

Trump unveils border security blueprint

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump rolled out a blueprint to beef up security at the southern border in a series of executive orders that began taking effect soon after his inauguration Monday, making good on his defining political promise to crack down on immigration and marking another wild swing in White House policy on the divisive issue.

Some of the orders revive priorities from his first administration that his predecessor had rolled back, including forcing asylum-seekers to wait in Mexico and finishing the border wall. Others launched sweeping new strategies, like an effort to end automatic citizenship for anyone born in America and ending use of a Biden-era app used by nearly a million migrants to enter America.

Actual execution of such a far-reaching immigration agenda is certain to face legal and logistical challenges.

But in a sign of how the changes quickly played out, migrants who had appointments to enter the United States using the CBP One

app saw them canceled minutes after Trump was sworn in, and Mexico agreed to allow people seeking U.S. asylum to remain south of the American border while awaiting their court cases.

“I will declare a national emergency at our southern border. All illegal entry will immediately be halted, and we will begin the process of returning millions and millions of criminal aliens back to the places in which they came,” Trump said in his inauguration speech to thunderous applause.

■ CBP One app disappears

The online lottery system gave appointments to 1,450 people a day at eight border crossings to enter on “parole,” which Joe Biden used more than any president.

It was a critical piece of the Biden administration’s border strategy to create new immigration pathways while cracking down on people who enter illegally.

Supporters said it brought order to a chaotic border. Critics said it was magnet for more people to come.

By midday Monday, it was gone.

Migrants who had scored coveted appointments weeks ago found them canceled.

That includes Melanie Mendoza, 21, and her boyfriend. She said they left Venezuela over a year ago, spending more than \$4,000 and traveling for a month, including walking for three days.

“We don’t know what we are going to do,” she said in Tijuana, Mexico, just on the other side of the border from San Diego.

■ Mexico to host migrants

The Trump administration is reinstating its “Remain in Mexico” policy, which forced 70,000 asylum-seekers in his first term to wait there for hearings in U.S. immigration court.

Mexico, a country integral to any American effort to limit illegal immigration, indicated Monday that it is prepared to receive asylum-seekers while emphasizing that there should be an online application allowing them to schedule appointments at the U.S. border.

Immigration advocates have said the policy put migrants at extreme risk.

“This is déjà vu of the darkest

kind,” said Krish O’Mara Vignarajah, president and CEO of Global Refugee. She said policies like “Remain in Mexico” have exacerbated conditions at the border while doing little to address reasons migrants leave home in the first place.

■ End birthright citizenship

Anyone born in the United States automatically becomes a citizen, including children born to someone in the country illegally or in the U.S. on a tourist or student visa. It’s a right enshrined in the 14th Amendment, ratified in 1868 after the Civil War to assure citizenship for all, including Black people.

Trump’s executive order suggests that the amendment has been wrongly interpreted, and it would go into effect in 30 days — meaning it would not be retroactive.

The American Civil Liberties Union and other groups immediately sued, calling it “a reckless and ruthless repudiation of American values.”

Trump said he thought he had “very good grounds” for the order.

Senate committee advances Hegseth’s nomination

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Senate Armed Services Committee on Monday advanced Pete Hegseth’s bid to become President Donald Trump’s defense secretary, sending his nomination to the Senate floor over the objections of Democrats.

The vote in favor of Hegseth, an Army National Guard veteran and former Fox News host, was 14-13. His nomination moved forward several hours after Trump was sworn in for his second term and will likely be approved by the full Senate, where Republicans hold a majority. The Senate vote could take place in the next several days.

Robert Salesses, a former Marine and longtime assistant defense secretary, is serving as the acting defense secretary until a new defense secretary is confirmed.

Republicans on the committee admitted Hegseth is an unconventional choice for the top Pentagon job — Trump had selected a four-star general, James Mattis, and then an Army secretary, Mark Esper, during his first term. But the Republican senators nonetheless rallied around Hegseth and said he would inject a “new warrior ethos” into the Pentagon.

Sen. Roger Wicker, R-Miss., the chairman of the panel, has said Hegseth will shake up the bureaucracy of the Defense Department,

which has a budget of nearly \$900 billion and employs 3 million people, and be an effective leader with the help of a team of experienced top officials.

Democrats, meanwhile, derided Hegseth’s lack of traditional credentials and said his views on the laws of war and women in combat as well as accusations that he mismanaged two veterans organizations, excessively drank at work and sexually assaulted a woman in 2017 made him unfit for the position.

Hegseth waved away questions about his alleged transgressions during his hearing and claimed to be the victim of a “coordinated smear campaign” by anonymous sources and the media.

Rutte: NATO nations set to 'turbocharge' spending on defense

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — NATO countries are ready to “turbocharge” defense spending, the alliance’s top official said this week as the security bloc prepares for President Donald Trump’s anticipated push to get European militaries to do more.

Secretary-General Mark Rutte, in a statement Monday shortly after Trump was sworn into office, made the American president’s top NATO issue his own.

“With President Trump back in office, we will turbocharge defense spending and production,” Rutte said, adding that Trump’s often-stated mantra of peace through strength can be achieved through NATO.

The return of Trump will once again put European defense spending levels at the center of the United States’ approach to NATO. Over the past several years, NATO members have boosted investments, with about 20 out of 32 members hitting the alliance’s benchmark of spending 2% of gross domestic product on defense.

