

USS Nimitz to remain in Middle East

By CAITLIN DOORNBOS

Stars and Stripes

The USS Nimitz will remain in the Middle East following Iranian threats against top U.S. officials, acting Secretary of Defense Chris Miller said in a statement Monday, reversing a decision four days ago to bring the ship home.

“Due to the recent threats issued by Iranian leaders against President Trump and other U.S. government officials, I have ordered the USS Nimitz to halt its routine redeployment,” Miller said in a brief statement issued by his office.

The decision reverses Miller’s order

Thursday to bring the Bremerton, Wash.-based aircraft carrier home after nearly 10 months at sea.

The Nimitz was supporting U.S. troops in Somalia when Miller on New Year’s Eve announced it would transit “directly home,” according to a Defense Department statement the same day.

“The Nimitz team provided persistent air cover during the troop drawdowns in Afghanistan and conducted operations and exercises that strengthened enduring partnerships and alliances in the U.S. Central Command and U.S. Indo-Pacific Command areas of responsibility,” Miller

said in the statement Thursday.

The Nimitz’s return was meant to reduce tensions with Iran during President Donald Trump’s final days in office, according to the Associated Press on Thursday.

Miller said the aircraft carrier “will now remain on station in the U.S. Central Command area of operations,” which spans from Egypt to Pakistan and includes the Red Sea and Persian Gulf.

“No one should doubt the resolve of the United States of America,” Miller said, according to the statement from his office.

Iran boosts uranium enrichment, seizes tanker

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Iran began enriching uranium Monday to levels unseen since its 2015 nuclear deal with world powers and also seized a South Korean-flagged tanker near the crucial Strait of Hormuz, a double-barreled challenge to the West that further raised Mideast tensions.

Both decisions appeared aimed at increasing Tehran’s leverage in the waning days in office for President Donald Trump, whose unilateral withdrawal from the atomic accord in 2018 began a series of escalating incidents.

Increasing enrichment at its underground Fordo facility puts Tehran a technical step away from weapons-grade levels of 90%, while also pressuring President-elect Joe Biden to quickly negotiate. Iran’s seizure of the MT Hankuk Chemi comes as a South Korean diplomat was due to travel to the Islamic Republic to discuss the release of billions of dollars in Iranian assets now frozen in

Seoul.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif seemed to acknowledge Tehran’s interest in leveraging the situation in a tweet about its nuclear enrichment.

“Our measures are fully reversible upon FULL compliance by ALL,” he wrote.

At Fordo, Iranian nuclear scientists under the watch of International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors loaded centrifuges with over 285 pounds of low-enriched uranium to be spun up to 20%, said Kazem Gharibabadi, Iran’s permanent representative to the U.N. atomic agency.

The IAEA later described the Fordo setup as three sets of two interconnected cascades, comprised of 1,044 IR-1 centrifuges — Iran’s first-generation centrifuges. A cascade is a group of centrifuges working together to more quickly enrich uranium.

Iranian state television quoted government spokesman Ali Rabiei as saying that President Hassan Rouhani had given the

order to begin the production. It came after its parliament passed a bill, later approved by a constitutional watchdog, aimed at increasing enrichment to pressure Europe into providing sanctions relief.

Meanwhile, Iran’s paramilitary Revolutionary Guard seized the MT Hankuk Chemi, with photos later released showing its vessels alongside the tanker. Satellite data from MarineTraffic.com showed the tanker off the Iranian port city of Bandar Abbas on Monday.

The ship had been traveling from a petrochemicals facility in Jubail, Saudi Arabia, to Fujairah in the United Arab Emirates. The vessel carries a chemical shipment including methanol, according to data-analysis firm Refinitiv.

Iran alleged it seized the vessel over it allegedly polluting the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, the gulf’s narrow mouth through which 20% of the world’s oil passes.

Calls to the ship’s listed owner, DM Shipping Co. Ltd. of Busan, South Korea, were

not answered after business hours Monday. The South Korean news agency Yonhap quoted an anonymous company official denying the Iranian claim that the ship polluted the water.

The captain “asked why we have to go and be examined and did not get any answer,” Yonhap quoted the official as saying.

In recent months, Iran has sought to escalate pressure on South Korea to unlock some \$7 billion in frozen assets from oil sales earned before the Trump administration tightened sanctions on the country’s oil exports.

South Korea’s Foreign Ministry demanded the ship’s release, saying in a statement that its crew was safe. The crew included sailors from Indonesia, Myanmar, South Korea and Vietnam, according to the Guard. South Korea’s Defense Ministry said it was also sending its anti-piracy unit near the Strait of Hormuz, which is a 4,400-ton-class destroyer with about 300 troops.

Ex-DOD chiefs: Election over, result true

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The time to question election results has passed, and there is no role for the military in changing them, all 10 of the living former defense secretaries said in an extraordinary rebuke to President Donald Trump and other Republicans who are backing unfounded claims of widespread fraud at the ballot box.

The former Pentagon chiefs issued their warning Sunday evening in an opinion piece that they co-authored and published in *The Washington Post*. Its authors include Trump's two former defense secretaries, Jim Mattis and Mark Esper, as well as each living Senate-confirmed Pentagon chief dating back to Donald Rumsfeld in the 1970s.

