

## US troop numbers in Afghanistan at 2,500

By PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN  
*Stars and Stripes*

The United States has reduced troop levels in Afghanistan to 2,500, the lowest number since the war's earliest months, despite recent passage of a federal law that sought to prevent an immediate drawdown during peace talks with the Taliban.

"The United States is closer than ever to ending nearly two decades of war and welcoming in an Afghan-owned, Afghan-led peace process to achieve a political settlement and a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire," Acting Defense Secretary Christopher Miller said in a statement Friday.

The White House announced in November that the number of U.S. service members in Afghanistan would drop to 2,500 by Friday, and force levels have drawn down gradually since.

The 2021 National Defense Authorization Act prevents the Defense Department from using funds to reduce troops below that of force levels when the law was enacted Jan. 1 without a report to Congress assessing the effects and implications.

Under an agreement Washington signed with the Taliban last year, all international

forces could withdraw from the country by the middle of this year.

The smaller number of U.S. troops — down from roughly 13,000 a year ago — will continue to support NATO's training and advising mission, and a separate counterterrorism mission, U.S. Forces-Afghanistan said.

"This [reduced] force has the appropriate lethality and the U.S. government retains its counterterrorism capacity in Afghanistan," Gen. Scott Miller, the top American commander in the country, said in an emailed statement Monday. "We still have the ability to provide train, advise and assist at ministerial levels and most core levels."

But repeated criticism of the war by Trump, who campaigned on ending it, has led some analysts to question whether the revised figure was based on political motivations rather than conditions on the ground.

"I like the [higher] number much better than 2,500, but there are few iron rules in this business and it's possible we could scrape by at 2,500," Michael O'Hanlon, a defense analyst at the Washington-based Brookings Institution, said in an email. "I'm

not sure I see the point of playing such a numbers game, though."

More than 10 bases closed in 2020, The Washington Post reported in November. Since then, U.S. and NATO forces have also left Camp Dahlke, formerly Forward Operating Base Shank, Afghan army and USFOR-A officials said.

Advocates of a total withdrawal argue that counterterrorism operations can be conducted without basing any troops in Afghanistan, and that the residual number is meaningless.

"Just to be clear, 2,500 [troops], tactically speaking, won't do anything. It won't allow you to eradicate a terrorist presence, all it will do is let you periodically pick off individuals," said Daniel L. Davis, a retired Army lieutenant colonel and senior fellow for Defense Priorities, a right-leaning Washington think tank. "It doesn't do any good to keep one soldier there."

President-elect Joe Biden has yet to announce a detailed plan for Afghanistan but said in an interview last year with CBS News that he supported keeping "several thousand" American troops in the country to fight threats posed by al-Qaida and the local Islamic State affiliate.

## Biden unveils \$1.9T plan to stem virus, help economy

*Associated Press*

WILMINGTON, Del. — President-elect Joe Biden has unveiled a \$1.9 trillion coronavirus plan to end "a crisis of deep human suffering" by speeding up vaccines and pumping out financial help to those struggling with the pandemic's prolonged economic fallout.

Called the "American Rescue Plan," the legislative proposal would meet Biden's goal of administering 100 million vaccines by the 100th day of his administration, and advance his objective of reopening most schools by the spring. On a parallel track, it delivers another round of aid to stabilize the economy while the public health effort seeks the upper hand on the pandemic.

"We not only have an economic imperative to act now — I believe we have a moral

obligation," Biden said in a nationwide address Thursday. At the same time, he acknowledged that his plan "does not come cheaply."

Biden proposed \$1,400 checks for most Americans, which on top of \$600 provided in the most recent COVID-19 bill would bring the total to the \$2,000 that Biden has called for. It would also extend a temporary boost in unemployment benefits and a moratorium on evictions and foreclosures through September. And it shoehorns in long-term Democratic policy aims such as increasing the minimum wage to \$15 an hour, expanding paid leave for workers, and increasing tax credits for families with children. The last item would make it easier for women to go back to work, which in turn would help the economy recover.

The political outlook for the legislation remained unclear. In a joint statement, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer praised Biden for including liberal priorities, saying they would move quickly to pass it after Biden takes office next Wednesday. But Democrats have narrow margins in both chambers of Congress, and Republicans will push back on issues that range from increasing the minimum wage to providing more money for states, while demanding inclusion of their priorities, such as liability protection for businesses.

"Remember that a bipartisan \$900 billion #COVID19 relief bill became law just 18 days ago," tweeted Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas. But Biden says that was only a down payment.

# Top naval officer visits Nimitz group

By JOHN VANDIVER  
*Stars and Stripes*

STUTTGART, Germany — The Navy's top officer visited a warship in the Persian Gulf this week after ongoing tensions with Iran led the Pentagon to extend an aircraft carrier group's deployment to the region.

Adm. Mike Gilday, chief of naval operations, met with members of the Nimitz Carrier Strike Group during his two-day visit and also held talks with officials in Bahrain, home to 5th Fleet headquarters.

"The work they do every day helps us provide security and stability and demonstrates a maritime combat prowess that gives any

potential adversary pause," Gilday said in a statement Thursday after meeting with sailors aboard the USS John Paul Jones, part of the Nimitz group.

