

## Iran navy seizes tanker in Gulf of Oman

*Associated Press*

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Iran's navy seized an oil tanker on Thursday in the Gulf of Oman, officials said, a seizure that further escalates tensions in the Mideast waterways.

The vessel was once known as the Suez Rajan and was involved in a yearlong dispute that ultimately saw the U.S. Justice Department seize 1 million barrels of Iranian crude oil on it.

The seizure also comes after weeks of attacks by Yemen's Iranian-backed Houthi rebels on shipping in the Red Sea, including their largest barrage ever of drones and missiles launched late Tuesday.

That has raised the risk of possible retaliatory strikes by U.S.-led forces now patrolling the vital waterway, especially after a United Nations Security Council vote on Wednesday condemning the Houthis and as American and British officials warned of potential consequences over the attacks.

Iran's state-run television acknowledged the seizure Thursday afternoon, hours after armed men boarded it.

"The violating oil tanker Suez Rajan ... stole Iranian oil by leading it to the Americans and delivered it to the Americans," state TV said. It said Iran's navy, rather than its paramilitary Revolutionary Guard, con-

ducted the seizure. Past tense incidents at sea have largely involved the Guard.

The British military's United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations, which provides warnings to sailors in the Middle East, said Thursday's seizure began early in the morning in the waters between Oman and Iran in an area transited by ships coming in and out of the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow mouth of the Persian Gulf through which a fifth of all traded oil passes.

The U.K. military-run group described receiving a report from the ship's security manager of hearing "unknown voices over the phone" alongside with the ship's captain. It said further efforts to contact the ship had failed and that the men who boarded the vessel wore "black military-style uniforms with black masks."

The private security firm Ambrey said that "four to five armed persons" boarded the ship, which it identified as the oil tanker St. Nikolas. It said the men covered the surveillance cameras.

The tanker had been off the city of Basra, Iraq, loading crude oil bound for Aliaga, Turkey, for the Turkish refinery firm Tupras.

Satellite-tracking data analyzed by The Associated Press showed the tanker had turned and headed toward the port of Ban-

dar-e Jask in Iran.

The St. Nikolas was earlier named the Suez Rajan, associated with the Greek shipping company Empire Navigation. In a statement to the AP, Athens-based Empire Navigation acknowledged losing contact with the vessel, which has a crew of 18 Filipinos and one Greek national.

"Empire have no such knowledge of a court order or the Iranian navy having seized their vessel, and have still not been contacted by anyone," the company said.

Attention began focusing on the Suez Rajan in February 2022, when the group United Against Nuclear Iran said it suspected the tanker carried oil from Iran's Khargh Island, its main oil distribution terminal in the Persian Gulf. Satellite photos and shipping data analyzed at the time by the AP supported the allegation.

For months, the ship sat in the South China Sea off the northeast coast of Singapore before suddenly sailing for the Texas coast without explanation. The vessel discharged its cargo to another tanker in August, which released its oil in Houston as part of a Justice Department order.

In September, Empire Navigation pleaded guilty to smuggling sanctioned Iranian crude oil and agreed to pay a \$2.4 million fine over a case involving the tanker.

## US, China discuss military relations, security

**BY ALEX WILSON**  
*Stars and Stripes*

Beijing will make no "concession or compromise" regarding Taiwan, Chinese military officials told their U.S. counterparts during the first face-to-face military dialogue between the two countries in four years.

U.S. and Chinese representatives met at the Pentagon on Monday and Tuesday to discuss military-to-military relations, global security and regional issues, according to readouts of the meeting released Wednesday by the Pentagon and China's Defense Ministry.

The discussions — led by Michael Chase, deputy assistant secretary of de-

fense for China, Taiwan and Mongolia, and Chinese army Maj. Gen. Song Yanchao — were the first between the two global powers' militaries since 2021; direct talks were shelved after former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan in August 2022.

President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping met in November during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum in San Francisco, where Xi agreed to resume the talks, the Pentagon said in its news release.

Chase "underscored the importance of maintaining operational safety" in the Indo-Pacific and reiterated the United States' promise to "fly, sail and operate safely and responsibly wherever interna-

tional law allows," according to the Pentagon.

China urged the U.S. to "reduce military presence and provocative actions in the South China Sea," Beijing's defense ministry said in its news release.

China will make no "concession or compromise on the Taiwan question and demanded the U.S. abide by the One China principle," the release states.

Beijing also called on the U.S. to "stop arming Taiwan, and not support Taiwan independence," according to the release.

China considers Taiwan, a functionally independent democracy since 1996, as a breakaway province that must be reunified with the mainland, by force if necessary.

# DOD IG set to review Austin hospital stay

By MATTHEW ADAMS  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's handling of his undisclosed hospitalization will be investigated by the Defense Department inspector general, the office announced Thursday.

Robert Storch, the inspector general, disclosed the review in a memo to Austin, Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks and other officials, saying his office would begin the investigation this month.

