

Austin, DOD facing growing scrutiny

The Washington Post

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, whose failure to disclose his need for emergency hospitalization has ignited a firestorm, was moved out of intensive care on Monday, as Democrats and Republicans intensified their calls for accountability, and senior officials at the White House and Pentagon struggled to defuse the uproar.

Austin, 70, remains under doctors' supervision at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Maryland. He was taken there by ambulance Jan. 1, while in "severe pain" with undisclosed complications from a Dec. 22 medical procedure that included an overnight stay, administration officials said.

But their halting explanation of the situation, and Austin's lack of transparency about what led to his health crisis, have only amplified the scrutiny following revelations that Austin's senior staff de-

clined to disclose the issue to the White House for days. The Pentagon said Monday night that it remains unclear when he may be released but that officials intend to provide daily updates so long as he remains at Walter Reed.

A spokesman, Maj. Gen. Patrick Ryder, said in a statement Monday night that Austin "continues to experience discomfort but his prognosis is good." Ryder said that Austin is in "good condition" and that he is "recovering well and in good spirits."

Critics, including political allies, have chastised the administration for its secrecy surrounding Austin's medical situation, with many noting the calamity that could have occurred with the United States actively, if indirectly, involved in two wars and the recent rise in attacks on U.S. forces deployed in the Middle East. Internally, some frustrated officials have complained, too, saying the handling of the incident

showed "unbelievably bad judgment" on Austin's part.

Officials in the White House and the Pentagon vowed Monday to review the lapses in communication that led to the imbroglio, but they declined again to reveal many basic details about the situation — including whether Austin was ever incapacitated and what prompted the extended hospital stay. Austin resumed his duties on Friday night from Walter Reed, Pentagon officials said.

Officials have said that President Joe Biden retains confidence in Austin and has no plans to replace him. John Kirby, a spokesman for the White House's National Security Council, said that Biden is focused on the secretary's recovery and looks forward to having him back at the Pentagon as soon as possible.

"There is no plans for anything other than Secretary Austin to stay in the job and continuing the leadership that he's been demon-

strating," Kirby said. It was unclear, though, whether even Biden, who spoke with Austin on Saturday evening, now knows specifics about his condition, or how enduring it could be.

"That would really be between the two men," Kirby said.

At the Pentagon, meanwhile, Ryder acknowledged during an hour-long back-and-forth with reporters that he first learned of Austin's hospitalization Jan. 2, two days before that information was transmitted to the National Security Council and three days before it was disclosed to Congress and the public. A handful of other Defense Department officials, including Gen. Charles Q. Brown Jr., chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; Kelly Magsamen, Austin's chief of staff; and Lt. Gen. Ronald Clark, Austin's senior military assistant; also were apprised of the secretary's medical situation before the White House was made aware.

In Israel, Blinken looks to plan for a post-war Gaza

Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel — U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken faced tough talks with Israeli leaders on Gaza's post-war future Tuesday, while Israel's military pushed ahead with its offensive in the beleaguered territory. Heavy bombardment and fighting shook refugee camps, sending Palestinians scrambling to find safety and hampering aid groups' efforts to get relief to the population.

Blinken said he was coming to Israel with promises from four Arab nations and Turkey to help in rebuilding Gaza after the war. But those nations also want to see an end to the fighting in

Gaza and concrete steps toward the eventual creation of a Palestinian state alongside Israel, something Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed not to allow.

The U.S. and Israel also remain deeply divided over how Gaza will be run when — and if — its current Hamas rulers are defeated. American officials have called for the Palestinian Authority, which currently governs parts of the Israeli-occupied West Bank, to take the reins in Gaza. Israeli leaders have rejected that idea but haven't put forward a concrete plan beyond an open-ended military control over the territory.

At the same time, Blinken is trying to prevent an all-out war between Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah. After a presumed Israeli strike last week hit Beirut, killing Hamas's deputy leader, the two sides have stepped up their exchanges. On Tuesday, Hezbollah said its exploding drones targeted the Israeli army northern command in the town of Safed — deeper into Israel than previous fire by the group. The Israeli military said a drone fell at a base in the north without causing damage, suggesting it had been intercepted. It did not identify the base.

"There is lots to talk about, in particular about the way for-

ward," Blinken said after meeting Israeli President Isaac Herzog.

The United States has pressed Israel to scale down its offensive in Gaza to more precise operations targeting Hamas. But the pace of death and destruction has remained largely the same, with several hundred Palestinians killed a day, according to health officials in Gaza. Israel has vowed to keep going until it has destroyed Hamas throughout the territory, in response to the Oct. 7 attack during which militants killed some 1,200 people, mainly civilians, in southern Israel and kidnapped around 250 others.

Commandant has heart surgery, to return

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Gen. Eric Smith, the commandant of the Marine Corps, had open heart surgery Monday, and he is expected to return to full duty as the service's leader, the Corps said in a statement.

Smith suffered cardiac arrest near his home at Marine Barracks Washington on Oct. 29, and was hospitalized. He had been confirmed as the new commandant on Sept. 21. The assistant commandant, Gen. Christopher Mahoney, has been serving as the acting head of the Marine Corps since

Smith's hospitalization.

