

Senate confirms Hegseth as DOD head

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Senate on Friday night confirmed Pete Hegseth as defense secretary by the narrowest of margins, elevating an Army National Guard veteran and former Fox News host to the top Pentagon job with the help of a rare tie-breaking vote by the vice president.

The 51-50 vote marked only the second time in modern history that a vice president had to be called to the Capitol to break a tie on a Cabinet nomination.

Vice President JD Vance's vote to push Hegseth over the finish line highlighted the division over President Donald Trump's pick to lead the Defense Department and came amid claims last week by Hegseth's ex-sister-in-law that he was abusive toward his second wife, frequently drank to excess and made derogatory statements about women and Muslims.

Republicans largely stuck by Hegseth despite those accusations, which were made in a sworn affidavit provided to lawmakers, while Democrats lined up in staunch opposition against him.

"I am ironclad in my assessment that... Mr. Hegseth is prepared to be the next secretary of the defense and that the allegations unfairly impugning his character do not pass scrutiny," said Sen. Roger Wicker, R-Miss., the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee. "Mr. Hegseth has the confidence of the president. He has the backing of Senate Republicans."

Not all Republicans agreed.

Sens. Susan Collins of Maine, Mitch McConnell of Kentucky and Lisa Murkowski of Alaska broke with their party to vote against Hegseth's nomination.

Murkowski said she does not believe he has the qualifications to manage the Defense Department and argued his admitted infidelity and other lapses in judgment were "unbecoming of someone who would lead our armed forces."

"These behaviors starkly contrast the values and discipline expected of service members," she said. "Men and women in uniform are held accountable for such actions, and they deserve leaders who uphold these same standards."

McConnell, who had voted Thursday to advance Hegseth's nomination but ultimately voted against it, said Hegseth did not impress him.

"Effective management of nearly 3 million military and civilian personnel, an annual budget of nearly \$1 trillion, and alliances and partnerships around the world is a daily test with staggering consequences for the security of the American people and our global interests," he said in a statement.

"Mr. Hegseth has failed, as yet, to demonstrate that he will pass this test."

Defense secretaries are typically confirmed with bipartisan support, including during Trump's first term. Jim Mattis, a four-star Marine Corps general, was almost unanimously confirmed while Mark Esper, a former Army secretary, was confirmed in a 90-8 vote.

But Hegseth, 44, faced an uphill battle to win over the Senate as he was dogged for months by accusations of sexual assault and harassment, alcohol abuse and financial mismanagement of two veterans organizations that he once led.

More allegations piled up last week as Hegseth's former sister-in-law described instances of drunken and volatile behavior, including an incident in which Hegseth apparently became extremely drunk in a strip club while wearing his Minnesota National Guard uniform — a violation of military law.

Hegseth and his second ex-wife have denied the claims in the affidavit.

Sen. Jack Reed of Rhode Island, the top Democrat on the Senate Armed Services Committee, said he requested sworn testimony from the ex-sister-in-law after learning the details that she provided to the FBI for its background check of Hegseth were omitted from the final briefing given to lawmakers.

Reed called the FBI's investigation "inadequate" and on Thursday said it was "unprecedented that the FBI has returned to my office two more times, as recently as last night, to provide additional information on the nominee."

"We cannot risk installing a leader who may have a history that is exploitable by our adversaries," he said. "Nor can we risk confirming a secretary of defense who has

shown that he is incapable of being responsible, accountable and law-abiding 24 hours a day, seven days a week, as that job requires."

Democrats have also repeatedly hammered Hegseth on his previous remarks opposing women in combat roles and dismissing the laws of war, his advocacy on behalf of troops who had been charged with war crimes and his unorthodox resume.

Hegseth is a graduate of Princeton University and Harvard University and served in the Army National Guard for more than a decade, deploying to Iraq, Afghanistan and Guantanamo Bay. He received two Bronze Stars and other commendations for his service and left the military at the rank of major in 2021.

In between deployments, Hegseth led two nonprofit advocacy groups — Veterans for Freedom and Concerned Veterans for America — and joined Fox News, first as a contributor and then as a host.

"It is true that I don't have a similar biography to defense secretaries of the last 30 years," he said last week at his confirmation hearing. "But, as President Trump also told me, we've repeatedly placed people atop the Pentagon with supposedly 'the right credentials'... and where has it gotten us?"

Hegseth has spun his lack of experience in the Defense Department as a positive, saying he will be a "change agent" who will focus on troops and warfighting rather than distractions such as diversity, equity and inclusivity efforts and climate change initiatives.

He admitted to falling short in his personal conduct but told senators that he is now a "changed man" and promised to abstain from drinking when he becomes the defense secretary.

He rejected the allegations against him as a "coordinated smear campaign."

In a break from custom, Hegseth did not meet with most Democrats on the Senate Armed Services Committee before his confirmation.

"He stiff-armed every one of us, except Jack Reed," said Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., a member of the panel.

Hegseth has said scheduling issues got in the way.

Trump reportedly eyes military cuts in Europe

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

President Donald Trump wants to withdraw 20,000 U.S. troops from Europe and demand a subsidy from allies to pay for the remaining American military presence on the Continent, Italy's leading news agency recently reported.

On Thursday, ANSA said Trump has been delivering his troop-cut message to European leaders since taking office.