The gains, some of which came during Trump’s first term, picked up momentum after Russia’s 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Numerous countries still don’t have a plan for immediately hitting the 2% target, however, let alone getting to Trump’s more recent demand that the minimum spending level be elevated to 5% of GDP.

It’s unclear what the consequences could be should allies

resist Trump, who in the past has indicated an openness to quitting the alliance if they don’t shoulder more of the security burden.

Lithuania, a Baltic state especially worried about Russian aggression, already has decided to ratchet up its spending level to between 5% and 6% of GDP.

Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda on Friday announced the decision, which puts the country in line with Trump’s preference. The Baltic countries and Poland are among the top NATO defense spenders on a per-capita basis.

Warsaw said last year that it aims to get to the 5% level in 2025. Poland has been on a weapons buying binge and over the weekend received its first batch of M1A2 Abrams battle tanks purchased from the U.S.

Not all allies are on board, however. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said last week that going to 5% would only be possible with “massive tax increases or massive cuts to many things that are important to us.”

Still, other leaders in Germany, where federal elections are slated to take place next month, have said Berlin needs to invest beyond the 2% of GDP level. Last year, Germany met the 2% threshold for the first time.

How Germany manages the defense spending debate with Trump could factor into White House calculations about the future of the American military presence in Europe.

Osprey loses load of MREs

By BRIAN McELHINEY
AND KEISHI KOJA
Stars and Stripes

A Marine Corps Osprey accidentally dropped a load of rations weighing nearly 1,000 pounds into the ocean west of Okinawa during training last week.

An aircraft assigned to an unspecified squadron with the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit was conducting routine parachute operations Thursday when it dropped a cargo pallet containing pre-packaged Meals, Ready to Eat off Ie Shima, unit spokesman Maj. Edward Pingel wrote in an email Tuesday.

The island is a few miles northwest of Okinawa’s Motobu peninsula.

A spokesman for the Okinawa Defense Bureau, an arm of Japan’s Defense Ministry, identified the aircraft as an MV-22 Osprey.

No injuries or damage were reported, and the Marine Corps notified nearby mariners to “prevent any potential interference or danger from the displaced cargo,” Pingel said.

“Due to an unexpected shift in wind conditions, the pallet was blown off course and into the water instead of landing on Ie Shima [Auxiliary Airfield] as intended,” he said.

“This incident is very regrettable because it caused anxiety and affected the local community,” Defense Minister Gen Nakatani said. “We strongly urged the U.S. side for thorough prevention of recurrences and to take all possible measures for safety management.”

Marines on Friday searched for the pallet but were unable to find it and called off the search that day, a spokesman with Okinawa’s Military Base Affairs Division said.

Okinawa loses lawsuit on future Marine airfield

By BRIAN McELHINEY
AND KEISHI KOJA
Stars and Stripes

Japan’s Supreme Court recently denied Okinawa Gov. Denny Tamaki’s final legal challenge to stop construction at a future Marine Corps airfield in the island’s north.

The Tokyo court rejected an appeal Thursday in a lawsuit filed by Okinawa prefecture in September 2022 seeking to block changes to construction permits required by Japan’s Ministry of Defense to finish the project, according to the prefecture’s website.

The lawsuit was originally dismissed by a three-judge panel in Naha District Court in November 2023 after oral arguments in February, April and July that year. The prefecture

appealed to the Fukuoka High Court, which also dismissed the case Sept. 2.

The airfield is under construction at the Marines’ Camp Schwab on land reclaimed from Oura Bay to replace Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in densely populated Ginowan city. The U.S. and Japanese governments agreed to move the base in 1996, but the prefectural government has repeatedly delayed construction.

“It is extremely regrettable that the Supreme Court dismissed us without any concrete judgment, since we had expected them to make a fair and neutral judgment based on the essence of local autonomy guaranteed by the Constitution,” Tamaki wrote in a statement posted on the prefecture’s website.

DHS: Coast Guard head fired for failures

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

Adm. Linda Fagan, commandant of the Coast Guard, was fired from the service's top job because of her leadership deficiencies, operational failures and her handling of the service's recent sexual-assault scandal, according to a senior official in the Department of Homeland Security.

Acting Secretary of Homeland Security Benjamin Huffman relieved her of command and announced the change in a message to the service Tuesday.

"She served a long and illustrious career, and I thank her for her service to our nation," according to the message. Adm. Kevin E. Lunday is now the acting commandant. He was previously the vice commandant.

But a senior department official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said Fagan was fired because she failed to address border security and meet recruiting and retention goals, mismanaged

acquisitions and lost trust with the force in her handling of the cover-up of a sexual assault scandal at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy in New London, Conn.

"The failure to adequately address the systemic issues exposed by this investigation has underscored a leadership culture unwilling to ensure accountability and transparency in protecting service members," the official said.

The investigation, known as Operation Fouled Anchor, was an internal review of sexual assault and harassment cases that occurred between 1990 and 2006 at the academy. As part of Fouled Anchor, the Coast Guard Investigative Service reviewed 102 reports of rape, sexual assault and sexual harassment at the academy and identified 63 potential victims.