The Marines said Smith underwent successful surgery to repair a bicuspid aortic valve in his heart, which was the cause of his cardiac arrest. No date was given for his return.

"He is in good condition and continues to recover at the hospital among family members and his doctors," the statement said. "Following his rehabilitation, Gen. Smith will return to full duty status as Commandant."

Smith's cardiac arrest came just two

days after he'd talked about the stress of having to do the top two high-level jobs for the service because Republican Sen. Tommy Tuberville had blocked hundreds of military promotions and nominations for months. Tuberville is opposed to Pentagon policy paying for troops' travel for abortions and other reproductive care.

Under pressure from lawmakers on both sides of the political aisle, Tuberville ended his holds in December, allowing the Senate to confirm more than 435 nominations.

Ukrainian air force: Russian strikes stretching Kyiv's defense resources

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russia's recent escalation of missile and drone attacks is stretching Ukraine's air defense resources, a Ukrainian air force official said Tuesday, leaving the country vulnerable in the 22-month war unless it can secure further weapons supplies.

"Intense Russian air attacks force us to use a corresponding amount of air defense means," air force spokesman Yuriy Ihnat told national television. "That's why we need more of them, as Russia keeps increasing its (air) attack capabilities."

As soldiers on both sides fight from largely static positions along the roughly 930-mile front line, recent Russian attacks have used large numbers of various types of missiles in an apparent effort to saturate air defense systems and find gaps in Ukraine's defenses.

The massive barrages — more than 500 drones and missiles were fired between Dec. 29 and Jan. 2, according to officials in Kyiv — are also using up Ukraine's weapons stockpiles.

Ukraine uses weapons from the Soviet era and more modern ones provided by its Western allies. Authorities want to build up the country's own weapons manufacturing capabilities, and analysts say those plants are among Russia's recent targets.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said on Sunday that "we lack a very concrete and understandable thing, that is air defense systems," to protect civilian areas and troop positions.

"We lack (air defense systems) both on the battlefield and in our cities," he told a Swedish

defense conference.

Speaking at a meeting with the Russian military brass, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu declared that Kyiv's efforts to bolster its firepower "won't change the situation on the line of contact and will only drag out the military conflict."

"We retain the strategic initiative along the entire line of contact," Shoigu said. "We will consistently continue to achieve the objectives of the special military operation" — the Kremlin's language for the war in Ukraine.

It was not possible to verify either side's battlefield claims.

Ukraine, meanwhile, has increasingly targeted Moscow-occupied Crimea and Russian border regions with long-range strikes. In the latest strike, two drones fell on the premises of a fuel and energy facility Tuesday in the Russian city of Orlov, about 150 miles from the Ukraine border, Gov. Andrei Klychkov said.

In what officials called the biggest aerial barrage of the war, Russia launched 122 missiles and dozens of drones on Dec. 29, killing 62 civilians across the country. On Jan. 1, Russia launched a record 90 Shahed-type drones across Ukraine.

Ukrainian officials have pleaded with the West for more weapons, especially air defense and artillery shells.

However, a plan by the administration of U.S. President Joe Biden to send to Kyiv billions of dollars in further aid is stuck in Congress, and Europe's pledge in March to provide 1 million artillery shells within 12 months has come up short, with only about 300,000 delivered so far.

Expert: Mock vessel in China 'not uncommon'

BY ALEX WILSON

Stars and Stripes

China has built another mock vessel that resembles the U.S. Navy's newest aircraft carrier and will likely use it for target practice for its "growing missile arsenal," according to a defense expert.

Satellite imaging company Planet Labs captured photos of the mock target on Jan. 1. It appears to match the profile of the USS Gerald R. Ford, which entered service late last year.

Planet Labs provided satellite images of the mock carrier spotted near Ruoqiang County in Xinjiang, a northwestern province of deserts and mountain ranges.

The mock carrier's presence indicates the "type of assets that China is training against," but building such a target is "not uncommon, and it's not exclusive to China," said Matthew P. Funaiolo, senior fellow for the China Power Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies think tank.

"In terms of signaling, building a stationary replica in the middle of the desert isn't going to send that strong of a message to the U.S.," he said by email Tuesday. "It's more likely to play well at home, where the Chinese propaganda machine can use the replica (and exercises against it) to bolster national pride and reaffirm its commitment to national defense."

Planet Labs photos show other targets in the same area: Two carrier-shaped targets lie within a larger carrier outline in the desert; another target appears to be a mock-up of a destroyer.

Storm ravages structures in Midwest on way to Northeast

Associated Press

DES MOINES, Iowa — A sprawling storm hit the South with tornado warnings and high winds that blew roofs off homes, flipped over campers and tossed about furniture in Florida on Tuesday. Another storm brought cities across the Midwest to a standstill with more than half a foot of snow, stranding people on highways as it headed to the Northeast.

In the South, the violent storm with 55 mph winds and hail moved through the Florida Panhandle and into parts of Alabama and Georgia by sunrise Tuesday, along with at least several reports of radar-confirmed tornadoes, the National Weather Service said. A wind gust of 106 mph was recorded before dawn near the coast in Walton County, Fla.

