

On job, Hegseth vows to cut DEI from DOD

By CAITLYN BURCHETT
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump is expected to sign executive orders that remove diversity, equity and inclusion programs from the military and reinstate troops booted out of the service for refusing coronavirus vaccines during the pandemic, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said Monday.

"This is happening quickly, and as the secretary of defense, it's an honor to salute smartly, as I did as a junior officer and now as the secretary of defense, to ensure these orders are complied with rapidly and quickly," he said.

Hegseth made a brief statement to reporters Monday as he climbed the steps of the Pentagon to begin his first official week on the job. The Senate on Friday night confirmed Hegseth as defense secretary by the narrowest of margins, elevating the Army National Guard veteran and former Fox News host to the top Pen-

tagon position with the help of a rare tiebreaking vote by Vice President JD Vance.

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.

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, and 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.

Hegseth made his first visit to the Pentagon on Saturday. There was no media coverage of his arrival. Later Saturday, Hegseth released a "Message to the Force"

that outlined his agenda for his tenure — focus on lethality, meritocracy, accountability, standards and readiness.

"The president gave us a clear mission: achieve peace through strength. We will do this in three ways — by restoring the warrior ethos, rebuilding our military and reestablishing deterrence," Hegseth's memo read.

Following Trump's executive order to get rid of federal diversity, equity and inclusion programs, commonly referred to as DEI, Hegseth shared Sunday on social media that the Pentagon would immediately comply with the order.

"No exceptions, name changes or delays. Those who do not comply will no longer work here," he wrote.

Hegseth was greeted Monday by Air Force Gen. Charles "CQ" Brown, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who Hegseth has criticized in the past.

"First of all, you got to fire the

chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Any general that was involved, general, admiral, whatever, that was involved in any of the DEI woke [stuff] has got to go," he said during a November podcast interview on the "Shawn Ryan Show."

As Hegseth climbed the Pentagon steps Monday, he responded to a few questions from reporters, including if he would fire Brown. Hegseth appeared to sidestep the question, instead telling the reporters that he was "standing with them right now."

Moments before Hegseth was asked if he would fire Brown, he thanked the general for welcoming him and said they would "get to work."

"Our job is lethality and readiness and war fighting and hold people accountable. I know the chairman agrees with that," he said. "The lawful orders of the president of the United States will be executed inside this Defense Department, swiftly and without excuse."

Border czar backs arrests in churches and schools

Boston Herald

Following the first wave of deportations under the Trump administration last week, newly-appointed border czar Tom Homan spoke to the administration's strategy, saying "if you're in the country illegally, you're on the table."

Homan addressed the Trump administration's over 500 deportations on their first day in office in an ABC News segment released Sunday and defended a controversial policy change to allow ICE agents to raid "sensitive locations," including schools, hospitals and churches.

The border czar said federal

agents are currently concentrating on "national security threats and public safety threats" as the first priority, but the country can expect to see the number of deportations "steadily increase" as the "aperture" opens to include everyone in the country illegally.

"The message needs to be clear that there's consequences to entering the country illegally," said Homan, asked if agents would enter schools to arrest adults or kids outside of public safety or national security threats. "If we don't show those consequences, you're never going to fix the border problem."

Responding on the policy, Homan said "no other agencies" are restricted from sensitive sites like ICE and argued there are safety threats in schools, noting "many MS-13 (gang) members are age 14 to 17."

However, Homan said ICE agents may also arrest people in schools who are not suspected of being a threat "on a case by case basis, depending who they are and what the circumstances are."

In Boston, school district leadership addressed the new ICE policy directly at last week's School Committee meet-

ing, saying BPS will "do everything in the district's lawful power to protect students and families constitutional and legal rights."

School officials did not go into specifics of what may happen if ICE agents raid schools.

"Our number one priority is to ensure that all BPS students, regardless of actual or perceived immigration status, are safe and accepted in our school communities," said BPS Superintendent Mary Skipper. "In these uncertain times, we will continue to adhere to our core principles and safeguard students' rights."

Ramstein squad breaking ground on hub

By JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

RAMSTEIN AIR BASE, Germany — A new \$23 million operations facility for the storied 37th Airlift Squadron took its first step toward becoming reality Friday, with the groundbreaking on a long-anticipated move to a more suitable home.

Airmen, 86th Airlift Wing leaders and construction experts gathered outside Ramstein's dual-bay hangar, a much newer dwelling that was finished in 2009 and allows two of the squadron's C-130J planes to be worked on at the same time.

The squadron, which began

flying troops around Europe in World War II, has been seeking a headquarters upgrade for decades.

Members of the Blue Tail Flies, as the squadron is nicknamed, have been forced for over 30 years to make do with the current building, which wasn't designed for air operations work, said Lt. Col. Rick Winfield, the 37th Airlift Squadron commander. It's also a bit of a hike to the hangar from where the squadron currently is housed.

"We'll be closer to maintenance (in the new operations center)," Winfield said. "It's a

solid half-mile walk to get to our airplanes back to our squadron. Now we're going to be right out the front door. It's going to be an awesome change."

