-only match that Mayweather won in a stoppage in the 10th round.

McGregor also has faced questions about sexual assault allegations revealed in sepa-

rate New York Times reports. The most recent report details a complaint by a woman in her 20s who alleges McGregor sexually assaulted her in a vehicle parked outside a Dublin pub.

McGregor has denied the charges, and fans booed when he was asked again to address them during Wednesday's news conference that was open to the general public in addition to media.

UFC president Dana White, who served as the moderator of the news conference, denied the sexual assault charges would have any impact on the scheduled five-round fight.

NBA roundup

Nunn, Dragic help Heat hold off Spurs

Associated Press

MIAMI — Kendrick Nunn scored 33 points, Goran Dragic added 17 and the Miami Heat held on to beat the San Antonio Spurs 106-100 and move back into the No. 2 spot in the Eastern Conference.

Bam Adebayo — cut from USA Basketball's national team by Spurs coach Gregg Popovich over the summer — had 14 points, 13 rebounds and seven assists for the Heat. Miami improved to 18-1 at home, one win shy of matching last season's home win total.

Jimmy Butler scored 12 and Duncan Robinson added 11 for Miami.

Trail Blazers 117, Rockets 107: Damian Lillard scored 25 points and CJ McCollum added 24 as Portland withstood a late surge at Houston.

Russell Westbrook had a triple-double with 31 points, 12 assists and 11 rebounds on a night when James Harden scored a season-low 13 points. The Rockets lost consecutive games for the first time since

a season-high three-game skid from Nov. 20-24, and have dropped three of four.

76ers 117, Nets 106: Tobias Harris scored 34 points, including two big baskets in the final two minutes that proved to be the difference, as host Philadelphia topped Brooklyn.

Ben Simmons had 20 points and 11 assists for the 76ers, who improved to 19-2 at home.

Pistons 113, Celtics 103: Sekou Doumbouya scored a season-high 24 points and Detroit snapped a three-game losing streak with a win at Boston.

Markieff Morris matched his season best with 23 points. Derrick Rose added 22 points and Sviatoslav Mykhailiuk had a season-high 21. The Pistons shot a season-best 60.3% from the field.

Bulls 115, Wizards 106: Zach LaVine had 30 points, seven rebounds and seven assists, and banged-up Chicago beat Bradley Beal and visiting Washington.

The Bulls placed seven players in double figures in their

second win in their last nine games. Thaddeus Young had 18 points and eight boards, and Tomas Satoransky scored 18 points against his former team.

Raptors 130, Thunder 121: Norman Powell scored 23 points, and Toronto held off a furious rally to win at Oklahoma City.

Pascal Siakam and OG Anunoby each added 21 points for the Raptors, who shot a season-high 61.2% from the field.

Pacers 104, Timberwolves 99: Domantas Sabonis matched a season high with 29 points and added 13 rebounds and six assists to lead Indiana to a win at Minnesota.

Malcolm Brogdon added 21 points and Doug McDermott scored 14 off the bench for the Pacers, who have won three straight.

Nuggets 100, Hornets 86: Rookie reserve Michael Porter Jr. scored 19 points and recent call-up P.J. Dozier had a big debut for host Denver, filling in for injured point guard Jamal Murray in the second half of a win over Charlotte.

Murray exited the game with 1:32 remaining in the second quarter after rolling his left ankle.

Mavericks 127, Kings 123: Luka Doncic had 25 points, 15 rebounds and a career-high 17 assists for his NBA-leading 12th triple-double, and Dallas held off a late run to win at Sacramento.

Seth Curry scored 21 points off the bench as the Mavs won their third straight despite the absence of Kristaps Porzingis, who missed his ninth consecutive game. Dwight Powell added 17 points and nine rebounds, and Tim Hardaway Jr. scored 18.

Magic 119, Lakers 118: Markelle Fultz hit two big layups in the final minute while scoring 21 points during his second career triple-double, and visiting Orlando snapped Los Angeles' nine-game winning streak.

Fultz added 11 rebounds and 10 assists, while Aaron Gordon had 21 points and a late go-ahead basket.

NHL roundup

Voracek's overtime goal pushes Flyers past Blues

Associated Press

ST. LOUIS — Jakub Voracek scored in overtime and the Philadelphia Flyers beat the St. Louis Blues 4-3 on Wednesday night.

Tyler Pitlick, Michael Raffl and Travis Konecny also scored for the Flyers, who won for the third time in their last four games. Brian Elliott, playing for the first time since Jan. 7, stopped 30 shots and improved to 6-2 in his career against his former team.

Justin Faulk, Ryan O'Reilly and Alexander Steen scored, and Jordan Binnington made 21 saves for the Blues, who

had their NHL best nine-game home winning streak snapped. The streak matched the longest in franchise history set from Jan. 26-Feb. 26, 1991.

Voracek's goal spoiled the Blues' comeback bid and snapped his 10-game scoreless drought, dating back to Dec. 21.

With the Blues trailing 3-1, O'Reilly cut the deficit in half with his ninth midway through the third. The goal snapped a seven game scoreless stretch for O'Reilly, dating back to Dec. 29.

Steen tied it with 6:21 left on a backhand after Robert Thomas' pass found him all alone in

front of the Flyers' net. It was Steen's fourth of the season, all of which came on the Blues' current five-game homestand.

Faulk's power-play goal, a one-timer off a perfect feed from Alexander Steen, gave the Blues a 1-0 lead with 5:36 left in the first period. Faulk has 21 points in 31 career games against Philadelphia, the most he has scored against any team.

St. Louis has at least one power-play goal in 11 of its last 14 games.

Blackhawks 4, Canadiens 1: Zack Smith scored twice to give visiting Chicago a victory over Montreal.

Alex DeBrincat and Drake Caggiula also scored for the Blackhawks, who were coming off a 3-2 overtime win against the Senators on Tuesday. Corey Crawford stopped 32 shots to improve to 11-2-2 against his hometown team. Chicago won for the seventh time in 10 games.

Phillip Danault scored for the Canadiens, who have lost 10 of their last 11. Still looking for his first victory of the season, Charlie Lindgren finished with 24 saves.

The Blackhawks scored twice in a fast-paced first period before Montreal even managed its second shot on net.