"The objective of the review is to examine the roles, processes, procedures, responsibilities and actions related to the Secretary of Defense's hospitalization

in December 2023-January 2024 and assess whether the DoD's policies and procedures are sufficient to ensure timely and appropriate notifications and the effective transition of authorities as may be warranted due to health-based or other unavailability of senior leadership," Storch wrote.

The IG review comes after the Pentagon announced Monday that it would conduct a 30-day review of the incident.

Austin, 70, has been in hospitalized since Jan. 1 after experiencing complications from a surgery conducted Dec. 22 to treat prostate cancer. The secretary has come under scrutiny for failing to notify President

Joe Biden and other federal officials about his illness and hospital stay.

During Austin's medical treatments, no one at the Defense Department notified the White House, Hicks, Congress or the public for several days. On Jan. 2, Austin transferred some of his more pressing responsibilities to Hicks, who was on vacation in Puerto Rico. Biden learned of the secretary's prostate cancer diagnosis Tuesday morning, National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said earlier in the week.

Rep. Mike Rogers, R-Ala., who is chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, launched a formal inquiry

Tuesday into Austin's failure to disclose his illness and hospitalization. Rogers is asking Austin, Hicks and Austin's chief of staff, Kelly Magsamen, to answer detailed questions and hand over documents related to delays in informing the White House, top Pentagon officials and lawmakers about Austin's medical condition.

"As you must be aware, this lack of transparency is inexcusable and could have resulted in calamity," Rogers wrote in a letter to Magsamen. "Congress must understand how this unacceptable breakdown in disclosure concerning the secretary's capacity to lead the [Defense] Department occurred."

## Zelenskyy rules out any cease-fire with Russia

*Associated Press*

TALLINN, Estonia — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Thursday ruled out a cease-fire as his country fights off the Russian invasion, saying the Kremlin's forces would use the pause to rearm and regroup in order to overwhelm Kyiv's troops.

"A pause on the Ukrainian battlefield will not mean a pause in the war," Zelenskyy said during a visit to Estonia. "A pause would play into (Russia's) hands. It might crush us afterward."

Limited cease-fires have occasionally been proposed since Russia launched its full-scale war in February 2022, but have never taken hold.

Both sides are scrambling to replenish their weapons after 22 months of fighting and are facing the prospect of a protracted conflict. With the roughly 930-mile front line mostly static during winter, they both

require artillery shells, missiles and drones that enable long-range strikes.

Zelenskyy said Moscow is receiving artillery shells and missiles from North Korea and drones from Iran. On Jan. 4, the White House cited U.S. intelligence officials as saying that Russia acquired ballistic missiles from North Korea and is seeking them from Iran.

Zelenskyy was in the Estonian capital of Tallinn as part of a two-day swing through Baltic countries, which have been among Ukraine's staunchest supporters.

He met with Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, who gave him a shirt with the Estonian word "Kaitsetahe" — "The will to defend" — printed on the front, which Zelenskyy wore as he addressed parliament.

"Tyranny must be defeated. Tyranny must be a loser," Zelenskyy said. "Always. Always. Always."

## South Africa to UN: Israel is committing genocide in Gaza

*Associated Press*

THE HAGUE, Netherlands — A continent away from the war in Gaza, South Africa accused Israel of committing genocide against the Palestinians there and pleaded with the United Nations' top court Thursday to order an immediate halt to the country's military operation. Israel has vehemently denied the allegations.

South African lawyers said during the opening arguments that the latest Gaza war is part of a decadeslong oppression of the Palestinians by Israel.

The two-day hearing is the public side of a landmark case, one of the most significant to be heard in an international court and which goes to the heart of one of the world's most intractable conflicts.

South Africa is seeking binding preliminary orders to compel Israel to stop its military campaign in Gaza, in which over 23,000 people have died, according to the health ministry

which is run by Hamas.

"Genocides are never declared in advance, but this court has the benefit of the past 13 weeks of evidence that shows incontrovertibly a pattern of conduct and related intention that justifies as a plausible claim of genocidal acts," South African lawyer Adila Hassim told the judges and audience in the packed, ornate room of the Peace Palace in The Hague.

"Nothing will stop the suffering except an order from this court," she said.

Israel, however, has said it is battling a fierce enemy in the Gaza Strip that carried out the deadliest attack on its territory, killing more than 1,200 people, since its creation in 1948. Israel said it is following international law and is doing its utmost to avoid harm to civilians. It blamed Hamas for the high toll, saying its enemy embeds in residential areas.

Israel's lawyers were set to address the court Friday.

# Summations heard in Trump fraud trial

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Bared from giving a formal closing argument, Donald Trump still got a brief chance to speak in court at the conclusion of his New York civil trial Thursday, calling the proceedings “a fraud on me” before the judge cut him off.

“We have a situation where I am an innocent man,” the former president said. “I’m being persecuted by someone running for office and I think you have to go outside the bounds.”

After about six minutes, Judge Arthur Engoron — who had denied Trump permission earlier to give a closing statement at the trial — cut him off and recessed for lunch.

The exchange took place hours after authorities responded to a

bomb threat at the judge’s house.

Police checked out the threat at Engoron’s Long Island home, which came a day after he denied the former president’s extraordinary request to deliver his own courtroom close, officials said. Proceedings were not delayed.

