

Racism a personal issue for DOD chief

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Newly confirmed Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin will have to contend not only with a world of security threats and a massive military bureaucracy, but also with a challenge that hits closer to home: rooting out racism and extremism in the ranks.

Austin took office Friday as the first Black defense chief, in the wake of the deadly insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, where retired and current military members were among the rioters touting far-right conspiracies.

The retired four-star Army general told senators that the Pentagon's job is to "keep America safe from our enemies. But we can't do that if some of those enemies lie within our own ranks."

Ridding the military of racists isn't his only priority. Austin, who was confirmed in a 93-2 vote, has made clear that accelerating delivery of coronavirus vaccines will get his early attention.

But the racism issue is personal. At Tuesday's confirmation hearing, he explained why.

In 1995, when then-Lt. Col. Austin was serving with the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, N.C., three white soldiers, described as self-styled skinheads, were arrested in the murder of a Black couple who was walking down the street. Investigators concluded the two were targeted because of

their race.

The killing triggered an internal investigation, and all told, 22 soldiers were linked to skinhead and other similar groups or found to hold extremist views. They included 17 who were considered white supremacists or separatists.

"We woke up one day and discovered that we had extremist elements in our ranks," Austin told the Senate Armed Services Committee. "And they did bad things that we certainly held them accountable for. But we discovered that the signs for that activity were there all along. We just didn't know what to look for or what to pay attention to."

Austin is not the first secretary to grapple with the problem. Racism has long been an undercurrent in the military.

A recent Air Force inspector general report found that Black service members in the Air Force are far more likely to be investigated, arrested, face disciplinary actions and be discharged for misconduct.

Over the past year, Pentagon leaders have struggled to make changes, hampered by opposition from then-President Donald Trump. It took months for the department to effectively ban the Confederate flag last year, and Pentagon officials left to Congress the matter of renaming military bases that honor Confederate leaders. Trump rejected renaming the bases and defended flying the flag.

Senators peppered Austin with questions

about extremism in the ranks and his plans to deal with it. The hearing was held two weeks after lawmakers fled the deadly insurrection at the Capitol, in which many of the rioters espoused separatist or extremist views.

Austin, who broke racial barriers throughout his four decades in the Army, said military leaders must set the right example to discourage and eliminate extremist behavior. They must get to know their troops, and look for signs of extremism or other problems, he said.

But Austin — the first Black man to serve as head of U.S. Central Command and the first to be the Army's vice chief of staff — also knows that much of the solution must come from within the military services and lower-ranking commanders. They must ensure their troops are trained and aware of the prohibitions.

"Most of us were embarrassed that we didn't know what to look for and we didn't really understand that by being engaged more with your people on these types of issues can pay big dividends," he said, recalling the 82nd Airborne problems. "I don't think that you can ever take your hand off the steering wheel here."

But he also cautioned that there won't be an easy solution, adding, "I don't think that this is a thing that you can put a Band-Aid on and fix and leave alone. I think that training needs to go on, routinely."

Trump impeachment trial to begin week of Feb. 8

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Opening arguments in the Senate impeachment trial for Donald Trump over the Capitol riot will begin the week of Feb. 8, the first time a former president will face such charges after leaving office.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer announced the schedule Friday evening after reaching an agreement with Republicans, who had pushed for a delay to give Trump a chance to organize his legal team and prepare a defense on the sole charge of incitement of insurrection.

The February start date also allows the Senate more time to confirm President Joe Biden's Cabinet nominations and consider his proposed \$1.9 trillion COVID relief package — top priorities of the new White House agenda that could become stalled during trial proceedings.

"We all want to put this awful chapter in our nation's history behind us," Schumer said about the deadly Jan. 6 Capitol siege by a mob of pro-Trump supporters.

"But healing and unity will only come if there is truth and accountability. And that is what this trial will provide."

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi will send the article of impeachment late Monday, with senators sworn in as jurors Tuesday. But opening arguments will move to February.

Trump's impeachment trial would be the first of a U.S. president no longer in office, an undertaking that his Senate Republican allies argue is pointless, and potentially even unconstitutional. Democrats say they have to hold Trump to account, even as they pursue Biden's legislative priorities, because of the gravity of what took place — a violent attack on the U.S. Congress aimed at overturning an election.

Guard may stay in DC into March

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

Several thousand National Guard troops could remain in Washington, D.C., to bolster security through mid-March under a plan that the National Guard Bureau is developing with federal law enforcement officials, a Guard spokeswoman said Friday.

Up to 7,000 National Guard troops could remain in D.C. through March 12, said Nahaku McFadden, a spokeswoman for the National Guard Bureau. The troops would come from volunteers among the about 25,600 forces rushed into the nation's capital in recent weeks to secure the city for President Joe Biden's inauguration on Wednesday, two weeks after the Jan. 6 attack on the

U.S. Capitol.