The article was published as some Republicans plan to con-

test the electoral college vote certification Wednesday, even after the president's attempts to challenge election results in court have failed. It also comes as concerns persist that Trump might seek to use the military to keep him in office, despite his electoral loss.

"Our elections have occurred. Recounts and audits have been conducted," the former defense secretaries wrote. "Appropriate challenges have been addressed by the courts. Governors have certified the results. And the electoral college has voted. The time for questioning the results has passed; the time for the formal counting of the electoral college votes, as prescribed in the Constitution and statute, has arrived."

The White House did not respond to a request for comment

about the article.

The article brings together a group of Republicans and Democrats who disagree on many national security issues. Its genesis is a conversation between Eric Edelman, a former U.S. ambassador and defense official in Republican administrations, and Cheney about how the military might be used in coming days, Edelman said in an interview.

While Trump has called reports that he discussed the possibility of invoking martial law to overturn election results "fake news," he did have Michael Flynn, a retired Army general and former national security adviser for Trump, at the White House recently after Flynn suggested on television that Trump could declare martial law and use the military to

hold new elections.

In addition to stating their concerns about the ongoing contesting of the election, the defense secretaries backed recent comments from senior military leaders that there is no role for the military in determining the outcome of a U.S. election, a point they affirmed after Flynn suggested that the president could invoke martial law.

"Efforts to involve the U.S. armed forces in resolving election disputes would take us into dangerous, unlawful and unconstitutional territory," the defense secretaries wrote.

"Civilian and military officials who direct or carry out such measures would be accountable, including potentially facing criminal penalties, for the grave consequences of their actions on our republic."

Trump, on tape, presses Ga. official to find votes

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump pressured Georgia's Republican secretary of state to "find" enough votes to overturn Joe Biden's win in the state's presidential election, repeatedly citing disproven claims of fraud and raising the prospect of a "criminal offense" if officials did not change the vote count, according to a recording of the conversation.

The phone call with Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger on Saturday was the latest step in an unprecedented effort by a sitting president to press a state official to reverse the outcome of a free and fair election that he lost. The president, who has refused to accept his loss to Democratic President-elect Biden, repeatedly argued that Raffensperger could change the certified results.

"All I want to do is this. I just want to find 11,780 votes, which is one more than we have," Trump said. "Because we won the state."

Georgia counted its votes three times before certifying Biden's win by an 11,779

margin, Raffensperger noted.

"President Trump, we've had several lawsuits, and we've had to respond in court to the lawsuits and the contentions," he said on the call. "We don't agree that you have won."

Audio snippets of the conversation were first posted online by *The Washington Post*. The Associated Press obtained the full audio of Trump's conversation with Georgia officials from a person on the call. The AP has a policy of not amplifying disinformation and unproven allegations. The AP plans to post the full audio as it annotates a transcript with fact check material.

Trump's renewed intervention and the persistent and unfounded claims of fraud come nearly two weeks before he leaves office and two days before twin runoff elections in Georgia that will determine political control of the U.S. Senate.

The president used the hourlong conversation to tick through a list of claims about the election in Georgia, including that hundreds of thousands of ballots mysteriously appeared in Fulton County, which includes

Atlanta. Officials have said there is no evidence of that happening.

The Georgia officials on the call are heard repeatedly pushing back against the president's assertions, telling him that he's relying on debunked theories and, in one case, selectively edited video.

"It was pretty obvious pretty early on that we'd debunked every one of those theories early on," Raffensperger told ABC's "Good Morning America" on Monday, "but President Trump continues to believe them."

At another point in the conversation, Trump appeared to threaten Raffensperger and Ryan Germany, the secretary of state's legal counsel, by suggesting both could be criminally liable if they failed to find that thousands of ballots in Fulton County had been illegally destroyed. There is no evidence to support Trump's claim.

"That's a criminal offense," Trump says. "And you can't let that happen."

Others on the call included Mark Meadows, the White House chief of staff, and attorneys assisting Trump, including Washington lawyer Cleta Mitchell.

More Europe bases start to vaccinate

By JENNIFER H. SVAN

Stars and Stripes

RAMSTEIN AIR BASE, Germany — Airmen in Germany were given their first dose of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine Monday, just over two weeks after it received emergency use authorization from the Food and Drug Administration.

"I'm hopeful that this is the way to finally end COVID-19," said Chief Master Sgt. Alex Angulo, the security forces manager for the 569th U.S. Forces Police Squadron, one of the first in line to get the jab in the gym at Ramstein Air Base.

He said he got the shot "for my parents, my kids and the community," and to set an example for his airmen — some of whom have expressed concern about the shot.

Like the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, the U.S.-made Moderna vaccine was developed in months rather than years and was granted

emergency use authorization, not full FDA approval. EUA is issued during emergencies like the coronavirus pandemic, when the FDA deems that a treatment or test will benefit patients, even if all the evidence establishing its effectiveness and safety is not yet available.