Trump "would like financial contributions from European countries because these soldiers

are a deterrent, and the costs cannot be borne solely by American taxpayers," a European diplomat told the news service.

The Pentagon did not immediately respond Friday to questions about the report.

Trump has long advocated for a smaller force in Europe, especially in Germany. At the end of his first term, he ordered 12,000 troops out of Germany, with some to be relocated to other areas in Europe and others back to the United States.

The plan was never put into effect and was later canceled by

then-President Joe Biden. Trump's new Pentagon team, however, has made clear that the U.S. needs to play a smaller military role in Europe and shift capabilities to the Pacific to counter a growing threat from China.

The U.S. has about 65,000 troops permanently stationed in Europe and thousands more there on a rotational basis. Since Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the overall force level has been in the range of 100,000 troops.

It's unclear what units would

be targeted for cuts, but the rotation of tank brigades to NATO's eastern flank, a linchpin of allied deterrence since the 2014 Russian invasion of Ukraine, could be in Trump's crosshairs.

Newly installed defense officials have previously indicated that such rotations could be an area where the Pentagon could achieve savings.

Other potential targets are assets that would be of value in deterring China in the Pacific, such as warships, long-range artillery and Patriot missile defense units.

Trump wants all in NATO to spend 5% on defense

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

President Donald Trump on Thursday said all NATO countries must sharply increase their defense spending, demanding member states push well beyond current benchmarks that many of them already struggle to hit.

Trump, speaking to an audience of global leaders gathered at an economic forum in Davos, Switzerland, said the current NATO threshold that calls for spending 2% of gross domestic product on military matters is insufficient.

"I'm also going to ask all NATO nations to increase defense spending to 5% of GDP, which is what it should have been years ago," Trump said, speaking virtually from Washington.

Trump, who made allied defense spending the focus of his approach to NATO in his first term, said the United States has shouldered too much of the security burden inside the 32-nation bloc. He said the situation has been "unfair" to the U.S.

Trump didn't directly say the 5% standard would apply to the U.S.

Washington would have to significantly boost its own defense spending to hit the 5% mark. Currently, the U.S. spends about 3.4% of GDP on the defense budget. Going to 5% would push the Pentagon budget of roughly \$842 billion to more than \$1 trillion.

The focus on defense spending comes amid a wide range of security threats, stretching from the Pacific to Europe and the Middle East.

Among NATO states, defense spending levels have been steadily rising for years. About 20 countries now hit the 2% mark, up from only three in 2014.

Russia's armed intervention in Ukraine in 2014 followed by its full-scale attack in 2022 have been major factors in the increases. Pressure from Trump during his first term also pushed allies to spend more, alliance officials have acknowledged.

NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte, also speaking in Davos on Thursday, backed Trump's demands for more spending.

"The problem is not the U.S., the problem is Europe," said Rutte, who added too many European states are failing to spend the bare minimum on defense.

Military families riled by lower rates paid for self-moves

By WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

Military families are incensed over sweeping cuts to reimbursement rates for service members who choose to manage their own moves when they change duty stations, rather than opt for defense contractors.

The reimbursement rates for personally procured moves

have been slashed by as much as 40%, Megan Harless, an advocate for reforming the process for permanent changes of station, said by phone Wednesday.

That could leave many of the thousands of families choosing to self-move each year no choice but to use HomeSafe Alliance, the sole contractor chosen to oversee all household moves for

the Defense Department, she said.

Much of the moving industry involved in military relocations has its own objections to contract rates offered by HomeSafe.

The U.S. Transportation Command awarded a \$20 billion contract to Houston-based HomeSafe Alliance LLC in late 2021 to replace roughly 900 for-

warding agents who have until now managed military moves.

HomeSafe is a joint venture between Tier One Relocation and KBR, formerly Kellogg Brown & Root.

HomeSafe moves are being made under the Global Household Goods Contract, or GHC, which has offered rates so low that much of the moving industry has not signed on.

Okinawa Marine's sex assault case dropped

BY BRIAN McELHINEY
AND KEISHI KOJA
Stars and Stripes

Japanese prosecutors on Okinawa will not pursue charges against a U.S. Marine accused of sexually assaulting and injuring a woman in November, a spokesman said Friday.

The Naha Public Prosecutors Office on Thursday dropped the case against the Marine due to a lack of evidence, a spokesman with the office said by phone.

"We determined that it would be difficult to press charges of nonconsensual sexual intercourse," he said.

Normally silent on its decisions, the prosecutors' office publicly disclosed parts of this one because of a high level of interest among Okinawans.

The case is one of at least four of sexual assault or attempted sexual assault alleged against U.S. troops on Okinawa in the past year.

The Marine, in his 30s, is still subject to the U.S. military Uniform Code of Military Justice, according to a spokeswoman for the III Marine Expeditionary Force.

The incident remains under investigation, 1st Lt. Isabel Izquierdo told Stars and Stripes by email Friday. She declined to identify the Marine or update his status.

The Marine was suspected of sexually assaulting and injuring a woman described as older than 20, whom he did not know, in a building on Okinawa. The case came to light Jan. 8 when police forwarded it to prosecutors.