Investigators finalized the report on Jan. 31, 2020, which found the academy knew of accusations against 30 of 43 people but only

five were reported to criminal investigators. It concluded academy leaders failed to take sufficient action to ensure a safe environment for cadets, yet no one was held accountable. Congress only found out about Fouled Anchor in June 2023 as reporters at CNN learned of its existence and began reporting about it.

Retired Adm. Karl Schultz, who served as commandant until June 2022 when Fagan took over, made the decision to bury the Operation Fouled Anchor report, according to a House investigation of the cover-up.

The service also has been plagued with ballooning costs and delays on the acquisition of a new ice breaker. The Coast Guard in November hired a commercial ice breaker to serve in the Arctic region while the service waits for its own.

Fagan also "excessively focused" on initiatives meant to improve the diversity and equity among Coast Guard members

and at the academy, the official said. President Donald Trump signed an executive order Monday — the first day of his second term in the White House — to terminate all diversity programs in federal government.

Rep. Joe Courtney, D-Conn., said Fagan's firing was an abuse of power and she had an "outstanding record." She led the Coast Guard to exceed recruitment goals for the first time in seven years, interdicted more than \$2.5 billion in illegal drugs and demonstrated an aggressive commitment to countering adversaries in the Arctic.

"Following her predecessor's cover up of Operation Fouled Anchor, Adm. Fagan provided a fundamental change in Coast Guard leadership and has led the service with transparency and honesty to rebuild trust and correct the persistent sexual misconduct problems facing the service," said Courtney, whose district includes the Coast Guard Academy.

Rubio confirmed as secretary of state by 99-0 vote

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Senate quickly confirmed Marco Rubio as secretary of state Monday, voting unanimously to give President Donald Trump the first member of his new Cabinet on Inauguration Day.

Rubio, the Republican senator from Florida, is among the least controversial of Trump's nominees and the vote was decisive, 99-0. Another pick, John Ratcliffe for CIA director, is also expected to have a swift vote, as soon as Tuesday. Action on others, including former combat veteran and Fox News host Pete Hegseth for defense secretary, is possible later in the week.

"Marco Rubio is a very intelligent man with a remarkable understanding of American foreign policy," Sen. Chuck Grassley of Iowa, the senior-most Republican, said as the chamber opened.

It's often tradition for the Senate to convene immediately after the ceremonial pomp of the inauguration to begin putting the new president's team in place, particularly the national security officials. During Trump's first term, the Senate swiftly confirmed his defense and homeland security secretaries on day one, and President Joe Biden's choice for director of national intelligence was confirmed on his own Inauguration Day.

With Trump's return to the White House, and his Republican Party controlling majorities in Congress, his outsider Cabinet choices are more clearly falling into place, despite initial skepticism and opposition from both sides of the aisle.

Rubio, who was surrounded by colleagues in the Senate chamber, said afterward he feels "good, but there's a lot of work

ahead."

"It's an important job in an important time, and I'm honored by it," Rubio said.

Senate Majority Leader John Thune moved quickly Monday, announcing he expected voting to begin "imminently" on Trump's nominees.

Democrats have calculated it's better for them to be seen as more willing to work with Trump, rather than simply mounting a blockade to his nominees.

They're holding their opposition for some of his other picks who have less support, including Tulsi Gabbard for director of national intelligence and vaccine skeptic Robert F. Kennedy Jr. for health secretary.

Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer said his party will "neither rubber-stamp nominees we feel are grossly unequal-

ified, nor oppose nominees that deserve serious consideration."

Rubio, he said, is an example of "a qualified nominee we think should be confirmed quickly."

Senate committees have been holding lengthy confirmation hearings on more than a dozen of the Cabinet nominees, with more to come this week.

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee unanimously advanced Rubio's nomination late Monday.

The Senate Armed Services Committee and Senate Intelligence Committee, respectively, voted to move the nominations of Hegseth and Ratcliffe. And the Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee advanced nominees Kristi Noem as homeland security secretary and Russell Vought as director of the Office of Management and Budget, but with opposition.

Trump seeks border plan that could add troops

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

President Donald Trump on Monday ordered defense officials to come up with a security plan that could include deploying more troops and drones and building up more barriers, such as the border wall.

Trump signed a string of executive orders in the Oval Office hours after his inauguration commencing his second term as president.

Among them was a handful of border-related orders, including Trump declaring a national emergency at the southwest border and calling for U.S.

Northern Command to be assigned the mission within 10 days “to provide steady-state southern border security, seal the border and maintain the sovereignty, territorial integrity and security of the United States by repelling forms of invasion, including unlawful mass migration, narcotics trafficking, human smuggling and trafficking, and other criminal activities.”

Military leaders can deploy “as many units or members of the armed forces, including the Ready Reserve and the National Guard” deemed necessary to support the Department of Homeland Security, according

to the order.

The defense secretary will have 30 days to report on what has been done to secure the southern border. The Senate could vote later this week on the nomination of Pete Hegseth, an Army National Guard veteran and former Fox News personality, to be the next defense secretary.

Any newly deployed troops would join about 2,500 National Guard members now at the border, according to the Pentagon. Those troops work a support mission that includes detection and monitoring, data entry, training, transportation, vehicle

maintenance, warehousing and logistical support. This includes helicopter support for aerial reconnaissance in support of Customs and Border Protection personnel on the ground.

The new orders also direct the Pentagon to provide a report on conditions within three months and make any recommended changes to the plan, including whether to invoke the Insurrection Act of 1807, which allows the president to deploy the military domestically for civilian law enforcement. This use of troops is limited by an 1878 law known as the Posse Comitatus Act.