Gilday's visit to the region came two weeks after the Pentagon ordered the Nimitz group to stay in the Middle East, reversing an earlier decision to send the carrier home. Acting Defense Secretary Christopher Miller said this was due to threats issued by Iranian leaders against President Donald Trump and other U.S. government officials.

The Nimitz's extended mission coincided with concerns that Iran could target the U.S. military in a revenge attack connected to the

death of Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani, who was killed in a U.S. airstrike last year in Iraq.

"I've spoken with Nimitz Strike Group leadership and they understand the mission, expectations and why they are needed in the region right now," Gilday said.

In recent weeks, the U.S. has been flexing its muscles in the area. On Thursday, Iranian media posted footage that appeared to show a U.S. Navy submarine operating near the Strait of Hormuz, a strategic chokepoint for global oil supplies. Iran's navy also has been displaying its capabilities this week, testing short-range missiles in the Gulf of Oman as it showcased two new warships.

## SEAL pleads guilty in death of Green Beret

*Associated Press*

NORFOLK, Va. — A U.S. Navy SEAL pleaded guilty Thursday to involuntary manslaughter for his role in the hazing death of a U.S. Army Green Beret while the men were stationed in Africa.

Chief Petty Officer Tony DeDolph, a member of the elite SEAL Team 6, also offered a detailed account of the night in which he and other service members initiated a prank known as a "tape job" on Army Staff Sgt. Logan Melgar.

DeDolph told a military judge that the men were trying to teach Melgar a lesson over perceived slights while they served in Mali in 2017. But the SEAL said they were

soon "in a state of shock and deeply disturbed" after the duct-tape-bound Melgar remained unresponsive for several minutes.

DeDolph said his role in the prank was to cause Melgar to temporarily lose consciousness by placing him in a martial-arts-style chokehold. DeDolph said the "rear naked choke" restricts blood flow in the neck and is used in the military.

"I effectively applied the chokehold as I have done numerous times in training, with combatants and has been done to me," DeDolph said.

Melgar lost consciousness in about 10 seconds, but failed to wake up after the typical 30 seconds, the SEAL said.

"Usually by that time, the individual has gotten up," DeDolph said. "And he did not."

DeDolph pleaded guilty inside a military courtroom at a Navy base in Norfolk, Va. He is the third of four U.S. service members — two SEALs and two Marines — to face a court-martial for the death of Melgar, a Texas native.

Besides involuntary manslaughter, DeDolph also pleaded guilty to hazing, conspiracy and obstruction of justice for trying to cover up the cause of Melgar's death. His case moves into the sentencing phase next week, during which prosecutors and defense attorneys can call witnesses before a jury of his peers.

## Aviano airman said to have died from COVID-19

*Stars and Stripes*

A U.S. airman based in Italy has died because of the coronavirus, family and friends say, which would mark the first active-duty death in the Air Force and the fourth such death among active-duty service members.

Aviano Air Base is investigating what caused the death Tuesday of Tech. Sgt. Michael W. Morris, 36, an HH-60 Pave Hawk helicopter craftsman assigned to the 31st Aircraft Maintenance Squadron, U.S. Air Forces in Europe and Air Forces Africa said in a statement.

Morris, of Cass Lake, Minn., was not hospitalized when he died in Cordenons, a town

near Aviano Air Base, officials said Friday.

"The Airmen of the 31st Aircraft Maintenance Squadron at Aviano are deeply saddened by this loss," squadron commander Maj. Christopher Clark said in the statement Thursday. "Mike was well known and highly respected in our community. He was a friend to many and we'll miss him dearly."

The statement provided few details about the death. But in a Facebook post on Thursday, his mother-in-law said he was "taken away from us by the COVID-19 virus."

The base did not immediately provide information about Morris's service history, deployments or military decorations, but Air

Force photos from 2015 show he deployed at least once to Afghanistan, where he served as a rescue helicopter crew chief.

At Aviano, Morris appears to have been with the 56th Helicopter Maintenance Unit. Some of the many Air Force veterans who changed their profile photos to honor Morris posted images of the unit's crest along with green footprints and a black ribbon reading "That Others May Live," the symbol and motto of the service's pararescue community.

Morris is the 16<sup>th</sup> service member to die from complications of the disease. All but three of the others were serving in the reserve or National Guard components.

# DOD orders review of policies on extremism

By COREY DICKSTEIN  
*Stars and Stripes*

Acting Defense Secretary Christopher Miller quietly ordered a review last month of the Pentagon's policies on extremist activities among service members, a senior defense official said Thursday, acknowledging the growing concern of troops harboring extreme views.

Officials in the military services involved in the recruiting and accessions policy and those in the Pentagon's personnel and readiness office are due to draft a report within two months outlining initiatives meant to stamp out extremists or hate group activity in the ranks, the senior defense official said. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to speak about the issue that has gained attention as some current and former service members face scrutiny over their alleged involvement last week in the deadly

storming of the U.S. Capitol.