The plan to extend some troops' deployments comes at the request of federal law enforcement officials, including the Secret Service, which led to planning for inauguration-related security, officials said. The intent to extend deployments beyond the end of January, as initially planned, comes as officials fear the potential for more violence in the wake of the storming of the Capitol by a mob of former President Donald Trump's supporters. Five people died, including one Capitol police officer, in the melee.

McFadden said troops deployed to Washington would not be required to remain in D.C. Those who volunteer to support the longer operation will have their initial 31-

day mobilizations orders modified.

The nearly 26,000 Guard troops sent into D.C. ahead of Biden's inauguration came from all 50 states and four U.S. territories, McFadden said. Guard troops — some armed at the Capitol — faced no security incidents during the inauguration nor at any other time since Jan. 6, she said.

Troops were spread across the city, with some manning traffic checkpoints and others standing watch around the Capitol complex, the National Mall and the White House. Most remained in place through Friday, officials said.

About 15,000 of those troops were slated to begin returning home this weekend, Guard officials said Thursday.

Dems rein in immigration bill expectations

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — It's taken only days for Democrats gauging how far President Joe Biden's bold immigration proposal can go in Congress to acknowledge that if anything emerges, it will likely be significantly more modest.

As they brace to tackle a politically flammable issue that's resisted major congressional action since the 1980s, Democrats are using words like "aspirational" to describe Biden's plan and "herculean" to express the effort they'll need to prevail.

A similar message came from the White House Friday when press secretary Jen Psaki said the new administration hopes Biden's plan will be "the base" of immigration discussions in Congress. Democrats' cau-

tious tones underscored the fragile road they face on a paramount issue for their minority voters, progressives and activists.

The citizenship process in Biden's plan would take as little as three years for some people, eight years for others. The proposal would make it easier for certain workers to stay in the U.S. temporarily or permanently, provide development aid to Central American nations in hopes of reducing immigration and move toward bolstering border screening technology.

No. 2 Senate Democratic leader Richard Durbin of Illinois said in an interview this week that the likeliest package to emerge would create a path to citizenship for so-called Dreamers. They are immigrants who've lived in the U.S. most of their lives af-

ter being brought here illegally as children.

"We understand the political reality of a 50-50 Senate, that any changes in immigration will require cooperation between the parties," said Durbin, who is on track to become Senate Judiciary Committee chairman. He said legislation produced by the Senate likely "will not reach the same levels" as Biden's proposal.

The Senate is split evenly between the two parties, with Vice President Kamala Harris tipping the chamber in Democrats' favor with her tie-breaking vote. Even so, major legislation requires 60 votes to overcome filibusters, or endless procedural delays, in order to pass. That means 10 Republicans would have to join all 50 Democrats to enact an immigration measure, a tall order.

State probes LA County Sheriff's Department

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department is under investigation for potential civil rights violations as state officials determine whether deputies have engaged in a pattern or practice of unconstitutional policing, California Attorney General Xavier Becerra announced Friday.

The nation's largest sheriff's department, with nearly 18,000 deputies and civilian

staff, has been roiled by allegations in recent months regarding fatal shootings, excessive force, deputy gangs, retaliation and other misconduct. Community activists have organized protests calling for independent investigations as Sheriff Alex Villanueva has repeatedly resisted the Board of Supervisors' attempts at oversight even as a county-appointed watchdog group called for his resignation.

While Becerra would not identify any specific incidents, the attorney general urged Los Angeles County residents to report potential abuses to his office. Though Becerra stressed that the probe is civil in nature and not a criminal investigation, he said his investigators had reviewed enough reports and evidence to reach a point where "we believed it was necessary to move forward" with a formal review.

Arizona begins legal marijuana sales

Associated Press

PHOENIX— Legal sales of recreational marijuana in Arizona started on Friday, a once-unthinkable step in the former conservative stronghold that joins 14 other states that have broadly legalized pot.

The state Health Services Department on Friday announced it had approved 86 licenses in nine of the state's 15 counties under provisions of the marijuana legalization measure passed by voters in November. Most of the licenses went to existing medical marijuana dispensaries that can start selling pot right away.

"It's an exciting step for those that want to participate in that program," said Dr. Cara Christ, Arizona's state health director, on Friday.

Under the terms of Proposition 207, peo-

ple 21 and older can grow their own plants and legally possess up to an ounce of marijuana or a smaller quantity of "concentrates" such as hashish. Possession of between 1 ounce and 2.5 ounces is a petty offense carrying a maximum \$300 fine.

The march toward decriminalization in the Sun Belt state was long. Approval of the legalization measure came four years after Arizona voters narrowly defeated a similar proposal, although medical marijuana has been legal in the state since 2010.

The initiative faced stiff opposition from Republican Gov. Doug Ducey and GOP leaders in the state Legislature, but 60% of the state's voters in the November election approved it.

The vote on marijuana reflected larger trends at play during the historic election

that saw Democrat Joe Biden flip the long-time Republican state where political giants include five-term conservative senator Barry Goldwater and the late GOP Sen. John McCain.