Trump, the leading contender for the Republican presidential nomination, has repeatedly disparaged Engoron, accusing him in a social media post Wednesday night of working closely with the New York attorney general “to screw me.”

“At this moment the judge is not letting me make the summation because I’ll bring up things he doesn’t want to hear,” Trump said as he walked into the courtroom, characterizing the decision as “political interference.”

“Forty-four days of trial — not one witness came into this courtroom, your honor, and said there was fraud,” Trump lawyer Christopher Kise said, contending his client “should get a medal” for his business acumen instead of punishment he deemed the “corporate death penalty.”

At 5:30 a.m. on Thursday, hours before the trial’s final day was to begin, Nassau County police said they responded to a “swatting incident” at Engoron’s Great Neck home. Nothing amiss was found at the location, officials said.

The false report came days after a fake emergency call reporting a shooting at the home of the judge in Trump’s Washington, D.C., criminal case. The incidents are among a recent spate of similar false reports at the homes of

public officials.

Engoron made no mention of the incident at his home.

On Wednesday, Engoron had nixed an unusual plan by Trump to deliver his own closing remarks in the courtroom, in addition to summations from his legal team, after lawyers for the former president would not agree to the judge’s demand that he stick to “relevant” matters.

That left the last words to the lawyers in a trial over allegations that Trump exaggerated his wealth on financial statements he provided to banks, insurance companies and others.

New York Attorney General Letitia James, a Democrat, wants the judge to impose \$370 million in penalties. Trump says he did nothing wrong.

## US inflation rises, fueled by food and housing prices

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Higher rents and food prices boosted overall U.S. inflation in December, a sign that the Federal Reserve’s drive to slow inflation to its 2% target will likely remain a bumpy one.

Thursday’s report from the Labor Department showed that overall prices rose 0.3% from November and 3.4% from 12 months

earlier. Those gains exceeded the previous 0.1% monthly rise and the 3.1% annual inflation in November.

Excluding volatile food and energy costs, though, so-called core prices rose just 0.3% month over month, unchanged from November’s increase. Core prices were up 3.9% from a year earlier, down a tick from November’s 4% year-over-year gain. Economists

pay particular attention to core prices because, by excluding costs that typically jump around from month to month, they are seen as a better guide to the likely path of inflation.

Overall inflation has cooled more or less steadily since hitting a four-decade high of 9.1% in mid-2022. Still, the persistence of still-elevated inflation helps explain why, despite steady eco-

nomics growth, low unemployment and healthy hiring, polls show many Americans are dissatisfied with the economy — a likely key issue in the 2024 elections.

The Federal Reserve, which began aggressively raising interest rates in March 2022 to try to slow the pace of price increases, wants to reduce year-over-year inflation to its 2% target level.

## Speaker Johnson facing pushback on spending deal

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — As Speaker Mike Johnson gathered House Republicans behind closed doors Wednesday to sell the spending deal he reached with Democrats, one thing quickly became clear: Many GOP lawmakers weren’t buying it.

Rep. Warren Davidson of Ohio left early, saying he’d had enough.

“I’m not going to sit there and listen to that drivel, be-

cause he has no plans to do anything but surrender,” Davidson said.

In the afternoon, 13 Republicans refused to support a routine procedural vote setting the stage for considering three GOP-led bills. A similar revolt occurred in June when, for the first time in some 20 years, such a routine vote was defeated, essentially grinding the House to a halt.

“We needed to send a message that what’s going on with

this announced agreement is unacceptable,” said Rep. Bob Good, R-Va., chairman of the House Freedom Caucus, made up many of the House’s most conservative lawmakers.

House Republicans are off to a raucous start in their first week back in Washington after an extended holiday break. The open criticism of the speaker and the parliamentary standoff reflects deep divisions within the party that have continued despite new leadership, raising

questions about his ability to unite the conference.

Most Republicans are still voicing support for Johnson, saying he is doing the best he can with such a slim majority and Democrats in control of the Senate and White House. But it took only eight Republicans to oust Rep. Kevin McCarthy as speaker last year — along with 208 Democrats. A similar revolt from just a handful of Republicans would leave Johnson vulnerable as well.

# Haley, DeSantis attack each other's records

Associated Press

DES MOINES, Iowa — In their most hostile encounter yet, Nikki Haley and Ron DeSantis attacked each other early and often in Wednesday's Republican primary debate rather than focus on Donald Trump, the absent front-runner, as both tried to demonstrate they were the strongest alternative to the former president.

DeSantis and Haley called each other liars and insulted each other's records and character in the opening minutes of the debate. They seemed to relish the chance to go head to head without their lower-polling rivals interrupting, as in past debates. The two Republicans instead drilled into each other's policy ideas and directed viewers to dueling fact-checking websites their campaigns set up.

The one-on-one format displayed their sharp differences over issues ranging from foreign policy to abortion less than a week before the Republican primary process begins in Iowa. But it was

unclear whether the debate could reshape a race that's been dominated by Trump, who had the stage to himself at a separate Fox News event in Des Moines where he was seldom challenged and teased the audience about whom he'd pick as his running mate.