Finding adequate and secure space for mission briefings, materials and equipment for air crews in a warren of offices has been challenging, he said.

The squadron has about 150 personnel but at times has to accommodate close to 200 from across the wing when collaborating on mission operations, according to Winfield.

Base officials could not say Friday how old the current building is or what its original

purpose was.

But various commanders all the way up to the combatant command level saw the need and have long advocated for a new building, Winfield said, adding that the project has been 20 years in the making.

The Air Force faced funding challenges in the initial stages of the design. Final military construction funding was provided late in 2023 to allow the project to move forward.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Europe District is overseeing construction in partnership with the German regional construction company LBB.

USAF restores lessons on Black and female aviators

By SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

The Air Force is restoring videos of the Tuskegee Airmen and Women Airforce Service Pilots to its basic training curriculum, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth announced Sunday.

Courses featuring videos about the pioneering Black combat pilots and female flyers who ferried warplanes during World War II were removed last

week, according to the Air Force, to comply with President Donald Trump's administration's crackdown on diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives.

The Tuskegee Airmen, known as the "Red Tails" during World War II, were America's first Black military flyers. They took to the skies in P-47 Thunderbolt, P-51 Mustang and other fighter aircraft to escort bombers on dangerous missions over Germany. The all-Black

332nd Fighter Group had one of the lowest loss records of all the bomber escorts in the war.

President George W. Bush awarded the Tuskegee Airmen the Congressional Gold Medal in 2007.

The WASPs ferried new bombers from the assembly lines to airfields where they were shipped off to war, freeing up male pilots for combat missions. They earned the right to be buried in Arlington National Cem-

etery just in the last decade.

"The documented historic legacy and decorated valor with which these units and Airmen fought for our nation in World War II and beyond will continue on 27 January," Lt. Gen. Brian Robinson, head of the Air Education and Training Command, said in a statement to the San Antonio Express-News that day. The command is based at Joint Base San Antonio-Randolph.

Marines take aim with new high-tech anti-drone system

By WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

POHAKULOA TRAINING AREA, Hawaii — Marines used their new hunter-killer system to blast dozens of target drones out of the sky Saturday over a training ground on the Big Island of Hawaii.

The live-fire demonstration marked the first time Marines went solo on the Marine Air Defense Integrated System, or

MADIS, said Lt. Col. Matthew Sladek, commander of the 3rd Littoral Anti-Air Battalion, on Saturday.

Battalion Marines directed a frenzy of live fire from the system, which incorporates a Stinger missile, 30 mm cannon and 7.62 mm machine gun, at about 30 drones over the Pohakuloa Training Area.

It was the first opportunity for a "Marine-led" exercise of the

system the regiment fielded last year, Sladek said at the training area.

"Before, during all the testing and stuff, you'd always have a contractor over the shoulder, and they were really the ones kind of maestroing it," he said. "This is Marine-led, Marine-executed, and it's really building confidence in the weapon system."

"Think of this as a Franken-

stein of different technologies," 1st Lt. Ian Menk, the battalion's air defense battery executive officer, told reporters Saturday.

The system is intended to counter the smallest drone threats with a suite of countermeasures that include electronic jamming, an M240C machine gun, a 30 mm cannon like those found on the Army's Apache helicopters and Stinger missiles.

Rain in Southern California creates mudflows

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Rain eased on Monday after Southern California's first significant storm of the season brought weekend downpours that aided firefighters but caused ash, mud and debris to flow across streets in wild-fire-burned areas.

Less than an inch of rain fell in most areas, but it was enough to loosen Los Angeles hillsides burned bare by the recent blaze near the Pacific Palisades, where crews working before dawn cleared inundated roadways including the famed Pacific Coast Highway.

In neighboring Malibu, four schools were closed Monday "due to dangerous road conditions and challenges with access," the Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District said in a statement.

North of Los Angeles, snowy

conditions late Sunday shut down the mountainous Tejon Pass section of Interstate 5, a key north-south artery. The California Department of Transportation said there was no estimated reopening time.

A winter storm warning remained in place until 4 p.m. Monday for mountains across San Bernardino and Riverside counties, where more than a foot of snow was predicted.

Flood watches also were in effect for the Palisades, Altadena and Castaic Lake, said Joe Sillard, a meteorologist for the National Weather Service's office for Los Angeles.

"All these fresh burns are very susceptible to rapid runoff," Sillard said, warning of even small amounts of rain in a few minutes' time. "What that means is we have a fairly high danger of mud and debris flows once we get

above those thresholds."

Los Angeles International Airport reported a little under an inch of rain in a 24-hour period ending at 3 a.m. Monday, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration reported. Surrounding areas reported lesser amounts.

The rain came Saturday after months of dry and often gusty weather that created dangerous fire conditions. The downpours were a boon for firefighters but created the risk of toxic ash runoff.