The woman told the Okinawa Times on Thursday that dropping the case is "unreasonable and shocking." She accused the Marine of holding her mouth closed with his right hand, grabbing her neck with his left hand and beating her when she resisted.

Three other cases of alleged sexual crimes last year on Okinawa led to indictments and one

conviction while stirring public discontent with the U.S. military.

A women's rights group drew about 250 people to a protest Tuesday outside the prefectural government building in Naha, group member Sachiko Kudeken said by phone Friday.

The same group — Okinawans Protesting Against the Rape of a Girl by a U.S. Service Member and Calling for Prevention of Recurrences — attracted 2,500 people to a Dec. 22 protest outside Okinawa City Hall.

The December protest followed the conviction earlier that month of Air Force Senior Airman Brennon Washington in Naha District Court for kidnapping and sexually assaulting a girl, 15, a year earlier. Washington has appealed the conviction.

Kudeken declined comment on the case that was dropped Thursday.

"They should protect us, the citizens of the prefecture, and not

the U.S. military," she said.

Also Tuesday, the Naha and Nago city assemblies filed opinion and protest letters with Japanese and U.S. authorities, respectively, seeking changes to the status of forces agreement governing U.S. troops in Japan, according to the assemblies' spokespeople.

Naha requested an apology and compensation for the woman in the November incident and asked Japan to "restructure and downsize U.S. military bases in Okinawa."

The letters were posted to the assemblies' websites.

The opinion letters were addressed to several Japanese office holders. The protest letters went to the U.S. ambassador to Japan, a post that's pending Senate confirmation, and several military commanders.

Some Japanese government officials may speak to the press only on condition of anonymity.

US administration's mass firing targets agency IGs

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Trump administration has fired about 17 independent inspectors general at government agencies, a sweeping action to remove oversight of his new administration that some members of Congress are suggesting violated federal oversight laws.

The dismissals began Friday night and were effective immediately, according to two people familiar with the actions. They spoke on condition of anonymity to provide details that have not been made public. Neither confirmed the exact number of firings, but an email sent by one of the fired inspectors general said "roughly 17" inspectors general had been removed.

Trump confirmed the move in a conversation with report-

ers aboard Air Force One on Saturday, claiming, "it's a very common thing to do."

Congress was not given the legally required 30-day notices about the removals — something that even a top Republican is decrying.

"There may be good reason the IGs were fired. We need to know that if so," Sen. Chuck Grassley, chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee, said in a statement. "I'd like further explanation from President Trump. Regardless, the 30 day detailed notice of removal that the law demands was not provided to Congress," said Grassley, R-Iowa.

Though inspectors general are presidential appointees, some serve presidents of both parties. All are expected to be nonpartisan.

1,500 troops joining 2,500 others at US-Mexico border

BY ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

AUSTIN, Texas — Military police and Army engineers from seven states will join Marine Corps engineers from California already en route for a deployment to the U.S. border with Mexico ordered last Monday by President Donald Trump.

In total, 1,500 active-duty troops will join about 2,500 National Guard members and helicopter crews already working at the southwest border in support of Customs and Border Protection. The forces will install physical barriers along the border and conduct detection and monitoring missions, according to U.S. Northern Command, which is leading the mission.

The first wave of active-duty troops was expected to be at locations along the border by the

end of the week. NORTHCOM would not say exactly where the troops would deploy.

"U.S. Northern Command is aggressively bolstering security at the southern border," said Air Force Gen. Gregory Guillot, NORTHCOM's commander.

There is discussion among defense officials and the White House that the number of troops deployed could reach 10,000, said a senior defense official who spoke on the condition of anonymity. The executive order that Trump signed Monday called for whatever number of troops that defense officials deemed necessary.

Despite the bulk of troops coming from military police units, the Pentagon stated Wednesday that none "are intended to be used for law enforcement."

CIA believes COVID came from lab but with low confidence

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The CIA now believes the virus responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic most likely originated from a laboratory, according to an assessment released Saturday that points the finger at China even while acknowledging that the spy agency has “low confidence” in its own conclusion.

The finding is not the result of any new intelligence, and the report was completed at the behest of the Biden administration and former CIA Director William Burns. It was declassified and released Saturday on the orders of President Donald Trump’s pick to lead the agency, John Ratcliffe, who was sworn in Thursday as director.

The nuanced finding suggests the agency believes the totality of evidence makes a lab origin more likely than a natural origin. But the agency’s assessment assigns a low degree of confidence to this conclusion, suggesting the evidence is deficient, inconclusive or contradictory.

Earlier reports on the origins of COVID-19 have split over whether the coronavirus emerged from a Chinese lab, potentially by mistake, or

whether it arose naturally. The new assessment is not likely to settle the debate. In fact, intelligence officials have said it may never be resolved due to a lack of cooperation from Chinese authorities.

The CIA “continues to assess that both research-related and natural origin scenarios of the COVID-19 pandemic remain plausible,” the agency wrote in a statement about its new assessment.

Instead of new evidence, the conclusion was based on fresh analyses of intelligence about the spread of the virus, its scientific properties and the work and conditions of China’s virology labs.

Chinese authorities have dismissed speculation about COVID’s origins as unhelpful and motivated by politics. On Saturday, a spokesperson for China’s U.S. embassy said the CIA report has no credibility.