Storm brings snow to Texas, Gulf Coast

Associated Press

A rare winter storm charged through Texas and the northern Gulf Coast on Tuesday, blanketing New Orleans and Houston with snow, closing highways, grounding nearly all flights and canceling school for millions of students more used to hurricane dismissals than snow days.

The storm prompted the first ever blizzard warnings for several coastal counties near the Texas-Louisiana border, and snow plows were at the ready in the Florida Panhandle. Heavy snow, sleet and freezing rain are expected around the Deep South as a blast of Arctic air plunges much of the Midwest and the eastern United States into a deep freeze.

Nearly 2,000 flights from or within the U.S. were canceled Tuesday with about 10,000 more flights delayed, according to online tracker FlightAware.com. In Texas, both Houston airports suspended flight operations starting Tuesday in expectation of hazardous conditions.

Winter storm warnings extended from Texas to North Carolina on Tuesday, with heavy

snow, sleet and freezing rain expected to move eastward through the region into Wednesday.

Meanwhile, a state of emergency was declared Monday night across at least a dozen counties in New York as heavy lake-effect snow was expected around Lake Ontario and Lake Erie through Wednesday — with 1 to 2 feet possible — along with extreme cold temperatures.

The blizzard warning in effect until midday Tuesday was the first issued by the office in Lake Charles, La., according to meteorologist Donald Jones. Strong winds with heavier snow bands were reducing visibility, and areas across the Gulf South that rarely see snow are expecting near-record or record snowfall, Jones said.

“The last time we saw snow of this magnitude was way back in 1960, and prior to that, the previous snowfall record that even stands to this day was way back in 1895,” Jones said. “By modern standards this is going to be a historic and very memorable storm for this part of the world.”

Dangerous winds, wildfires return to Southern California

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Dangerous winds returned to Southern California on Tuesday as firefighters battled new fires amid dry conditions, and a pair of major blazes burned for a third week in the Los Angeles area.

Forecasters warned that gusts could peak at 70 mph along the coast and 100 mph in the mountains and foothills during extreme fire weather that was expected to last through Tuesday morning. Wind speeds ranged from 35 mph along the coast to 63 mph at elevation overnight, according to the National Weather Service.

The weather service warned of a “particularly dangerous situation” in Los Angeles, Ventura and San Diego counties due to low humidity and damaging Santa Ana winds.

“The conditions are ripe for explosive fire growth should a fire start,” said Andrew Rorke, a meteorologist with the weather service in Oxnard.

Evacuation orders were issued for the Lilac Fire, which had burned at least 80 acres of dry brush and was threatening structures in the Bonsall area early Tuesday, the California Depart-

ment of Forestry and Fire Protection said. Meanwhile, crews stopped the forward progress of the nearby Pala Fire, the agency said.

On Monday, Los Angeles firefighters quickly extinguished a small brush fire near the iconic triple-domed Griffith Observatory in a park overlooking the city. A man suspected of starting the fire was taken into custody, said David Cuellar, a Los Angeles Police Department spokesperson. Firefighters also quickly extinguished a brush fire along Interstate 405 in the LA neighborhood of Granada Hills that temporarily closed the northbound lanes.

President Donald Trump, who criticized the response to the wildfires during his inaugural address, has said he will travel to Los Angeles on Friday.

Gov. Gavin Newsom on Monday said the devastation left by the blazes underscores the need for partnership between the state and federal governments.

“I look forward to President Trump’s visit to Los Angeles and his mobilization of the full weight of the federal government to help our fellow Americans recover and rebuild,” Newsom said.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Animals evacuated amid wildfires in California

TX FORT WORTH — Two cargo planes landed on the Texas Jet tarmac in Fort Worth packed with four-legged evacuees from Southern California. The 161 dogs and 15 cats inside had been through multiple disasters.

The animals were already longtime residents of Los Angeles city shelters, which were so overcrowded last year that some dogs had been forced to live in crates in hallways. Then came the Jan. 7 wildfires.

The ongoing fires that have killed at least 27 people and displaced thousands also sent hundreds of pets into shelters — some that had gotten lost among the chaos and others dropped off for temporary care while their owners evacuated.

Welfare groups in California like Paws for Life K9 Rescue rushed to pull shelter long timers, including these 176 animals, in order to make room for pets waiting to be reunited with their families after the fires.

Man to serve life in prison for kidnappings

OR PORTLAND — An Oregon man has been sentenced to life in federal prison after being convicted of kidnapping and sexually assaulting two women in separate instances, including locking one in a cinder block cell.

Negasi Zuberi, 31, was sentenced in federal court in Medford, Portland television station KGW reported. A federal jury convicted him in October on charges of kidnapping, trans-

portation for criminal sexual activity, being a felon in possession of a weapon and attempting to break out of jail when he tried to smash through his cell window in August 2023.

In July 2023, Zuberi solicited a woman to engage in prostitution in Seattle, authorities said.

He told the woman he was an undercover officer, showed her a badge, pointed a Taser at her and placed her in handcuffs and leg irons before putting her in the back of his vehicle.

He then drove hundreds of miles to his home in Klamath Falls, Ore., and locked the woman in a cinder block cell in his garage, according to the FBI.