Regulators, vaccine developers and the military moved extremely quickly to get the Moderna vaccine "from emergency use authorization to putting needles into arms," said Gino Mattorano, spokesman for Regional Health Command Europe.

The Moderna vaccine was granted EUA on Dec. 18, the FDA says on its website.

The first doses arrived in theater around Christmas Day, and troops began to be inoculated less than a week after that, Mattorano said.

Clinical trials have found the Moderna vaccine to be more than 94% effective at preventing the illness caused by the coronavirus after

two doses, given about 28 days apart, according to a report published last month in the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

Spangdahlem Air Base also began vaccinating medical professionals and first responders Monday, and Air Force bases in the United Kingdom gave key health care and emergency workers their first jabs last week.

The Army began vaccinating front-line health care personnel in Germany last week and expected to continue this week. Vaccinations are also underway at Naval Support Activity Bahrain, where the 5th Fleet is based.

The vaccine was expected to be delivered this week to more military bases in Belgium, Italy, Portugal and Spain, U.S. European Command said in a statement released Thursday. But officials at the immunization clinic at Aviano Air Base in Italy said Monday they didn't expect to receive the vaccine for "a few weeks."

COVID-19 inoculations to begin at Naval Hospital Guam

By MATTHEW M. BURKE

Stars and Stripes

The Navy on Guam planned to start inoculating its frontline personnel against the coronavirus Monday, two days after the Moderna vaccine arrived on the island.

A "limited quantity" of the vaccine arrived Saturday at Naval Hospital Guam; first priority are health care providers and emergency services and public safety personnel, Joint Region Marianas spokesman Navy Lt. Cmdr. Rick Moore wrote in an email Monday to *Stars and Stripes*.

"The arrival of the COVID-19 vaccine to our region after a challenging year is good

news and cause for measured optimism," Moore wrote.

Guam, a U.S. territory of 160,000, was hit hard by the pandemic. As of mid-November, it had recorded 6,346 coronavirus infections, including 315 U.S. service members, and 100 deaths, the island's Joint Information Center said at the time. More than 1,900 of those cases were active..

As of Monday, confirmed cases had risen to 7,163, including 330 U.S. service members, and 122 deaths, according to Guam's Department of Public Health and Social Services.

However, only 133 are under observation, including three on U.S. military facilities.

The island recorded 63 positive cases between Dec. 28 and Monday, the department reported.

Vaccines will be administered to U.S. military personnel in three phases, according to the Defense Department. The next phase involves personnel deploying outside the United States and "critical and essential support personnel," followed by high-risk individuals and the general population.

Virus prevention protocols like social distancing, wearing masks and washing hands to stem further spread are still mandatory even for those who are vaccinated, according to Moore's statement.

UK judge refuses to extradite WikiLeaks founder to US

Associated Press

LONDON — A British judge on Monday rejected the United States' request to extradite WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange to face espionage charges, saying he was likely to kill himself if held under harsh U.S. prison conditions.

District Judge Vanessa Baraitser rejected allegations that Assange is being prosecuted for political reasons or would not receive a fair trial in the U.S. But she said his precarious mental health would likely deteriorate further under the conditions of "near total isolation" he would face in U.S.

prison.

The U.S. government said that it would appeal the decision. Assange's lawyers said that they would ask for his release from a London prison where he has been held for more than a year-and-a-half at a bail hearing on Wednesday. Assange, who sat in the dock at London's Central Criminal Court for the ruling, wiped his brow as the decision was announced. His partner Stella Morris, with whom he has two young sons, wept.

U.S. prosecutors have indicted Assange on 17 espionage charges and one charge of

computer misuse over WikiLeaks' publication of leaked military and diplomatic documents a decade ago. The charges carry a maximum sentence of 175 years in prison.

Lawyers for the 49-year-old Australian argue that he was acting as a journalist and is entitled to First Amendment protections of freedom of speech for publishing leaked documents that exposed U.S. military wrongdoing in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The judge, however, said Assange's actions, if proven, would "amount to offenses in this jurisdiction that would not be protected by his right to freedom of speech."

Dozens of virus cases traced to church

Associated Press

BOSTON — Dozens of positive coronavirus cases have been traced back to Christmas services at a Massachusetts church, authorities said.

The Woburn Board of Health has been working with the state to notify people who attended one of four services Dec. 23 and 24 at Genesis Community Church in Woburn, Mayor Scott Galvin told *The Boston Globe*.

The church is cooperating with authorities, the mayor said.

At least 44 cases have been traced to the church, authorities said.

Genesis in a statement said it is encouraging anyone who attended the services to get tested, whether symptomatic or not, and helping those who need to quarantine to prevent further transmission. Services are now being held online.

Arizona

WINDOW ROCK — The Navajo Nation has reported 146 additional known cases of COVID-19 and three more deaths.

The figures reported by tribal health officials late Sunday increased the tribe's totals since the pandemic began to 23,728 cases and 819 deaths.

The Navajo reservation has been under a 57-hour weekend lockdown that began Friday evening and ended Monday morning.

Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez said in a statement that it could not be emphasized enough the importance of staying home and abiding by a mask mandate. He added following these measures was crucial since some areas of Arizona do not have similar steps in place.