“We firmly oppose the politicization and stigmatization of the source of the virus, and once again call on everyone to respect science and stay away from conspiracy theories,” embassy spokesperson Liu Pengyu said in a statement emailed to The Associated Press.

US military contractors to secure checkpoint in Gaza

The Washington Post

Armed U.S. security contractors were set to take up positions over the weekend at a checkpoint inside Gaza, tasked with inspecting vehicles headed north from southern refugee centers where hundreds of thousands of Palestinians fled from relentless Israeli bombardment during the past year.

Two American companies, together with an Egyptian partner group, will operate independently from the Israel Defense Forces redeploying away from population centers under the terms of the temporary Israel-Hamas ceasefire that went into effect a week ago.

The contractors, North Carolina-based UG Solutions and Safe Reach Solutions of Wyoming, will be authorized to search vehicles and confiscate any weapons or military materiel; but the vehicles and whoever is inside them — including Hamas personnel — will be allowed to pass.

Travelers are “going to go through that checkpoint, and we are not going to stop them. They just can’t carry anything deemed unsafe,” said a UG Solutions official, who like others interviewed, spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive operations.

Under the terms of the ceasefire deal requiring non-Israeli inspections, the contractors have no offensive man-

date, no military mission and no ability to detain combatants.

Company officials said they do not anticipate difficulties, but acknowledged the risks in an environment where the dangers of provocation and attack are high and where the United States is well known as Israel’s primary military supplier and diplomatic supporter.

Officials from the contracting companies said they will have additional forces positioned nearby in the event of trouble. They emphasized that the Israeli military would not be involved.

Israeli troops, however, will never be far away within the tight confines of the 141-square-mile Gaza enclave.

Contractors will be armed, according to an internal UG Solutions document obtained by The Washington Post, with M4 assault rifles, SR-25 sniper rifles and Glock pistols.

Payment is \$1,100 per day for “operators” and \$1,250 for medics. Personnel were due to be mustered in Baltimore for departure to the region, the document said.

The choice of contracting companies for Gaza was “determined by the mediators,” an SRS spokesperson said, referring to the U.S., Qatar and Egypt, whose negotiators spent more than a year trying to nudge Israel and Hamas toward an agreement to stop fighting.

North Korea says it tested cruise missile system

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — North Korea said Sunday that it tested a cruise missile system, its third known weapons display this year, and vowed “the toughest” response to what it called the escalation of U.S.-South Korean military drills that target the North.

The moves suggested North Korea will likely maintain its confrontational stance against the United States for now, even though President Donald Trump said he intends to reach out to North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

The official Korean Central News Agency said Kim observed

the test of sea-to-surface strategic cruise guided weapons Saturday. The term “strategic” implies nuclear-capability. KCNA said the missiles hit their targets after traveling 932-mile-long elliptical and figure-eight-shaped flight patterns, but couldn’t be independently verified.

On Sunday, North Korea’s

Foreign Ministry criticized the U.S. for committing “serious military provocations aiming at” North Korea with a series of military exercises with South Korea this month. The Foreign Ministry warning was in line with Kim’s vows to implement the “toughest” anti-U.S. policy during a year-end political meeting.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Aesthetician charged over counterfeit Botox

NY NEW YORK — A New York City aesthetician was charged last week with injecting customers with counterfeit Botox at his medical spa after some of them complained that it made them sick. The charges against Joey Grant Luther were announced by federal authorities, who said some clients faced life-threatening injuries after receiving injections between 2021 and last July at the spa business in the Hell's Kitchen neighborhood of Manhattan.

Luther, 54, of Manhattan, who authorities said was not licensed to provide Botox injections, was charged with wire fraud, smuggling and other crimes related to misbranded and counterfeit drugs. Authorities said he'd been buying counterfeit Botox from countries in Asia, including China, between April 2023 and last July.

U.S. Attorney Danielle R. Sassoon said in a release that Luther told his clients that counterfeit Botox he purchased from China was the real thing.

Court: Schools can be sued over discrimination

MN ALBUQUERQUE — The New Mexico Supreme Court on Thursday cleared the way for an anti-discrimination lawsuit to proceed against the state's largest school district, ruling that public schools and universities can be sued for discriminatory conduct under the New Mexico Human Rights Act.

The ruling stems from a 2018 case in which a high school

teacher in Albuquerque was accused of cutting off one Native American girl's hair and asking another if she was dressed as a "bloody Indian" during class on Halloween. That 16-year-old Navajo student was in a costume and had fake blood on her cheek. Outrage over the girls' treatment prompted legislation in New Mexico and elsewhere to prohibit discrimination based on hairstyle and religious head garments.

Alaskans win auction for golden railroad spike

AK ANCHORAGE — The golden spike that was used to complete the Alaska Railroad over a century ago will be on permanent display in Alaska for the first time after entities combined to win an action for the 14-karat artifact Friday.

The Anchorage Museum and the city of Nenana, with financial help from private donors and the Alaska Railroad, won the Christie's auction for the spike in New York with a bid of \$201,600, more than four times the \$50,000 top-line estimate for the historical artifact. The price includes a premium of 26% for the auction company.

The plan is for the two cities to alternate displaying the spike.

The project's principal engineer was U.S. Army Col. Frederick Mears, who was transferred to Seattle four months before completion. The city of Anchorage thanked him for his work by presenting him the golden spike.

