

## Airstrike in Baghdad kills militia leader

*Associated Press*

BAGHDAD — A U.S. airstrike on the headquarters of an Iran-backed militia in central Baghdad on Thursday killed a high-ranking militia commander, militia officials said.

Thursday's strike comes amid mounting regional tensions fueled by the Israel-Hamas war and fears that it could spill over into surrounding countries. It also coincides with a push by Iraqi officials for US-led coalition forces to leave the country.

The Popular Mobilization Force, or PMF, a coalition of militias that is nominally under the control of the Iraqi military, announced in a statement that its deputy head of operations in Baghdad, Mushtaq Taleb al-Saidi, or "Abu Taqwa," had been killed "as a result of brutal American aggression."

A U.S. official who spoke on condition of anonymity to provide information that has not yet been publicly released confirmed that U.S. forces conducted a strike on a vehicle in Baghdad on Monday against the group Harakat al-Nujaba. The group, one of the militias within PMF, was designated a

terrorist organization by Washington in 2019.

Iraqi military spokesman Yehia Rasool said in a statement that the Iraqi army blames the U.S.-led International Coalition Forces for the "unprovoked attack on an Iraqi security body operating in accordance with the powers granted to it by" the Iraqi military.

The primary mission of the U.S.-led coalition is to fight the Islamic State, the Sunni extremist militant group that continues to carry out periodic attacks in Iraq despite having lost its hold on the territory it once controlled in 2017. Since then, the coalition has transitioned from a combat role to an advisory and training mission.

The PMF, a group of Iranian-backed, primarily Shiite militias, were also key in the fight against Islamic State after it overran much of Iraq in 2014. The PMF is officially under the command of the Iraqi army, but in practice the militias operate independently.

Thursday's strike killed two people and wounded five, according to two militia offi-

cialists who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly.

One of the officials said al-Saidi was driving into the garage of the headquarters affiliated with the Harakat al-Nujaba militia, along with another militia official, when the car was hit, killing both.

Heavy security was deployed around the location of the strike on Baghdad's Palestine Street, and Iraqi war planes could be seen flying overhead. An Associated Press photographer was eventually allowed access to the scene of the strike, where he saw the remains of the charred car.

Since the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war on Oct. 7, a group of Iranian-backed militias calling itself the Islamic Resistance in Iraq has carried out more than 100 attacks on bases housing U.S. troops in Iraq and Syria.

The group has said the attacks are in retaliation for Washington's support of Israel in the war against Hamas that has killed more than 20,000 people in Gaza, and that they aim to push U.S. forces out of Iraq.

## Military boosts service members' separation pay

**BY KELLY AGEE**

*Stars and Stripes*

Troops who live apart from their family members will see a \$150 increase in their separation pay this year due to changes in the National Defense Authorization Act.

The NDAA for fiscal year 2024, signed on Dec. 22 by President Joe Biden, includes an increase from \$250 a month to \$400 a month for the Family Separation Allowance.

Rep. Tony Gonzales, R-Texas, was among the congressional sponsors of an amendment to increase the allowance.

"#Results: Proud to have secured an increase in the Family Separation Allowance (FSA) this year," he wrote Dec. 28 on X, formerly known as Twitter. "This is the first time the FSA has been raised in two decades — I'll always stand with our military families."

Petty Officer 2nd Class Dean Cates, a radio and video production supervisor for

American Forces Network at Yokota Air Base in western Tokyo, has received \$250 a month in separation pay for two years.

"I think the pay bump would give just a little more breathing room, but still not enough to be comfortable," said the San Francisco native. "As it stands, a majority of my paychecks go toward supporting my family, often leaving me to essentially live like a broke college student."

Cates' wife, Petty Officer 2nd Class Aimee Ford, is stationed with Naval Air Force Atlantic in Norfolk, Va., and cares for their son, Lucas, who is almost a year old.

"Some positives about receiving separation pay is that it helps to supplement mortgage payments, childcare costs, an emergency fund and college fund," Cates said.

"As a dual military marriage and as a geobachelor I'm not entitled to basic housing allowance, just overseas housing allowance, if I had elected to live off base," he said.

"However, in terms of financial responsibility, going that route, living off base, I feel would not have been financially responsible, especially with the removal of Overseas Cost-of-Living Allowance for service members in our area."

To receive the Family Separation Allowance, service members must complete a DD Form 1561, Statement to Substantiate Payment of Family Separation Allowance, according to the Department of Defense official website.

Eligible service members are those involuntarily separated from their dependents, which includes troops whose dependents do not live at or near the member's permanent duty station.

Other eligible service members include those aboard a ship away from its homeport, or who are under orders to remain aboard the ship at the homeport for more than 30 continuous days.

# Analysts: US may go on offense in Red Sea

By J.P. LAWRENCE  
*Stars and Stripes*

A warning issued this week by the U.S. and 12 other countries likely puts the American military on course to strike an Iranian-backed group that is brazenly attacking commercial ships in the Red Sea, according to analysts.

Houthi militants have emerged from nearly 10 years of civil war in Yemen with a missile and drone arsenal that they've launched at ships transiting the Red Sea as a show of support for Hamas in its war with Israel.