Connecticut

HARTFORD — The leader of Connecticut's largest teachers union is urging school superintendents statewide to switch all classes to remote learning until at least the middle of this month, citing concerns about the coronavirus pandemic.

Jeff Leake, president of the Connecticut Education Association, said many students and educators were to return to classrooms on Monday, before potential virus surges from the holiday season are over. He said many school districts have already moved to all-distance learning through mid-January.

Leake also called on the state to mandate more COVID-19 testing and said a new survey by his union and the American Federation of Teachers shows that "schools are not the safest places for children or educa-

tors" amid a pandemic.

Gov. Ned Lamont and state education officials have been allowing local school officials to decide whether to switch to all-remote learning but have been advocating for schools to be kept open, saying it's better for students.

Delaware

Delaware's poultry processing plants and state health officials say they are well-prepared for a winter surge of coronavirus cases.

Dr. Rick Pescatore, the Delaware Division of Public Health's chief physician, has told the *Daily Times of Salisbury* (Md.) that the implementation of best practices is mostly complete.

The *Daily Times* reported Monday that DPH cultivated a close relationship with the plants as they rolled out coronavirus testing for employees in late spring.

Poultry workers also fall into the category of critical infrastructure personnel. Pescatore said they would be some of the first to receive the coronavirus vaccine. But vaccination will most likely be on a volunteer basis and not as a condition of employment.

Maine

PORTLAND — Maine has started providing coronavirus vaccines to health workers other than hospital staff, and hopes to give one to all health care personnel in the state by next month.

The first phase, or "phase 1A," of the state's vaccine plan is slated to conclude in February, the Maine Department of Health and Human Services said. The initial phase involves vaccinating all the long-term care residents in the state as well as all the health care workers.

The state's goal remains dependent on the federal government's allocation of the vaccines, the DHHS said in a statement. Public health officials in Maine and other states have expressed frustration at the pace and volume of the supply of vaccines from the feds.

The Maine Medical Association is working with state authorities on the rollout, said Andrew McLean, the chief executive officer of the organization.

Maryland

Students in central Maryland will continue to attend school virtually while about half of the students in the nation will be able to go back to their school buildings.

The *Baltimore Sun* reported Monday that

there is no clear idea of when those Maryland students might get back to in-person classes.

Few students in suburban Maryland counties have been back inside a school during the pandemic. Experts have said that the reasons why include politics, union opposition and the failure of federal and state leaders to set clear guidelines as the pandemic began.

Meanwhile, a contingent of some parents are furious that schools aren't open. And they say they've sent emails and letters, and held protests with no success. Maryland's governor and state superintendent have advocated for schools to reopen. But they have stopped short of ordering schools to open because they say that it is up to local school boards and superintendents.

Rhode Island

PROVIDENCE — A recently retired Rhode Island Supreme Court justice has tested positive for the coronavirus, prompting a change in at least two swearing-in ceremonies.

Francis X. Flaherty, who retired on Dec. 31, was supposed to swear in the new House speaker, K. Joseph Shekarchi, and Warwick Mayor-elect Frank Picozzi on Tuesday.

News of the positive test came in a news release about Picozzi's ceremony.

District Court Judge Stephen Isherwood will take Flaherty's place to swear in Picozzi, while Supreme Court Justice Maureen McKenna Goldberg will swear in Shekarchi.

Virginia

NORFOLK — More than 1,400 long-term care facilities in Virginia are expected to receive doses of the coronavirus vaccine in the coming weeks.

The *Virginian-Pilot* reported Sunday that CVS and Walgreens will administer the vast majority of the doses. The pharmacy chains are partnering with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to take vaccines directly to the facilities so residents don't have to travel.

Virginia is putting front-line health care workers and long-term care residents in the top tier priority group for immunizations. The state has received 388,000 vaccine doses collectively from Pfizer and Moderna.

State health officials said that nearly 65,000 vaccinations had been administered before New Year's Day. But that number is believed to be lower than the actual total because of lags in reporting.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Quinault Tribe recall 29 tons of Dungeness crab due to toxin

WA SEATTLE — Nearly 29 tons of Dungeness crab is being voluntarily recalled by the Quinault Tribe. The recall affects live and unviscerated Dungeness crab.

The crabs are being recalled due to possible elevated marine toxin levels. The toxin is called domoic acid, which can be harmful to people if the contaminated shellfish are consumed, KIRO-TV reported.

Symptoms can include vomiting, nausea, diarrhea and abdominal cramps, which can start within 24 hours of consumption.

The crab was caught by the tribe from Dec. 23-28 and sold to food processors in Washington. Everyone who purchased the crabs is being advised to destroy the product and contact the place where it was purchased.

After 50 years, hippies welcome in county again as law repealed

IN LAGRANGE — LaGrange County, has repealed a 1971 law that was intended to block huge gatherings like the 1969 Woodstock music festival in New York state.

The ordinance regulated large gatherings that lasted over 12 hours and involved more than 500 people, The News Sun reported.

The law was recently dropped as part of an effort to repeal ordinances that have no practical use but have been on the books for as long as 100 years, especially certain traffic restrictions. County attorney Kurt Bachman's research lasted three years.