Los Angeles County crews spent much of last week removing vegetation, shoring up slopes and reinforcing roads in areas devastated by the Palisades and Eaton fires, which reduced entire neighborhoods to rubble and ash after breaking out during powerful winds on Jan. 7.

The Palisades Fire, the largest

of the blazes that destroyed thousands of homes and killed at least 11 people, reached 94% containment Monday. The Eaton Fire, which broke out near Altadena and has killed at least 16 people, was 98% contained.

The Hughes Fire, which ignited north of Los Angeles last week and caused evacuation orders or warnings for more than 50,000 people, was 95% contained as of Monday morning.

In San Diego County, firefighters made progress to contain the smaller Border 2 Fire as it burned through a remote area of the Otay Mountain Wilderness near the U.S.-Mexico border.

Most of the region was forecast to get about an inch of precipitation over several days and the weather service warned of localized cloudbursts causing mud and debris to flow down hills.

Trump: Immigration, not inflation, is his top issue

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Two months ago, in his first network television interview after the election, Donald Trump said he owed his victory to Americans' anger over immigration and inflation, specifically the rising cost of groceries.

"When you buy apples, when you buy bacon, when you buy eggs, they would double and triple the price over a short period of time," he told NBC's "Meet the Press." "And I won an election based on that. We're going to bring those prices way down."

But in Trump's first week back in the White House, there was little in his initial blitz of executive orders that directly tackled those prices, besides directing federal agencies to start "pursuing appropriate actions." He is taking steps to lower energy costs, something that Trump hopes will have ripple effects throughout the

economy. Otherwise, his focus has been clamping down on immigration, which he described as his "No. 1 issue" shortly after taking the oath of office.

"They all said inflation was the No. 1 issue. I said, 'I disagree,'" Trump said. "I talked about inflation too, but how many times can you say that an apple has doubled in cost?"

Trump is banking on voters giving him a pass and continuing to blame former President Joe Biden for high prices. The Republican's comments reflect the reality that presidents have almost no levers to reduce inflation quickly without causing collateral damage to other parts of the economy.

There is more that Trump can do on energy. He is pushing to reduce regulations and increase the amount of land available for drilling. He is trying to persuade oil producers to potentially sacrifice profits by pumping more.

Cotton: Trump should rethink revoking key security details

Associated Press

DES MOINES, Iowa — President Donald Trump should rethink his decision to remove security details from three former senior national security officials, the chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee said Sunday.

That protection is not just for them, but also the public, said Sen. Tom Cotton, a Trump loyalist who nonetheless is pushing back against the president's targeting of those he perceived as adversaries. Cotton said a president needs to keep qualified individuals interested in serving the White House and that may sometimes require enhanced security for officials.

The Arkansas senator said he would encourage Trump "to revisit the decision for those people" — former national security adviser John Bolton, former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Brian Hook, a former senior policy adviser to Pompeo. All

were involved in planning and discussions of the deadly drone strike on Iranian Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani in January 2020.

"The threat to anyone involved in President Trump's strike on Qassem Soleimani is persistent. It's real," Cotton said during an appearance on "Fox News Sunday." "Iran is committed to vengeance against all of these people."

Trump had revoked security protection for the three, effective last week, despite the fact that they faced threats from Iran for taking hardline stances against the Islamic Republic during Trump's administration.

The security protections to Bolton, Pompeo and Hook had been regularly extended by the Biden administration over credible threats to the men's lives.

Cotton said he had seen recent intelligence that suggests all three former Trump officials remained targets of Iran.

Thousands return to northern Gaza

Associated Press

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip — Tens of thousands of Palestinians streamed into the most heavily destroyed part of the Gaza Strip on Monday as Israel lifted its closure of the north for the first time since the early weeks of the 15-month war with Hamas in accordance with a fragile ceasefire.

Israel, meanwhile, announced that a Hamas list showed that eight of the 33 hostages to be released in the first phase of the truce are dead. Whether hostages are alive or dead inside Gaza has been a heartbreaking question for waiting families who have pushed Israel's government to reach a deal to free them, fearing that time was running out.

On Monday, massive crowds of people walking with their belongings stretched along a main road running next to the coast in a stunning reversal of the mass exodus from the north at the start of the war that many Palestinians had feared Israel would make permanent.

Palestinians who have been sheltering in squalid tent camps and schools-turned-shelters for over a year are eager to return to their homes — even though they have likely been damaged or destroyed.

Yasmin Abu Amshah, a mother of three, said she walked nearly 4 miles to reach her home in Gaza City, where she found it damaged but still habitable. She also saw her younger sister for the first time in over a year.

"It was a long trip, but a happy one," she said. "The most important thing is that we returned."

Many saw their return as an act of steadfastness after Israel's military campaign, which was launched in response to the Hamas militant group's Oct. 7, 2023, attack on southern Israel. The return was also seen as a repudiation of U.S. President Donald Trump's suggestion that large numbers of Palestinians be resettled in Egypt and Jordan.