Changing demographics, including a fast-growing Latino population and a flood of new residents, have made the state friendlier to Democrats.

The recreational pot measure was backed by advocates for the legal marijuana industry and criminal justice reform advocates who argued that the state's harsh marijuana laws were out of step with the nation. Arizona was the only state in the country that still allowed a felony charge for first-time possession of small amounts of marijuana, although most cases were prosecuted as lower-level misdemeanors.

Protests erupt in cities across Russia over Navalny

Associated Press

MOSCOW — Protests erupted in cities across Russia on Saturday to demand the release of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, the Kremlin's most prominent foe.

Police arrested more than 2,100 people, some of whom took to the streets in temperatures as frigid -58 Fahrenheit.

In Moscow, thousands of demonstrators filled Pushkin Square in the city center, where clashes with police broke out and demonstrators were roughly dragged off by helmeted riot officers to police buses and detention trucks, some beaten with batons.

Navalny's wife Yulia was among those arrested.

Police eventually pushed demonstrators out of the square. Thousands then re-

grouped along a wide boulevard about a half-mile away, many of them throwing snowballs at the police.

The protests stretched across Russia's vast territory, from the island city of Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk north of Japan and the eastern Siberian city of Yakutsk, where temperatures plunged far below zero, to Russia's more populous European cities.

The range demonstrated how Navalny and his anti-corruption campaign have built an extensive network of support despite official government repression and being routinely ignored by state media.

"The situation is getting worse and worse, it's total lawlessness," said Andrei Gorkyov, a protester in Moscow. "And if we stay silent, it will go on forever."

The OVD-Info group that monitors political arrests said at least 795 people were detained in Moscow and more than 300 at another large demonstration in St. Petersburg. Overall, it said 2,131 people had been arrested in some 90 cities.

Undeterred, Navalny's supporters called for protests again next weekend.

Navalny was arrested on Jan. 17 when he returned to Moscow from Germany, where he had spent five months recovering from a severe nerve-agent poisoning that he blames on the Kremlin and which Russian authorities deny. Authorities say his stay in Germany violated terms of a suspended sentence in a 2014 criminal conviction, while Navalny says the conviction was for made-up charges.

Winning ticket of \$1B lottery prize sold in Michigan

Associated Press

DES MOINES, Iowa — One winning ticket was sold in Michigan for the \$1 billion Mega Millions jackpot, making it the third-largest lottery prize in U.S. history.

The winning numbers drawn Friday are: 4, 26, 42, 50, 60 and a Mega Ball of 24. The winning ticket was purchased at a Kroger store in Novi, Mich. — a city about 8 miles northwest of Detroit — according to the Michigan Lottery website.

The Mega Millions top prize had been

growing since Sept. 15, when a winning ticket was sold in Wisconsin. The lottery's next estimated jackpot is \$20 million.

Friday night's drawing comes two days after a ticket sold in Maryland matched all six numbers drawn and won a \$731.1 million Powerball jackpot.

Only two lottery prizes in the U.S. have been larger than Friday's jackpot. Three tickets for a \$1.586 billion Powerball jackpot were sold in January 2016, and one winning ticket sold for a \$1.537 billion Mega Millions

jackpot in October 2018.

The jackpot figures refer to amounts if a winner opts for an annuity, paid in 30 annual installments. Most winners choose a cash prize, which for the Mega Millions jackpot is \$739.6 million.

The odds of winning a Mega Millions jackpot are incredibly steep at one in 302.5 million.

The game is played in 45 states as well as Washington, D.C., and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Key Calif. virus data out of public eye

Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — California Gov. Gavin Newsom has from the start said his coronavirus policy decisions would be driven by data shared with the public to provide maximum transparency.

But with the state starting to emerge from its worst surge, his administration won't disclose key information that will help determine when his latest stay-at-home order is lifted.

State health officials said they rely on a very complex set of measurements that would confuse and potentially mislead the public if they were made public.

Dr. Lee Riley, chairman of the University of California, Berkeley School of Public Health infectious disease division, disagreed.

"There is more uncertainty created by NOT releasing the data that only the state has access to," he said in an email. Its release would allow outside experts to assess its value for projecting trends and the resulting decisions on lifting restrictions, he wrote.

Newsom, a Democrat, imposed the nation's first statewide shutdown in March. His administration developed reopening plans that included benchmarks for virus data such as per capita infection rates that counties needed to meet to relax restrictions.

As cases surged after Thanksgiving, Newsom tore up his playbook. Rather than a county-by-county approach, he created five regions and established a single measurement — ICU capacity — as the determination for whether a region was placed under a stay-at-home order.

In short order, four regions — about 98% of the state's population — were under the restrictions after their capacity fell below the 15% threshold. A map updated daily tracks each region's capacity.

At the start of last week, no re-

gions appeared likely to have the stay-at-home order lifted soon because their capacity was well below 15%. But within a day, the state announced it was lifting the order for the 13-county Greater Sacramento area.