The Houthis were warned against further attacks in a Wednesday statement from the White House that included the United Kingdom, Germany, Japan, Bahrain and eight other countries.

But the Houthis are unlikely to back down, meaning the U.S. will feel compelled to shift from protecting civilian sea traffic to offensive tactics if it wants to ensure the free flow of freight in an economically critical part of the world, experts said.

"The Houthis are starting to open up more, full throttle, in part because it doesn't seem to be that there's much perceived cost to the Houthis themselves,"

said Jonathan Lord, senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security in Washington.

The group should not expect another warning if attacks continue, a senior Biden administration official told reporters Wednesday without detailing rules of possible engagement.

The U.S. defensive posture in the Red Sea has included a naval task force dubbed Prosperity Guardian, which thus far is composed primarily of America's Navy and western allies. Aside from the task force, U.S. destroyers have shot down dozens of Houthi drones and missiles in recent months.

The militants have attacked cargo ships at least 23 times, a total that includes firing missiles and drones, attempted hijackings and small boat skirmishes, U.S. Central Command has said. The group says the attacks are meant to pressure Western countries into ending their support for Israel's offensive into Gaza.

U.S. officials say that the ships under attack aren't connected to Israel and that the disruptions affect a transit route for roughly 15% of global seaborne trade.

The Red Sea's commercial

importance has garnered international attention for the Houthis, which gives them an incentive to keep going after cargo ships, according to analysts.

"Intercepting Houthi drones with expensive missiles is not going to stop the attacks," said Sam Tangredi, the director of the U.S. Naval War College's Institute for Future Warfare Studies.

Despite losing 10 people over the weekend after U.S. Navy helicopters sank three Houthi boats said to be firing on a civilian cargo ship, the militant group shows no signs of being deterred.

It will continue to prevent ships thought to be linked to Israel from navigating the Red Sea, a Houthi spokesman said Wednesday in a statement on X, formerly Twitter.

"The only way to make it clear that we will not tolerate their attacks on commercial ships and sailors of various nations is by destroying the means of attack," said Tangredi, a retired Navy captain.

The U.S. has the capability to detect the launch positions of Houthi missiles and drones as well as their storage locations, and it should attack these sites,

he said.

Such strikes on Yemen's soil would be the first, at least publicly, since 2016, when the U.S. launched Tomahawk missiles on three radar sites after two rounds of Houthi missile attacks on the destroyer USS Mason.

However, direct attacks on the Houthis risks galvanizing support for the group in Yemen, said Mohammed al-Basha, senior Middle East analyst for the Virginia-based Navanti Group.

The Houthis control Yemen's capital of Sanaa and much of the northwest coast along the Red Sea.

They've survived a nearly nine-year bombing campaign by Saudi Arabia and allied countries, and the militants are confident in their ability to withstand U.S. barrages, al-Basha said.

"The Houthis' string of victories has instilled in them a sense of euphoric hubris, perceiving divine intervention and an alignment with history on their side," al-Basha said.

He added that they seem to believe that the U.S. and Western countries do not want a full-scale war, which would undo years of peace talks on ending Yemen's civil war.

## Commander: Houthis using exploding drone boats

By DOUG G. WARE  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — Houthi rebels in Yemen, who have been threatening U.S. forces and commercial ships in the Middle East for weeks, are now using one-way, unmanned attack boats to target vital shipping lanes in the region, a top Navy commander said Thursday.

The Iranian-backed Houthis have been engaged in civil war in Yemen for a decade and have

dramatically increased their attacks in the region since the Israel-Hamas conflict began in early October.

"There are no signs their irresponsible behavior is abating," said Vice Adm. Brad Cooper, who commands U.S. Navy operations in the Middle East. "Since Nov. 18, there have now been 25 attacks against merchant vessels transiting the southern Red Sea and Gulf of Aden."

On Thursday, U.S. forces spotted a new threat from the Houthis — an unmanned surface vessel, or USV. Cooper said the vessels were packed with explosives and detonated about 50 miles off the coast of Yemen. It exploded just a few miles away from U.S. warships and commercial vessels. No ships were damaged and there were no injuries. Cooper, who is the commander of the 5th Fleet, described the unmanned vessels

as low-profile drone boats and said they are "a concern."

Since Operation Prosperity Guardian was created in mid-December, over 1,500 commercial ships have safely navigated the shipping lanes with the increased security presence of U.S. and coalition forces, Cooper said. He also said the operation is gaining more international support because the Houthi attacks are affecting dozens of countries.

# Trump asks court to overturn ballot ruling

Associated Press

DENVER—Former President Donald Trump on Wednesday asked the U.S. Supreme Court to overturn a ruling barring him from the Colorado ballot, setting up a high-stakes showdown over whether a constitutional provision prohibiting those who “engaged in insurrection” will end his political career.

Trump appealed a 4-3 ruling in December by the Colorado Supreme Court that marked the first time in history that Section 3 of the 14th Amendment was used to bar a presidential contender from the ballot. The court found that Trump’s role in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol disqualified him under the clause.

The provision has been used so sparingly in American history that the U.S. Supreme Court has never ruled on it.