Ismail Abu Matter, a father of four who waited for three days near the crossing point before moving north with his family, described scenes of jubilation on the other side, with people singing, praying and crying as they were reunited with relatives.

"It's the joy of return," said Abu Matter, whose relatives were among the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who fled or were driven out of what is now Israel during the 1948 war surrounding its creation. "We had thought we wouldn't return, like our ancestors."

Taliban warn Rubio against bounty threat on top Afghan leaders

Associated Press

A Taliban ambassador on Monday warned the new U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio against making threats after saying he would place bounties on Afghanistan's rulers for their continued detention of U.S. nationals.

A prisoner swap between the U.S. and Afghanistan last week freed two Americans in exchange for a Taliban figure, Khan Muhammad.

The deal to release Ryan Corbett and William McKenty was brokered by Joe Biden's administration before he left office.

But two more Americans, George Glezmman and Mahmood Habibi, remain in Taliban custody. The Taliban have not revealed how many foreigners are behind bars.

"Just hearing the Taliban is holding more American hostages than has been reported," Rubio said in a post on X Saturday. "If this is true, we will have to immediately place a VERY BIG bounty on their top leaders, maybe even bigger than the one we had on (Osama) bin Laden."

The Taliban's ambassador to Qatar, Suhail Shaheen, said it was the policy of the Afghan government to resolve issues

peacefully through dialogue, and he fired a warning shot at Rubio.

"In the face of pressure and aggression, the jihad (struggle) of the Afghan nation in recent decades is a lesson that everyone should learn from."

The Taliban fought U.S. and NATO forces for two decades, eventually returning to power in August 2021 amid a deadly and chaotic withdrawal of foreign troops.

Shaheen was part of the Taliban's negotiating team in Doha to secure a peace deal for Afghanistan.

He said the recent release of another foreigner, Canadian David Lavery, from an Afghan jail had been achieved through mediation by the "friendly country of Qatar" and positive interactions with the Taliban government on such cases.

Earlier Monday, Canada's foreign minister, Melanie Joly, said she had spoken with Lavery upon his arrival in Qatar.

"He is in good spirits," Joly wrote on X, thanking Qatari Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani for helping in Canada's efforts to facilitate Lavery's release.

Shipping company denies its vessel sabotaged cable

Associated Press

SOFIA, Bulgaria — A Bulgarian shipping company on Monday denied that one of its ships had intentionally damaged an underwater fiber optic cable connecting Latvia and the Swedish island of Gotland.

Swedish prosecutors announced on Sunday night that they had launched a preliminary

investigation on suspicion of sabotage, after the ship was detained in the Baltic Sea.

Navigulgar CEO Alexander Kalchev said in a statement it was possible that the Vezhen ship had caused a cable to break but dismissed any possibility of sabotage or any other action on the part of the crew.

Kalchev cited information

obtained from the crew that the ship was sailing late on Sunday in extremely bad weather. Eventually, the crew discovered that the left anchor was apparently being dragged along the seabed. He added that the automatic ship identification system clearly showed that the Vezhen passed over the cable, and that it was not clear when

exactly it was cut.

"I hope that the investigators will quickly establish that this is not a matter of any intentional action, but a technical incident due to bad weather, and that the ship will be released," Kalchev said.

The Maltese-flagged Vezhen was sailing to South America, loaded with fertilizer.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Freighter on the move after freed from ice

NY BUFFALO — A freighter is on the move after it was freed from ice that trapped it in a frozen Lake Erie for days, the U.S. Coast Guard said.

The Manitoulin, a 663-foot Canadian vessel with 17 people on board, got stuck in the ice on Lake Erie on Wednesday after it dropped off a load of wheat in Buffalo, and was heading back to Canada, the Coast Guard said. It was freed Saturday.

The ship wasn't damaged, and its crew is safe, officials said. Freighters in the Great Lakes often encounter surface ice in the winter but sometimes run into ice that is too hard or thick to break through.

A U.S. Coast Guard icebreaking ship had been working since Thursday to help the Manitoulin, and on Saturday, officials said a second ship arrived to help. The Canadian Coast Guard also had a ship assisting.

Kia issues recall due to air bag issue, bad wiring

NY NEW YORK — Automaker Kia America is recalling more than 80,000 vehicles due to floor wiring beneath the front passenger seat that can become damaged and prevent airbags and seat belts from deploying properly.

Damaged wiring can also cause an unintended side curtain air bag deployment, according to documents filed with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

The recall covers 80,255 2023-2025 Niro EV, Plug-in Hybrid (PHEV), and Hybrid vehicles.

To remedy the situation, dealers will inspect, replace and reroute the floor wiring assembly, as necessary, for free. In addition, dealers will install wiring covers. Owners will be notified by letters mailed in March.

'24 home sales hit lowest level in nearly 30 years

CA LOS ANGELES — The latest evidence that homeownership is becoming increasingly less accessible to many Americans: Sales of previously occupied U.S. homes fell last year to a nearly 30-year low for the second time in as many years.