Local officials and businesses were caught off guard. State officials did not describe their reasoning other than to say it was based on a projection for ICU capacity.

State officials projected future capacity using a combination of models. "At the moment the projections are not being shared publicly," Department of Public Health spokeswoman Ali Bay said in an email to The Associated Press.

Connecticut

HARTFORD — COVID-19-related hospitalizations in Connecticut continued to decrease Friday as a growing number of people have received their first dose of the vaccine.

There were 1,058 people hospitalized, a decrease of 11 since Thursday. Hartford County has the largest number of patients, with 325. It was followed by 308 in New Haven County and 250 in Fairfield County.

Democratic Gov. Ned Lamont called the state's recent trend of declining hospitalizations "extraordinarily good news" during a media briefing on Thursday.

"We're watching the metrics carefully," he said, "but we are continuing to make progress, I think, every day."

Illinois

SPRINGFIELD — Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker announced Friday that the state's COVID-19 vaccination program would expand next week to include the second tier of priority recipients.

More than 616,000 first doses of the two-round vaccine have been administered, although inoculations for a priority popula-

tion — residents of long-term care facilities — lag behind, Pritzker said during a briefing in Chicago on the coronavirus pandemic. Pritzker said while shots for the first phase continue, officials will sign up for the next lot, referred to as Phase 1b.

The state is closely following vaccine-priority recommendations of a committee of the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Nevada

RENO — A rural Nevada church wants the U.S. Supreme Court to weigh in on a legal battle over the government's authority to limit the size of religious gatherings amid the COVID-19 pandemic even after the church won an appeals court ruling that found Nevada's restrictions unconstitutional.

Attorneys general from 19 other states recently joined the Calvary Chapel Dayton Valley near Reno in urging the Supreme Court to rule on the merits of the Nevada case to help bring uniformity to various standards courts across the country have used to balance the interests of public safety and freedom of religion.

The 9th Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco ruled in favor of the church last month, finding it was unconstitutional for Nevada to treat casinos and other businesses more favorably than churches.

Oklahoma

OKLAHOMA CITY — Oklahoma is seeing promising declines in the number of people testing positive and being hospitalized with the coronavirus, but the state's death count continues to climb, state health officials said Friday.

Because it can take several weeks to confirm a death was caused by COVID-19, the disease caused by the virus, many of the deaths reported this week are the result of a spike in cases

that were reported after Thanksgiving and into the Christmas holidays, State Epidemiologist Dr. Jared Taylor said.

"Given that lag in reporting, I anticipate we will continue to see these higher death tolls for probably a week or longer," Taylor said.

Texas

AUSTIN — A raging coronavirus outbreak in Laredo, now one of the biggest hotspots in the U.S., is leading to hundreds of new cases a day around the border city as Texas again reported more than 400 new COVID-19 deaths Friday.

The more than 8,900 new cases reported in Webb County, which includes Laredo, over the past two weeks is one of the highest per-capita outbreaks in the country, according to data from John Hopkins University. Gov. Greg Abbott announced Friday that more medical personnel and equipment would be sent to Laredo, where roughly half of all hospital beds are occupied by patients with COVID-19 — the highest rate of anywhere in the state.

Washington

SEATTLE — A suburban Seattle man who advertised a supposed COVID-19 "vaccine" he said he created in his personal lab, was arrested Thursday by federal authorities.

Johnny T. Stine, 56, faces a misdemeanor charge of introducing misbranded drugs into interstate commerce in that case and could face up to one year in prison if convicted, KUOW reported. It wasn't immediately known if he has a lawyer to comment on his case.

In March 2020, Stine advertised injections of the supposed vaccine for \$400 on his personal Facebook page, according to Brian T. Moran, the U.S. Attorney for the Western District of Washington.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

City council approves law for home delivery of alcohol

NV LAS VEGAS— Las Vegas city residents will be able to dial for drink deliveries at home under a new law approved by the City Council.

The measure lets restaurants and convenience stores deliver alcohol through third-party services. It was cast as a boost for businesses struggling with coronavirus pandemic restrictions.

The bill requires stores and restaurants to have licenses to sell alcoholic beverages for off-premise consumption and an ancillary license, and for third-party services to obtain a new \$4,000 delivery license.

Officials uncover plot to smuggle tobacco into jail

WA BELLINGHAM — A man was arrested after corrections deputies reportedly uncovered a plot to smuggle tobacco to inmates inside the Whatcom County Jail.

Steven Lee Dodson, 42, was booked into the jail on suspicion of third-degree introducing contraband and driving with a suspended license.

Deputies monitored nine phone calls made from inmate Cody Lee Wilson, 32, to an unknown person outside the jail.

During the calls, details about when and where the accomplice would meet Wilson's connection and details about how it would be smuggled into the jail were discussed, officials said.

Confederate statue damaged, nose is missing

LA LAFAYETTE — A monument of Confederate Gen. Alfred Mouton in Louisiana was damaged, with several holes punctured from its head to jaw and half of its nose taken off and missing.