The review was ordered before Jan. 6, the day that a mob of President Donald Trump's supporters marched on the Capitol building after listening to the president speak near the White House. The senior official and other Pentagon officials declined to comment on the participation of current or former troops in the attack, citing the Justice Department's ongoing investigations. No active-duty troops are known to have been charged with crimes related to the incident, however some military veterans have been charged.

Two senior defense officials said Thursday that Pentagon officials were most concerned with extremist activity among troops and veterans aligned with anti-government militia movements and those who hold white supremacist views.

"We know that some groups

actively attempt to recruit our personnel into their cause, or actually encourage their members to join the military, for purpose of acquiring skills and experience," one official said. "We recognize that [military] skills are prized by some of these groups."

The groups also believe having veterans within their ranks lends some sense of "legitimacy, in their mind, to their cause."

"The fact that they can say they have former military personnel that align with their extremist and violent extremist views, clearly is of great concern to us," this official said.

The Pentagon has a zero-tolerance policy for any extremism among its forces. But some Defense Department officials and members of Congress have been critical of the department's efforts to keep extremists from its ranks. In the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act, which

sets annual Pentagon policy and spending priorities, Congress included measures meant to help the department address the issue. Lawmakers created a new position with the DOD inspector general's office — the deputy inspector general for diversity and inclusion and supremacist, extremism and criminal gang activity. They also charged the inspector general with establishing a "mechanism to track and report" extremist or gang activity in the military.

All troops are screened for indications that they hold extremist views or are involved in extremist activity, Garry Reid, director of Defense Intelligence, said in a statement issued Thursday. He said troops are continuously monitored for indications that they are involved in such activity and received training to identify others around them who could be "insider threats."

## Va. National Guardsmen charged in Capitol riot

By COREY DICKSTEIN  
*Stars and Stripes*

A Virginia Army National Guard soldier faces federal charges for participating in the siege last week of the U.S. Capitol, defense and Justice Department officials said Thursday.

Jacob Fracker, a corporal in the Virginia Guard, was charged Wednesday with one count of knowingly entering or remaining in any restricted building or grounds without lawful authority and one count of violent entry and disorderly conduct on Capitol grounds, officials said. Charging documents state Fracker entered the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6 amid an attack by some supporters of President Donald Trump and he confirmed he participated via social media posts.

Fracker is the first known service member to have been directly involved in the siege of the Capitol or charged in connection

to it.

Fracker is an infantryman who serves in a traditional, part-time National Guard role, said Cotton Puryear, a spokesman for the Virginia Guard. He was not among the some 1,000 Virginia Guard troops activated to support security operations ahead of Biden's Jan. 20 inauguration, Puryear said.

"The Virginia National Guard will conduct an investigation into the matter, and we will be able to release more information when that is complete," Puryear said. He declined to provide additional information about Fracker's Guard service.

In his civilian life, Fracker serves as a police officer in Rocky Mount, Va., according to the Justice Department. He previously served in the Marine Corps and deployed to Afghanistan, a defense official said Thursday.

## Feds: Capitol mob aimed to 'assassinate elected officials'

*Associated Press*

PHOENIX — The pro-Trump mob that stormed the U.S. Capitol last week aimed to "capture and assassinate elected officials," federal prosecutors said in court documents.

The remark came in a motion prosecutors filed late Thursday in the case against Jacob Chansley, the Arizona man who took part in the insurrection while sporting face paint, no shirt and a furry hat with horns.

Prosecutors say that after Chansley climbed up to the dais where Vice President Mike Pence had been presiding moments earlier, Chansley wrote a threatening note to Pence that said: "It's only a matter of time, justice is coming."

Pence and other congressional leaders had been ushered out of the chamber by the Secret Service and U.S. Capitol Police before the rioters stormed into the room.

"Strong evidence, including Chansley's own words and actions at the Capitol, supports that the intent of the Capitol rioters was to capture and assassinate elected officials in the United States Government," prosecutors wrote in their memo urging the judge to keep Chansley behind bars.

Gerald Williams, Chansley's attorney, didn't return a phone call and email Friday morning seeking comment. A detention hearing is scheduled in his case for later Friday.

The FBI has been investigating whether any of the rioters had plots to kidnap members of Congress and hold them hostage, focusing particularly on the men seen carrying plastic zip tie handcuffs and pepper spray.

Chansley, who calls himself the "QAnon Shaman" and has long been a fixture at Trump rallies, surrendered to the FBI field office in Phoenix on Saturday.



# Expanded vaccine rollout in US spawning new problems

Associated Press

The rapid expansion of COVID-19 vaccinations to senior citizens across the U.S. has led to bottlenecks, system crashes and hard feelings in many states because of overwhelming demand for the shots.

Mississippi's Health Department stopped taking new appointments the same day it began accepting them because of a "monumental surge" in requests. People had to wait hours to book vaccinations through a state website or a toll-free number Tuesday and Wednesday, and many were booted off the site because of technical problems and had to start over.

In California, counties begged for more coronavirus vaccine to reach millions of their senior citizens. Hospitals in South Carolina ran out of appointment slots within hours. Phone lines were jammed in Georgia.

"It's chaos," said New York City resident Joan Jeffri, 76, who had to deal with broken hospital web links and unanswered phone

calls before her daughter helped her secure an appointment. "If they want to vaccinate 80% of the population, good luck, if this is the system. We'll be here in five years."