Elevated mortgage rates, a yearslong shortage of homes on the market and record-high home prices continued to stymie prospective home shoppers, especially first-time buyers. That led existing home sales to fall 0.7% last year to 4.06 million — the weakest showing for home sales since 1995 and edging out the terrible year for sales in 2023, the National Association of Realtors said.

Even in the midst of a sales slump, a dearth of homes on the market and rising mortgage rates gave sellers an edge over buyers, helping drive up the national median home price for all of last year to an all-time high \$407,500, an increase of 4.7% from a year earlier.

Private investigator admits to DUI case bribes

NM ALBUQUERQUE — A private investigator embroiled in a corruption scandal that rocked New Mexico's law enforcement community for over a decade was the first to plead guilty to a slew of federal charges that include

racketeering and bribery, according to court records released.

Ricardo Mendez took part in a yearslong scheme between a law firm he worked for that specialized in defending those charged with driving while intoxicated and the Albuquerque Police Department, New Mexico State Police and the Bernalillo County Sheriff's Office. Mendez admitted that since 2008 he had been offering gifts and cash in bribes to officers in exchange for having his clients' cases dismissed.

"I admit that, since at least 2008, this DWI scheme I participated in constituted an enterprise (the DWI Enterprise) that engaged in a pattern of racketeering activity that included multiple acts of bribery, chargeable under New Mexico state law, as well as multiple acts of interference commerce by extortion," Mendez wrote.

Clients would pay Mendez or his associate an attorney retainer fee, court records said. Then Mendez would pay officers in cash or in the form of gifts or legal services to not appear in court as a necessary witness to the driving incident, resulting in the dismissal of the case, according to court records.

Man arrested for threats to Trump near Mar-a-Lago

FL WEST PALM BEACH — A Florida man has been arrested on charges of making online threats against President Donald Trump, police said.

A tip to the FBI threat center led to the arrest of Shannon Depararra Atkins, 46, West Palm Beach police said in a news release. He is charged with one count of written or

electronic threats to kill, do bodily injury or conduct a mass shooting or act of terrorism.

Atkins was arrested after a traffic stop and was found in possession of cocaine, leading to a drug charge as well.

The nature of the alleged online threats was not immediately released. Atkins lives a few miles from Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort in Palm Beach, but there was no indication he took any steps toward going there.

West Palm Beach police said the Secret Service will determine whether any federal charges will be filed.

Bridgestone tire plant to close, 700 to lose jobs

TN NASHVILLE — Tire manufacturer Bridgestone Americas is closing its LaVergne, Tenn., truck and bus radial tire plant and laying off 700 workers there, the company announced in a news release.

Bridgestone said the closure will help the company "optimize its business footprint" and "strengthen its competitiveness."

In addition, Bridgestone announced capacity and workforce reductions at its Des Moines, Iowa, agriculture tire plant and additional workforce reductions in U.S. corporate, sales and operations. In Latin America, it plans reductions in workforce and production capacity in Argentina and Brazil.

The LaVergne plant was the first tire-producing facility in North America for the Bridgestone Corp. The company stopped making tires for cars and light trucks at the plant in 2009, laying off roughly half of the workers at the time.

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Chiefs reach 3rd consecutive Super Bowl

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Everything looked oh-so familiar at Arrowhead Stadium on Sunday night: Patrick Mahomes hoisting the AFC championship trophy as confetti rained down, Andy Reid hugging Kansas City owner Clark Hunt and Travis Kelce kissing Taylor Swift, grabbing the mic and imploring fans to once more party the night away.

The two-time defending Super Bowl champions had earned a chance at an unprecedented three-peat.

And once again, they had brushed aside the Buffalo Bills on the way.

This time, it was Mahomes' arm and his legs — 245 yards passing and a touchdown, two more scores rushing — and some key stops by the Chiefs defense that preserved a 32-29 victory over the Bills in the AFC Championship Game.

"It's just so hard to get to the Super Bowl and I don't take it for granted, and to do it again at Arrowhead Stadium was special," Mahomes said. "You get that trophy on that stage and you look around here and there's not an empty seat — it's special."

Kansas City will get a familiar foe in the big game in the Eagles, whom they beat two years

ago for the title. Philadelphia romped to a 55-23 victory over the Washington Commanders earlier Sunday to earn a shot at the champs on Feb. 9 in New Orleans.

It's the fourth time since January 2021 that the Chiefs have ended Buffalo's season in the playoffs. And like all the rest, it came after a heavyweight fight between two of the top teams in the AFC, one that was tied 29-all after Buffalo quarterback Josh Allen found Curtis Samuel in the back of the end zone to set up a little more drama in the conference championship game.

Mahomes was simply unflappable, though. He completed four consecutive passes on the ensuing possession, setting up Harrison Butker's go-ahead field goal with 3:33 left, and put the Bills in another do-or-die situation in Kansas City.

Allen got their drive going by running for a first down, but his next two throws were batted at the line of scrimmage. He hit Amari Cooper for a short gain on third down, and Buffalo chose to go for it — it was 4-for-5 on fourth downs at that point — and the Chiefs blitz forced Allen to loft up a prayer that Dalton Kincaid was unable to corral deep downfield.