Standing at lecterns an arm's length apart, DeSantis and Haley fired off detailed critiques and sarcastic quips from the beginning.

"You're so desperate. You're just so desperate," the former U.N. ambassador interrupted DeSantis at one point.

The Florida governor in turn said Haley's "got this problem with ballistic podiatry, shooting herself in the foot every other day."

In one of her most brutal critiques, Haley ridiculed DeSantis for the turmoil within his political operation, with several rounds of personnel changes and new strategies along with the millions spent on his behalf.

"Why should we think you can

manage or do anything in this country?" Haley asked.

DeSantis accused Haley of being beholden to big donors and of flip-flopping on conservative issues.

"We don't need another mealy-mouthed politician who just tells you what she thinks you want to hear just to try to get your vote, then to get into office and to do her donors' bidding," DeSantis said of Haley.

One rare point of agreement was that Trump should have been onstage too.

When asked about Trump's comments in 2022 calling for the "termination" of parts of the Constitution over his lie that the 2020 election was stolen, Haley was blunter than DeSantis about critiquing the president she once worked for.

"That election, Trump lost it. Biden won the election," Haley said.

She also said the Jan. 6, 2021, storming of the U.S. Capitol by his supporters "was a terrible day

and I think President Trump will have to answer for it."

DeSantis, who has been suggesting the party will need to nominate someone other than Trump because of his legal challenges, predicted that the former president would likely end up being convicted for the criminal charges he faces for his efforts to overturn the election.

Wednesday's debate was especially important for Haley, a politician long known for her disciplined approach to messaging. That reputation has been tested recently after a series of gaffes, including her failure to mention slavery as the root cause of the Civil War and a quip that New Hampshire voters will have a chance to "correct" the results that emerge from Iowa.

DeSantis has bet his campaign on Iowa's caucuses and has vowed to win them despite trailing badly in most state polls. He has visited all of Iowa's 99 counties and has the endorsement of Republican Gov. Kim Reynolds.

## Trump relaxes at town hall as rivals stage fiery debate

Associated Press

NEW YORK — As Donald Trump's two main Republican rivals slugged it out Wednesday on an Iowa debate stage, the former president appeared across town on a Fox News Channel town hall in a counterprogramming move where few discouraging words were heard.

He was barely challenged by questioners who left several challenging topics on the table — like Trump's false claims about the 2020 election, his support for Capitol insurrectionists and legal arguments this week in which his lawyers claimed he had immunity from any potential crimes he might have conducted while in office.

When asked about his previous statements that a second

term as president would be about retribution for his enemies, Trump said he wouldn't have time for it.

"The ultimate retribution," he said, "is success."

It was Trump's first live appearance on Fox News since 2022, and it came less than a year after Fox agreed to pay Dominion Voting Systems \$787 million to settle a lawsuit related to lies told in the aftermath of the 2020 election.

His standing atop 2024 presidential polls put him in a position of strength. While Fox held Iowa town halls with Ron DeSantis and Nikki Haley outside of prime-time hours in the past week, Trump's town hall aired in direct competition with the CNN debate between his two rivals.

## Chris Christie suspends campaign for presidency

Associated Press

WINDHAM, N.H. — Former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie on Wednesday suspended his Republican presidential bid just days before Iowa's leadoff caucuses, ceding to growing pressure to drop out of the race from those desperate to deny Donald Trump a glidepath to the nomination.

Addressing supporters at a New Hampshire town hall, Christie said he had come to the conclusion that he had no pathway to victory.

"Campaigns are run to win. That's why we do them," he said. "It's clear to me tonight that there isn't a path for me to win the nomination."

"My goal has never been to be just a voice against the hate and

division and the selfishness of what our party has become under Donald Trump," he added.

"I am going to make sure that in no way do I enable Donald Trump to ever be president of the United States again. And that's more important than my own personal ambition," he said.

Christie did not immediately endorse any of his rivals and instead continued to lace into them. Underscoring his deep frustrations, he was overheard on a hot mic before the event began criticizing former United Nations Ambassador Nikki Haley.

"She's going to get smoked," he said in an audio broadcast on the campaign's livestream feed. "She's not up to this."

**AMERICAN ROUNDUP**

**OSHA fines lumber firm years after employee death**

**WI** MADISON — A northeastern Wisconsin lumber company has been fined nearly \$300,000 by federal safety regulators for continuing to expose workers to amputation and other dangers years after an employee was killed on the job.

The U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration announced Tuesday that it fined Tigerton Lumber Co. \$283,608 on Dec. 22. The agency said that an inspection last July uncovered violations of multiple federal safety regulations, ranging from inadequate guards on machines, stairs without railings, conveyors not fenced off or marked as prohibited areas, open electrical boxes and a lack of signs warning employees not to enter dangerous areas.

The inspection was part of an OSHA program to monitor severe violators. The company was designated as such after 46-year-old employee Scott Spiegel was killed while working with logging equipment in 2018.