Up until the past few days, health care workers and nursing home patients had been given priority in most places around the U.S. But amid frustration over the slow rollout, states have thrown open the line to many of the nation's 54 million senior citizens with the blessing of President Donald Trump's administration, though the minimum age varies from place to place, at 65, 70 or higher.

On Thursday, New Jersey expanded vaccinations to people between 16 and 65 with certain medical conditions — including up to 2 million smokers, who are more prone to health complications.

More than 11.1 million Americans, or over 3% of the U.S. population, have gotten their first shot of the vaccine, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Thursday.

## Former governor, nine others charged after Flint water probe

Associated Press

FLINT, Mich. — A new investigation of the Flint water disaster led to charges against nine people, including former Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder and key members of his administration, who are accused of various crimes in a calamitous plan that contaminated the community with lead and contributed to a fatal outbreak of Legionnaires' disease, authorities said Thursday.

Nearly seven years after the doomed decision to use the Flint River, pipes at more than 9,700 Flint homes have been replaced and water quality has greatly improved. But prosecutors said it's not too late to pursue people responsible for one of the worst human-made environmental disasters in U.S. history.

It's the second time that six of the nine people have faced charges; their previous cases were dropped in 2019 when a new prosecution team took over. Snyder is the biggest new name in the bunch, though his alleged crimes are not as serious as others:

two misdemeanor counts of willful neglect of duty.

The charges stemmed from evidence presented to Judge David Newblatt, who served as a secret one-person grand jury. All nine defendants pleaded not guilty during a series of brief court appearances.

The indictment alleges that Snyder failed to check the "performance, condition and administration" of his appointees and protect Flint's nearly 100,000 residents when he knew the threat. The Republican served as governor from 2011 through 2018.

Snyder has acknowledged that his administration failed in Flint. But his attorney, Brian Lennon, said a criminal case against him was a "travesty."

Prosecutors charged Earley and another former Flint manager, Gerald Ambrose, with misconduct. Rich Baird, a friend and close adviser to Snyder, was charged with extortion, perjury, obstruction of justice and misconduct. Jarrod Agen, who was Snyder's chief of staff, was charged with perjury.

## N. Korea holds military parade in power brag

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — North Korea displayed new submarine-launched ballistic missiles under development and other military hardware in a parade that underlined leader Kim Jong Un's defiant calls to expand the country's nuclear weapons program.

State media said Kim took center stage in Thursday night's parade celebrating a major ruling party meeting in which he vowed maximum efforts to bolster the nuclear and missile program that threatens Asian rivals and the American homeland to counter what he described as U.S. hostility.

During an eight-day Workers' Party congress that ended Tuesday, Kim also revealed plans to salvage the nation's economy, hit by U.S.-led sanctions over his nuclear ambitions, pandemic-related border closures and natural disasters that wiped out crops.

The economic setbacks have left Kim with nothing to show for his ambitious diplomacy with President Donald Trump, which derailed over disagreements about sanctions relief in exchange for North Korean denuclearization steps, and pushed Kim to what is clearly the toughest moment of his nine-year rule.

Kim's comments are likely intended to pressure the incoming U.S. government of Joe Biden, who has previously called the North Korean leader a "thug" and accused Trump of chasing spectacle rather than meaningful curbs on the North's nuclear capabilities. Kim has not ruled out talks, but said the fate of bilateral relations depends on whether Washington abandons its hostile policy toward North Korea.

North Korean state TV on Friday aired edited footage of the parade which showed thousands of civilians and troops roaring and fireworks exploding overhead as Kim stepped out of a building and took his spot at a podium in Kim Il Sung Square, named after his grandfather and the country's founder.

Reports and video from state media suggested that Kim did not make a speech during the parade.

His defense minister, Kim Jong Gwan, said in a speech that North Korea's military would "pre-emptively marshal our greatest might to thoroughly punish hostiles forces" if they threaten the North's safety.

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

### Man pleads guilty to assaulting flight attendants while in air

**NM** ALBUQUERQUE — A California man has pleaded guilty to assaulting two flight attendants while he was a passenger on a 2019 flight to New Mexico.

Federal prosecutors said Alton James Johnson, 43, of Yuba City, entered his plea Tuesday.

Johnson will remain in custody pending sentencing and prosecutors said he's facing a six-month prison sentence.

The incident occurred on a Dec. 23, 2019, flight from San Diego to Albuquerque.

Johnson was accused of repeatedly touching a female flight attendant up and down her legs.

After she told him to stop, Johnson then grabbed the flight attendant inappropriately.

When a second flight attendant stepped in and asked Johnson not to touch any flight attendants, prosecutors say he forcefully grabbed the second flight attendant by the arm.

### Authorities: Man set off alarm at his home, then fired on deputies

**VA** POWHATAN — Authorities said a Virginia man set off his own home alarm and then fired at deputies who responded to the house to investigate the alarm call.

The house alarm called deputies to the scene, news outlets reported. They arrived after it was set off around 1 a.m. on Wednesday and found the front door of Michael Andrew Layman's home in Powhatan standing open, Powhatan County Chief Deputy Jeffery Searfoss said in a news release.