Kansas City took over, picked up a couple of first downs and

began to celebrate once again.

"I've always said it: It's not about one guy. It's not about a couple guys. It's about the whole entire team," Mahomes said. "When we needed the defense to get stops, they got stops. Offense, we made plays. That's why we're so special."

Kareem Hunt had a touchdown run and Xavier Worthy had six catches for 85 yards and a score for the Chiefs, who became just the fourth franchise to reach at least three consecutive Super Bowls with its ninth consecutive playoff victory.

"Every one of these is so special," said Clark Hunt, whose father Lamar's name adorns the AFC championship trophy.

Allen threw for 237 yards and two scores for Buffalo, while James Cook ran for 85 yards and two touchdowns of his own.

Yet the Bills still have not been to the Super Bowl since a run of four straight during the 1990-93 seasons.

"I told them they've got nothing to be ashamed of," Bills coach Sean McDermott said, "and I love them."

The Bills and Chiefs have become well acquainted over the years, meeting eight times now since Kansas City beat Buffalo under the exact same circumstances — the AFC title game at Arrowhead Stadium — to reach

the Super Bowl in January 2021.

Buffalo has won all four games in the regular season. Kansas City has won the four that mattered in the postseason.

All of that familiarity, along with the fact that McDermott once worked for Reid, was evident as the game transpired. The Bills refused to let Kelce beat them, like he did against the Texans in the divisional round, while Kansas City did everything it could to keep Allen from beating him with his legs — or his arm, for that matter.

It was the Chiefs who took a 21-16 lead into the locker room after a topsy-turvy first half.

Mahomes and Kareem Hunt ran for scores and Worthy had a touchdown reception as the teams traded the lead. Cook reached the end zone for Buffalo, and a spectacular touchdown catch by Mack Hollins just before halftime kept the Bills in the game.

It remained a game of inches in the second half: Cook barely reached across the goal line for a TD, the Chiefs stopped Allen inches shy of the marker on fourth down, Mahomes bulldozed into the end zone for a score, and the Bills answered with a 70-yard drive in which their MVP-candidate quarterback hit Samuel on fourth-and-goal to tie the game at 29-all.

Gilgeous-Alexander leads Thunder past Blazers

Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. — Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 33 points and the NBA-leading Oklahoma City Thunder beat the Portland Trail Blazers 118-108 on Sunday night.

Jalen Williams added 24 points and eight assists, and Isaiah Hartenstein had 14 points and 11 rebounds to help the Thunder bounce back from a home loss to the Dallas Mavericks on Thursday night. Oklahoma City is

37-8 overall and 17-5 on the road.

The Thunder had a 52-22 edge in points in the paint and a 28-13 advantage in second-chance points.

Deni Avdija had 28 points, eight assists and seven rebounds for the Trail Blazers.

After the first quarter ended 27-27, Oklahoma City outscored Portland 39-27 in the second quarter.

The Trail Blazers made things interesting in the final

period, cutting it to 93-88 on Anfernee Simons' free throws. The Thunder countered with a banked 3-pointer from Williams to make it 96-88. A 3-pointer from Alex Caruso made it 105-90.

Takeaways

Thunder: Oklahoma City leads the league in steals for the second straight season. According to coach Mark Daigneault, the biggest reason is the defensive prowess of their

best players, not anything he is coaching.

"On our level, it's the quality of defensive personnel," he said.

Trail Blazers: Rookie center Donovan Clingan has been in and out of the lineup this season with injuries. He returned Friday night in a win over Charlotte, finishing with 13 rebounds and four blocks.

"I'm happy to have him back out there," coach Chauncey Billups said.

Hurts, Barkley lead Eagles over Commanders

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Saquon Barkley consulted with his family before the star running back decided — yes, it was time to leave his only professional home with the New York Giants and sign with the Eagles.

His youngest daughter, Jada, had one question for dad as he told her the family was headed to Philadelphia.

Does this mean dad will win now?

As Barkley lay on a football field littered with confetti and cradled his daughter against his chest, the answer was undeniable: You bet Barkley and the Eagles are going to win — with a chance at the biggest one of the season still ahead with a date in the Super Bowl.

Barkley dashed 60 yards for a touchdown on Philadelphia's first play and finished with 118 yards and three scores, Jalen Hurts rushed for three TDs and the Eagles soared into the Super Bowl with a 55-23 win over the Washington Commanders on

Sunday.

Hurts and Philadelphia are in the Super Bowl for the second time in three seasons, and this time Barkley is along for the ride. They will play former Eagles coach Andy Reid's Kansas City Chiefs in the Super Bowl for the second time in three seasons.

"I came to Philly to be part of games like this," Barkley said. "And there's nothing better than a game where you can advance to the Super Bowl."

The 55 points are the most any team has scored in a conference championship game since the 1970 AFL-NFL merger.