Deputy among 3 people shot by theft suspect at shopping center

VA STERLING — Three people, including a sheriff's deputy, were shot Saturday at a northern Virginia shopping center by a suspected shoplifter, authorities said. The shooting occurred at the Dulles Crossing Plaza in Sterling.

All three victims were transported to a hospital with serious but not life-threatening injuries, according to Loudoun County Sher-

iff's Office Public Information Officer Kraig Troxell.

The suspect was initially confronted by two civilian Walmart loss prevention officers who believed he was stealing, according to a news release from the sheriff's office. As two deputies responded to take the man into custody, the suspect began to struggle with them, pulled out a gun and fired multiple rounds, striking one deputy and the two store employees.

The suspect fled in a stolen vehicle but was later taken into custody, authorities said.

New flag design heads back to drawing board after criticism

SC COLUMBIA — A committee trying to standardize the iconic design of the South Carolina state flag is starting over after residents ridiculed the historians' first attempt.

The Post and Courier reported that the lawmaker-selected team of historians chosen to straighten out the design are taking critics' complaints in stride.

The South Carolina flag features a palmetto tree and a crescent on an indigo background. But the state has lacked a standard flag design since 1940, meaning flag manufacturers are at liberty to choose their own shades of blue and adjust the curve of the crescent to their liking.

After the newspaper first publicized the proposed design, the historians responded to thousands of complaints, with many deriding the quality of the palmetto tree depiction, by acknowledging they were going back to the drawing board.

Small plane skids off runway, minor injuries reported

NY WHITE PLAINS — A small plane skidded off the runway at a suburban New York City-area airport over the weekend, but only minor injuries were reported.

The pilot of the eight-seat plane was the only person on board and was treated at the scene for minor injuries after the accident at Westchester County Airport in White

Plains, lohud.com reported.

The plane skidded off the runway while trying to land at about 3 p.m. The airport near the Connecticut line was closed for nearly an hour during the response to the accident.

The cause of the mishap is under investigation.

3 arrested after officer pushed by woman, then run over by ATV

RI CRANSTON — Three people were arrested after an incident police said involved an officer being pushed, surrounded and run over while responding to dozens of recklessly driven motorcycles and all-terrain vehicles.

About 30 motorcycles and ATVs were speeding and weaving in and out of traffic before one of the drivers dropped her motorcycle in the middle of the road to block traffic, police said. Shyanne Boisvert, 23, of North Providence, is accused of pushing the officer who approached her on foot and, as he handcuffed her, several others circled him in a threatening manner, police said.

Eduardo Rivera, 33, of Warwick, is accused of running over the officer's legs with his ATV before fleeing and later crashing into a cruiser. Kemoni Mitchell, 22, of Providence, is accused of leading police on a chase and striking a passing car. The officer was being treated for his injuries.

Police: Man driving 132 mph on interstate also faces drug charge

NH WARNER — A man arrested on drunken driving and reckless operation charges was recorded traveling 132 miles an hour on Interstate 89, more than double the speed limit, New Hampshire State Police said.

Police were able to stop the vehicle in Warner. The speed limit was 65 miles an hour.

The driver, Randher Alcantara-Bautista, 21, of the Bronx, N.Y., was also charged with transporting drugs and possessing a false government identification. He was awaiting arraignment.

— From The Associated Press

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Playoff field: Powerhouses, pretenders and 7-9

Associated Press

From the rested in Kansas City and Pittsburgh to the relieved in Cleveland, Chicago and Los Angeles, the field for the Super Bowl chase is set. There are some powerhouses and some pretenders — and a team with a losing record.

The reigning Super Bowl champion Chiefs (14-2) and Green Bay (13-3) earned each conference's lone bye in the expanded playoffs. And no, adding a third wild-card entrant is not why a 7-9 club will be playing next weekend. Washington “earned” that spot by winning the abysmal NFC East that displayed in the finale of the regular season why NFC Least has been so appropriate a moniker.

So while New York Giants fans scream that Eagles coach Doug Pederson didn't truly play to beat Washington on Sunday night, it should emphasized that the Giants went 6-10, a record more in line with relegation than reward.

Besides, coach Ron Rivera dealing with skin cancer and quarterback Alex Smith returning from an injury that nearly cost him his leg, those are redemptive plots.

“This one's special just because of how hard it was,” Rivera said. “How tough everything was, how it's been on the guys, the organization. There's a great group of young men in there and we're trying to do things the right way. It's really a cool thing to come out and get the division.”

As for the spoils, here's who plays next weekend and how it might look.

Saturday

Indianapolis (11-5) at Buffalo (13-3): Frank Reich has been a hero in Western New York since engineering the great comeback in NFL history while replacing the injured Jim Kelly in a 1992 opening-

round matchup with the Houston Oilers. Reich now coaches the Colts, and he'll remain heroic in Buffalo if they go quietly against what has been the league's most impressive team the last month.

This might be Colts QB Philip Rivers' final game, but it's the Indy defense that must stand tall here. That's a tall order the way Josh Allen, Stefon Diggs and the Bills are going.