A section of Panama City Beach, Fla., showed parts of roofs blown away, furniture, fences and debris strewn about and a house that appeared tilted on side, leaning on another home.

In Panama City, about 10 miles away, police early Tuesday asked residents to stay indoors and off the roads “unless absolutely necessary” as officers

checked on damage from the storms, including downed power lines and trees.

The city is in Bay County, where there had been multiple reports of tornadoes on the ground, Sheriff Tommy Ford said in a brief Facebook Live post.

“We’ve rescued people out of structures,” he said.

The department urged people to stay home, posting photos of a damaged apartment complex and marina. The Walton County sheriff’s department in the Florida Panhandle posted photos of power lines draped across a road, damage to a gas station and large pieces of building materials littering the area. About 70 miles northeast, in Jackson County, Fla., photos showing damage to a campground and RV park in Marianna were posted.

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis issued an executive order to include 49 counties in North Florida under a state of emergency from tornadoes.

Heavy rain across Georgia stopped air traffic at Atlanta’s busy airport for a time Tuesday morning and caused flash flooding, blocking some lanes on freeways around Atlanta during the

morning commute. More than 80 public school systems across Georgia called off classes entirely while others taught students online or delayed the start of in-person classes.

More than 200,000 customers were without power in Florida, Alabama and Georgia, according to the PowerOutage.us website.

In North Carolina, Gov. Roy Cooper declared a state of emergency before the storm approached so weight and size restrictions on large and heavy trucks containing emergency supplies or agricultural goods would be waived.

Some schools were canceled or shut down early to avoid the threats from high winds and flooding.

Meanwhile, in the Midwest, where a snowstorm started Monday, up to 12 inches of snow could blanket a broad area stretching from southeastern Colorado all the way to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. That includes western Kansas, eastern Nebraska, large parts of Iowa, northern Missouri and northwestern Illinois, said Bob Oravec, a forecaster with the National Weather Service in College Park, Md.

21 injured in explosion at historic hotel in Fort Worth

Associated Press

FORT WORTH, Texas — An explosion at a historic Texas hotel in Fort Worth on Monday blew out windows, littered downtown streets with large sections of debris from the building and injured 21 people, including one who was in critical condition, authorities said.

The blast flung doors and entire sections of wall onto the road in front of the 20-story hotel, where authorities said rescue crews found several people trapped in the basement. Fifteen people were taken to hospitals, including six whose conditions were described as “semi-critical” by MedStar, which provides ambulances and emergency medical services in Fort Worth.

Authorities did not indicate anyone was missing, but fire officials said late Monday that they would continue searching the building.

More than two dozen rooms were occupied at the Sandman Signature Hotel at the time, officials said.

Authorities said they believe a gas leak caused the explosion — which happened in the middle of the afternoon at the start of the workweek — and said the hotel had been undergoing construction.

“There was debris. There was insulation. There was office furniture,” Charlie Collier, 31, said. He was working nearby when he said he saw a large flash and what sounded like thunder.

“Everything that was in the first couple floors of the building was blown out all over the street,” he said.

The Sandman Signature Hotel is in a busy area of downtown about one block from the Fort Worth Convention Center.

Fuel leak prevents US moon landing

Associated Press

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — A crippling fuel leak forced a U.S. company on Tuesday to give up on landing a spacecraft on the moon.

Astrobotic Technology’s lander began losing fuel soon after Monday’s launch. The spacecraft also encountered problems keeping its solar panel pointed toward the sun and generating solar power.

“Given the propellant leak,

there is, unfortunately, no chance of a soft landing on the moon,” Astrobotic said in a statement.

Astrobotic had been targeting a lunar landing for Feb. 23, following a roundabout, fuel-efficient flight to the moon. It could have been the first U.S. moon landing in more than 50 years, and the first by a private company. A second lander from a Houston company is due to launch next month.

Only four countries have ever pulled off a successful moon landing.

The company said the new goal was to keep the lander operating as long as possible in space, in order to learn as much as possible for its next mission a year or so from now. Flight controllers managed to keep the spacecraft pointed toward the sun and its battery fully charged, with another 40 hours of operations anticipated.

US sailor sentenced for selling secrets

By PHILLIP WALTER
WELLMAN

Stars and Stripes

A sailor who passed sensitive information about the U.S. military to China was sentenced this week to over two years in prison and kicked out of the Navy, according to federal prosecutors in California.

Petty Officer 2nd Class Wenheng Zhao, 26, of Monterey Park, Calif., received a prison term of 27 months on Monday from U.S. District Judge R. Gary Klausner in Los Angeles.

He had pleaded guilty in October to taking nearly \$15,000 in bribes from a Chinese intelligence officer for informa-

tion about Navy operational security, critical infrastructure and military exercises.

The information Zhao sold included plans for a major exercise in the Pacific, a dozen photographs of computer screens showing operational orders of military training exercises, and several photographs of diagrams and blueprints for a radar system at a U.S. base in Okinawa, Japan, according to court documents.