He sent it back from Seattle for the ceremony featuring President Warren G. Harding.

On July 15, 1923, near Nenana, Harding lightly tapped the

5½-inch spike twice, and then replaced it with a regular spike and drove it into the final coupling. Shortly after, the spike was returned to Mears in Seattle and Harding headed back to Washington but died of a fatal heart Aug. 2, 1923, in San Francisco.

Law requires destruction of turned-in guns

MI LANSING — State police in Michigan will be required to destroy guns collected during community buybacks or other efforts, under legislation signed into law last week by Gov. Gretchen Whitmer.

State police in 2024 acknowledged that a previous disposal method destroyed only the frame or receiver of the firearm. A private company was recycling and selling the other parts.

State police in March announced that they would destroy entire guns turned over by local police departments. Now that policy has been written into law.

State police handled more than 11,000 guns in 2023, spokesperson Shanon Banner said.

State Republicans take aim at teachers unions

UT SALT LAKE CITY — Utah lawmakers advanced a bill Thursday that experts say would establish one of the most restrictive labor laws in the country as Republicans seek to curb the political influence of unions serving teachers and other public service professionals.

The GOP proposal would ban collective bargaining across all

of Utah's public sectors — education, transit, law enforcement and more. It would bar labor unions from negotiating on behalf of workers for better wages and working conditions.

Many educators, the state's most frequent users of collective bargaining, view the bill as way for Republicans to weaken teachers unions and clear a path for their own education agenda.

Teachers unions are some of the most outspoken opponents of Republican policies in Utah and other states where lawmakers have sought to eliminate diversity, equity and inclusion programs, expand school choice vouchers and restrict transgender bathroom use and sports participation in schools.

Ex-cop charged in beating of handcuffed inmate

AR LITTLE ROCK — A former Arkansas police officer who was caught on video beating a handcuffed inmate in the back of his patrol car last year has been arrested and charged with aggravated assault.

Former Jonesboro Police Officer Joseph Tucker Harris, 29, was arrested last week on felony charges of aggravated assault, filing a false report, and misdemeanor third-degree battery. Harris was released from a county detention center on \$15,000 bond.

Harris was fired in August after he was shown on his patrol car camera punching, elbowing and slamming a car door against the head of detainee Billy Lee Coram, who was being transferred from a hospital back to jail in Craighead County.

— From wire reports

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Mantras took Keys to 1st Slam title

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Be brave.

Go for it.

Those were the mantras Madison Keys turned to as she confronted the most significant points of her tennis career, trapped in the cauldron of a third set that was tied at 5-all, 30-all in the Australian Open final against two-time defending champion Aryna Sabalenka on Saturday.

No reason to be anything but aggressive now, Keys thought. No reason to try to wish there weren't nerves accompanying the moment. No reason to worry — as the American long did along the journey from prodigy at age 12 to major champion less than a month before her 30th birthday — about what would happen if things didn't quite work out.

"I just kept saying, 'Be brave.' And, 'Go for it.' I kind of just kept repeating that. That was really my goal for the day — to just be proud, no matter a win or a loss," Keys said in an interview with The Associated Press after winning her first Grand Slam title with a 6-3, 2-6, 7-5 victory over the No. 1-ranked Sabalenka in Rod Laver Arena.

"I went after it, every single point. And if I missed it and I just didn't execute, I could live

with that. I didn't want to have any sort of regret that I was passive and I missed. (Then) it could have been something where I thought: 'I should have done something else,'" Keys said, her hands clasped as she recalled what had transpired. "So I kind of just kept saying that, over and over."

She spread the credit for her achievement. To the team around her, including Bjorn Fratangelo, a former player who has been her partner for years, her coach since mid-2023 and her husband since November. To her therapist, with whom she spoke or texted frequently over the past two weeks. To her friends on tour who lifted her up when she needed it.

They all believed in Keys, she said, and now, lately, she believed in herself, too.

At her post-match news conference, Keys discussed at length the ways in which her outlook changed.

She used to be concerned about never living up to the hype that accompanied her from before she was even a teen and only increased when she made her first appearance in a Grand Slam semifinal at Melbourne Park at age 19 (she lost to Serena Williams). She used to think nothing about her tennis

career would matter if she never managed to claim a major trophy. She used to assume the sport's best never felt jitters like those hampering her during her first Grand Slam final at the U.S. Open at age 22 (she lost to Sloane Stephens).

Eventually, Keys let all of that go. It was OK not to obsess over others' opinions. It was OK if she never won a Slam. It was OK to face the nerves, because, after all, that's how the greats succeed — they feel discomfort but play through it.

"I was nervous my entire career. So is Novak (Djokovic). So was Roger (Federer). Everybody has been," Fratangelo, a former player who looked on with reddened eyes as Keys accepted her trophy, said during the tournament. "It's just how you deal with it. And she's starting to deal with it in a better way."

That was the case throughout her run, which featured five three-setters and four victories over top-10 seeds (No. 1 Sabalenka, No. 2 Iga Swiatek, No. 6 Elena Rybakina and No. 10 Danielle Collins), including a trio of major champs (Sabalenka, Swiatek, Rybakina). No woman had defeated the top two players in the WTA rankings during one major since 2009.