Los Angeles Rams (10-6) at Seattle (12-4): A third go-around for the NFC West rivals who split during the regular season. Both have strong defenses and have been spotty on offense, LA more so than Seattle.

The Rams clinched their spot in the playoffs without the inconsistent Jared Goff (thumb surgery) at quarterback. The Seahawks have no issues at that position with Russell Wilson, though his first half of the season was better than the last two months.

Tampa Bay (11-5) at Washington (7-9): For sure, the Washington story is uplifting, particularly the way Rivera is leading a change in culture for a franchise so desperately needing it. And the last three teams to capture division titles without a winning record also pulled off upsets in the wild-card round.

Don't look for much of that in prime time, not with Tom Brady leading the Buccaneers, who are balanced enough to threaten anyone. You remember Brady. If not, tune in to this one and see him likely dismantle Washington's impressive but inexperienced defense.

Sunday

Baltimore (11-5) at Tennessee (11-5): A year ago, the Titans rode Derrick Henry's rushing power, agility and underrated speed to a stunning upset in Baltimore. They still are riding Henry, who became the

eighth player to gain 2,000 yards on the ground in a season. Tennessee also can throw the ball better than last season.

Alas, the Titans barely play any defense. So, with the Ravens having a more diverse but just as effective running game and a sturdy D — not to mention the memories of that beatdown last January — Henry and Co. have an even bigger task ahead against Baltimore this time.

Chicago (8-8) at New Orleans (12-4): The other NFC interloper, the Bears, almost belong in the Least, uh, East. They went from 5-1 to 5-7 before finishing strongly enough to sneak in. Their defense is dangerous if not quite Monsters of the Midway, and when they run the ball well, they compete.

If the Saints get some of their running backs back from the COVID-19 list — particularly scoring machine Alvin Kamara — they will be heavily favored. This could be Drew Brees' last shot at a second NFL title, too. And New Orleans has a defense to match Chicago's.

Cleveland (11-5) at Pittsburgh (12-4): This had to be the topper for the weekend's action. One of the grand rivalries of the sport, and it was just played out in Week 17 — albeit with the Steelers resting a bunch of regulars. Yet Pittsburgh pushed Cleveland to the limit before the Browns snapped the league's longest playoff drought, dating to 2003.

Can the Browns win again in the wild-card matchup? Sure, as long as they get their ample running game going and don't have another COVID-19 outbreak like the one that hit in the last two weeks. The Steelers have lost four of their last five, but they also have won 17 straight at home against Cleveland. Ben Roethlisberger will be back and he's 23-2-1 in his career against the Browns.

Murray can't rally Cardinals after injury

Associated Press

INGLEWOOD, Calif. — Kylan Murray's injured right ankle was the least of his concerns after the Arizona Cardinals' post-season hopes were dashed with an 18-7 loss to the Los Angeles Rams on Sunday.

Murray's disappointment at not being able to get a late-sea-

son win stung more.

“Right now it doesn't matter how it feels. I don't have anything to look forward to as far as moving around on it. I'll be fine,” Murray said about the ankle after the game.

Coach Kliff Kingsbury said it was Murray's call on going back into the game.

“He needed to loosen it up. He couldn't push off on it,” he said. “He felt like (the pain) was bearable when he came back.”

Murray, who completed 8 of 11 passes for 87 yards, added it was more of a matter of loosening up the ankle and making sure the pain-killing injections had done their job before he was

able to feel fine.

Arizona finishes the season 8-8, which is a three-win improvement from last year. But the Cardinals won only two of their final seven games after they beat Buffalo on the 43-yard “Hail Murray” to DeAndre Hopkins on the last play of the game.

Titans' Henry eighth player to reach 2,000 yards rushing

Associated Press

HOUSTON — King Henry added another jewel to his crown.

Already a back-to-back rushing champ before the game even started, Derrick Henry became the eighth player in NFL history to run for 2,000 yards in a season, finishing with a career-high 250 yards as the Titans beat the Houston Texans 41-38 on Sunday to win their first AFC South title since 2008.

"I got it. I did it," Henry said. "But I ... wasn't pressing for it, just wanted to be able to win the game as a team and make to the playoffs, win the division."

Henry, who entered the game with 1,777 yards rushing, reached 2,000 on a 6-yard run in the fourth quarter.

He said he was trying not to keep up with his statistics and told everyone he didn't want to know how close he was getting.

"I knew somebody was going to keep track of it," he said. "I think we were just all focused on winning, putting drives together, getting into the end zone and playing well as an offense. As long as we did that, what we wanted to happen would happen for us."

He's the first player to top 2,000 yards since Adrian Peterson had 2,097 in 2012.

Henry's final carry of the day was a 4-yard run on Tennessee's last drive and he finished the season with a franchise-record 2,027 yards.

His season ranks fifth in NFL history behind Hall of Famer Eric Dickerson (2,105 in 1984), Peterson, Jamal Lewis (2,066 in 2003) and Hall of Famer Barry Sanders (2,053 in 1997).

Henry had a 52-yard touchdown run early in the second quarter and added a second score on a 6-yarder early in the third.