Wednesday’s development came a day after Trump’s legal team filed an appeal against a rul-

ing by Maine’s Democratic secretary of state, Shenna Bellows, that Trump was ineligible to appear on that state’s ballot over his role in the Capitol attack. Both the Colorado Supreme Court and the Maine secretary of state’s rulings are on hold until the appeals play out.

Trump’s critics have filed dozens of lawsuits seeking to disqualify him in multiple states. He lost Colorado by 13 percentage points in 2020 and does not need to win the state to gain either the Republican presidential nomination or the presidency. But the Colorado ruling has the potential to prompt courts or secretaries of state to remove him from the ballot in other, must-win states.

None had succeeded until a slim majority of Colorado’s seven justices — all appointed by Democratic governors — ruled last month against Trump. Critics warned that it was an overreach and that the court could not sim-

ply declare that the Jan. 6 attack was an “insurrection” without a judicial process.

“The Colorado Supreme Court decision would unconstitutionally disenfranchise millions of voters in Colorado and likely be used as a template to disenfranchise tens of millions of voters nationwide,” Trump’s lawyers wrote in their appeal to the nation’s highest court, noting that Maine has already followed Colorado’s lead.

Trump’s new appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court follows one from Colorado’s Republican Party. Legal observers expect the high court will take the case because it concerns unsettled constitutional issues that go to the heart of the way the country is governed.

All the parties to the case have urged the court to move quickly. Trump’s lawyers on Wednesday asked the court to overturn the ruling without even hearing oral arguments. The lawyers representing the Colorado plaintiffs

have urged oral arguments but also seek a vastly accelerated schedule, calling for a resolution by next month. Colorado’s primary is March 5.

Sean Grimsley, an attorney for the plaintiffs seeking to disqualify Trump in Colorado, said late last month on a legal podcast called “Law, disrupted” that he hopes the nation’s highest court hurries once it accepts the case, as he expects it will.

The Colorado high court upheld a finding by a district court judge that Jan. 6 was an “insurrection” incited by Trump. It agreed with the petitioners, six Republican and unaffiliated Colorado voters whose lawsuit was funded by a Washington-based liberal group, that Trump clearly violated the provision. Because of that, the court ruled he is disqualified just as plainly as if he failed to meet the Constitution’s minimum age requirement for the presidency of 35 years.

## US House speaker pushes strict rules at border visit

Associated Press

EAGLE PASS, Texas — U.S. House Speaker Mike Johnson led about 60 fellow Republicans in Congress on a visit Wednesday to the Mexican border to demand hard-line immigration policies in exchange for backing President Joe Biden’s emergency wartime funding request for Ukraine. He expressed serious doubts about whether he would support a bipartisan compromise.

The trip to Eagle Pass, Texas, came as the Senate engages in delicate negotiations in hopes of striking a deal on border policies that could unlock Senate GOP support for Biden’s \$110 billion package for Ukraine, Israel and other U.S. security priorities.

But Johnson, R-La., told The Associated Press during the border tour that he was holding firmly to the policies of a bill passed by

House Republicans in May without a single Democratic vote. The bill, H.R. 2, would revive many of the policies pursued by former President Donald Trump, build more of the border wall and impose new restrictions on asylum seekers. Democrats called the legislation “cruel” and “anti-immigrant,” and Biden promised a veto.

“If it looks like H.R. 2, we’ll talk about it,” Johnson said of any border legislation that emerges from the Senate.

With the number of illegal crossings into the U.S. topping 10,000 on several days last month, Eagle Pass has been at the center of Republican Gov. Greg Abbott’s Operation Lone Star, his nearly \$10 billion initiative that has tested federal government authority over immigration and elevated the political fight over the issue.

## FBI says bomb threats to state capitols are a hoax

Associated Press

A bomb threat emailed to officials in several states early Wednesday briefly disrupted government affairs and prompted some state capitol evacuations, but no explosives were found and federal officials quickly dismissed the threats as a hoax.

Connecticut, Georgia, Hawaii, Kentucky, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi and Montana were among the states that evacuated statehouse offices or buildings.

The FBI said it was aware of numerous hoax bomb threats at state Capitol buildings, but had “no information to indicate a specific and credible threat.” The bureau said it was working with state, local and federal law enforcement to gather, share and act on information.

Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear

said on X that the Capitol was evacuated while state police investigated a threat received by the Secretary of State’s Office. Lawmakers were elsewhere for ethics training, but Secretary of State spokeswoman Michon Lindstrom said some candidate filings were disrupted.

The “mass email” warned of multiple explosives that would go off in a few hours.

Public safety officials locked down the Mississippi Capitol on the second day of the legislative session and the state Senate delayed its morning meeting. The building was evacuated and bomb-sniffing dogs circled before an all-clear was given.

Other states — including Wyoming, Oklahoma, Nebraska, New Hampshire, Missouri and Maryland — received threats, but didn’t close.

# DOJ sues Texas over new migrants law

*Associated Press*

AUSTIN, Texas — The Justice Department on Wednesday sued Texas over a new law that would allow police to arrest migrants who enter the United States illegally, taking Republican Gov. Greg Abbott to court again over his escalating response to border crossers arriving from Mexico.