After the woman escaped after repeatedly banging on the cell door until it broke open, Zuberi fled and was arrested in Reno, Nev.

Lawmaker's death leaves chamber deadlocked

PA HARRISBURG — A Democrat in Pennsylvania's House of Representatives has died, the House Democratic caucus said Sunday night, leaving the chamber deadlocked at a 101-101 partisan divide.

Rep. Matt Gergely, D-Allegheny, died Sunday. He was 45, House Democrats said.

Neither House Democrats nor Gergely's family disclosed a cause, although they said two weeks ago that he had suffered a "medical emergency over the holidays requiring hospitalization" in the days before the chamber convened its two-year session earlier this month.

House Democrats won a one-seat margin in November's election, the same one-seat

margin that Democrats had maintained in the last legislative session.

Gergely's death means the chamber will be tied at 101-101 until a special election is held to fill the seat in the heavily Democratic Pittsburgh-area district.

Members of MS-13 gang plead guilty in 9 killings

NY NEW YORK — Three high-ranking members of the MS-13 street gang have pleaded guilty to their roles in nine killings involving machetes and guns in the New York City suburbs, federal prosecutors said.

Kevin Torres pleaded guilty Friday in federal court in Central Islip to racketeering charges for his role in the killings, which took place during a violent period for the transnational gang in New York from 2016 to 2017.

The 29-year-old Freeport resident was the New York regional leader of the Sailors Locos Salvatruchas Westside, a Long Island-based clique of MS-13, according to the U.S. Attorney's office for the Eastern District of New York.

David Sosa-Guevara, 33, and Victor Lopez-Morales, 36, both of Roosevelt, entered guilty pleas in Central Islip court.

Prosecutors say Sosa-Guevara was the New York leader of the Hollywood Locos Salvatruchas, another MS-13 clique that operated on Long Island, and Lopez-Morales had been a high-ranking member.

Customer's pet monkey attacks drive-thru worker

AL MOBILE — A Starbucks employee was attacked by a customer's pet

monkey, Alabama police say.

The incident happened on Jan. 10, the Mobile Police Department said in a Jan. 19 email. The animal and its owner were gone by the time officers arrived, but investigators pieced together what happened.

The employee was working the drive-thru when a monkey inside a customer's vehicle got free, police said.

"The monkey then leapt from the vehicle, through the window of the business, and attacked an employee," according to police.

A co-worker rushed to help and pulled the monkey off of the employee.

"The monkey then reentered the customer's vehicle before the customer drove away," police said.

Bird flu discovered in a commercial poultry flock

GA ATLANTA — For the first time since the 2022 countrywide outbreak, bird flu hit a poultry producer in Georgia, the nation's top state for chicken production.

The state Department of Agriculture announced Friday that the agency has detected a case of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza at a commercial poultry producer in Elbert County, approximately 100 miles northeast of Atlanta. The agency suspended all poultry exhibitions, shows, swaps, meets and sales.

The virus has been detected four times in Georgia, but only in backyard flocks previously, including among 13 chickens and ducks earlier this month in Clayton County south of Atlanta.

— From wire reports

STARS  STRIPES®

Single source convenience, reliably independent. Visit www.stripes.com.

Reporting
World, National
and Military News

Buckeyes beat Irish for CFP title

Associated Press

ATLANTA — The pass seemed to hang up there forever. Did it feel like seven weeks? Did it feel like 10 years?

What a great debate for Ohio State fans to have forever.

When that teardrop of a throw from Buckeyes quarterback Will Howard on third-and-11 finally landed, light as a feather, in the hands of receiver Jeremiah Smith late in the fourth quarter Monday, Ohio State had locked up what would be a 34-23 victory over Notre Dame for its sixth national title and first in a decade.

That 56-yard gain snuffed out a feverish Notre Dame comeback and made the Buckeyes the champion of college football's first 12-team playoff, just as they were champions of its first four-team tournament a decade ago.

"They were running man coverage and I said, 'Hey, I'm gonna let this loose and let him make a play on it,'" Howard said of a play that felt about 100 years removed from Ohio State's once program-defining "Three yards and a cloud of dust."

This was a victory that hardly

anyone thought possible a mere seven weeks ago — Nov. 30 — when a 13-10 loss to Michigan led to a near-riot on the field and questions over whether coach Ryan Day would keep his job when the calendar flipped.

"It's a great story about a bunch of guys who have just overcome some really tough situations, and at the point where there's a lot of people that counted us out (they) just kept swinging and kept fighting," Day said.

It might be that much sweeter because of how it went down in a jam-packed stadium in the middle of SEC country that looked like a Christmas tree — Ohio State fans on one half in red, Notre Dame's on the other in green.

Trailing 31-7, Notre Dame scored two touchdowns and two 2-point conversions to make it a one-score game late in the fourth quarter. The in-stadium camera found legendary Irish coach Lou Holtz in his luxury box, and he ignored all those booing Buckeye fans and flashed a thumbs-up.

But Notre Dame's time was running out. After stopping the Buckeyes on their first two

plays and using their timeouts, the Irish put Christian Gray — whose interception wrapped up Notre Dame's semifinal victory over Penn State — in single coverage on Smith.

Smith got behind Gray on the right sideline and Howard dropped his best pass of the season into the hands of the second-team All-American.