Another long run, this one for 45 yards later in the third quarter, put him at 201 yards rushing for the day. He lost a fumble on Tennessee's next drive before reaching 2,000 in the fourth quarter.

"Incredibly durable, incredibly productive," Tennessee coach Mike Vrabel said. "He's disappointed putting the ball on the ground, but we understand the type of player he is and the impact that he has on this team on the field and off it. I'm proud to coach him and this entire football team."

The fumble had the league's best back talking about how he needs to improve.

"Fumble is a mistake, a fumble is not sup-

posed to happen," Henry said. "You're supposed to take care of the ball, and I pride myself on trying to take care of the ball. I didn't do that today well. So I got to fix that. I got to be cautious of it and be better next week."

Chris Johnson held the previous franchise record. He rushed for 2,006 yards in 2009, making the Titans the only team to have two players eclipse the 2,000-yard mark. Johnson cheered for Henry on Twitter when he drew close to 2,000 yards, posting: "2 2k's!!!!"

Henry became the first player to lead the league in rushing in consecutive seasons since LaDaianian Tomlinson in 2006-07. Second-place rusher Dalvin Cook of Minnesota entered the week with 1,557 yards rushing and missed Sunday's game after the death of his father.

Henry, the 2015 Heisman Trophy winner, ran for 1,540 yards last season.

He's the first player in the Super Bowl era to rush for 200 or more yards against the same team in three straight games. He had 212 yards rushing in a Week 6 win against Houston and piled up 211 yards rushing in last year's regular-season finale.

It was the fifth career 200-yard game for Henry, which ranks second behind Adrian Peterson and O.J. Simpson, who have six each.

"He's a great running back," Houston defensive end J.J. Watt said. "He's big. He's fast. He's powerful. He does a good job. We obviously did not do enough to stop him today."

WATT'S FUTURE: Houston defensive end J.J. Watt is under contract for one more season, but has said he doesn't want to be part of a rebuilding team, leading to speculation that he could be traded this offseason.

The three-time NFL Defensive Player of the Year reflected on the possibility that Sunday could be his last time playing in front of the fans he's loved for a decade.

"I've certainly considered it but... there's too many unknowns to really know," he said. "But if it is, it's unfortunate that it wasn't in front of a full stadium ... but I hope they know how I feel about them and how thankful I am and I've tried to do everything I possibly can and give everything I possibly have."

Eagles' Pederson defends decision to bench Hurts

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — The Philadelphia Eagles chose to give a third-string quarterback playing time in a game with playoff implications for other teams.

Coach Doug Pederson benched Jalen Hurts for Nate Sudfeld in the fourth quarter of a 20-14 loss to Washington on Sunday night. The victory gave Washington (7-9) the NFC East title. The New York Giants (6-10) would've won the division crown if Philadelphia (4-11-1) had won.

The decision didn't go over well with Giants players posting their reaction on Twitter. Sudfeld hadn't thrown a pass since 2018 and was picked on his second attempt. He also lost a fumble.

"Yes, I was coaching to win," Pederson said. "Yes, that was my decision solely. Nate has been here four years and I felt he deserved an opportunity to get some snaps."

The loss gave the Eagles the sixth pick in the NFL draft. A victory would've dropped them to the ninth spot.

"Nobody who stepped on that field wanted to lose," said running back Boston Scott. "Nobody lacked energy."

Hurts had a pair of 6-yard touchdown runs to help the Eagles overcome a 10-0 deficit but he misfired on his last pass, a 4-yard toss into the end zone that would've given them a lead late in the third quarter.

Hurts, who took over for Carson Wentz last month, finished 7 of 20 for 72 yards with one interception. His passer rating of 25.4 was the lowest by an Eagles starter since Nick Foles posted a 9.3 rating in the final regular season game in 2017. Foles finished that season as Super Bowl MVP.

"As a competitor, I play to win," Hurts said about getting pulled. "Just trust Coach with that."

Hurts said he knew Pederson had planned to give Sudfeld some snaps.

"I know Coach had a plan to go about it the way he did and stuck to his plan," Hurts said.

The Eagles missed the playoffs for the first time since Pederson's first season in 2016.

They face several decisions in the offseason, starting with their quarterback. Wentz's \$128 million, four-year contract extension kicks in next season. The team would have to absorb a significant cap hit by trading him.

Curry's career-high 62 lift Warriors

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Stephen Curry let it fly from way out under pressure with a minute-plus left for another perfect swish on the way to a career-high 62 points, and the Golden State Warriors beat Portland 137-122 on Sunday night to split the two-game set with the Trail Blazers.

Curry had the highest-scoring game in the NBA this season, finishing 18-for-31 and 8 of 16 on three-pointers. He had his 10th career 30-point half to help the Warriors take a 66-54 at the break.

Damian Lillard scored 32 points for Portland, and CJ McCollum added 28. McCollum shot 2-for-8 from deep after his 25 three-pointers over the initial five games left him and Curry as the only players to ever do so.

After Portland's 25-point win Friday night, the Warriors were embarrassed and

determined to be more aggressive and defend better after the Blazers came out firing to finish 20 of 43 from deep — and they looked more energetic on the defensive end. Portland shot 14 of 43 on threes Sunday.