The monument is owned by the city and there have been efforts to get it moved. But The United Daughters of the Confederacy, which erected the monument in 1922, opposes that and is claiming in court the city does not have the rights to move the statue.

Gen. Mouton, who was born in 1829 in Opelousas, was the son of former Louisiana Gov. Alexandre Mouton. He, along with his father, helped train a "Vigilante Committee" who whipped and lynched Black people in Lafayette Parish, the Daily Advertiser newspaper said.

Teen accused of stealing nearly \$1M from Kroger

GA DULUTH — A suburban Atlanta teenager was arrested on charges that he defrauded a supermarket where he worked of nearly \$1 million over a two-week period.

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution reported that Tre Brown, 19, was arrested by Gwinnett County police on charges of felony theft.

Gwinnett County police spokesman Cpl. Collin Flynn said Brown stole more than \$980,000 over two weeks in December and January by fabricating more than 40 returns for non-existent items.

High-speed interstate pursuit across state lines leads to arrest

SD CHANCELLOR — An Iowa man was behind bars in South Dakota after a pursuit that crossed state lines and reached speeds of more than 100 mph.

The incident started when deputies with the Lyon County Sheriff's Office in Iowa started pursuing a stolen vehicle. The pursuit entered Lincoln County and the South Dakota deputies there were asked to take over.

It lasted for several miles in Lincoln County with speeds reaching 110 mph, authorities said.

The man, 25, from Spencer was arrested on tentative charges including possession of stolen property and drunken driving.

1st female mayor to serve in city's 160-year history

UT ST. GEORGE — For the first time since the city of St. George was founded in 1861, a woman will serve as mayor.

City councilwoman Michele Randall was appointed mayor of St. George in a four-to-

one vote, the Spectrum newspaper reported.

She will serve the 11 months remaining in the term of mayor Jon Pike, who stepped down Jan. 4 to run the Utah Insurance Department under newly-elected Gov. Spencer Cox.

Randall intends to run for a full four-year term in the upcoming municipal election in November.

6 Canada geese shot, dumped along river

ID BOISE — Idaho Fish and Game said officers found six Canada geese dumped along the Snake River on Jan. 16. These birds were dumped in the same spot that nine other geese were found in late December, CBS2 News reported.

Both times officers found the birds completely intact with no meat taken off.

"This is a blatant case of wasting game, which is very disturbing, especially if this is the same individual or individuals who are responsible," said Senior Conservation Officer Aaron Andruska.

Man accused of threats to police arrested on weapons charges

MN ST. PAUL — A Minnesota man who allegedly bragged about planning to kill a police officer at a pro-Trump rally in St. Paul was accused in federal court of trying to sell an undercover agent a sawed-off shotgun.

A federal complaint stated that Dayton Sauke, 22, of Owatonna, had been offering to sell illegal firearms on Snapchat for months and he posted about plans to kill a law enforcement officer at a Trump event. Sauke told agents he sold 120 firearms last year, the complaint said.

Sauke is charged with one count of possession of an unregistered short-barreled shotgun.

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Packers say Rodgers compares to Brady

Associated Press

Aaron Rodgers' Green Bay Packers teammates understand what this NFC championship game means to the All-Pro quarterback's legacy.

Rodgers has delivered the kind of season that puts him in contention for a third MVP honor, which would match the total won by Tampa Bay Buccaneers quarterback Tom Brady.

The Super Bowl count between the two NFC championship game quarterbacks is more one-sided. Brady won six Super Bowl titles and appeared in nine overall while starring for the New England Patriots. Rodgers led the Packers to a Super Bowl crown in the 2010 season, but hasn't brought them back since.

"You look at Brady and everybody wants to make that comparison forever, but it's basically turned into a quarterback stat: Super Bowls," Packers All-Pro wide receiver Davante Adams said.

"If that's what it's going to be, then obviously we're going to

put as much as we can on ourselves to try to help him get there and, ultimately, relieve him of the Super Bowls being a thing that hinder him from being the GOAT (greatest of all time). In my mind, he's the GOAT, regardless of how many Super Bowls are won."

Rodgers' brilliant season has included just one outright dud. It occurred the previous time these two teams met.

Green Bay led Tampa Bay 10-0 early in the second quarter back on Oct. 18 until Jamel Dean scored on a 32-yard interception return. Rodgers' next pass was picked off by Mike Edwards and returned 38 yards to the Green Bay 2-yard line, setting up another touchdown.

After the Packers lost 38-10, Rodgers called the performance a wakeup call and kick in the rear for an offense that had moved the ball virtually at will up to that point.

The Packers haven't been held below 22 points since. They'll be chasing their eighth consecutive victory when the

Packers (14-3) host the Bucs (13-5) on Sunday.

"We've been playing the right way, and I feel like the way we've been winning has been better than early in the season," Rodgers said. "We've been playing a lot better on both sides of the ball."

The performance at Tampa Bay was out of character for someone who protects the ball so well.