A China-born naturalized U.S. citizen who uses the first name Thomas, Zhao was stationed at Naval Base Ventura County in Port Hueneme and worked as an electrician, in-

stalling and repairing electrical equipment at various military installations, according to the Justice Department and court documents.

He had a security clearance and entered restricted military installations to collect and record sensitive, nonpublic information, which he sold to the Chinese official, the DOJ said.

Zhao initially faced a maximum penalty of 20 years in prison. As part of a plea deal, he waived his right to appeal any sentence shorter than five years and three months.

“Mr. Zhao betrayed his solemn oath to defend his country and endangered those who

serve in the U.S. military,” Matthew Olsen, the assistant attorney general for the Justice Department’s national security division, said in a statement Monday, when the sentence was announced.

Between August 2021 and May 2023, Zhao received at least 14 payments totaling \$14,866 for the information, which he transmitted with sophisticated encrypted communication methods, the DOJ said.

He also destroyed evidence and hid his relationship with the Chinese intelligence officer, according to the statement.

Judges skeptical of claims by Trump of his immunity

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — With Donald Trump present for the first time in months, federal appeals court judges in Washington expressed deep skepticism Tuesday that the former president was immune from prosecution on charges that he plotted to overturn the results of the 2020 election.

The panel of three judges, two of whom were appointed by President Joe Biden, also questioned whether they had jurisdiction to consider the appeal at this point in the case, raising the prospect that Trump’s effort could be dismissed.

During lengthy arguments, the judges repeatedly pressed Trump’s lawyer to defend claims that Trump was shielded from criminal charges for acts that he says fell within his official duties as president. That argument was rejected last month by a lower-court judge, and the appeals judges suggested through their questions that they, too, were dubious that the Founding Fathers envisioned absolute immunity for presi-

dents after they leave office.

“I think it’s paradoxical to say that his constitutional duty to take care that the laws be faithfully executed allows him to violate criminal law,” said Judge Karen LeCraft Henderson, an appointee of former President George H.W. Bush.

The outcome carries enormous ramifications both for the landmark criminal case against Trump and for the broader, and legally untested, question of whether an ex-president can be prosecuted for acts committed in the White House. It will also likely set the stage for further appeals before the U.S. Supreme Court.

A swift decision is crucial for special counsel Jack Smith, who is eager to get the case — now paused pending the appeal — to trial before the November election. But Trump’s lawyers, in addition to seeking to get the case dismissed, are hoping to benefit from a protracted appeals process that could delay the trial well past its scheduled March 4 start date, including until after the election.

South Korea passes ban on production, sale of dog meat

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korea’s parliament on Tuesday passed a landmark ban on production and sales of dog meat, as public calls for a prohibition have grown sharply over concerns about animal rights and the country’s international image.

Some angry dog farmers said they plan to challenge the bill’s constitutionality and hold protest rallies, a sign of continued heated debate over the ban.

After a three-year grace period, the bill would make slaughtering, breeding and sales of dog meat for human consumption illegal from 2027 and punishable by 2-3 years in prison. It doesn’t provide any penalties for eating dog meat.

Dog meat consumption, a centuries-old practice on the Korean Peninsula, is neither explicitly banned nor legalized in South Korea. It has long been viewed as a source of stamina on hot summer days. Recent surveys show over half of South Koreans want dog meat banned and a majority no longer eat it.

But one in every three South Koreans still opposes a ban even though they don’t consume it.

The National Assembly passed the bill by a 208-0 vote. It will become law after being endorsed by the Cabinet Council and signed by President Yoon Suk Yeol, considered formalities since his government supports the ban.

“This law is aimed at contributing to realizing the values of animal rights, which pursue respect for life and a harmonious co-existence between humans and animals,” the legislation says.

The bill offers assistance to dog farmers and others in the industry in shutting down their businesses and shifting to alternatives. Details are to be worked out among government officials, farmers, experts and animal rights activists.

Dozens of animal rights activists gathered at the National Assembly to celebrate the bill’s passage.

Humane Society International called the legislation’s passage “history in the making.”

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Contract given to raise bridge for bigger ships

GA SAVANNAH — The Georgia Department of Transportation said last week that it has chosen a general contractor to oversee a \$189 million project to raise Savannah's towering suspension bridge so larger cargo ships can pass underneath and reach one of the nation's busiest seaports.

Maintenance and construction on the Eugene Talmadge Memorial Bridge are expected to begin in the first quarter of 2025, the DOT said in a statement announcing that Kiewit Infrastructure South Co. will serve as general contractor.

Officials with the Georgia Ports Authority began calling for the bridge to be replaced more than five years ago, saying its 185 feet of clearance will eventually be too low to accommodate growing classes of cargo ships.

The DOT's solution, at least for now, is to replace and shorten the bridge's massive cables to raise its center span up to an additional 20 feet. The agency said most of the work can be done without closing the bridge to traffic.

Missing Ohio teen found after logging in to game

FL DUNNELLON — A missing Ohio teen was recovered in Florida after she logged in to an online video game at the home of the man who took her, authorities said.