Hurts, wearing a brace on his left knee, also threw for 246 yards and a TD pass and the Eagles had a towel-waving crowd in a frenzy for the NFC Championship Game at Lincoln Financial Field.

"I don't want anybody else leading this team at quarterback other than him. He's a winner," coach Nick Sirianni said.

"Again, he deals with so much criticism which just blows my mind because of the questions I have to answer. I don't look too much into that. The questions I have to answer it's just like, man, this guy wins. He's won his entire life."

A.J. Brown caught six passes for 96 yards and a touchdown — and faked tossing the NFC championship trophy off a platform — and a Philadelphia team at just 2-2 headed into the bye week scored a season high in points to usher the franchise into its fifth Super Bowl.

The Commanders played a role in getting the NFC title game to Philly with two road wins — including last week's stunner at No. 1 seed Detroit that set the stage for the second-seeded Eagles to host.

Jayden Daniels threw for 255 yards with one touchdown, one interception and fell short in his bid to become the first rookie quarterback to lead his team to the Super Bowl. Washington was doomed by four turnovers,

including a lost fumble by Austin Ekeler in the third quarter and the Commanders down 34-23.

"We believed that we belonged here," Daniels said. "It was just another game for me. That's how I treated it."

Philadelphia won its only Super Bowl in the 2017 season and Nick Foles, the QB in that game against New England, was the honorary captain.

The Eagles cut to other stars from that game in attendance on the big screen and now — two years after Philadelphia lost to the Chiefs in the Super Bowl — the franchise has a chance at winning its second one.

Including the playoffs, Barkley extended an NFL record Sunday with his seventh rushing touchdown of 60-plus yards in a season.

"When he does it early, it doesn't really matter who gets the party started, just for us to gain some momentum as an offense and gain a rhythm, (we) keep going," Hurts said.

Golden Knights get back on track with win over Panthers

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — Adin Hill made 32 saves, Tanner Pearson had his first game-winning goal of the season and the Vegas Golden Knights beat the Florida Panthers 4-1 on Sunday night.

The Golden Knights came in losers of seven of their last nine and got a much-needed victory over the defending Stanley Cup champions to open their three-game homestand.

Brayden McNabb, Jack Eichel and Tomas Hertl also scored for Vegas, and Nic Roy had three assists. Anton Lundell scored for the Panthers, and Spencer Knight stopped 22 shots.

Florida was playing its fourth road game in six nights and was on the second leg of a back-to-back after beating San Jose 7-2 on Saturday night.

The Golden Knights reclaimed sole possession of first place in the Pacific Division, moving a point in front of Edmonton.

Avalanche 5, Rangers 4: Artturi Lehko-

nen scored the tiebreaking goal with 14.7 seconds left and Mackenzie Blackwood made 33 saves as visiting Colorado defeated New York.

Defenseman Cale Makar scored twice and assisted on the winning goal while Jack Drury and Juuso Parssinen also scored for the Avalanche, who won for the first time since acquiring Martin Necas and Drury in a trade Friday that sent top Colorado scorer Mikko Rantanen to the Carolina Hurricanes.

Necas and Avs captain Nathan MacKinnon each had two assists.

Senators 3, Utah 1: Claude Giroux broke a third-period tie and added an assist, rookie Leevi Merilainen made 34 saves and host Ottawa beat Utah.

Giroux gave the Senators a 2-1 lead at 7:33 and helped set up Brady Tkachuk's goal with 6:38 remaining. Tim Stutzle also assisted on both goals.

Karel Vejmelka stopped 24 shots for Utah, which closed a three-game trip with

its second straight loss.

Jets 5, Flames 2: Gabriel Vilardi had two goals and two assists, Kyle Connor had a goal and two assists and host Winnipeg beat Calgary.

Mark Scheifele had a goal and an assist, and Mason Appleton also scored for the Jets. Eric Comrie had 20 saves to help Winnipeg win its third straight and sixth in the last eight games.

MacKenzie Weegar and Nazem Kadri scored for the Flames, who had won three straight. Dan Fladar finished with 22 saves.

Wild 4, Blackhawks 2: Jared Spurgeon, Joel Eriksson Ek and Frederick Gaudreau scored to help visiting Minnesota top Chicago.

Matt Boldy had three assists for the Wild in the opener of a five-game trip. Minnesota had lost five of six.

The Blackhawks dropped to 1-4-3 in their last eight games. They lost three of four in the season series against the Wild.

Wisconsin starts fast, tops Nebraska

Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. — John Tonje scored 27 points and No. 18 Wisconsin never trailed while routing Nebraska 83-55 on Sunday to hand the Cornhuskers their sixth consecutive loss.

Wisconsin (16-4, 6-3 Big Ten) bounced back from an 85-83 loss at UCLA that snapped a seven-game winning streak.

Wisconsin grabbed a 19-2 lead less than five minutes into the game by shooting 7-for-8 from the floor and 5-for-6 on 3-pointers. Nebraska responded with a 19-5 spurt that included Wisconsin going scoreless for over six minutes, but the Badgers answered with a 16-2 run and never looked back.