The lawsuit draws Texas into another clash over immigration at a time when New York and Chicago are pushing back on buses and planes carrying migrants sent by Abbott to Democrat-led cities nationwide. Texas is also fighting separate court battles to keep razor wire on the border and a floating barrier in the Rio Grande.

But a law Abbott signed last month poses a broader and bigger challenge to the U.S. government's authority over im-

migration. In addition to allowing police anywhere in Texas to arrest migrants on charges of illegal entry, the law — known as Senate Bill 4 — also gives judges the authority to order migrants to leave the country.

The lawsuit asks a federal court in Austin to declare the Texas law unconstitutional. It calls the measure a violation of the Supremacy Clause, which establishes that federal laws in most cases supersede state law.

"Texas cannot run its own immigration system," the Justice Department states in the lawsuit. "Its efforts, through SB 4, intrude on the federal government's exclusive authority to regulate the entry and removal of noncitizens, frustrate the United States' immigration operations and proceedings, and interfere with U.S. foreign relations."

Abbott's office did not re-

spond to an email seeking comment.

"Biden sued me today because I signed a law making it illegal for an illegal immigrant to enter or attempt to enter Texas directly from a foreign nation." Abbott said in a post on X, formerly Twitter. "I like my chances."

The law is scheduled to take effect in March. Civil rights organizations and officials in El Paso County, Texas, filed a lawsuit last month that similarly described the new law as unconstitutional overreach.

The Justice Department sent Abbott a letter last week threatening legal action unless Texas reversed course. In response, Abbott posted on X that the Biden administration "not only refuses to enforce current U.S. immigration laws, they now want to stop Texas from enforcing laws against illegal immi-

gration."

On Wednesday, House Speaker Mike Johnson and about 60 fellow Republicans visited the Texas border city of Eagle Pass, which has been the center of Abbott's \$10 billion border initiative known as Operation Lone Star. Johnson suggested he could use a looming government funding deadline as further leverage for hardline border policies.

President Joe Biden has expressed willingness to make policy compromises because the number of migrants crossing the border is an increasing challenge for his 2024 reelection campaign. Johnson praised Abbott, who was not in Eagle Pass, and slammed the lawsuits that seek to undo Texas' aggressive border measures.

"It's absolute insanity," Johnson said.

## Official: Iowa school shooting suspect dead

*Associated Press*

PERRY, Iowa — Multiple people were shot inside a small-town Iowa high school early Thursday as students prepared to start their first day of classes after their annual winter break, authorities said.

The suspect in the shooting in Perry, Iowa, has died of what investigators believe is a self-inflicted gunshot wound, a law enforcement official told The Associated Press. The official was not authorized to publicly discuss details of the investigation.

The official also said that at least one of the victims is a school administrator.

Two gunshot victims were taken by ambulance to Iowa Methodist Medical Center in the state capital of Des Moines, a health system spokesperson

said. Some other patients were transported to a second hospital in Des Moines, a spokesperson for MercyOne Des Moines Medical Center confirmed, declining to comment on the number of patients or their statuses.

The state capital is about 40 miles southeast of Perry, which has about 8,000 residents.

High school senior Ava Augustus said she was in a counselor's office when she heard three shots. She and other people barricaded the door, preparing to throw things if necessary.

"And then we hear 'He's down. You can go out,'" Augustus said through tears. "And I run and you can just see glass everywhere, blood on the floor. I get to my car and they're taking a girl out of the auditorium who had been shot in her leg."

## Winter storm expected to wallop East Coast

*Associated Press*

NEW YORK — A winter weather system moving through the United States is expected to wallop the East Coast this weekend with a mix of snow and freezing rain from the southern Appalachians to the Northeast — although it's too early to say exactly which areas will get what kind of precipitation and how much.

Details on the storm's path should firm up this week as the Pacific system moves through Colorado and New Mexico on Thursday and into Texas and the Southeast before moving up the East Coast, said Tony Fracasso, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service's Weather Prediction Center in College Park, Md.

"It's still a few days away, so we'll have to hash out the storm

track — where the precipitation falls, and how long the cold air can stay," he said Wednesday.

Major U.S. cities accustomed to white winters — such as Boston, Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia — didn't receive much snow last year due to a lack of cold air.

The National Weather Service in New York City posted on social media platform X on Wednesday that the city has a low probability of snow and sleet Saturday into Sunday, with significant snowfall expected in areas west and north of the city.

Earlier this week, the NWS of New York said that 2023 would go down as the city's "least snowiness" year, with just 2.3 inches measured in Central Park.

**AMERICAN ROUNDUP**

**Border crossing set to reopen after influx**

**AZ** LUKEVILLE — A border crossing on the most direct route from Phoenix to the nearest beaches is set to reopen, authorities said, one month after it closed in response to a large migrant influx.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection said it was also reopening a pedestrian border crossing in San Diego and resuming full operations at a bridge in Eagle Pass, Texas, and a crossing in Nogales, Ariz.