Thomas Ebersole, 31, was arrested last Wednesday at his Dunnellon home, according to the Marion County Sheriff's Office. The area is about 80 miles north of Tampa. Police in Lima, Ohio, about 80 miles northwest

of Columbus, had reported the girl missing on Dec. 28.

The FBI had contacted the sheriff's office earlier that day to request help in locating the missing 16-year-girl. Investigators determined that her World of Warcraft account had been used at a local address, which turned out to be Ebersole's home, authorities said.

Investigators made contact with Ebersole at his home, and he initially denied knowing the girl, officials said. But he eventually admitted that he had driven to Ohio to meet the teen and brought her back to his home, authorities said. Ebersole also told investigators that he was in a romantic relationship with the girl.

Lobster fishers sue over laws helping rare whale

ME PORTLAND — A group of lobster fishermen has sued fishing regulators in federal court, claiming that new electronic monitoring requirements designed to protect rare whales are unconstitutional.

The new rules went into effect Dec. 15 and require fishermen with federal lobster fishing permits to install 24-hour electronic tracking devices on their boats. The Maine Department of Marine Resources, which regulates fisheries in Maine, has promoted the new rule as a way to collect better data that can both benefit the fishery and help save the vanishing North Atlantic right whale, which is vulnerable to potentially lethal entanglement in fishing gear.

Five lobstermen who are members of a lobster fishing union filed their lawsuit in federal court last week. The fisher-

men said they oppose the requirement that the tracking devices must be operational regardless of what the boat is being used for at the time.

Regulators have defended the fishing monitoring rules as vitally important to collect data used to manage fisheries, but many fishing groups view them as overreach.

Governor to back limited GOP marijuana proposal

WI MADISON — Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers, who has pushed for full legalization of recreational marijuana, said Wednesday that he is open to a more limited medical marijuana legalization being promoted by Republicans.

Republicans have been working behind closed doors for years on a medical marijuana bill, and Assembly Speaker Robin Vos said in December that they would unveil it this month. Republicans have repeatedly rejected calls from Evers and other Democrats to legalize all uses of marijuana, including medical and recreational.

Vos said the proposal would be limited and modeled after the medical marijuana law that had been in place in neighboring Minnesota before it moved to full legalization.

Nude man arrested after diving in store aquarium

AL LEEDS — A man crashed his car outside a Bass Pro Shop in Alabama, stripped down and plunged into the giant aquarium inside the store, police said.

The ordeal happened Thursday night in front of shocked

shoppers in the town just outside Birmingham, Leeds Police Chief Paul Irwin said.

The 42-year-old Alabama man did a "cannonball" leap into the aquarium and then stood under a waterfall. He left the water to yell at two officers, then dove back into the aquarium, police said.

The man eventually climbed over the side of the aquarium and fell to the concrete floor below. Police then apprehended him, the news site Al.com reported.

Judge dismisses professor's lawsuit

IN SOUTH BEND — A judge Monday dismissed a University of Notre Dame's professor's defamation lawsuit against a student-run publication over news coverage of her abortion-rights advocacy.

St. Joseph County Superior Court Senior Judge Steven David found that sociology professor Tamara Kay's assertions that The Irish Rover's coverage of her was false and defamatory were unfounded.

"The Court concludes that Dr. Kay does not present any evidence that shows that The Irish Rover had any doubts about the truth of their statements before they were published. By failing to present such evidence, the Court concludes that Dr. Kay's defamation claim fails as a matter of law," David's ruling said.

Kay's lawsuit disputed some quotes the newspaper used and said it misinterpreted a sign on her door about helping students access health care. She had argued that her motivation was to support sexual assault victims.

— From wire reports

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Reporting
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Michigan claims national championship

Associated Press

HOUSTON — Jim Harbaugh raised the championship trophy as gold and white confetti sprayed over his team and “We Are the Champions” blared.

Nine years after he took over at Michigan, Harbaugh delivered on the lofty expectations he brought with him to his beloved alma mater.

Blake Corum ran for 134 yards and two fourth-quarter touchdowns as Harbaugh and the top-ranked Wolverines — undeterred by suspensions and a sign-stealing case that shadowed the program — completed a three-year surge to a national title by beating No. 2 Washington 34-13 Monday night in the College Football Playoff.

“We’re innocent and we stood strong and tall because we knew we were innocent. And I’d like to point that out,” Harbaugh said when asked about off-field

issues, jumping in to answer a question posed to his players. “And these guys are innocent. And overcome that? It wasn’t that hard because we knew we were innocent.

“(The season) went exactly how we wanted it to go. It went exactly how we wanted it to go.”

The Wolverines (15-0) sealed their first national title since 1997 when Corum, who scored the winning touchdown in overtime against Alabama in the Rose Bowl, blasted in from the 1-yard line with 3:37 left to put Michigan up by 21 and set off another rousing rendition of “The Victors” from the band.

After a third consecutive playoff appearance, Harbaugh won the championship so many expected when he took over a struggling powerhouse in 2015 — despite missing six regular-season games this season while serving two suspensions.