It set up a field goal that started the celebration in earnest, and helped Ohio State cover the 8½-point spread at BetMGM Sportsbook.

"It was do or die, it was that type of down," Notre Dame coach Marcus Freeman said. "He's a heck of a player. He's difficult to cover."

Howard, a transfer-portal success story from Kansas State, threw for 231 yards and two TDs, but nothing will beat the pass to Smith with the game on the line.

The receiver, who had been bottled up by Texas in the semifinals then fairly quiet for most of this game, finally got loose for the kind of play he's been making all year. He finished with five catches for 88 yards.

"We felt at the end we wanted

to give Jeremiah that shot," Day said. "We really hadn't thrown it all night, but I thought, 'Know what, let's be aggressive, let's do this and lay it on the line.'"

Ohio State didn't really look like a team that needed to take risks after scoring touchdowns on its first four possessions, then adding a field goal on its fifth.

When Quinshon Judkins (100 yards, 11 carries, three TDs), a transfer from Mississippi who highlighted Ohio State's judicious use of the ever-growing portal, busted a 70-yard run to set up the score that made it 28-7, this game looked over.

It wasn't, and now Freeman will have to answer a few tough questions — one about the failed fake punt in the third quarter that turned into a field goal for a 31-7 lead; the other about sending Mitch Jeter in for a short field goal attempt while down 16 and facing fourth-and-goal from the 9. It might have looked like a better call had Jeter's kick not clanged off the left upright.

"I know it's still a two-score game, but you have a better probability of getting 14 points than you do 16 points," Freeman said.

Ohio State QB Howard played his best in playoff run

Associated Press

ATLANTA — Will Howard transferred to Ohio State to win a national championship, and he reached that goal by playing the best football of his career throughout the Buckeyes' four games in the College Football Playoff.

He was never better than in the first half and at the end of Ohio State's 34-23 victory over Notre Dame on Monday night.

Howard connected on his first 13 passes to set the record for consecutive completions in a CFP title game. On third-and-11 after the Irish had pulled within

eight points, he lofted a pass to Jeremiah Smith for a 56-yard gain that all but sealed the win.

"I give this guy a lot of credit right here," Buckeyes coach Ryan Day said with Howard sitting to his left. "I think he ran the ball 16 times, and we knew it was going to be that way. It was the last game of the season, and we were going to (use all) our bullets. He really put the team on his back."

Howard arrived in Atlanta with a hot hand, and the Irish did nothing to cool him off early. He spread the ball among six receivers, often throwing short

and letting them pick up yards after the catch.

He tied the mark for consecutive completions in the second quarter when he hit Carnell Tate for 20 yards on third-and-7, then broke it with a 15-yard pass to Smith two plays later.

The streak ended when Notre Dame safety Xavier Watts broke up a pass intended for TreVeyon Henderson near the goal line.

"Coming into the season, one thing Coach Day emphasized was taking completions," Howard said. "Maybe I had to check it down or it wasn't per-

fectly drawn up. You just want to keep the ball moving and stay on schedule."

Alabama's Mac Jones set the previous record with 12 completions in a row against Ohio State in the 2021 championship game.

Howard finished 17-for-21 for 231 yards and was selected offensive MVP of the game. He threw TD passes of 8 yards to Smith and 6 yards to Quinshon Judkins in the first half.

Over his four playoff games, Howard completed 75.2% of his throws (82 of 109) for 1,150 yards and eight touchdowns with two interceptions.

Djokovic tops Alcaraz, nears 25th title

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Novak Djokovic refused to let anything stop his pursuit of a record 25th Grand Slam trophy in the Australian Open quarterfinals. Not a problem with his left leg. Not an early deficit. And not the kid across the net, Carlos Alcaraz, who was making things difficult and eyeing his own bit of history.

Djokovic overcame it all, just as he has so often along the way to so many triumphs, moving into the semifinals at Melbourne Park for the 12th time with a 4-6, 6-4, 6-3, 6-4 victory over Alcaraz in a scintillating showdown Tuesday night between a pair of stars born 16 years apart and at opposite ends of their careers.

"I just wish that this match today was the final," Djokovic said. "One of the most epic matches I've played on this court. On any court."

The action was non-stop, the

shot-making brilliant, even as the encounter stretched on for more than 3½ hours and nearly to 1 a.m. — never more so, perhaps, than when Alcaraz saved a break point in the fourth set. The 33-stroke exchange was the longest of the evening, and when it ended with Djokovic sailing a forehand long, the capacity crowd at Rod Laver Arena went wild. Djokovic reached for his bothersome leg and yelled toward his entourage; Alcaraz, his chest heaving, leaned on a towel box and grinned.

Turned out that only delayed the final result.

With his wife, son and daughter cheering in the stands — Dad joked about the late hour afterward — the No. 7-seeded Djokovic prevailed thanks to the sort of remarkable returning and no-mistakes-made groundstrokes against Alcaraz that Big Three rivals Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal dealt with for years.

Djokovic enjoyed some of his own best efforts in the latter stages, pointing to his ear or blowing kisses or spreading his arms while puffing out his chest. There was the forehand winner on a 22-stroke point that earned the break for a 5-3 lead in the third set. There was that set's last point, which included a back-to-the-net sprint to chase down a lob. Alcaraz wasn't shy, either, shouting "Vamos!" and pumping his fists after one particularly booming forehand in the fourth set.