When the deputies announced their presence, Searfoss said they were fired upon multiple times from outside the house. No one was injured.

More deputies and officers responded to the scene, and the suspect was found inside a structure on adjacent property, authorities said.

Layman, 50, has been charged with two

counts of attempted capital murder of a law enforcement officer and one count of recklessly handling a firearm.

### A drive to this summit is going to cost you

**ME** BAR HARBOR — It's going to take more than a reservation to drive to the top of Acadia National Park's Cadillac Mountain this summer. A proposal would require motorists to pony up \$6 per vehicle.

The reservation system, aimed at reducing vehicle congestion at one of Acadia's most popular attractions, requires reservation holders to drive to the summit at specified times.

The National Park Service has not previously required reservations for the Cadillac summit road, nor has it charged private motorists a fee to do so, the Bangor Daily News reported.

Of the proposed \$6 fee, \$4 would go to the National Park Service and \$2 would go toward the administrative costs of Recreation.gov, which is the online reservation service provider.

The reservation fee would be in addition to the park entrance fee, which varies from \$15 to \$55.

### Police ID woman who abandoned 3 newborn babies since 2016

**FL** ORLANDO — Investigators have identified the biological mother of three newborns who've been found at apartment complexes in the Orlando area since 2016, police said.

Previous DNA testing had confirmed that the babies were siblings, and investigators connected with their mother through additional testing late last year, Orlando police Lt. Frank Chisari told reporters Wednesday morning.

The mother currently has several other children in her care, police said.

Investigators are working with the state attorney's office to determine what charges may be brought against the woman, who police did not publicly identify.

Chisari added that the woman appeared to have abandoned the babies out of "pure desperation."

### Deputy kills mountain lion that followed family on trail

**CA** PLACERVILLE — A sheriff's deputy shot and killed a mountain lion that had been following a family on a bike trail in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada east of Placerville.

The El Dorado County Sheriff's Office said it responded Monday afternoon to a 911 call from a couple with two small children in a stroller and two small dogs.

The adult mountain lion had been following the family for about 10 minutes and was not deterred when the couple and others yelled at it.

A deputy observed the lion pacing back and forth on the trail and also yelled at the animal, but it moved toward the deputy instead of running away, the Sheriff's Office said.

The deputy fired a shot into the ground in front of the lion but it continued toward the deputy, "further showing that it was not well and dangerous to the public," the office said. "The deputy had no option other than to put down the animal."

### Sculpture at development closed to public after 3rd suicide

**NY** NEW YORK — The centerpiece sculpture at a massive development on Manhattan's west side has been closed to the public, and the developer is looking at suicide prevention efforts after three deaths in the past year.

The Vessel, a 150-foot-high sculpture in the shape of an inverted beehive made up of stairways and platforms in the Hudson Yards development that opened in March 2019, has been the site of three suicides, the most recent of which was on Monday.

The New York Times reported Wednesday that Related Cos. was talking to psychiatrists and others about how to reduce the potential for future deaths.

— From wire reports

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# Three NFL teams hope to follow Chiefs

Associated Press

Aside from winning the final Super Bowl before the merger in 1970, the Kansas City Chiefs' biggest claim to fame for over half a century was team founder Lamar Hunt coining the phrase Super Bowl.

Patrick Mahomes changed all of that a year ago when he led a furious fourth-quarter rally that sent the Chiefs to a 31-20 win over San Francisco in Super Bowl 54.

Now, there are Mahomes murals all over town, the city's famous restaurants run specials in his honor and he even has a cereal named after him.

The Chiefs (14-2) are again a top seed and they're one win away from becoming the first team ever to host three consecutive AFC championships. The only NFC team to do that was the Philadelphia Eagles from 2002-04 when Andy Reid was their coach.

Even after an excruciatingly long wait, a franchise's fortunes can change quickly.

Three long-downtrodden teams — the Browns, Bills and Buccaneers — have made it to the divisional round this weekend and are certain they have as good a chance as the Chiefs, Packers, Saints, Ravens or Rams of winning Super Bowl 55.

**Brash Browns:** In Cleveland, a strange season has turned surreal.

The Browns are playing football in January — not searching for a coach or general manager or trying to figure out what to do with one of their high draft picks.

After a nearly two-decade crawl, the Browns (12-5) are among the NFL's elite, one of eight teams remaining with a shot at winning it all. That's heady stuff for a franchise that has never made it to the Super Bowl.

Yet, under first-year coach Kevin Stefanski's steady hand, the Browns have steered around one obstacle after the next and have taken off on a run few imagined.

They won 11 games to make the playoffs for the first time since the 2002 season. Then, with Stefanski unable to make the trip after he tested positive for COVID-19 and missing two other key players and four assistant coaches, the Browns won their first playoff game in 26 years last Sunday by stunning the rival Pittsburgh Steelers at Heinz Field, where so many Cleveland seasons had died previously.

They did it with Stefanski in his basement back home, and they finished off their first playoff road win since 1969 with a

left guard who introduced himself to quarterback Baker Mayfield in the locker room before kickoff.