“That man, he’s the reason

we’re here today,” Michigan quarterback J.J. McCarthy said of his coach.

And Harbaugh did it with a team his old coach, Bo Schembechler, would have adored. The Wolverines ran for 303 yards against Washington (14-1), and their rugged defense held Michael Penix Jr. and the Huskies’ prolific passing game to just one touchdown while intercepting the Heisman Trophy runner-up twice.

Penix’s remarkable six-year college career ended with maybe his worst performance of the season. Usually unfazed by pressure, Penix was not nearly as precise against a Michigan defense that took away his signature deep throws.

“That was a spectacular game by our defense,” Harbaugh said.

The Indiana transfer who came back from two knee surgeries and two shoulder injuries

was roughed up by the Wolverines, limping at times, stepped on another time.

Asked how he was feeling, Penix said, still undaunted: “Better than I was three years ago.”

Penix finished 27-for-51 for 255 yards and a touchdown as the Huskies had their 21-game winning streak snapped.

“They’ve given me everything they possibly can,” coach Kalen DeBoer said of a group of players who went 4-8 just two seasons ago and 25-3 since he took over in 2022.

McCarthy had a modest game, throwing for 140 yards and running for 31. But it was enough for him to improve to 27-1 as a starter for the Wolverines.

Michigan gave Washington a taste of life in the Big Ten, where the Pac-12 champion is heading next season, and the Huskies were up for the grind for a while.

Harbaugh faces decision on whether to go back to NFL

Associated Press

HOUSTON — Michigan’s climb back to the summit of college football ended with its 34-13 win over Washington in the College Football Playoff championship game on Monday night.

Next, the Wolverines and their fans wait to see if Jim Harbaugh stays or goes.

Harbaugh, as he did during the lead-up to the championship, deflected all questions about his future an hour after the game, but decision time is drawing near as NFL franchises begin or consider searching for new coaches.

“I just want to enjoy this. I hope you give me that. Can a guy have that?” Harbaugh said. “Does it always have to be, ‘What’s next, what’s the future?’”

Harbaugh looked into NFL jobs the last two years before

deciding to stay at Michigan. It’s possible he won’t this time, especially with the school facing possible NCAA sanctions for recruiting violations and the sign-stealing scandal that hung over the team all season.

There is also the question of what’s left to accomplish at Michigan for the 60-year-old Harbaugh. The “Michigan Man” did what he set out to do when he left the San Francisco 49ers in 2014 to return to Ann Arbor, where his father was an assistant under Bo Schembechler and where he was a star quarterback in the mid-1980s.

Harbaugh took over a proud program humbled under Rich Rodriguez and Brady Hoke and has gone 89-25 over nine years, six with at least 10 wins. His only losing record came during the pandemic-shortened 2020 season.

The last three years mark one

of the most dominant periods in the history of the only program to win more than 1,000 games. The Wolverines have gone 40-3, won three straight Big Ten championships, made three consecutive playoff appearances and now are national champions. Harbaugh’s father, Jack, and NFL coach brother John watched his moment of triumph inside NRG Stadium.

Harbaugh did divulge one of his future plans after the game. He said he would make good on his promise to get a tattoo saying “15-0” if the Wolverines had a perfect season.

“I’m going to put it on my shoulder — I don’t know if it’s my left or right yet,” he said. “I’m a right-handed quarterback. I’ll probably get it on my right. And then an ‘M’ that’s a maize and blue ‘M.’ Also that signifies a thousand in Roman numerals. Can’t tell you what

that means to us, too, that we reached 1,000 wins this year.”

The Wolverines’ 28 wins over the last two years are the most over back-to-back seasons in program history.

Michigan has said it wants to retain Harbaugh, but the coach put off contract talks, perhaps a sign he wants to entertain NFL offers.

Michigan fourth-year defensive end Braiden McGregor said Harbaugh is always helpful and happy for players who decide to pursue an NFL career.

“So I think that’s the same way we should feel about him,” McGregor said before the game. “If that is his decision at the end of the day or he does get a job, happy for him, hopefully he can go win a Super Bowl. But if he comes back, happy that he comes back, let’s try to win another natty.”

Belichick's status with Pats up in air

Associated Press

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. — After a tumultuous season filled with setbacks and unfulfilled expectations, Bill Belichick still very much wants to do his job for the New England Patriots.

Even if the job description could be different going forward.

A day after posting a 4-13 finish that was the worst of his 29 seasons as an NFL head coach, the 71-year-old Belichick intimated a willingness to be flexible about his job duties should Patriots owner Robert Kraft decide to bring him back for his 25th year in New England.

That includes letting someone else handle personnel decisions.

"I'm for whatever collectively we decide as an organization is the best thing to help our football team," Belichick said during his season-ending video conference Monday. "I'm under contract. I'm going to do

what I always do, which is every day I come in, work as hard as I can to help the team in whatever way I can. So that's what I'm going to continue to do."

The confirmation that he is under contract was a departure for Belichick, who didn't divulge any details about its terms or length. He was expected to meet with Kraft and his son, team president Jonathan Kraft, this week to discuss his job status.