At 4-all, Djokovic grabbed at his thigh and crouched down after stretching for a shot. He finished that game but lost it, before taking a medical timeout. When play resumed, his left thigh was taped, and Alcaraz served out that set. Anyone who thought Djokovic might go gently into the night is not familiar with his game. He began attacking Alcaraz's serves relentlessly and,

soon, the second set was his.

"If I lost that second set, I don't know if I would continue playing," Djokovic said, crediting medicine from the tournament doctor with helping him feel better.

When the match ended, Djokovic yelled toward his team's box, before giving his coach, Andy Murray, a hug. Then Djokovic applauded for No. 3 seed Alcaraz as he left the court.

"I'm sure we are going to see a lot of him," Djokovic said. "Maybe not as much as I would like."

On Friday, Djokovic's 50th major semifinal will come against No. 2 seed Alexander Zverev, a two-time runner-up at majors who beat No. 12 Tommy Paul 7-6 (1), 7-6 (0), 2-6, 6-1. The other men's quarterfinals are Wednesday: No. 1 Jannik Sinner vs. No. 8 Alex de Minaur, and No. 21 Ben Shelton against unseeded Lorenzo Sonego.

Ball, Bridges each score 23 to lift Hornets over Mavs

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — LaMelo Ball and Miles Bridges each scored 23 points and the Charlotte Hornets held on to beat the Dallas Mavericks 110-105 on Monday to extend their winning streak to a season-high three games.

Nick Smith Jr. added 19 points and Mark Williams overcame foul trouble to finish with 13 points and 13 rebounds for the Hornets (11-28).

Kyrie Irving had 33 points and Daniel Gafford added a career-high 31 points and 15 rebounds for the Mavericks (23-20), who've lost four of their last five games.

Pelicans 123, Jazz 119 (OT): CJ McCollum scored six of his 45 points in overtime and host New Orleans orchestrated the largest comeback in franchise history, overcoming a 25-point

deficit to beat Utah.

Dejounte Murray had 26 points and 11 assists, and Trey Murphy III added 24 points for the Pelicans, who won for the fifth time in six games.

Keyonte George scored 23 points and Isaiah Collier had 20 points and 11 assists for the Jazz.

Grizzlies 108, Timberwolves 106: Jaren Jackson Jr. had 24 points, including 15 in the fourth quarter, and Desmond Bane added 22 points as host Memphis used a late rally to beat Minnesota.

Jackson, who was 6-for-8 in the final quarter, added 10 rebounds and two blocks for the Grizzlies, who won their third straight.

Anthony Edwards led the Timberwolves with 32 points

Cavaliers 118, Suns 92: Donovan Mitchell scored 33 points — 23 in the second half — and

Darius Garland added 16 as host Cleveland began the season's unofficial second half by dominating Phoenix.

The Cavaliers, who opened the season with 15 straight wins, improved the NBA's best record to 36-6 — tied for the eighth-best start in history. They're also 21-2 at home and 13-1 against Western Conference teams.

Kevin Durant scored 23 to lead the Suns.

Pistons 107, Rockets 96: Cade Cunningham had 32 points, nine rebounds and seven assists to lead visiting Detroit past Houston.

Fred VanVleet scored 20 points, and Jalen Green scored 19, and Amen Thompson added 17 for the Rockets.

Knicks 119, Hawks 110: Jalen Brunson scored 34 points as host New York beat Atlanta. It was the 68th 30-plus point game

in Brunson's career as a Knick.

Despite Trae Young leading seven Hawks in double-figure scoring with 27, Atlanta fell to 22-20 and had its three-game winning streak snapped. De'Andre Hunter added 22 points off the bench.

Celtics 125, Warriors 85: Jayson Tatum scored 22 points, Kristaps Porzingis had 18 and Boston handed Golden State its most lopsided home loss in 40 years with a victory.

Stephen Curry led the Warriors with 18 points.

Bulls 112, Clippers 99: Zach LaVine scored 35 points and visiting Chicago defeated Los Angeles to snap a five-game skid.

The Clippers' four-game winning streak ended without starters Kawhi Leonard and Ivica Zubac. Norman Powell scored 27, and James Harden had 17 points and 10 assists.

Kings return to Los Angeles, fall to Penguins

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin scored milestone goals and the Pittsburgh Penguins defeated Los Angeles 5-1 on Monday night, snapping the Kings' nine-game home win streak.

Crosby, Anthony Beauvillier and Kevin Hayes each had a goal and an assist. Cody Glass also scored for Pittsburgh, and Alex Nedeljkovic stopped 25 shots.

Adrian Kempe had the Los Angeles goal and David Rittich made 27 saves.

The Kings honored firefighters and first responders in the first game back in their downtown arena since the catastrophic wildfires that devastated large parts of Los Angeles.

The Penguins and Kings wore LAFD caps during pregame warmups. Firefighters and first responders from various departments in the region were honored at center ice before the game.

The Kings replaced their traditional logo at center ice with a graphic paying tribute to the Los Angeles Fire Department.

"To see the guys out there and the gals, it was humbling. I don't know. I just felt that way," Kings coach Jim Hiller said about the ceremony. "I felt a little emotional. I just felt like those people have been out there doing some pretty amazing things that we just saw a little bit from a long distance. And we're in our own little bubble doing what we have to do. It brought it to life for me, pretty personal, and it's just disappointing we couldn't do more with it."