**Bullish Bills:** Behind Josh Allen and Stefon Diggs, the Bills (15-3) erased plenty of franchise records established by Jim Kelly & Co. back when the Bills won a record four consecutive AFC titles in the 1990s.

"There has been so much stuff that we have said as former players, 'These guys got a damn good football team,'" Hall of Fame running back Thurman Thomas said. "Their defense probably won't hold you to 3 points or whatever, but their offense? Their offense is a problem."

The Bills led the AFC with a 30.3-point scoring average during the season, and they haven't lost since Nov. 15, when DeAndre Hopkins hauled in Kyler Murray's 42-yard Hail Mary as time expired, giving Arizona a 32-30 win.

Allen's 69.2 completion percentage represents an NFL-record jump of 16.4% since his rookie season in 2018.

"But you give him Stefon Diggs and you see what he's made of and how he's gone about his business," Thomas said. "And he has been tremendous. I think Bills fans, including myself, didn't think he was

going to be this good this good this early. And he has proved a lot of people wrong."

**Bold Buccaneers:** The Buccaneers ended the NFC's longest playoff drought with their first playoff berth since 2007 thanks to the arrival of six-time champion Tom Brady in the offseason.

The Buccaneers immediately went from a franchise that spent more than a decade trying to transform themselves into playoff contenders to a club with expectations of becoming the first team to appear in a Super Bowl in their home stadium.

Brady was attracted to a roster featuring a slew of offensive playmakers, including receivers Mike Evans, Chris Godwin and Scotty Miller, running back Ronald Jones and tight ends O.J. Howard and Cameron Brate.

The Bucs then lured Rob Gronkowski out of retirement, upgraded the offensive line by drafting tackle Tristan Wirfs, and signed veterans LeSean McCoy, Leonard Fournette and Antonio Brown to bolster the depth around their 43-year-old quarterback.

Coach Bruce Arians acknowledged before the start of the playoffs that the Bucs won't consider it a successful season unless they win it all.

## Meyer leaves broadcast booth to roam Jags' sideline

Associated Press

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. — Urban Meyer has won everywhere he's coached. Small colleges. Big-time programs. He's been a difference maker at each stop during his storied career.

He's ready to try something new: the NFL.

Meyer agreed to become head coach of the Jacksonville Jaguars on Thursday, leaving the broadcast booth and returning to the sidelines after a two-year absence that followed another

health scare.

The 56-year-old Meyer was team owner Shad Khan's top target for weeks, maybe even months, and the deal was signed shortly after their third and final meeting in seven days. They met last Friday on Khan's yacht in Miami, again Wednesday and once more at the facility Thursday.

Hiring the longtime college coach with three national championships signifies a new direction for a franchise that has lost

105 of 144 games since Khan took over in 2012.

"This is a great day for Jacksonville and Jaguars fans everywhere," Khan said in a statement. "Urban Meyer is who we want and need, a leader, winner and champion who demands excellence and produces results."

"While Urban already enjoys a legacy in the game of football that few will ever match, his passion for the opportunity in front of him here in Jacksonville is powerful and unmistakable."

Meyer went 187-32 — a staggering winning percentage of 85.3 — in stops at Bowling Green (2001-02), Utah (2003-04), Florida (2005-10) and Ohio State (2012-18). He ranks seventh all time in collegiate winning percentage, trailing only Notre Dame legends Knute Rockne and Frank Leahy among coaches at major programs.

Meyer never lost more than five times in any season as a college head coach; he went 83-9 at Ohio State.



# Jets hire 49ers DC Saleh as coach

*Associated Press*

NEW YORK— The New York Jets were searching for a leader, someone who could bring a frustrated, playoff-starved franchise back to respectability.

They think they found their guy in Robert Saleh.

The Jets reached an agreement in principle with the popular and energetic San Francisco 49ers defensive coordinator Thursday night to hire him as their head coach. Saleh replaces Adam Gase, who was fired on Jan. 3 after going 9-23 in two seasons.

The 41-year-old Saleh, believed to be the first Muslim head coach in NFL history, emerged as a favorite for the Jets job when he was brought in for a second -- and this time, in-person -- interview Tuesday night and those discussions ex-

tended into Wednesday. He was the first of the nine known candidates New York interviewed remotely to meet with chairman and CEO Christopher Johnson, team president Hymie Elhai and general manager Joe Douglas at its facility in Florham Park, N.J.

Saleh left the Jets and met with Philadelphia, which fired Doug Pederson on Monday. And New York also had an in-person meeting with Tennessee offensive coordinator Arthur Smith on Wednesday night and Thursday morning.

After Smith left without a deal, New York had internal discussions and opted to hire Saleh.

“YESSS SIRRRRRRRRRR,” an excited defensive tackle Quinnen Williams wrote on Twitter.

Saleh, recognized as an ener-

getic leader who is well liked by his players, had been the 49ers’ defensive coordinator under Kyle Shanahan since 2017, overseeing San Francisco’s defense that ranked No. 2 overall on the way to the Super Bowl last season.