The moves reflect a drop in illegal crossings from December highs, authorities said. Troy Miller, acting CBP commissioner, said last month that crossings had reached “unprecedented” heights, topping 10,000 on several days.

The Lukeville closure on Dec. 4 brought heavy pressure on CBP from Arizona’s top elected officials. While remote, it is used to travel to Puerto Peñasco, or Rocky Point, a resort area on Mexico’s Sea of Cortez.

Lukeville and other crossings closed because CBP said it needed to reassign officials to processing migrants.

**City bans souvenir sellers from Brooklyn Bridge**

**NY** NEW YORK — Visitors to New York City hoping to take home a souvenir from the Brooklyn Bridge will now have to settle for a photograph, as vendors are now banned from the iconic span.

The new rule aims to ease overcrowding on the bridge’s heavily trafficked pedestrian walkway, where dozens of trinket sellers currently compete for space with tourists and city

commuters.

As crowds flocked to the bridge over the holiday season, the situation turned dangerous, according to New York City Mayor Eric Adams. He pointed to videos that showed pedestrians leaping from the elevated walkway onto a bike lane several feet below in order to bypass a human traffic jam.

The new rules apply to all of the city’s bridges — though none have close to as many vendors as the 140-year-old Brooklyn Bridge.

**Licenses of 2 pot grow operations revoked**

**NM** ALBUQUERQUE — New Mexico marijuana regulators on Tuesday revoked the licenses of two growing operations in a rural county for numerous violations and have levied a \$1 million fine against each business.

One of the businesses — Native American Agricultural Development Co. — is connected to a Navajo businessman whose cannabis farming operations in northwestern New Mexico were raided by federal authorities in 2020. The Navajo Department of Justice also sued Dineh Benally, leading to a court order halting those operations.

A group of Chinese immigrant workers sued Benally and his associates — and claimed they were lured to northern New Mexico and forced to work long hours illegally trimming marijuana on the Navajo Nation, where growing the plant is illegal.

In the notice made public Tuesday by New Mexico’s Cannabis Control Division, Native American Agricultural Devel-

opment was accused of exceeding the state’s plant count limits, of not tracking and tracing its inventory, and for creating unsafe conditions.

**Passerby directs police to remote site of car crash**

**IN** GARY — A woman who was trapped in a car that crashed early on New Year’s Day was rescued after a passerby directed officers to the crash scene along a little-used northwest Indiana road, police said.

Police and emergency responders spent two hours searching unsuccessfully for the car after a woman called 911 about 3:40 a.m. Monday and said she and another woman were trapped in a car that had flipped over in Gary, police said.

One of the women eventually got out of the wrecked car, which was upside down, and flagged down a passerby who directed officers to the crash, the Lake County Sheriff’s Department said.

Greg Zellers, who’s a mechanic, said he was on his way to work about 6:30 a.m. when the woman flagged him down and walked him to where the car had crashed about 50 yards from the roadway.

He told WLS-TV the car’s headlights and tail lights weren’t visible and there is little traffic on the road in the Buffington Harbor area. Zellers directed first responders and two officers to the crashed car.

**Carbon monoxide sickens 22 parishioners at church**

**UT** MONROE — Twenty-two people were hospitalized for carbon monoxide poisoning over the weekend

at a Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints church in central Utah, authorities said Monday.

Emergency personnel initially responded to two medical calls on Sunday at the church in Monroe, the Sevier County Sheriff’s Office said. The calls involved a 4-year-old girl with breathing problems and a man who was feeling sick.

After a third call, the Monroe City Fire Department checked the building and found elevated levels of carbon monoxide, prompting the church to be evacuated.

More people reported being ill later in the evening and police said in all 22 individuals were taken to hospitals with hyperbaric chambers.

The source of the carbon monoxide poisoning had not been determined.

**Police: Officer killed after witnessing a crime**

**NC** GREENSBORO — An off-duty police officer was shot and killed in North Carolina after witnessing a crime at a gas station and approaching the two suspects, officials said.

The police sergeant, Philip Dale Nix, was a 23-year veteran of the Greensboro Police Department, according to a Sunday news release from the agency. Three men have been arrested in the case, according to police.

During a news conference Saturday night, Greensboro Police Chief John Thompson didn’t specify what crime Nix witnessed or provide additional details about the events leading up to the shooting.

— From wire reports



**STARS AND STRIPES**

Single source convenience, reliably independent. Visit [www.stripes.com](http://www.stripes.com).

**Reporting  
World, National  
and Military News**

# 4-team playoff format changed college football

Associated Press

The four-team playoff changed college football. Not just the postseason and crowning of a national champion that finally could be called undisputed.

College Football Playoff 1.0, which wraps up a 10-year run Monday night when No. 1 Michigan (14-0) faces No. 2 Washington (14-0) in the national championship game, created a new standard for success — and failure — for teams and conferences. It helped the rich and powerful become more rich and powerful, further nationalized a sport with regional roots and was an imperfect but necessary step in the evolution of the postseason.

“I think what’s coming is going to be better, but this worked really well,” said Notre Dame athletic director Jack Swarbrick, one of the architects of the 12-team system that goes in to effect next season.

But with unintended consequences.