Belichick wouldn't say exactly when that would occur but said it could be "a series of meetings."

"I don't know. We'll deal with that internally," he said.

Externally, an entire league waits to see how the situation plays out. Reports swirled as different coaching jobs came available Monday, including one by the Athletic that quoted a source saying the Atlanta Falcons would be interested in Bel-

ichick should he depart from New England. The Falcons fired coach Arthur Smith late Sunday night.

The Patriots' finish at the bottom of the AFC standings placed them third behind only Carolina (2-15) and Washington (4-13) in the 2024 NFL Draft order.

They likely would draft a quarterback following a disastrous third season by 2021 first-round pick Mac Jones, who continued to regress and was eventually benched. Jones' demotion could be a signal the team is ready to move on.

If a restart and rebuild is on tap for the Patriots, it's unclear whether ownership will want Belichick to lead it.

One possible replacement could be linebackers coach Jerod Mayo, who turned down multiple head coaching interviews last offseason and signed a contract extension with the Patriots. He said recently that

getting a head coaching job is still something he wants.

But Belichick was just as clear Monday that he wants the opportunity to be part of the Patriots' future.

"I'm going to do everything I can every day to do the best I can to help our football team. That's what I've always done. It's never been any different for me in my career," he said. "I learned that lesson from my dad growing up. You work for the team that you're working for and do the best you can for it, until somebody tells you different. So, that's not going to change."

With Belichick declaring that he could be having multiple meetings with the Krafts, it's possible his fate may not be settled for several days.

It makes for an intriguing week ahead of the playoffs. Whenever a decision is made, there will be ripples across the NFL.

Pacific-leading Canucks top Rangers to keep rolling

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Elias Pettersson and Nils Högländer each scored twice, Thatcher Demko made 39 saves and the Vancouver Canucks defeated the New York Rangers 6-3 on Monday night in a battle of first-place teams.

JT Miller and Brock Boeser also scored goals while Pettersson, Boeser and Filip Hronek had two assists apiece for Vancouver, which won for the third time in four games.

After missing the playoffs for three straight seasons, the Canucks lead the Pacific Division with a 26-11-3 record. The Rangers lead the Metropolitan Division at 26-11-2.

"We understand each other how we want to defend and fore-check. And that sets up your chances offensively," said Pet-

tersson, who led the Canucks with 102 points last season and has 52 points in 40 games this year. "It's great to see where we are in the standings."

Vincent Trocheck had two goals and Artemi Panarin also scored for the Rangers, who lost their second straight for just the second time this season. Alexis Lafreniere had two assists.

The Rangers were coming off a 4-3 shootout loss at Montreal on Saturday. Their only previous consecutive losses were Dec. 5 and Dec. 9, when they fell on the road to Ottawa and Washington, respectively.

"They are a high-powered, high-octane team. The way we played, how we played mentally was just not sharp enough to be good for 60 minutes," Rangers captain Jacob Trouba said.

Avalanche 4, Bruins 3 (SO):

Valeri Nichushkin scored the only goal in the shootout, and host Colorado won for the fifth time in six games.

The first five shooters couldn't convert, but Nichushkin beat Jeremy Swayman with a shot under his glove.

Sam Malinski, Mikko Rantanen and Logan O'Connor had goals and Alexandar Georgiev had 24 saves through overtime and three more in the shootout for the Avalanche.

Nathan MacKinnon had an assist to continue his dominant play in Denver, where he has 16 goals and 29 assists. He has registered at least one point in all 22 home games this season.

Stars 4, Wild 0: Matt Murray stopped 23 shots for his first career NHL shutout, and visiting Dallas scored two short-handed goals to snap a three-game los-

ing streak.

Tyler Seguin and Roope Hintz each had a goal and an assist for Dallas. Radek Faksa and Jason Robertson also scored.

Marc-Andre Fleury made 16 saves but missed in his first chance to pass Patrick Roy for sole possession of second place on the NHL's career wins list.

Penguins 4, Flyers 1: Evgeni Malkin had a goal and an assist to lead visiting Pittsburgh over Philadelphia in a scrappy contest.

Rickard Rakell, Erik Karlsson and Chad Ruhwedel also scored for Pittsburgh.

Owen Tippett scored for the Flyers, who have lost seven of nine.

The game was feisty between the in-state rivals. The teams combined for 11 penalties that totaled 24 minutes.

Mathurin caps Pacers' rally over Celtics

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Benedict Mathurin scored 26 points, including the deciding free throws with 0.6 seconds remaining, and the Indiana Pacers rallied after All-Star point guard Tyrese Haliburton suffered a hamstring injury to beat the Boston Celtics 133-131 on Monday night.

Haliburton strained his left hamstring when he slipped and did the splits on a drive in the second quarter. He was carried to the locker room by two teammates. An MRI was scheduled for Tuesday.

"That was a very deflating moment," Pacers coach Rick Carlisle said. "(But) this was an important game. Every game that we play has the ability to be a season-defining game."

Mathurin was fouled by Kristaps Porzingis on a 3-pointer just before time expired. The call was reviewed and upheld. Mathurin sank the first two free throws and missed the third on purpose.