Rodgers completed 45.7% of his passes for 160 yards with two interceptions and no touchdowns that day. In the Packers' other 16 games, he has completed 71.9% of his passes for 4,435 yards with 50 touchdowns and three interceptions.

He has been picked off just five times in 562 pass attempts this season (526 in the regular season, 36 in a playoff victory over the Los Angeles Rams). His only other multi-interception game over the past three seasons came when he was picked off twice in last year's NFC championship game loss at San Francisco.

"When you throw five interceptions and throw the ball 526 times, that's amazing," said Rich Gannon, a former NFL quarterback who now works for CBS Sports.

"You're going to get the ball tipped, deflected. Balls are going to go through the hands of a receiver. Something bad going's to happen. Yet he's thrown five picks. I think in the last three years, he's thrown 11 picks. Think about that. You throw 38 touchdown passes and 11 picks in a season, you'd think that's pretty good. Eleven picks in three years.

"He's been the best in the last decade at ball security. There's no one who's been better."

This marks Rodgers' fourth NFC championship game appearance over the past seven years. All of Rodgers' previous starts in the NFC championship games came on the road.

Green Bay has finished the regular season 13-3 each of the past two years, but looks far more imposing this time around.

Game's QBs have never met with stakes so high

Associated Press

For as much as Tom Brady and Aaron Rodgers have accomplished in their Hall of Fame-caliber careers, they've rarely faced off on the field.

Never have they met with so much at stake.

When Rodgers' Green Bay Packers (14-3) host Brady's Tampa Bay Buccaneers (13-5) in the NFC championship game Sunday, it will be just the fourth time they've squared off as starting quarterbacks, and first in the playoffs.

"I remember when I heard the news about him coming to the NFC, I thought this was a real possibility," Rodgers said. "I'm excited about the opportunity to play against him one more time."

The Bucs trounced the Packers 38-10 in Tampa on Oct. 18. They met two other times during Brady's tenure in New England, with the Packers winning 26-21 at Green Bay in 2014 and the Patriots winning 31-17 in Foxborough four years later.

Both understand all eyes will be on them Sunday.

Kurt Warner, the Hall of Fame quarterback and NFL Network analyst, said that's just human nature.

"When I played, I always knew who was on the other sideline," Warner said. "I always said when I went into these matchups, at the end of the day, I know if we're going to win this game, I've got to outperform that guy. I've got to be better than the quarterback

on the other side."

Brady, 43, has helped the Bucs earn a franchise-record seven straight road wins. A win at Lambeau Field clinches their first Super Bowl berth since their 2002 championship season.

"This is one of the coolest stadiums in the league to play in," Brady said. "I know they're excited, we'll be excited, and it will make for a great football game."

Brady is trying to join Warner, Peyton Manning and Craig Morton as the only quarterbacks to lead two separate franchises to a Super Bowl. He already won six Super Bowls and played in nine total with the Patriots.

Green Bay is making its

fourth NFC championship game appearance in the past seven seasons, but Rodgers hasn't reached a Super Bowl since leading the Packers to a title in the 2010 season.

Warner said the postseason weighs heavily on where players stack up in history.

"That's why Tom is the GOAT (greatest of all time)," Warner said. "It's why Joe Montana is up there and guys who've been there numerous times — the John Elways — and everyone else kind of gets knocked down a notch. Even though they've been great in the regular season, there's a combination of the two that I think weighs heavily."

Simply put, Rodgers needs this victory more than Brady.

Bills' rise no surprise to Chiefs' Reid

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Ten years after firing Sean McDermott as his defensive coordinator, Kansas City Chiefs coach Andy Reid will stare across the field inside Arrowhead Stadium on Sunday and see his protégé trying to spoil his hopes of a Super Bowl repeat.

Funny thing: Even after firing him, Reid suspected deep down that McDermott was destined for big things.

"Very organized, very smart and very tough," he explained this week. "He came from a coaching family — his dad was a heck of a coach. Sean just kind of picked up right from there. Very solid, very good."

In fact, downright exceptional.

McDermott has the long-suffering Buffalo Bills playing in their first AFC championship game since beating Kansas City on Jan. 23, 1994, when they advanced to their fourth

straight Super Bowl. They have won 11 of their past 12 games since losing to the Chiefs in Week 6, beating the Colts in the wild-card round and the Ravens in last week's divisional round.

"He deserves coach of the year, man. He's taken a franchise there, both he and his general manager, have put this thing together with some bold moves and production now," Reid said. "I think he's done a tremendous job. What a great thing for the NFL and for Buffalo. They love football in Buffalo and he's really done a nice job with that whole program."

Not surprisingly, the job McDermott has done with the Bills neatly parallels the job Reid has done in Kansas City.

Both took over downtrodden organizations and quickly built them into juggernauts. Both have bright young quarterbacks in the Bills' Josh Allen and the Chiefs' Patrick Ma-

homes. Both have surrounded them with playmakers, such as the Bills' Stefon Diggs and the Chiefs' Tyreek Hill and Travis Kelce. And both have built defenses to not only complement two of the best offenses in the NFL, but capable of clinching wins under pressure, as each did last weekend.