The 49ers ranked fifth in overall defense this season despite season-ending injuries to pass rushers Nick Bosa — the 2019 AP NFL Defensive Rookie of the Year — and Dee Ford, as well as defensive linemen Solomon Thomas and Ezekiel Ansah. While San Francisco missed the playoffs, Saleh’s work with a banged-up and short-handed defense made him a popular candidate among the teams looking for a coach.

“The @nyjets got a great one!” 49ers cornerback Richard Sherman tweeted. “Congrats to them!”

Saleh, the son of Lebanese parents, is the second minority coach to be hired by the Jets in the last six years and first since Todd Bowles, who is Black, in 2015. He’s the fourth active minority coach in the NFL, joining Miami’s Brian Flores, Washington’s Ron Rivera and Pittsburgh’s Mike Tomlin.

Saleh, who first interviewed remotely with the Jets last Friday, also spoke with Detroit, Atlanta, Jacksonville and the Los Angeles Chargers.

New York pounced, though, after Douglas promised the team would “cast a very wide net” in its search. Both Johnson and Douglas spoke about finding a leader, a CEO-type of coach who would oversee the entire operation of the team and help re-establish a culture and identity for the franchise.

## No. 1 Gonzaga downs Pepperdine, stretches streak

*Associated Press*

SPOKANE, Wash. — Top-ranked Gonzaga has been jumping on opponents early this season, leading by an average of more than 20 points at halftime in home games. That didn’t happen against Pepperdine, as the Zags led by just four points at the break.

Corey Kispert had 23 points and eight rebounds as undefeated Gonzaga stormed back in the second half to beat Pepperdine 95-70 on Thursday for its 17th consecutive victory over the last two seasons.

“We’re not just going to blow everybody out in the first half,” Gonzaga coach Mark Few said. “It’s not going to happen.”

Few cited missed shots from close range and turnovers as the cause of Gonzaga’s slow start.

“We missed a lot of little shots around the rim early,” Few said. “We were trying to make something out of nothing.”

He also said: “We are not used to turning the ball over 18 times.”

Gonzaga shot 61% in the second half and outscored the Waves 52-31 to win its 46th consecutive home game, the longest streak in the nation.

Drew Timme scored 20 points, Joel Ayayi 19 and Jalen Suggs 18 for Gonzaga (13-0, 4-0 West Coast), which has defeated Pepperdine in 40 straight games dating to 2002. That includes 23 straight wins in Spokane.

Kessler Edwards scored 14 points and Kene Chukwuka 11 for Pepperdine (4-6, 0-1), which was playing its first game since Dec. 23 because of COVID-19 protocols.

Pepperdine hounded Gonzaga into 36% shooting in the first 12 minutes of the game and trailed just 23-21.

Sedrick Altman’s basket gave the Waves a 26-25 lead, but

Suggs completed a three-point play to ignite a 16-4 run that put Gonzaga up 41-30.

Edwards replied with consecutive three-pointers and Darryl Polk added a three-pointer at the buzzer as Pepperdine cut Gonzaga’s lead to 43-39 at halftime.

Ayayi had 14 points and four steals at the half for Gonzaga.

Gonzaga went on a 15-4 run midway through the second to take a 65-48 lead with 11 minutes left. The Waves made only 4 of 17 shots to open the second half and could not close the gap.

Timme, who finished with seven rebounds and four assists, was particularly solid in the second half.

“He was pretty sloppy in the first half,” Few said. “He missed three, four, five shots right around the rim.”

Pepperdine coach Lorenzo Romar said his team did some good things against a great op-

ponent.

“They had 18 turnovers and I thought we were active defensively in the first half,” Romar said. “In the second half, we came out and didn’t have the same look. Whether we used it all up in the first half, I don’t know. But it was a tale of two halves for sure.”

### Random stats

The Bulldogs are 95-0 against West Coast Conference teams not named Saint Mary’s or BYU since 2014.

Gonzaga has a 51.8% chance of going unbeaten in the regular season, according to KenPom.

### Front runner

In the first 12 games (480 minutes), Gonzaga trailed for just 27 minutes, 14 seconds, most of that against West Virginia.

### Poll implications

A win at Saint Mary’s on Saturday would likely keep the Zags on top of the Top 25.

# Rockets win first game since Harden trade

Associated Press

SAN ANTONIO — Christian Wood had 27 points and 15 rebounds and the Houston Rockets rallied to beat the San Antonio Spurs 109-105 on Thursday night in their first game since trading franchise cornerstone James Harden.

Sterling Brown, who took Harden's spot in the starting lineup, had 23 points, seven rebounds and three assists in 36 minutes.

Spurs forward Keldon Johnson had a career-high 29 points, and Lonnie Walker IV added 16 points.

Houston was playing its first game since sending Harden to the Brooklyn Nets in a four-team blockbuster trade Wednesday. Victor Oladipo, Dante Exum and Rodions Kurucs, who the Rockets acquired along with numerous draft picks and draft swaps for Harden, are not with the

team yet. The Rockets also were without John Wall and Eric Gordon due to injuries. The upheaval led to more minutes for the remaining roster, and they took advantage of it.

The teams will meet again Saturday in San Antonio.

**Nuggets 114, Warriors 104:** Nikola Jokic scored 18 of his 23 points in the second half to help host Denver overcome Golden State star Stephen Curry's blazing shooting.