Swiatek used the word

"brave" to describe the ways Keys played while saving a match point before coming through in their final-set tiebreaker.

"To do it that way," Keys said at her news conference, "I think, really, I thought to myself after the match that I can absolutely win on Saturday."

She was so good at the start and down the stretch against Sabalenka.

From 5-all, 30-all, Keys claimed six of the last eight points. She hammered first-strike forehand winners on consecutive points to hold serve, then earned the lone break of the third set, closing it out with — fittingly — yet another forehand winner.

"If she can play consistently like that, I mean, it's not much you can do," Sabalenka said.

Keys was brave.

She went for it.

"My first semifinal here feels like it was forever ago. I mean, I honestly felt like I was a different person then. But I think that that kind of happens when so many things have happened throughout the past decade," Keys told the AP. "It's just kind of all accumulated to get to the point where I was finally able to just go out and play some really good tennis and walk away with a Grand Slam."

Sinner repeats as Australian Open men's champion

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — There's all sorts of ways beyond merely the score to measure just how dominant Jannik Sinner was while outplaying and frustrating Alexander Zverev during the 6-3, 7-6 (4), 6-3 victory on Sunday that earned the 23-year-old Italian a second straight Australian Open championship.

The zero break points Sinner faced. Or the 10 he accumulat-

ed. The 27-13 advantage in points that lasted at least nine strokes. Or the way Sinner accumulated more winners, 32 to 25, and fewer unforced errors, 27 to 45. The way Sinner won 10 of 13 points that ended with him at the net. Or the way he only let Zverev go 14 of 27 in that category, frequently zipping passing shots out of reach.

One more bit of evidence — Listen to what Zverev told Sinner during the trophy ceremon-

ny: "You're the best player in the world, by far. I was hoping that I could be more of a competitor today, but you're just too good. It's as simple as that."

That's coming from the guy who is ranked No. 2 behind Sinner, who has held the No. 1 spot since last June and is not showing any signs of relinquishing it. This was the first Australian Open final between the men at No. 1 and No. 2 since 2019, when No. 1 Novak Djokovic defeated

No. 2 Rafael Nadal — also in straight sets.

"It's amazing," Sinner said, "to achieve these things."

That includes being the youngest man to leave Melbourne Park with the trophy two years in a row since Jim Courier in 1992-93 and the first man since Nadal at the French Open in 2005 and 2006 to follow up his first Grand Slam title by repeating as the champion at the same tournament a year later.

No. 1 Auburn slips past No. 6 Tennessee

Associated Press

AUBURN, Ala. — Miles Kelly hit a go-ahead 3-pointer with 30 seconds remaining and Johni Broome had 16 points and 13 rebounds in his return to the lineup as No. 1 Auburn extended its winning streak to 11 games with a 53-51 victory over No. 6 Tennessee on Saturday night.

The Tigers (18-1, 6-0 SEC) were held to their lowest point total of the season by the Volunteers' physical defense. Kelly's 3-pointer off a feed from Broome turned a two-point deficit into a one-point lead.

Tennessee had a chance to take the lead in the final seconds, but a 3-point try from the Vols' Zakai Zeigler missed the mark.

Broome, a 6-foot-10, 240-pound fifth-year senior and pre-season Associated Press All-American, was back in action for the first time since suffering what coach Bruce Pearl called a "significant sprain" to his left ankle two weeks ago in a victory at South Carolina. He secured crucial defensive rebounds on Tennessee's final two possessions.

No. 2 Duke 63, Wake Forest 56: Star freshman Cooper Flagg had 24 points, seven rebounds and six assists as the visiting Blue Devils pushed past the Demon Deacons.

Fellow freshman Kon Knueppel had 15 points for Duke (17-2, 9-0 Atlantic Coast Conference), which missed its first 13 shots after halftime and went 1-for-19 through the first 12 minutes of the second half.

That helped Wake Forest rally from 15 down before halftime to push ahead 45-39 on Juke Harris' basket at the 9:55 mark. The Blue Devils responded with seven straight scoring possessions, going up 53-47 on Flagg's two free throws with 3:53 left.

No. 3 Iowa State 76, Arizona State 61: Curtis Jones scored 33 points, Keshon Gilbert had seven of his 12 during a key run and the visiting Cyclones pulled away late for a win over the Sun Devils.

Iowa State (17-2, 7-1 Big 12) bounced back from a loss to West Virginia with a 108-83 blowout of UCF on Tuesday, but found a lot less offensive freedom early against scrappy Arizona State.

The Cyclones went back and forth with the Sun Devils (11-8, 2-6) in the second half until ratcheting up their defense in a game-closing 19-3 run. Gilbert scored seven straight points early in the run.

No. 4 Alabama 80, LSU 73: Aden Holloway scored 19 points and Mouhamed Dioubate added 14 as the host Crimson Tide survived a scoreless night from their top scorer for a victory over the Tigers.

It was the second consecutive game that Holloway and Dioubate came off the bench to have big nights for Alabama (17-3, 6-1 Southeastern Conference), after they combined for 44 points in Tuesday's win over Vanderbilt.

Alabama guard Mark Sears, the SEC's leading scorer at 19 points per game, did not play in the second half after going scoreless on 0-for-5 shooting in the first half.