## The positive

A four-team playoff made sense for college football when it was conceived in 2012, following 16 years of the Bowl Championship Series, which was implemented in 1998 and birthed from the Bowl Coalition and Bowl Alliance earlier in the 1990s.

The BCS gave only two teams a chance to win a national championship in the postseason and often produced unsatisfying results. The four-team playoff fixed that.

“We were able to eliminate any real controversy about who the champion was because it was decided on the field,” said Bill Hancock, who was the first executive director of the BCS before moving into a similar role with the CFP.

The CFP debuted in 2014 and was a smash hit, drawing record television ratings for ESPN, with New Year’s Day semifinals in the Rose and Sugar bowls. And it produced the type of

champion that never would have been possible before when an Ohio State team that suffered a bad early season loss peaked late and won it all as the last team in the field.

“Whether it’s broadcast ratings, total attendance, whatever it may be, the game has never been more popular. And I think you have to give some credit to the playoff system for helping to make that happen,” Swarbrick said.

## The negative

“It hurt conference brands,” American Athletic Conference Commissioner Mike Aresco said. “Because if you didn’t make a four-team playoff, man, there’s some problem with your conference.”

None more than the Pac-12, among the Power Five conferences. The Pac-12 made the field just three times in 10 years, including a six-year drought from 2017-22 that was snapped by Washington.

To draw a direct line from

CFP exclusion to the demise of the Pac-12 would be an overstatement.

“No, I don’t think you could go that far,” Aresco said. “On the other hand, did it help the Pac-12? No, of course not.”

The CFP seemed to create a self-perpetuating cycle that reinforced the idea that certain teams and conferences were superior. The Southeastern Conference never had a team left out, put two teams in the field twice and won six of the first nine CFP titles.

Over 10 years, only 15 teams made the CFP, as the very top tier of programs capable of winning a national title seemed to shrink.

“A lot of the same teams kept making it, which gave them a huge advantage in recruiting and probably had a somewhat deleterious effect on some of the other schools that were competing with them,” Aresco said. “Because if you’re in the playoff time and time again, kids want to play in it.”

# Steichen has Colts on cusp of playoffs in 1st season as coach

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — The Indianapolis Colts hired first-year coach Shane Steichen to take them in a new direction.

He wasted no time hiring assistants the players could trust, installing an offense they could embrace and making sure his rookie quarterback knew the playbook while urging the backup to stay prepared.

Now they’re on the playoff precipice because Steichen never viewed his first head coaching job as a rebuilding project. He expected to win from the start, and the players believed him.

“Shane made it very clear the expectations were very high,” center Ryan Kelly said. “Execution fuels emotion and we’ve had a lot of fun doing it. I think you’ve seen that through the postgame (videos) and all the interviews he does, and the way we play. It’s a combination of all those things and really believing that we can be whatever we want to be.”

What they could be after Saturday, surprisingly, is playoff bound.

A fourth straight home victory would give the Colts (9-7) another season sweep of Houston (9-7) and their first postseason appearance since 2020. A win, coupled with a Jacksonville loss at Tennessee on Sunday, would give Indy its first AFC South title and first home playoff game since 2014, as well as a chance at its first postseason win in five years.

Outside of team headquarters, few saw this kind of turnaround coming after an abysmal 2022 season that included a constantly churning quarterback carousel, a rare midseason coaching change and seven straight losses to finish a 4-12-1 season.

“I think all of the trials and tribulations we went through last year, it prepared us for the highs and lows of this season,” linebacker Zaire Franklin said. “I just think that every time something happened, we just came closer together.”

There were many times Indy’s season could have gotten derailed, but Steichen deftly navigated the ups and downs.

2021 All-Pro running back Jonathan Tay-

lor missed seven games because of injuries, started the season mired in an ugly contract dispute and took only one official snap with rookie quarterback Anthony Richardson.

Right tackle Braden Smith missed seven games with an assortment of injuries, Kelly entered the concussion protocol twice and top receiver Michael Pittman Jr. also had a concussion after taking a big hit that led to a season-ending suspension for Pittsburgh safety Damontae Kazee.

There also was the quarterback situation. Steichen selected Richardson as the opening day starter after one preseason game, an announcement that disappointed Gardner Minshew, who followed Steichen from Philadelphia so he could compete for the job.

It didn’t take Minshew long to prove his worth.

He relieved an injured Richardson in three of Indy’s first four games, won his first start, at Baltimore, and took over for good when Richardson suffered a season-ending shoulder injury in Week 5.

# Wild statistical night across the NBA

Associated Press

There had never been a day in NBA history where five teams all scored at least 140 points. And there had never been a day where the league saw four teams all score at least 130 points in losses.

That is, until Wednesday — when both events happened.

Mark it down: Jan. 3, 2024, was perhaps one of the oddest statistical nights the league has seen. Utah, Detroit, Indiana, Atlanta and Cleveland all topped the 140-point mark.

“Obviously, it’s fun to score the ball,” Utah’s Lauri Markkanen said after the Jazz beat Detroit in overtime.

True, though some teams had more fun than others. Just ask the four teams that also scored a ton of points on Wednesday but lost anyway.