**Prospects unclear as gambling push renewed**

**GA** ATLANTA — Supporters of legal sports gambling in Georgia renewed their push Tuesday, but it's unclear whether they're closer to assembling a winning coalition after they went bust in 2023.

The Senate Regulated Industries voted 8-4 to advance Senate Bill 172, which would legalize, regulate and tax sports betting in Georgia, sending it to the full Senate for more debate. But the measure requires a state

constitutional amendment to take effect. That needs two-thirds of both the House and Senate before it could go to voters for approval in a statewide referendum.

The measure's sponsor, Republican Bill Cowsert, argued again Tuesday that an amendment is needed because when Georgia voters approved a lottery in 1992, sports bets could only be placed in person in a Nevada casino. Vermont recently became the 38th state nationwide to allow sports betting.

But supporters of an approach favored by the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce and Georgia's pro sports teams argue sports betting could be overseen by Georgia's lottery without amending the constitution.

**Vote backs official who took Trump off of ballot**

**ME** AUGUSTA — Democrats who control the Maine Legislature on Tuesday turned back a Republican effort to impeach the state's top election official for her decision to remove former President Donald Trump from the state ballot over his role in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol.

The Maine House voted 80-60 along party lines against an impeachment resolution targeting Shenna Bellows, the first secretary of state in history to block someone from running for president by invoking the U.S. Constitution's insurrection clause.

Bellows has vowed to abide by any legal ruling on her decision to keep Trump off Maine's March 5 primary ballot, which is under appeal.

Republicans are furious over

Bellows' conclusion that the GOP front-runner doesn't meet ballot requirements.

**Supervisors OK measure calling for Gaza cease-fire**

**CA** SAN FRANCISCO — Supervisors in San Francisco approved a resolution calling for an extended cease-fire in Gaza that condemns Hamas as well as the Israeli government and also urges the Biden administration to press for the release of all hostages and delivery of humanitarian aid.

Cease-fire advocates in the audience erupted into cheers and chants of "Free Palestine" after the 8-3 vote Tuesday on a last-minute compromise proposed by Aaron Peskin, president of the Board of Supervisors. It is more succinct than the original resolution.

San Francisco joins dozens of other U.S. cities in approving a resolution that has no legal authority but reflects pressure on local governments to speak up on the Israel-Hamas war, now entering its fourth month following a deadly Oct. 7 attack by Hamas militants.

**Man guilty in shootings on lawmakers' homes**

**NM** SANTA FE — One of three defendants has pleaded guilty to federal charges in connection with a series of drive-by shootings at the homes of state and local lawmakers in Albuquerque after the 2022 election, according to federal court filings made public Tuesday.

Jose Louise Trujillo, 22, pleaded guilty at a Monday hearing to charges of conspiracy, election interference, illegal

use of a firearm and fentanyl possession with the intent to distribute. Federal and local prosecutors allege that the attacks were orchestrated by former Republican candidate Solomon Peña with the involvement of Trujillo and a third man. Peña maintains his innocence.

Alexander Uballez, the U.S. attorney in Albuquerque, has said the shootings targeted the homes of two county commissioners shortly after and because of their certification of the 2022 election, in which Peña lost his bid to serve in the state legislature. No one was injured.

**Judge enters final order striking down gun law**

**OR** PORTLAND — An Oregon judge has entered the final order striking down a gun control law that was narrowly approved by voters in 2022.

Harney County Circuit Court Judge Robert Raschio signed the general judgment on Monday. The judgment finalizes the opinion Raschio issued in November finding the law violated the right to bear arms under the Oregon Constitution.

The law, one of the toughest in the nation, was among the first gun restrictions to be passed after a major U.S. Supreme Court ruling last year changed the guidance judges are expected to follow when considering Second Amendment cases.

The law requires people to undergo a criminal background check and complete a gun safety training course to obtain a permit to buy a firearm. It also bans high-capacity magazines.

The state trial stemmed from a lawsuit filed by gun owners.

— From wire reports



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# Tide's Saban retires with 7 national titles

Associated Press

Nick Saban's coaching reign has come to an end. His dominance over college football, however, will forever linger in lore.

Saban, who won seven national championships — more than any major college football coach — and turned Alabama back into a national powerhouse that shattered an Associated Press poll record for most consecutive seasons at No. 1, announced his retirement Wednesday.

"The University of Alabama has been a very special place to Terry and me," Saban said in a statement. "It is not just about how many games we won and lost, but it's about the legacy and how we went about it. We always tried to do it the right way."

Saban, 72, restored a Crimson Tide program once ruled by Paul "Bear" Bryant to the top of college football after taking over in 2007. As he stacked his wins, Saban's celebrity status

reached royalty levels in the state of Alabama.

For a time, he was the sport's overlord and there was little that could be done to stop him.

Saban won six of his titles during his 17 seasons at Alabama. He won his first with LSU in 2003. His Tide teams were ranked No. 1 in the AP poll in a remarkable 15 straight seasons, breaking the old record of seven held by Miami.

Saban's wife, Terry, posted about their "incredible run" at Alabama on the Facebook page for Nick's Kids Foundation.