No. 5 Florida 89, Georgia 59: Alijah Martin and Walter Clayton Jr. scored 17 points apiece, and the host Gators dominated while extending their winning streak in the series to 12.

It's the longest streak by either team in the Southeastern Conference rivalry that began in 1923.

Will Richard chipped in 16 points and Alex Condon 14 for the Gators (18-2, 5-2), who also got a double-double off the bench from Thomas Haugh (13 points, 11 rebounds).

No. 7 Houston 92, No. 12 Kansas 86 (2OT): J'Wan Roberts scored 24 points, including six in two overtime periods, and the visiting Cougars beat the Jayhawks.

Roberts hit two free throws with 13.9 seconds left in regulation to tie the game. At the end of

the first overtime, Houston (16-3, 8-0 Big 12) got back-to-back 3-pointers from Emanuel Sharp and Mylik Wilson to send it to the second overtime.

The Cougars got 18 from Wilson and 17 points, nine rebounds and nine assists from Milos Uzan.

No. 8 Michigan State 81, Rutgers 74: Freshman guard Jase Richardson scored a career-high 20 points and the Spartans rolled to their 12th consecutive victory, beating the Scarlet Knights at Madison Square Garden.

Coen Carr added 14 points on 5-of-5 shooting for Michigan State (17-2, 8-0 Big Ten) and grabbed eight rebounds. The Spartans are riding their longest winning streak since a 13-game run during the 2018-19 season — the most recent of eight teams to reach the Final Four under Hall of Fame coach Tom Izzo.

Vanderbilt 74, No. 9 Kentucky 69: Tyler Nickel's 3-pointer with 1:50 left put the host Commodores ahead to stay as they upset a Top 10 team on their home court for a second straight Saturday by beating the Wildcats.

Jason Edwards led Vanderbilt (16-4, 4-3 Southeastern Conference) with 18 points, Devin McGlockton added 14, Nickel finished with 11 and Jaylen Carey had 10.

Texas 70, No. 13 Texas A&M 69: Tramon Mark's layup with 3 seconds remaining sent the host Longhorns to a victory over the Aggies as Texas rallied from a 22-point second-half deficit.

The Longhorns earned their second straight home win over a ranked opponent and its third win in four games after an 0-3 start in Texas' first season in the SEC.

No. 14 Mississippi State 65, South Carolina 60 (OT): Josh Hubbard's two foul shots with 56.5 seconds left in overtime rescued the visiting Bulldogs for a victory over the Gamecocks after blowing a 14-point lead in

the last nine minutes of regulation.

Mississippi State (16-4, 4-3 Southeastern Conference) held a 50-36 lead with 8:50 to play, but South Carolina rallied to tie it when Zachary Davis picked up a ball bobbled by Cameron Matthews and took it in to tie the game at 55-all with 26.1 seconds to go.

Minnesota 77, No. 15 Oregon 69: Dawson Garcia scored a season-high 31 points on 13-for-19 shooting and Parker Fox had 13 points and 11 rebounds to help the Golden Gophers beat the Ducks.

Lu'Cye Patterson added 11 points for Minnesota (11-9, 3-6), which won its third straight Big Ten game to match its longest such streak in four seasons under coach Ben Johnson.

No. 22 Missouri 83, No. 16 Mississippi 75: Tamar Bates scored 26 points, Caleb Grill added 22 and the host Tigers extended the Rebels' losing streak to three games.

Anthony Robinson II added seven points and seven rebounds for Missouri (16-4, 5-2 Southeastern Conference), which improved to 15-0 at home and 3-1 against ranked opponents.

Xavier 76, No. 19 UConn 72: Dailyn Swain and Zach Freemantle each scored 15 points to help the host Musketeers defeat the Huskies.

Xavier (13-8, 5-5 Big East) had lost four straight to UConn. It was the Musketeers' second victory over a ranked conference opponent recently. They won at then-No 7 Marquette last Saturday.

Kansas State 73, No. 23 West Virginia 60: Dug McDaniel scored 15 points and David N'Guessan added 14 as the host Wildcats snapped a six-game skid with a victory over the Mountaineers.

Kansas State (8-11, 2-6 Big 12) charged to a 19-2 lead and shot 26 for 55 (47.3%), including 6 for 17 from 3-point distance.

Celtics beat Mavs in Finals rematch

Associated Press

DALLAS — Jayson Tatum scored 24 points, Derrick White added 23, including Boston's first 11 of the third quarter, and the Celtics beat the Dallas Mavericks 122-107 on Saturday night in the first meeting between the teams since the NBA Finals.

Jaylen Brown added 22 points as the defending champions bounced back from a 21-point loss to the Los Angeles Lakers on Thursday night, their most lopsided defeat this season.

Boston shrugged off an early 16-6 deficit and led by as many as 25 points in the third period. White scored 16 in the period.

Pacers 136, Spurs 98: Tyrese Haliburton scored 16 of his 28 points in a dazzling 2½-minute display late in the third quarter, Pascal Siakam scored 23 and Indiana downed Victor Wembanyama and San Antonio in the NBA Paris Games finale.

Wembanyama had 20 points

and 12 rebounds.

Timberwolves 133, Nuggets 104: Anthony Edwards scored 34 points and became Minnesota's career leader in 3-pointers in a victory over visiting Denver.