For the Pistons, Oklahoma City, Orlando and Milwaukee,

scoring 130 points wasn’t even enough to win.

“We played a hell of a game,” said Paolo Banchemo, who led the Magic with a career-high 43 points but missed a potential tying 3 as the final buzzer sounded in the loss to Sacramento. “Despite everything that happened with injuries, we gave ourselves a shot and that’s all we can ask for.”

There was one previous instance of three teams scoring 130 in losses on the same day — that being April 10, 2019, when it happened to Utah, Sacramento and Atlanta.

“We didn’t have our best night, obviously,” Oklahoma City coach Mark Daigneault said.

Scoring has been up — really up — in the NBA this season, with teams averaging 115.5 points per game, the highest clip the league has seen since the av-

erage was 116.7 points in the 1969-70 season.

The scores of note in those super-high-scoring Wednesday games: Utah beat Detroit 154-148 in overtime, Indiana beat Milwaukee 142-130, Atlanta beat Oklahoma City 141-138, Cleveland beat Washington 140-101 and Sacramento edged Orlando in double overtime 138-135.

The previous record for teams scoring 140 or more points on the same day was four, done on Jan. 16, 2019. The four teams to do it that day were Brooklyn, Houston, Golden State and New Orleans — the Nets beat the Rockets 145-142, the Warriors beat the Pelicans 147-140.

Other stats of note on the wild Wednesday in the NBA:

■ The Jazz-Pistons game was the second this season to top 300 total points; the 302 com-

bined points tied for the 25th-most in a game in NBA history. Utah also became the ninth team in league history to shoot at least 50% from the field, 50% from 3-point range and 90% from the foul line in an overtime game.

■ Miami beat the Los Angeles Lakers 110-96, and the Heat tied a franchise record by having eight players score at least 10 points.

■ There were 10 teams that scored at least 130 on Wednesday (the Los Angeles Clippers had 131, joining the Jazz, Pistons, Pacers, Bucks, Hawks, Thunder, Cavaliers, Kings and Magic with 130 or more). There have now been 128 such games in the NBA this season, putting the league on pace for about 310 this season — which would break the record of 266, set last season.

## McIlroy eases off criticism of LIV, Rahm move ‘smart’

Associated Press

KAPALUA, Hawaii — Rory McIlroy has gone from being the harshest critic of LIV Golf to extending an olive branch. He said on a British soccer podcast Wednesday that he was too judgmental about players defecting and has accepted that LIV is “part of our sport now.”

He referred to Jon Rahm’s decision to join LIV Golf last month as a “smart business move.”

McIlroy also suggested he helped instigate discussions with the PGA Tour and the Saudi backers of LIV Golf. He said he met with Yasir Al-Rumayyan, the governor of the Public Investment Fund, at the end of 2022 in Dubai.

“When I got back to America, I was on the board of the PGA Tour and I said to the guys, ‘Someone has got to go talk to this guy.’ Then there was a plan put in place that one of the board

members would try to develop a relationship with him,” McIlroy said.

He said on the “Stick to Football” podcast the surprise was how quickly a deal came together. Board member Jimmy Dunne and chairman Ed Herlihy arranged the first meeting after the Masters in April.

The PGA Tour and PIF announced the agreement for a commercial deal on June 6.

The podcast was posted a day before the PGA Tour begins a new year that includes eight “signature events” with limited fields and \$20 million purses, a model that McIlroy helped orchestrate over the last year.

He resigned from the policy board in November, saying it was taking up too much of his time. The framework agreement missed its Dec. 31 deadline to get finalized, and now the PGA Tour also is negotiating

with a private group of U.S. investors.

McIlroy referred to early defections to LIV as players wanting to take the easy way out, and said that players were being duplicitous for pledging support and then taking the Saudi cash.

He had said no peace could be made as long as Greg Norman was in charge, and as recently as July said he “hates” LIV and hoped it went away. “If LIV Golf was the last place to play golf on Earth, I would retire. That’s how I feel about it,” he said in July.

His tone began to soften when Rahm, the Masters champion, became arguably the biggest name to leave, because the 29-year-old Spaniard is entering the peak of his career.

“I think, at this point, I was maybe a little judgmental of the guys who went to LIV Golf at the start, and I think it was a bit of a mistake on my part because I

now realize that not everyone is in my position or in Tiger Woods’ position,” McIlroy said on the podcast.

“We all turn professional to make a living playing the sports that we do, and I think that’s what I realized over the last two years. I can’t judge people for making that decision.”

McIlroy said his biggest beef is players leaving and speaking poorly about the PGA Tour because that’s what gave players their start in the game.

“Jon Rahm has not got any of the heat that the first guys got for going,” McIlroy said. “I think Jon, he’s smart. And I think he sees things coming together at some point. ... I thought it was a smart business move. It was opportunistic.”

And because Rahm is exempt in all the majors for five years or more, McIlroy said, there was little risk for him in leaving.

# Wild's Fleury reaches goalie milestone

*Associated Press*

The two decades Marc-Andre Fleury has spent in the NHL have passed as quickly for him as the airborne pucks that speed toward him in the net each time he takes the ice.