"We hope that the Saban legacy will be about helping others and making a positive difference in people's lives as well as the winning tradition on the field," Terry Saban wrote.

Saban's tutelage helped launch the head coaching careers of Georgia's Kirby Smart, Texas' Steve Sarkisian and Mississippi's Lane Kiffin, among others.

He finished just shy of the top

in his final season, leading the Tide from a shaky start to a Southeastern Conference championship and back into the College Football Playoff before falling in overtime to Michigan in a semifinal game at the Rose Bowl.

Alabama athletic director Greg Byrne called him "one of the greatest coaches of all time, in any sport."

Saban led the Tide to nine SEC championships and won his first national title at Alabama with a 14-0 season in 2009. Titles came again in 2011, 2012, 2015, 2017 and 2020. He also won the SEC with LSU in 2001 and 2003.

After a 7-6 debut in 2007, Saban won at least 10 games in his final 16 seasons.

It wasn't until the rise of Dabo Swinney's Clemson teams in the late 2010s and later Smart's Georgia Bulldogs that any school could be considered a consistent threat to the Tide.

Saban has stepped away as

the fabric of college football undergoes dramatic change. Colorado's Deion Sanders, a coach who has sought to capitalize on the intervention of players profiting financially from their play on the field, said on social media "College Football just lost the GOAT."

"WOW! I knew it would happen 1 day soon but not this soon," he wrote. "The game has change so much that it chased the GOAT away. College football let's hold up our mirrors and say HONESTLY what u see."

Saban made a two-year foray into the NFL with the Miami Dolphins before returning to college to revive one of the nation's most storied programs, which hadn't won a national title in 15 years. Saban is 297-71-1 as a college head coach, with stops at Toledo, Michigan State and LSU. But Alabama is where he cemented his status as one of college football's greatest coaches.

# Patriots, Belichick part ways after 6 Super Bowl crowns

Associated Press

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. — Six-time NFL champion Bill Belichick agreed to part ways as the coach of the New England Patriots, ending his 24-year tenure as the architect of the most decorated dynasty of the league's Super Bowl era.

"It's with so many fond memories and thoughts that I think about the Patriots," Belichick said Thursday alongside owner Robert Kraft. "I'll always be a Patriot. I look forward to coming back here. But at this time, we're going to move on. And I look forward, excited for the future."

Neither Belichick nor Kraft took questions, though Kraft scheduled an availability for later in the day.

Speaking to reporters from the podium where he had given

so many terse, non-responsive postgame recaps, Belichick appeared in a jacket and tie and spoke first, followed by Kraft. The coach even smiled a couple of times — including when he conceded respect for the media "even though we don't always see eye to eye."

He also thanked the fans for "the sendoffs, the parades, the Sundays." But most of his time was spent thanking the people throughout the organization, especially the more than 1,000 Patriots players he coached in his time there.

"Players win games in the NFL," Belichick said. "I've been very, very fortunate to coach some of the greatest players to ever play the game."

Kraft called the relationship a marriage that had required work and had come to an end.

"I'm very proud that our partnership lasted for 24 years," Kraft said. "Bill has taught me a lot over those years, and we had high expectations for what we could achieve together. I think we were the only ones who had those expectations, and I think it's safe to say we exceeded them."

"We did," Belichick agreed.

"Thanks to you," Kraft said.

Belichick, 71, became just the third coach in NFL history to reach 300 career regular-season victories earlier this season, joining Hall of Famers Don Shula and George Halas. With 333 wins including the playoffs, Belichick trails only Shula (347) for the record for victories by a coach.

But the Patriots ended this season 4-13, Belichick's worst record in 29 seasons as an NFL

head coach. It supplanted the 5-11 mark he managed in his last year in Cleveland in 1995 and again in his first year in New England in 2000. Including the playoffs, he ends his Patriots tenure with a 333-178 overall record.

Belichick is expected to resume his pursuit of Shula's record elsewhere.

With his cutoff hoodies and ever-present scowl, Belichick teamed with quarterback Tom Brady to lead the Patriots to six Super Bowl victories, nine AFC titles and 17 division championships in 19 years. During a less successful — but also tumultuous — stint with the original Cleveland Browns, Belichick earned 37 of his career victories.

It's not immediately clear who Kraft will tap to replace the future Hall of Famer.

# Carroll out after 14 seasons in Seattle

*Associated Press*

RENTON, Wash. — Pete Carroll's mantra was "always compete" — it was the title of a book, after all.

And he did right up to the point where the ownership of the Seattle Seahawks decided it was time for a new voice to be in charge following 14 seasons.

After bringing the Seahawks two NFC championships and the team's only Super Bowl title, Carroll will no longer be the head coach in Seattle following the longest stretch of success in franchise history.

The decision seems less a firing and more a separation, but one the 72-year-old Carroll was at least somewhat forced to accept following discussions with ownership. Carroll will move into an undefined advisory role within the organization, according to Wednesday's statement from owner Jody Allen.

But it's clear that Carroll wanted to continue in the role he had and see if he could produce one more title team.