Jack Janicki made the key play. He converted a steal into a dunk on the other end with less than five minutes left in the first half, sparking the spurt that gave Wisconsin a 17-point advantage.

John Blackwell scored 14 points and Kamari McGee added 11 for Wisconsin.

Wisconsin shot 17-for-37 from 3-point range to match its third-highest, single-game total for 3-pointers in school history.

Brice Williams had 11 points to lead Nebraska (12-8, 2-7). Wisconsin transfer Connor Essegian scored eight points while facing his former team for the first time.

No. 17 Illinois 83, Northwestern 74: Kylan Boswell scored 17 points and had six rebounds to lead the host Illini past the Wildcats.

Morez Johnson Jr. had 15 points, nine rebounds and three blocked shots, Ben Humrichous had 14 points, and Kasparas Jakucionis had 11 points, 10 rebounds and seven assists for Illinois (14-6, 6-4 Big Ten).

Nick Martinelli and Jalen Leach each scored 17 points Northwestern (12-8, 3-6), which trailed 43-21 at halftime. Ty Berry had 10 points.

Illinois, the No. 2 rebounding team in the country, dominated the boards 50-27 without leading rebounder Tomislav Ivisic, who missed his second straight

games because of an illness. The Illini had 21 offensive rebounds.

No. 24 Memphis 100, UAB 77: PJ Haggerty scored 23 points, Dain Dainja had a season-high 21 points and eight rebounds and the host Tigers shot 62% in a victory over the Blazers.

Dainja was 10-for-12 from the field before fouling out as Memphis (16-4, 6-1 American Athletic Conference) won its third straight game and seventh in its last eight.

Efrem Johnson led UAB (12-8, 5-2) with 21 points. Bradley Ezewiro finished with 19, while Yaxel Lendeborg had 18 points and 10 rebounds.

The game pitted two of the three teams in the American standings and the top two picks in preseason polls, with UAB voted first to win the conference and Memphis second.

Memphis used inside-out scoring to take a 52-39 halftime lead with Dainja scoring 16 points and Haggerty adding 13.

Johnson kept the Blazers in

the game with 17 points, including 5 of 7 from outside the arc.

Navy 59, Army 49: Jordan Pennick scored 20 points as the visiting Mids beat the Black Knights.

Pennick added five rebounds for Navy (7-14, 4-4 Patriot League). Austin Benigni scored 18 points and added six rebounds. Aidan Kehoe shot 6 of 10 from the field and 1 for 3 from the free-throw line to finish with 13 points.

Army (11-9, 5-3) were led in scoring by Josh Scovens, who finished with 12 points and six rebounds. Ryan Curry added 11 points and four assists for Army. AJ Allenspach also had nine points. The loss ended a five-game winning streak for the Black Knights.

Navy carried a slim two-point lead into halftime, as Kehoe led the way with eight points. Navy took a nine-point lead in the second half thanks to a 9-0 scoring run. Pennick led their club in second-half scoring with 15 points.

Florida coach Golden cleared in Title IX allegations

Associated Press

GAINESVILLE, Fla. — The University of Florida has cleared men's basketball coach Todd Golden following a four-month Title IX investigation into allegations of sexual exploitation, sexual harassment and stalking.

The school released a statement Monday saying no evidence was found and ended its investigation amid No. 5 Florida's best season in a decade, with the Gators having won 18 of their first 20 games.

"The University of Florida takes these matters seriously and works deliberately to ensure that due process is upheld for everyone," university spokesman Steve Orlando said

in a statement. "After a thorough investigation that included dozens of interviews over the past months, the University of Florida has found no evidence that Todd Golden violated Title IX. The Title IX office has closed its investigation."

Golden previously side-stepped chances to deny the allegations "out of the respect to the process" and threatened legal action, presumably against his publicly unnamed accusers. He also recently ripped proceedings that are supposed to be confidential.

"I am just frustrated and disappointed that a Title IX mechanism that is created to protect both sides during a situation like this — that confidentiality and

privacy continues to be abused," Golden said earlier this month after assistant coach Taurean Green was accused of sexual assault in another Title IX case.

The school's University Athletic Association supported Golden throughout the investigation and backed his confidentiality comment following the case's dismissal.

"The UAA acknowledges the completion of the review," the UAA said in a statement. "We take these matters seriously and understand the need for the process to be conducted with strict confidentiality and discretion."

The complaint against Golden accused him of sending pho-

tos and videos of his genitalia, making unwanted sexual advances on Instagram and requesting sexual favors. The Independent Florida Alligator first reported the allegations in early November.

Title IX is designed to protect students from discrimination, including sexual harassment. Florida began outsourcing its Title IX investigations in 2023 to Grand River Solutions, a private firm based in California.

The 39-year-old Golden signed a two-year contract extension last March that included a \$1 million raise and brought his annually salary to \$4 million. The deal runs through the 2029-30 season. He is 58-31 in three seasons.