Mahomes, who was knocked out of last week's game against Cleveland with a concussion, took first-team reps all week. He was finally cleared to play by team doctors and an independent neurologist on Friday.

"You have to take it day by day. I think that's the biggest thing," Mahomes said. "You can only control what you can control."

Chiefs cornerback Bashaud Breeland, who also sustained a concussion last Sunday, practiced this week while awaiting clearance from doctors. Running back Le'Veon Bell was held out Thursday and Friday

with a swollen knee.

On the flip side, Clyde Edwards-Helaire is expected to play for the first time since a high-ankle sprain in Week 15 and Sammy Watkins could be back from a calf injury that he sustained the following week.

Star struck: Though the Bills would love to have Star Lotulelei enjoy this playoff run with them, cornerback Tre'Davious White and several teammates continued backing the starting defensive tackle's decision to opt out because of COVID-19 concerns.

"You can't make a wrong decision in this thing," said White, who contemplated opting out before signing a \$70 million, four-year extension in September and earning second-team All-Pro honors. "Obviously he chose his family over a game and the things that he had going on. I don't think that he's necessarily missing out on anything."

Coyotes hand Knights their first loss

Associated Press

GLENDAL, Ariz. — Conor Garland had a goal and an assist, Darcy Kuemper stopped 29 shots and Arizona handed Vegas its first loss of the season, 5-2 on Friday night.

The Coyotes bounced back from a drubbing two nights earlier in Vegas with one of their best games of the early season.

Arizona's Nick Schmaltz scored for the third straight game and had an assist. Christian Dvorak also had a goal and an assist. Derick Brassard scored his first of the season, and Jordan Oesterle closed it out with an empty-net goal.

Penguins 4, Rangers 3 (SO): Kris Letang scored in the final round of a shootout to lift host Pittsburgh to the victory.

Letang ripped a backhand over Igor Shesterkin to put the Penguins in front.

Capitals 4, Sabres 3 (SO): Jakub Vrana had a goal and an assist, Vitek Vanecsek made 24 saves through overtime and short-handed Washington beat visiting Buffalo.

Nicklas Backstrom and Nic Dowd also

scored for the Capitals.

Avalanche 3, Ducks 2 (OT): Gabriel Landeskog scored 1:38 into overtime, Mikko Rantanen extended his goal-scoring streak to four games, and visiting Colorado topped Anaheim.

Blackhawks 4, Red Wings 1: Patrick Kane had a goal and an assist, and host Chicago earned its first win of the season.

Andrew Shaw, Calvin de Haan and Mattias Janmark also scored for Chicago in its home opener after beginning the season with a four-game trip. Dylan Strome and Alex DeBrincat each had two assists.

Wild 4, Sharks 1: Zach Parise scored his first goal of the season to break a second-period tie, sending host Minnesota to the victory.

Joel Eriksson Ek had an early goal for the Wild against former teammate Devan Dubnyk, who made 25 saves for the Sharks on the Minnesota ice he called home for the previous six years. Kevin Fiala and Jordan Greenway added empty-netters for the

Wild (4-1-0) in their home opener.

Maple Leafs 4, Oilers 2: John Tavares broke a tie on a power play midway through the third period, helping host Toronto to the win.

Toronto played without Auston Matthews and Joe Thornton. Coach Sheldon Keefe said before the game Matthews is day to day with "upper-body soreness" following a 3-1 loss to the Oilers on Wednesday night, while Thornton will miss at least four weeks after fracturing a rib in that game.

Stars 7, Predators 0: Joe Pavelski had two goals and two assists and Alexander Radulov also scored twice, helping host Dallas win its delayed season opener over Nashville.

The Stars unveiled their Western Conference championship banner, and then rolled past the Predators. Anton Khudobin stopped 34 shots in his first season-opening start, and Joel Kiviranta had a goal and an assist.

ROUNDUP

Embiid, 76ers beat Celtics

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Joel Embiid had 38 points and 11 rebounds, Tobias Harris scored 23 points and the Philadelphia 76ers beat the Boston Celtics 122-110 on Friday night.

Seth Curry returned to the Sixers' starting lineup following a seven-game absence because of a positive COVID-19 test and scored 15 points.

Jaylen Brown led the Celtics with 42 points and nine rebounds, and Marcus Smart had 20 points.

Embiid followed a 42-point outing in a win over Boston on Wednesday night with another fantastic effort. He made 14 of 15 from the free-throw line — a near-flawless retort after some mild criticism from Smart.

Smart said Embiid "flails and gets the calls" after the All-Star center went to the line 21 times in his 42-point game. The Celtics shot just 20 free throws in that loss and none in the fourth quarter.

Cavaliers 125, Nets 113: Collin Sexton had 25 points and nine assists, Andre Drummond added 19 points and 16 rebounds and Cleveland beat visiting Brooklyn for the second time in three days.