"I competed pretty hard to be the coach, just so you know," Carroll said during an emotional farewell news conference. "I just wanted to make sure I stood up for all of our coaches and the players and the things that we had accomplished. Not just so we could be the coach still, but so we could continue to have a

chance to be successful and keep the organization going. That's what I was fighting for.

"In that regard, that's what I was representing in our discussions," Carroll continued. "And we got to a good part, good, clean spot where it made sense, and I went along with their intentions."

With staff from throughout the facility, assistant coaches and a few current players filling the auditorium, Carroll spoke for more than 30 minutes through a mix of tears and laughter about a tenure that will be difficult for any coach to match in the future.

"I'm thrilled that we've had this run. I really am. This level of consistency that we've demonstrated is such that it makes you proud," Carroll said.

Carroll will step aside as the most successful coach in franchise history, but with an unsatisfactory conclusion after several seasons of middling results, including a 9-8 record and no playoff berth in his final season.

He'll forever be lauded as the first coach to bring the Lombardi Trophy to Seattle with the Super Bowl 48 victory over Denver. Carroll finished with a 137-69-1 record in the regular season with the Seahawks. He led Seattle to five NFC West titles and 10 playoff victories.

But Carroll and the organiza-

tion never fully recovered from what happened in Super Bowl 49 and Russell Wilson's goal-line interception in the final seconds. The core that took Seattle to those title games eventually unraveled and while Carroll tried several different reboots, the Seahawks never again found that level of talent and chemistry to experience another title and wash away the memories of that painful loss.

Seattle also plateaued toward the end of Carroll's time, finishing with a losing record in 2021 followed by consecutive 9-8 seasons while falling short of becoming more of a contender in the NFC West.

The postseason was another problem. Seattle has not advanced past the divisional round since the 2014 playoffs and lost in the wild-card round in three of its past four postseason appearances.

"We lost our edge, really, the edge to be great, which was really how we ran the football and how we played defense. It wasn't as good as it needed to be," Carroll said.

The future for Seattle will be under the watch of a different coach and with general manager John Schneider entirely in control of personnel.

One of the unique aspects of Seattle's success was the marriage between Schneider and

Carroll. It was Carroll that was hired first in January 2010 before bringing aboard Schneider as his running mate. It was Carroll that retained final control over personnel decisions.

Now, it's flipped. Schneider will be making the call on the next coach and personnel.

"It's why this happened," Carroll said. "You want to know? I want him to have this chance. It's been 14 years he's been sitting there waiting for his opportunity and he deserves it. And he's great at what he does."

Despite the lackluster final chapter, Carroll's tenure in Seattle will be viewed as the most successful run since the franchise arrived in 1976. He ushered in a player-friendly environment built around allowing personalities to show within the defined structure of his system.

The Seahawks thrived under Carroll with the personalities of Marshawn Lynch, Doug Baldwin and Richard Sherman, for example. They plucked Wilson out of the third round and watched him help the team win a Super Bowl in his second season. Known for his defensive mind, Carroll created a defense that was the best of its era for multiple seasons and was at the foundation of those back-to-back teams which won NFC titles.

## Young WRs emerged as unlikely playmakers for Packers

*Associated Press*

GREEN BAY, Wis. — Jayden Reed and Dontayvion Wicks were coming off relatively disappointing finishes to their college careers when they began their rookie seasons in the NFL. Bo Melton spent much of the past two years toiling on practice squads.

The three of them have emerged as some of Jordan Love's most reliable playmakers while helping the Green Bay

Packers make an unlikely postseason appearance. The Packers (9-8) visit the Dallas Cowboys (12-5) on Sunday.

"They're taking advantage of the opportunity they got and they're just trying to go out there and make the most of that," Love said. "And they're doing a really good job of it."

One of the most remarkable elements of Love's debut season as a starter is that he is not only throwing primarily to rookies

and second-year pros, but that some of his top options have been in and out of the lineup with injuries.

Christian Watson caught three touchdown passes in an overtime victory over the Cowboys as a rookie last season, but missed Green Bay's past five games with a hamstring injury. Romeo Doubs left the Packers' 17-9 victory over Chicago on Sunday with a chest injury. Both were limited on Wednesday.

If they're unable to go, the Packers will be relying on Reed, Wicks and Melton to help pick up the slack. They've done quite well in that regard so far.

These young receivers credit Love for helping the transition by getting to know each of them. They noted how Love hosted offensive players for dinners and team-bonding sessions on a couple of Mondays this season.

"Jordan just has a knack for every receiver," Melton said.

# Rams QB Stafford ready for return to Detroit

Associated Press

THOUSAND OAKS, Calif. — Matthew Stafford arrived in Detroit as a hotshot 21-year-old quarterback. He left three years ago as a grown man with a wife and four daughters all born in Michigan.

During the 12 years in between, he desperately tried to end the Lions' decades-long playoff victory drought. The Lions failed, but he formed a bond with Detroit that remains a foundational part of his character.

Although Stafford grew up in Texas and has now made a comfortable home in Southern California, he came of age in the Mo-

tor City.