Now the fourth goalie in history to appear in 1,000 games, a mark he made with Minnesota in a 3-2 loss to Winnipeg on Sunday, Fleury is on the verge of another lofty milestone in his 20th season in the league. He's one win away from a tie for second place on the career wins list, a perch he could reach this week with fellow Wild goalie Filip Gustavsson on injured reserve.

"I feel very fortunate that I was able to play hockey for so long and do something I love," Fleury said. "I think loving the game is something that kept me going through all the years."

Over 691 games with Pittsburgh, 192 with Vegas, 45 with Chicago and 73 and counting with Minnesota, Fleury has grown his reputation as one of

the most personable and reliable goalies to ever put on the pads since the Penguins made him the first pick in the 2003 draft out of Quebec.

Fleury has backstopped three Stanley Cup championship teams, won the 2021 Vezina Award for the best goalie in the NHL and, most importantly for his legacy, gained the unrelenting trust and admiration of his teammates along the way.

"He's a natural born leader," Wild defenseman Brock Faber said. "The positivity he brings to the rink every day, that's something I've never seen before. It's truly an honor to be able to play in front of him and be a teammate of his."

Fleury has 550 wins in 1,001 games, trailing Patrick Roy (551 wins in 1,029 games) for second place behind career leader Martin Brodeur (691 wins in 1,266 games).

The only other goalie in NHL history to play in 1,000 games was Roberto Luongo (489 wins

in 1,044 games). Brodeur, Luongo and Roy all recorded praise for Fleury in a video tribute the Wild assembled for him. His teammates let him take the ice for a solo lap to commence pregame warmups on Sunday.

"The first thing that jumps out at you is just the quality person he is — his attitude, how he is around the rink, his ability to communicate," said Wild coach John Hynes, who first got to know Fleury with the Penguins when he coached their AHL affiliate from 2009-15. "He's still the same guy."

With his easy smile and fondness for locker room pranks, Fleury's fun-loving disposition belies the intensity of his competitiveness on the ice. He has tried over the years to fight the temptation to smash his stick after a soft goal or a frustrating defeat, proudly noting in a recent interview with The Associated Press that he gave a stick away to a kid at the game in Edmonton instead of venting some

anger on his equipment following a 4-3 loss.

"I try to smile, get back to work and practice and move on. I find that's how you get out of a slump quicker, if you always keep grinding," said Fleury, who is 6-7-2 with a 3.09 goals-against average this season.

The two-year, \$7 million contract Fleury signed with the Wild four months after he was acquired in a trade with the Blackhawks will expire this summer. He turns 40 on Nov. 28. The Wild have Gustavsson carrying a \$3.75 million annual salary cap charge for the next two seasons and 21-year-old prospect Jesper Wallstedt waiting in the AHL.

"I do this because I love it. I feel very fortunate to play. I take a lot of pride in winning games and helping my team, and hopefully I can be remembered as a guy who had some success along the way," said Fleury, who has three children between the ages of 4 and 10.

# Rays' Franco facing charges in Dominican Republic

*Associated Press*

SANTO DOMINGO, Dominican Republic — Dominican prosecutors on Wednesday accused Wander Franco of commercial sexual exploitation and money laundering following allegations that the Tampa Bay Rays shortstop had a relationship with a minor whose mother also faces the same charges.

Prosecutors requested that a judge hold Franco on an \$86,000 bond, bar him from leaving the Dominican Republic and place him under house arrest. They noted the money laundering charges stem from allegations that Franco made payments to the minor's mother.

Prosecutors also asked that the judge prohibit the minor's mother from leaving the coun-

try and place her under house arrest.

"These measures requested by the Public Ministry seek to guarantee the integrity of the process," the ministry said in a statement.

Prosecutors on Wednesday also delivered evidence to a judge who is expected to soon rule on Franco's future.

The judge is scheduled to analyze the documents and other evidence collected during a monthslong investigation and issue a ruling Friday in a courtroom in the northern Dominican Republic province of Puerto Plata, where the alleged act occurred.

The judge has several options: release Franco on bond, temporarily arrest him, prevent him from leaving the Do-

minican Republic or demand that he make occasional appearances until the investigation or a trial has ended.

The 22-year-old All-Star player remains in jail for now after being detained on Monday in Puerto Plata.

His attorney, Teodosio Jáquez Encarnación, has declined to talk to media, saying only that Franco is doing fine.

Prosecutors also have declined comment.

Authorities have not shared details of the case, although prosecutors said on Aug. 14 that Franco was being investigated because of social media postings suggesting he had a relationship with a minor. The AP has not been able to verify the reported posts.

On Dec. 26, police and prose-

cutors visited two of Franco's properties located in his hometown of Baní, just southwest of the capital of Santo Domingo, but the player was not there.

On Dec. 28, a prosecutor requested that Franco appear, but he did not do so until Monday, when he was detained following a nearly three-hour interview.

Major League Baseball placed Franco on administrative leave in August under its joint domestic violence, sexual assault and child abuse policy with the players' association. He was paid and received service time while on leave.

There is no timetable for a conclusion of MLB's investigation and whether the results might lead to discipline by the commissioner's office.