Lakers 108, Grizzlies 94: LeBron James had 22 points, 13 rebounds and eight assists, Anthony Davis added 17 points and nine rebounds and Los Angeles won the opener of a two-game set in Memphis.

Clippers 112, Suns 107: Paul George scored 39 points and Los Angeles held on to beat host Phoenix after nearly blowing a 31-point lead in a matchup of two of the Western Conference's top early season teams.

Celtics 122, Pistons 120: Jayson Tatum hit a fallaway as Blake Griffin stumbled with 2.9 seconds left, then tied up the Detroit veteran on the other end to help visiting Boston beat the Pistons for a weekend split.

Wizards 123, Nets 122: Bradley Beal had 27 points, 10 rebounds and the assist on Thomas Bryant's go-ahead dunk with 14.9 seconds left, leading Washington past host Brooklyn.

Kyrie Irving and Kevin Durant missed jumpers on the last possession, dropping the Nets to 3-4.

Nuggets 124, Timberwolves 109: Jamal Murray scored a season-high 36 points, Nikola Jokic had 19 points, 12 rebounds and 12 assists for his fourth triple-double of the season and visiting Denver beat Minnesota.

Jazz 130, Spurs 109: Bojan Bogdanovic scored 28 points and Utah made a season-high 21 three-pointers to beat host San Antonio.

Bulls 118, Mavericks 108: Zach LaVine had 39 points and Coby White scored 21 of his 23 points in the second half to lead Chicago past visiting Dallas.

No. 5 Houston rebounds from first loss to beat SMU

Associated Press

DALLAS — Houston coach Kelvin Sampson spent a lot of time at halftime talking to his team about rebounding and being aggressive. The No. 5 Cougars responded.

"The second half, I just liked our execution, I liked the ball movement and I liked our rebounding," Sampson said. "We looked like a Houston basketball team."

Quentin Grimes hit a go-ahead 3-pointer to ignite a 10-0 run to start the second half, and the Cougars rebounded from their first loss with a 74-60 victory over previously undefeated SMU on Sunday night.

The Cougars (8-1, 3-1 American) had 28 of their 45 rebounds after halftime, with 11 offensive boards and 15 second-chance points after the break. Justin Gorham had 13 of his 19 rebounds in that span.

"One of the hallmarks of this team is you stay on the attack, especially on the road," Sampson said. "We scored 21 points (overall) on second-chance points. That's who we are."

SMU coach Tim Jankovich said he was disappointed after spending so much time before the game emphasizing to his Mustangs (6-1, 2-1) how well Houston rebounded.

"That's the reason we lost. It wasn't for no other reason," said Kendrick Davis, SMU's top scorer with 23 points. "We guarded the first shot great. They just got too many of-

fensive rebounds."

That three-pointer by Grimes from the top of the key to put Houston ahead to stay on the first shot after halftime and Justin Gorham then made a three. Grimes also had a layup and two free throws in that game-turning run in just over 2 ½ minutes.

Marcus Sasser led Houston with 17 points. DeJon Jarreau scored 15 points, while Gorham and Grimes had 11 points.

Feron Hunt had 12 points and 12 rebounds for SMU, and Ethan Chargois scored 10 points.

Grimes, Houston's leading scorer at 18.5 points a game and second in the AAC only to Davis' 19.2 coming in, was scoreless with only one shot before halftime, when he played only eight minutes after two early fouls.

No. 16 Michigan 85, No. 19 Northwestern 66: Hunter Dickinson scored 15 of his 19 points in the second half and the host Wolverines remain unbeaten.

Chaundee Brown, Franz Wagner and Eli Brooks scored 14 points apiece for the Wolverines (9-0, 4-0 Big Ten). The Big Ten's last remaining team without a loss, Michigan took control by scoring the last nine points of the first half and then quickly extended its lead early in the second.

Robbie Beran scored 14 points for Northwestern (6-3, 3-2). They have dropped two in a row.

No. 21 Minnesota 77, No. 25 Ohio State 60: Liam Robbins had 27 points, 14 rebounds and five blocks, keeping up his impactful introduction to the Big Ten for the host Gophers in a victory over the Buckeyes.

Robbins, the 7-footer who transferred from Drake and had his eligibility immediately granted by the NCAA, pitched in four assists and two steals in another display of all-around excellence.

Marcus Carr added 15 points, and Gabe Kalscheur had 13 for the Gophers (10-2, 2-2). They emerged with three wins from a 10-day, four-game stretch — all against Top 25 foes.

Duane Washington Jr. had 21 points on 5-for-7 shooting from 3-point range for the Buckeyes (8-3, 2-3).

Army 75, Colgate 73: Aaron Duhart converted a three-point play in the final 45 seconds, and then added another free throw, scoring the last four points as the visiting Black Knights clipped the Raiders less than 24 hours after being blown out by 44 points.

Colgate's Tucker Richardson turned the ball over on an offensive foul with 12 seconds left and Army held on to win.

Lonnie Grayson had 13 points with eight rebounds. Tucker Blackwell added 12 points for the Black Knights, and Jalen Rucker chipped in 11 points and seven assists.