Jokic also had 14 rebounds and 10 assists for his 46th career triple-double. The big man entered the game averaging a triple-double and leading the NBA in assists.

Will Barton and Jamal Murray each added 17 points.

Curry finished with 35 points on 14-for-23 shooting. He hit five three-pointers to give him 2,545 for his career. Curry is 15 from tying Reggie

Miller for second place on the league's career list. Miller eagerly counted down Curry's made threes throughout the TNT broadcast. Ray Allen is first with 2,973.

**Pacers 111, Trail Blazers 87:** Domantas Sabonis had 23 points and 15 rebounds to lead visiting Indiana past Portland.

Malcolm Brogdon added 25 points and seven assists for the Pacers. They improved to 4-1 on the road this season and snapped an 11-game losing streak in Portland. Indiana led by 25 in the second quarter and maintained a double-digit advantage the rest of the way.

CJ McCollum and Damian Lillard each scored 22 points for Portland. Center Jusuf Nurkic fractured his right wrist in the third quarter.

**76ers 125, Heat 108:** Shake Milton scored 31 points, and Ben Simmons had 10 points, 10 assists and 12 re-

bounds to help host Philadelphia beat Miami.

The Sixers swept the two-game home set against a Heat team that continues to play with a depleted roster because of COVID-related issues. Jimmy Butler, Bam Adebayo and Goran Dragic sat out, and the Heat were roughed up early by Milton, Tyrese Maxey and Tobias Harris.

Duncan Robinson led the Heat with 22 points. Gabe Vincent had 21.

**Raptors 111, Hornets 108:** At Tampa, Fla., Chris Boucher had 25 points and 10 rebounds, Kyle Lowry had 16 points and 12 assists, and Toronto beat Charlotte.

Pascal Siakam added 15 points and seven rebounds to help Toronto improve to 3-8.

Terry Rozier led the Hornets with 22 points, and P.J. Washington had 20 points and 11 rebounds.

## Capitals down Sabres in Laviolette's debut as coach

Associated Press

BUFFALO, N.Y. — T.J. Oshie had a goal and two assists and Washington made a winner of coach Peter Laviolette in his Capitals' debut, beating the Buffalo Sabres 6-4 on Thursday night.

Jakub Vrana stripped Eric Staal of the puck in front of Buffalo's net and scored 46 seconds into the third period to preserve the victory after the Capitals were in jeopardy of squandering a 4-1 lead. Vrana's goal came 26 seconds after defenseman Jake McCabe cut Buffalo's deficit to 4-3 by scoring on a shot from the right point.

**Islanders 4, Rangers 0:** Anders Lee scored two goals and joined Brock Nelson and Mathew Barzal with first-period scores as the Islanders beat the Rangers at Madison Square Garden.

Semyon Varlamov stopped 24

shots for his 28th career shutout and third with the Islanders.

**Bruins 3, Devils 2 (SO):** Brad Marchand had a goal and an assist, then scored the only goal in the shootout to lift visiting Boston, spoiling Lindy Ruff's debut as New Jersey's coach.

Marchand scored a power-play goal and set up another by Nick Ritchie for the Bruins.

**Hurricanes 3, Red Wings 0:** Nino Niederreiter scored early in the first period and Petr Mrazek made 14 saves for a shutout, helping visiting Carolina beat Detroit.

Ryan Dzingel scored on a power play with 2:34 left and Andrei Svechnikov added an empty-net goal.

**Predators 3, Blue Jackets 1:** Filip Forsberg scored the tie-breaking goal at 5:48 of the third period to lead host Nashville over Columbus.

Luke Kunin and Calle Jarnk-

rok also scored for the Predators.

**Jets 4, Flames 3 (OT):** Patrik Laine scored his second goal of the game in overtime to give host Winnipeg a victory over Calgary in the opener for both teams.

The Finnish winger scored 1:18 into extra time, using speed to create space before beating goalie Jacob Markstrom in tight.

**Sharks 4, Coyotes 3 (OT):** Martin Jones stopped Clayton Keller in a shootout and visiting San Jose bounced back after Arizona's Phil Kessel scored with 3.2 seconds left in regulation.

Tomas Hertl had two goals and an assist for San Jose. Kane added a goal and two assists.

**Oilers 5, Canucks 2:** Connor McDavid had a hat trick and an assist, Ryan Nugent-Hopkins scored twice and added an assist and host Edmonton beat Van-

couver.

Leon Draisaitl, the NHL's top scorer last season, had four assists to help the Oilers rebound from a 5-3 loss to the Canucks a night earlier in the opener for both teams.

**Golden Knights 5, Ducks 2:** Mark Stone scored the tiebreaking goal early in the third period, Robin Lehner made 20 saves and host Vegas beat Anaheim in the teams' opener.

The Golden Knights improved to 9-2-2 against Anaheim since entering the league in 2017.

**Wild 4, Kings 3:** Kirill Kaprizov scored his first NHL goal with 1:13 remaining in overtime and finished with three points as visiting Minnesota rallied to beat Los Angeles.

The 23-year-old Russian scored on a breakaway, putting the puck past Los Angeles goaltender Jonathan Quick.