"It's an amazing city," Stafford said Wednesday. "It's an amazing group of fans. The organization does a heck of a job, and I know they're going to be excited. It's going to be a heck of an atmosphere. Probably one of the best we've played in in a long time. It's a group of people that from my experience love the Lions, want what's best for them. And now they're playing good football."

On Sunday night, Stafford will finally get to play in his first postseason game in Detroit. He'll do it in the horned helmet of the Los Angeles Rams, the team he led to a Super Bowl

championship in his first season after leaving the Lions.

Stafford is now in position to play a major role in extending the Lions' postseason misery when Detroit hosts a playoff game for the first time in 30 years. While Stafford still holds Detroit dear, he'll understand if the city doesn't feel the same way this weekend.

"I'm not a stranger to the situation, and understanding that I'm the bad guy coming to town," Stafford said. "I'm on the other team, and they don't want success from me. So whatever happens, happens. I'm going to go experience it."

Stafford played in three road

playoff losses during his time with the Lions, and he hasn't forgotten his frustration at being unable to end the Lions' decades of disappointment.

"I had a lot of experiences there over 12 years," Stafford said. "All my daughters were born there. My wife and I went through things there that the team and the city, the town, everybody supported. So I have nothing but great memories there. Obviously didn't get it done on the field as much as I wish we could have, but the people that I was lucky enough to know and grow with are people that I'm still close with today and mean a lot to me."

## No. 1 ranking in college basketball brings validation, pressure

Associated Press

Phil Martelli still remembers, nearly two decades later, the exact moment when he realized the team he was coaching at tiny Saint Joseph's in Philadelphia was about to become the No. 1-ranked team in college basketball.

"I was at home, watching Stanford play somebody in the Pac-10, and they were the other team — they were 1 and we were 2," Martelli said. "And I was watching the game and I realized that they were going to lose, and I remember turning to my wife and saying, 'Let's go get something to eat. We're about to be the top team in the country and it's going to get crazy.'"

They went to Bertucci's, a pizza joint in the Philly suburbs, and had a relatively peaceful dinner. The next morning, they went to Mass, then headed to Staten Island to watch Central Connecticut State, where Martelli's son was an assistant coach.

"Then on Monday," Martelli recalled in an interview with The Associated Press, "I gathered my team. And I said to them, 'At some point in practice our athletic director, Don DiJulia — he's going to come in and tell us we're the No. 1 team in the country. But that does not change who we are. There may be more attention on us. Just be ready to be thankful.'"

Indeed, when the fresh AP Top 25 was released March 8, 2004, the Hawks were No. 1.

The stay would be brief — they lost to Xavier that week in the Atlantic 10 Tournament — but it left an indelible impression on Mar-

telli and the entire program. Saint Joseph's had become one of just 61 schools to ever reach No. 1 in the 75-year history of The Associated Press men's basketball poll, even if it was destined to become one of seven to be there for a single week.

"It's funny," said Martelli, now an assistant coach at Michigan. "I remember right where I was sitting. I have this little den off my family room, and I sat in that den and I was like, 'I cannot believe this is going to happen.'"

Martelli saw reaching No. 1 as validation for a program that had some success in the 1960s but had never achieved national acclaim. Other coaches, players and fans tend to view reaching No. 1 through much different lenses.

Duke has spent 145 weeks there, more than any program in poll history, and UCLA once spent 46 consecutive weeks on top, a record that may never be broken. For them, and schools such as Kentucky and North Carolina, it may not be such a big deal.

For a school like Saint Joseph's or city rival Villanova? It's a truly big deal.

It brings national attention to the school, and with that flows donations and fan support. Games are suddenly sold out, tip-offs are dictated by television, and merchandise and ticket sales help the bottom line for the entire athletic department.

Jay Wright remembers the first time Villanova reached the top spot. For all the success the Wildcats had under Rollie Massimino, including the 1985 national championship, they had never been No. 1 until Feb. 8, 2016.

"I do remember the excitement of everybody saying it's the first time. I remember that," said Wright, who led the Wildcats to the national title that season, and another two years later, and now serves as a TV analyst following his 2022 retirement.

"I do think fans care about it more than players. The coaches are the last on that list," Michigan State coach Tom Izzo said with a laugh. "But it is an honor. I do respect it."

Izzo acknowledged an undeniable pressure that comes with being No. 1. More people are paying attention, nobody wants to get knocked from the pedestal once they reach it, yet every opposing team will have put a little extra into preparing for a game against the nation's top-ranked team.

"We were the No. 1 team at Louisville and Kentucky," said Rick Pitino, now the coach at St. John's, "and I will say, the '96 pressure was as much pressure as I've experienced at Kentucky and Louisville, that year, because it was a given from start to finish that we were the prohibitive favorite to win it all, and every night you had to bring it."

"It was always a big deal for us," Wright said of becoming No. 1. "I know our school talked about benefiting from it, that people were talking about your university every week, which is really the main goal of sports on a college campus: to market the university. And the poll is huge in that your name is out there nationally, all week, you know? For consecutive weeks. And we felt like that was just great for us and our program, but really beneficial for the university."