"I was excited," Mathurin said. "It was a pretty good thing to be a part of."

He finished 8-for-15 from the field, including five 3-pointers, as Indiana split a two-game home series against the top team in the Eastern Conference.

"Really amazing effort from our team," Carlisle said. "A lot

of emotions in this game, for a lot of reasons: you're playing the best team in basketball and Tyrese's injury situation."

All-Star Jaylen Brown scored a season-high 40 points on 17-for-26 shooting for the Celtics, who were without leading scorer Jayson Tatum. The four-time All-Star sat out to manage a left ankle sprain. Tatum averages 27.5 points, and he had 38 points, 14 rebounds and six assists in Saturday's 118-101 win over the Pacers.

"He stepped up and didn't force anything," Celtics coach Joe Mazzulla said of Brown. "He let the game come to him. He scored in many different ways."

Jrue Holiday scored 21 points and Porzingis had 19 for Boston.

"We all played a relatively decent offensive game," Mazzulla said, "but we all have to be better on defense."

The Pacers trailed by nine points at halftime but finished with seven double-figure scorers. Aaron Nesmith scored 17 points, Myles Turner had 16 and Buddy Hield had 15.

Bulls 119, Hornets 112 (OT): Coby White scored 27 points, Andre Drummond added 21 points and 15 rebounds and visiting Chicago overcame a 39-point performance from Terry Rozier to beat Charlotte.

Nikola Vucevic added 21

points and nine rebounds in his second game back from an injury for the Bulls (17-21), who defeated the Hornets for the second time in four nights.

Rozier had seven 3-pointers and was 12-for-12 from the foul line for Charlotte (8-26), which has lost 13 of its last 14 games.

Miles Bridges added 24 points for the Hornets, who remain without three starters due to injuries.

Thunder 136, Wizards 128: Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 32 points, Chet Holmgren added 31 and visiting Oklahoma City led most of the way in a victory over Washington.

Jalen Williams added 21 points and 10 assists for the Thunder (24-11), who avoided a third loss following defeats at Atlanta and Brooklyn to begin a four-game road trip.

Holmgren spearheaded that effort, making 11 of 14 shots and going 4-for-5 from beyond the arc.

Jordan Poole scored 24 points, and Kyle Kuzma added 22 points and grabbed 15 rebounds for Washington (6-30).

Clippers 138, Suns 111: Paul George scored 25 points, Ivica Zubac added 19 and host Los Angeles beat Phoenix for the second time in five days.

James Harden had 19 points, seven rebounds and 10 assists for the Clippers, who won 131-122 in Phoenix last Wednesday

and have won six of seven overall. Kawhi Leonard added 17 points.

Kevin Durant scored 20 of his 30 points in the first half for the Suns. Devin Booker finished with 20 points and Bradley Beal had 15 points.

Heat 120, Rockets 113: Tyler Herro scored 28 points, Bam Adebayo finished with 22 points and 12 rebounds, and host Miami topped Houston.

Kevin Love scored 15 points for Miami (21-15), while Duncan Robinson and Jaime Jaquez Jr. each had 14 for the Heat. Josh Richardson finished with 12 for Miami. Adebayo had 10 of his points in the fourth quarter.

Fred VanVleet led all scorers with 32 points for the Rockets (18-17), who opened a six-game road trip. Alperen Sengun scored 22 points and grabbed 11 rebounds for Houston.

Jazz 132, Bucks 116: Jordan Clarkson and Lauri Markkanen had 21 points apiece and visiting Utah staved off a second-half rally for a victory over Milwaukee.

Giannis Antetokounmpo had 25 points, 10 rebounds and 11 assists for the Bucks (25-12), who have lost four of five.

John Collins, Collin Sexton and Keyonte George each had 19 points for Utah (18-20), which has won five of its last six.

Morant's season over due to shoulder injury

Associated Press

Ja Morant's season is over, with the Memphis Grizzlies announcing Monday night that their star guard needs surgery to repair a tear in his right shoulder.

Morant got hurt in practice on Saturday, the Grizzlies said. The two-time All-Star was in a sling for the Grizzlies' game against Phoenix on Sunday, and then the news came a day later about how serious the issue is.

"Following ongoing soreness and instability, Morant underwent an MRI that re-

vealed an underlying labral tear," the Grizzlies said.

Morant missed the first 25 games of the season while serving an NBA suspension for displaying a gun on social media — his second such suspension in less than a year, after missing eight games last season for a similar offense.

He returned from the 25-game suspension and averaged 25.1 points in nine games, with the Grizzlies going 6-3 in those contests.

The Grizzlies are 7-20 without Morant

this season, are 4½ games out of the final play-in spot in the Western Conference and now have to go the rest of the way without their best player. A playoff push, with Morant, didn't seem completely unreasonable. Without him, the long odds just got much longer.

It seems as though the severity of the shoulder issue caught the Grizzlies off guard. On Sunday, Grizzlies coach Taylor Jenkins said Morant was dealing with soreness and even went as far as to say it would be a game-time decision against the Suns.