Nets superstar forward Kevin Durant was held out as a precautionary measure as he continues his comeback from right Achilles tendon surgery.

Kyrie Irving scored 38 points, and James Harden had 19 points and 11 assists for Brooklyn, which lost 147-135 in double-overtime to the Cavaliers in the debut of its high-scoring trio on Wednesday.

Nuggets 130, Suns 126 (OT): Nikola Jokic scored 31 points, Gary Harris added 19 and Denver rallied to force overtime before beating host Phoenix.

Denver won for the third time in four games to improve to 8-7 this season.

Devin Booker led the Suns with 31 points but took a hard fall late in overtime and didn't play the final few possessions. Phoenix's offense looked out of synch without its leading scorer on the floor and didn't score a field goal after he left.

Rockets 103, Pistons 102: Jerami Grant's driving layup on the final play came too late, and visiting Houston held on to beat Detroit.

Down one with 3.4 seconds remaining, the Pistons inbounded to Grant, who faked a handoff to Blake Griffin and then drove

down the right side of the lane. Time clearly ran out before he laid the ball in, but he was also bumped by Houston's P.J. Tucker. Replays showed that contact also came after time expired, and after a review, the game ended.

Pacers 120, Magic 118 (OT): Malcolm Brogdon hit a three-pointer with 2.8 seconds left in overtime, lifting host Indiana past Orlando.

Evan Fournier's three-point attempt bounced off the rim at the buzzer for Orlando.

Clippers 120, Thunder 106: Kawhi Leonard scored 31 points, Paul George added 29 and Los Angeles beat visiting Oklahoma City for its sixth straight victory.

Shai Gilgeous-Alexander led the Thunder with 30 points.

Hawks 116, Timberwolves 98: Trae Young scored a season-high 43 points, Clint Capela had 13 points, 19 rebounds and 10 blocks and Atlanta beat host Minnesota.

Minnesota has lost four straight and 11 of its last 12 after starting the season 2-0.

Mavericks 122, Spurs 117: Luka Doncic had 36 points, 11 assists and nine rebounds and visiting Dallas withstood a late rally to beat San Antonio.

Dallas won its second straight after a three-game losing streak. San Antonio is 2-5 at home.

Raptors 101, Heat 81: At Tampa, Fla., Norman Powell scored 23 points, OG Anunoby added 21 and Toronto recovered to beat Miami after blowing a 21-point lead.

Pascal Siakam had 15 points and 14 rebounds for the Raptors. They never trailed on their way to avenging a loss to the Heat on Wednesday night.

Bulls 123, Hornets 110: Zach LaVine continued his strong play with 25 points and nine assists, leading Chicago past host Charlotte for its third straight victory.

Lauri Markkanen added 23 points, and Coby White had 18 points and eight assists.

Kings 103, Knicks 94: Harrison Barnes had 21 points, eight rebounds and seven assists, and Sacramento overcame a cold shooting spell late in the fourth quarter to hold off visiting New York and end a four-game losing streak.

De'Aaron Fox added 22 points and seven assists for Sacramento, which had lost nine of its previous 11.

No. 7 Michigan shut down Boilermakers

Associated Press

WEST LAFAYETTE, Ind. — Michigan coach Juwan Howard put the emphasis on defense from the first time his entire team practiced this season.

It paid big dividends Friday night.

On a night Isaiah Livers matched his season high with 22 points and Eli Brooks added 11, the seventh-ranked Wolverines used a staunch defense to pull away from Purdue 70-53.

"They all did a great job. It was not easy because Trevion (Williams) is one of the best bigs in this conference and also one of the best in the country," Howard said when asked specifically about Michigan's post play. "I know tomorrow they're going to wake up sore because they earned it. This was an old-school, Big Ten type of game. The Big Ten has always been a physical conference and tonight's game was really about physicality."

By winning their fifth straight in the series, the Wolverines (13-1, 8-1 Big Ten) maintained their stranglehold on the conference lead.

But this one came with some trepidation after Purdue's top three-point shooter, Sasha Stefanovic, tested positive for COVID-19. A second test Wednesday confirmed the initial result.

Boilermakers coach Matt Painter explained that the team's protocols required Stefanovic to wear a mask on their bus trip and plane ride back from Ohio State earlier this week and that the senior guard was not around anyone else after he returned to campus. No other players tested positive and after Howard said he spoke with his players individually, the game was played.

Livers, for one, said he had been nervous about playing — until being told of the precautions Purdue took.

And without Stefanovic on the perimeter, the Wolverines took full advantage by packing it in and daring Purdue to win from the perimeter.

While Trevion Williams led the Boilermakers with 14 points and 11 rebounds, he didn't have enough help from the supporting cast as Purdue's four-game winning streak ended. The Boilermakers (11-6, 5-4) shot just 32.1% and missed all six 3-point attempts in the first half as Michigan jumped to a 34-21 lead.