Jamal Murray led the Nuggets with 25 points. Nikola Jokic added 20 points and 11 assists for Denver.

Heat 106, Nets 97: Tyler Herro scored 25 points, Bam Adebayo had 17 points and 16 rebounds and visiting Miami beat Brooklyn.

Nikola Jovic had 17 points, six rebounds and four assists, and Duncan Robinson had 15 points and seven rebounds for the Heat, who snapped their two-game losing streak and won for the second time in the past six games.

Rockets 135, Cavaliers 131: Amen Thompson had his second career triple-double, Alperin Sengun and Jalen Green scored 26 points apiece and visiting Houston beat Eastern Con-

ference-leading Cleveland.

Suns 119, Wizards 109: Kevin Durant scored 29 points, Nick Richards added 20 points along with a career-high 19 rebounds and host Phoenix held off Washington.

Clippers 127, Bucks 117: James Harden scored 40 points and host Los Angeles overcame Giannis Antetokounmpo and Damian Lillard to beat Milwaukee.

Antetokounmpo had 36 points and 13 rebounds. Lillard added 29 points.

Hornets 123, Pelicans 92: LaMelo Ball scored 25 points, Miles Bridges had 22 and host Charlotte beat New Orleans.

Raptors 117, Hawks 94: Scottie Barnes had 24 points and 11 rebounds and Toronto swept a two-game set in Atlanta for its season-high third straight victory.

Knicks 143, Kings 120: OG Anunoby scored 33 points, Josh Hart added 20 points, 18 re-

bounds and 11 assists in his sixth triple-double of the season and host New York beat Sacramento.

Magic 121, Pistons 113: Franz Wagner scored 25 of his 32 points in the fourth quarter, Paolo Banchero had 32 points, nine rebounds and seven assists and host Orlando beat Detroit.

76ers 109, Bulls 97: Tyrese Maxey had 31 points and nine assists, Kelly Oubre Jr. added 22 points and 12 rebounds and visiting Philadelphia beat Chicago for its second straight victory.

Grizzlies 125, Jazz 103: Jaren Jackson Jr. scored 28 points, Zach Edey added 19 points and four blocks and host Memphis won its sixth straight by beating Utah.

Lakers 118, Warriors 108: Anthony Davis had 36 points and 13 rebounds, LeBron James added 25 points and 12 assists, and visiting Los Angeles beat Golden State.

McTavish remains hot, helps Ducks cool off Predators

Associated Press

ANAHEIM, Calif. — Mason McTavish had two goals for the second straight game, Jansen Harkins and Trevor Zegras scored 62 seconds apart in the second period and the Anaheim Ducks beat Nashville 5-2 on Saturday night to snap the Predators' five-game winning streak.

McTavish has scored five of his 11 goals this season in the last three games. He missed out on his first career hat trick when his shot at the Predators empty net in the final seconds was wide right.

Zegras, who also had an assist, has three points in three games (one goal, two assists) after missing 22 games following surgery to repair a torn meniscus in his right knee.

Canucks 2, Capitals 1: Quinn

Hughes scored twice as host Vancouver beat NHL-leading Washington, keeping Capitals star Alex Ovechkin 20 goals shy of breaking Wayne Gretzky's career record.

Hughes has five goals and two assists in a five-game points streak.

Red Wings 2, Lightning 0: Cam Talbot stopped 28 shots for his second shutout of the season as Detroit beat visiting Tampa Bay.

Bruins 3, Avalanche 1: David Pastrnak had a goal and two assists as Boston beat visiting Colorado, which traded star winger Mikko Rantanen a day earlier.

Pastrnak set up both of Morgan Geekie's goals in the third period. He also had an empty-netter in the final seconds for his 24th goal of the season.

Kraken 4, Penguins 1: Vince Dunn scored the go-ahead goal late in the second period, and Eeli Tolvanen and Matty Beniers both scored in the third as Seattle beat visiting Pittsburgh.

Oilers 3, Sabres 2: Ryan Nugent-Hopkins scored two goals to help host Edmonton beat Buffalo.

Edmonton improved to 21-6-1 in its last 28 games. It also moved into first place in the Pacific Division, one point up on the idle Vegas Golden Knights.

Stars 3, Blues 0: Evgenii Dadonov had a goal and an assist, Casey DeSmith stopped 33 shots in his second shutout of the season and Dallas won at St. Louis.

Blue Jackets 3, Kings 2 (OT): Kirill Marchenko scored with 1:16 remaining in overtime to lift

Columbus to a victory over visiting Los Angeles.

Senators 2, Maple Leafs 1: Shane Pinto scored the tie-breaking goal midway through the third period and Ottawa beat visiting Toronto.

Flames 5, Wild 4: Andrei Kuzmenko had two goals and an assist, and Calgary used its power play to win at Minnesota.

Devils 4, Canadiens 3 (OT): Jack Hughes scored at 4:06 of overtime and visiting New Jersey beat Montreal.

Islanders 3, Hurricanes 2 (OT): Brock Nelson scored 2:03 into overtime and New York rallied to beat visiting Carolina.

Panthers 7, Sharks 2: Defenseman Aaron Ekblad had a goal and an assist in his return from an upper-body injury and Florida routed host San Jose.