Crosby picked up his 50th point of the season 14:09 into the first period when he got a piece of Matthew Grzelcyk's shot from the point and put it past Rittich to make it 2-0. Crosby is the 11th player in NHL history with at least 50 points in 18 or more seasons.

Bruins 6, Sharks 3: Charlie

Coyle scored a pair of third-period goals, stealing the spotlight from fellow Boston University product Macklin Celebrini in his first game back at the TD Garden as an NHLer and leading host Boston to a victory over San Jose.

It was the Bruins' 14th straight victory over the Sharks.

Coyle converted a backhanded pass from Matt Poitras to make it 3-3 with about 12 minutes left in the game for his first goal since Dec. 27. He made it 4-3 four minutes later on a shot that bounced off goalie Yaroslav Askarov's pads and into the net.

It was the second own goal for San Jose on the day: David Pastrnak's second-period score ricocheted off Sharks defenseman Jake Walman, who was standing at the top of the crease when the Boston forward banked the puck into the net off his skates.

Wild 3, Avalanche 1: Yakov Trenin scored against his former team early in the third period, and visiting Minnesota beat Colorado.

Jake Middleton had a goal and an assist, Brock Faber also scored and Marc-Andre Fleury made 26 saves for the Wild.

The game was tied entering the third period but Trenin gave Minnesota a 2-1 lead with a wrister in the slot that beat Mackenzie Blackwood at 2:08. Faber scored 1:35 later to make it a two-goal game.

Nathan MacKinnon, the NHL leader in points, had tied the game with 1:08 left in the second with his 18th goal of the season.

Kraken 6, Sabres 4: Jamie Oleksiak scored the go-ahead goal in the second period, and Adam Larsson and Jared McCann added scores in the third as host Seattle beat Buffalo.

Oleksiak's goal at the 16:34 mark snapped a 3-all tie and came less than a minute after the Sabres' Tage Thompson scored to erase a two-goal deficit.

Jack Quinn's goal just over 5 minutes into the game gave Buffalo an early lead. The Kraken assumed the lead after goals by John Hayden, Chandler Stephenson in the first, and Matty Beniers made it 3-1 midway through the second.

The Sabres countered with scores by Jason Zucker and Thompson, who made it 3-all at 15:38 with his 20th goal of the season. Oleksiak put Seattle back in front, and scores by Larsson and McCann put the game out of reach in the third.

Blues 5, Golden Knights 4 (SO): Jake Neighbours and Brayden Schenn scored during a shootout to lift visiting St. Louis past Vegas.

The Blues, who have a 12-8-8 record against the Golden Knights, improved to 4-1-1 in their last six games played in Vegas.

Schenn, Neighbours, Nathan Walker and Cam Fowler scored for St. Louis in regulation. Jordan Binnington made 28 saves.

The Blues inched closer in the Western Conference playoff race and are now tied with Vancouver, both with 50 points and one point shy of Calgary for the second wild-card spot.

Maple Leafs 5, Lightning 3: Matthew Knies had two goals and an assist as host Toronto held on late to down Tampa Bay.

Auston Matthews and William Nylander also scored for the Maple Leafs. Joseph Woll made 27 saves. Mitch Marner added an empty-net goal and two assists.

Nick Paul scored twice for the Lightning and Darren Raddysh had a goal and an assist. Jonas Johansson stopped 23 shots. Victor Hedman chipped in two assists.

Toronto, which picked up a third straight regulation victory over Tampa Bay this season, top the Atlantic Division with 62 points after extending its current winning streak to three games.

Islanders 3, Blue Jackets 1:

Bo Horvat scored twice in host New York's three-goal second period, and the Islanders beat Columbus.

Simon Holmstrom also scored and Mathew Barzal had two assists as New York won its second straight and fifth in seven games. Ilya Sorokin made 25 saves.

Kent Johnson scored for the Blue Jackets and Elvis Merzlikins had 22 saves, but Columbus ended a seven-game point streak (6-0-1).

The Islanders scored three goals in a span of 5:04 in the second period to take the 3-1 lead and held on to win consecutive games at home for the first time this season.

Hurricanes 4, Blackhawks 3 (OT): Sebastian Aho scored 59 seconds into overtime, and visiting Carolina beat Chicago.

Seth Jarvis, Jordan Staal and Jesperi Kotkaniemi also scored for the Hurricanes in their second straight win. Staal picked up his 700th career point in game No. 1,300.

Freddie Andersen made 22 saves for Carolina in his first game since Oct. 26 and No. 500 for his career. He had been sidelined by a knee injury.

The Hurricanes tied it at 3 on Staal's 10th goal with 6:23 left in regulation. Staal found a loose puck under Petr Mrazek and poked it in. Aho closed it out with his 14th goal.

Utah 5, Jets 2: Connor Ingram made 23 saves and Olli Maatta scored his first goal for host Utah in a victory over Winnipeg.

Logan Cooley, Barrett Hayton, Matias Maccelli and Clayton Keller also scored to help Utah win its second consecutive home game. Hayton, Josh Doan and Nick Schmaltz each had two assists.

Connor Hellebuyck stopped 23 shots for the Jets. Nino Niederreiter and Dylan DeMelo scored in the third period as Winnipeg avoided its second shutout loss of the season.