

Militarizing Greenland seen as averting crisis

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — A clash over the status of Greenland is shaping into a NATO stress test as President Donald Trump's push for more control sparks European concerns that coercion from Washington could lead to the alliance's unraveling.

Some analysts say one way to avoid such a scenario is to find a diplomatic off-ramp that leaves the political autonomy of the Danish island intact but entails more U.S. forces on the ground and greater American access to its natural resources.

The question is whether the United States and Denmark can reach a deal that satisfies Trump's stated desire for more security on the territory while avoiding a rupture in NATO that could come from a unilateral American push into the territory.

The White House doubled down this week on its assertion that Greenland should be transferred to American control.

"You know what Denmark did recently to boost up security

in Greenland? They added one more dogsled," Trump said.

But if the United States strangles its way into seizing control of fellow NATO ally Denmark's territory, it could put the bloc's future viability at risk. NATO's core principle — that an attack on one member is an attack on all — would effectively be turned on its head.

The situation calls for a new "Northern Corridor Doctrine" that would update U.S.-Danish security cooperation agreements while expanding allied efforts to develop key minerals and other resources on the territory, Vienna-based geopolitical strategist Velina Tchakarova said.

That would bolster the American and European position against Russia and China, as well as manage what she called "an unavoidable reality."

"The United States will expand its military, security and geoeconomic presence in Greenland," Tchakarova said. "The only strategic question is whether this expansion produces confrontation and polarization or cohesion and stability

among strategic allies."

A new arrangement would expand U.S. access in Greenland in exchange for a wide range of security activity, she said.

"Such an agreement would acknowledge an uncomfortable but necessary truth: in Cold War 2.0, Greenland is once again indispensable to North American and transatlantic security," Tchakarova said. "Avoiding this reality does not preserve sovereignty. It weakens it."

There is a historical basis for ramping up the U.S. military presence in Greenland. During the Cold War, the United States had thousands of troops there in addition to numerous military sites equipped with nuclear-armed long-range bombers.

Today, the presence is much smaller, with about 200 troops involved in an early-warning ballistic missile mission.

One reason Greenland has emerged as a potential flash-point is the failure of Europeans to recognize its strategic importance, Atlantic Council analyst Justina Budginaite-Froehly

said.

"Europe's problem is not that Washington sees Greenland as a strategic asset. It is that Europe has largely failed to do so itself," Budginaite-Froehly said. "For decades, Greenland was treated as a political sensitivity rather than a strategic priority. That complacency is now dangerous."

That reasoning echoed comments by Stephen Miller, Trump's deputy chief of staff.

"We live in a world ... that is governed by strength, that is governed by force, that is governed by power," Miller told CNN host Jake Tapper on Monday. "These are the iron laws of the world since the beginning of time."

When asked about using force against a NATO ally, Miller responded that "nobody's going to fight the United States militarily over the future of Greenland."

Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen said Monday that such a move would spell the end of the transatlantic security bloc, founded 76 years ago as a counter to the Soviet Union.

Cuba on edge after strike topples Venezuelan leader

Associated Press

HAVANA — Cuban officials on Monday lowered flags before dawn to mourn 32 security officers they say were killed in the U.S. weekend strike in Venezuela, the island nation's closest ally, as residents here wonder what the capture of President Nicolás Maduro means for their future.

The two governments are so close that Cuban soldiers and security agents were often the

Venezuelan president's bodyguards, and Venezuela's petroleum has kept the economically ailing island limping along for years. Cuban authorities over the weekend said the 32 had been killed in the surprise attack "after fierce resistance in direct combat against the attackers, or as a result of the bombing of the facilities."

The Trump administration has warned outright that toppling Maduro will help advance

another decades-long goal: Dealing a blow to the Cuban government. Severing Cuba from Venezuela could have disastrous consequences for its leaders, who on Saturday called for the international community to stand up to "state terrorism."

On Saturday, Trump said the ailing Cuban economy will be further battered by Maduro's ouster.

"It's going down," Trump said of Cuba. "It's going down

for the count."

Maduro's government was shipping an average of 35,000 barrels of oil daily over the last three months, about a quarter of total demand, said Jorge Piñón, a Cuban energy expert at the University of Texas at Austin Energy Institute.

"The question to which we don't have an answer, which is critical: Is the U.S. going to allow Venezuela to continue supplying Cuba with oil?" he said.

Navy caps a busy year for ship naming

By GARY WARNER

Stars and Stripes

President Donald Trump scrambled Navy ship-naming traditions last month with his announcement of a new “Trump-class” battleship, to be called the USS Defiant, featuring nuclear-tipped missiles and laser defenses.

Battleships are usually named after states — the last commissioned was the USS Missouri in 1944. Ship classes are named after the first ship of the type built — the Missouri was an Iowa-class ship, named for the first of four battleships ordered in 1939.

Trump’s announcement put an exclamation point on the end of a busy year for Navy ship naming.

The period between a presidential election and inauguration is often filled with last-minute ship naming.

In January 2021, Navy Secretary Kenneth J. Braithwaite traveled to Massachusetts to film a video in front of the Navy’s oldest ship, the USS Constitution, nicknamed “Old Ironsides,” commissioned in October 1797.

“We must always look to our wake to chart our future course,” he said before announcing names for a new frigate, an expeditionary ship, an attack submarine and an amphibious transport dock.

Four years later, it was the turn of outgoing President Joe Biden’s administration to go on a ship-naming spree.

Biden’s Navy secretary, Carlos Del Toro, rolled out 19 new ship names — including new Gerald R. Ford-class aircraft carriers to be named for former President William J. Clinton (a Democrat) and President George W. Bush (a Republican).

“When I personally delivered the news to Bill and George, they were deeply humbled,” Biden said at the time.

“Each knows firsthand the weight of the responsibilities that come with being commander-in-chief.”

In 2025, the naming — and renaming — of ships didn’t hit much of a speed bump with a change in the occupant of the White House.

In June, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth ordered the name of the USNS Harvey Milk stripped from the official Naval Vessel Register. Milk was a gay-rights leader and San Francisco supervisor assassinated in 1978. The Navy said Hegseth had ordered Navy Secretary John Phelan to make the change, “taking the politics out of ship naming.”

The ship was renamed for Navy Chief Petty Officer Oscar V. Peterson, a Medal of Honor recipient from the World War II Battle of the Coral Sea in 1942.

The ship is the second of new class of replenishment oilers. According to the Congressional Research Service, Congress directed that they be named for promi-

nent civil rights advocates. The class carries the name of the late Black civil rights advocate and longtime U.S. Rep. John Lewis, D-Ga.

Phelan, Hegseth and Trump have not ordered any further name changes to the Lewis-class ships.

Before the new battleship announcement, Trump scrambled Navy ship naming plans with an announcement canceling the Constellation frigate program after the two ships were already under construction — the USS Constellation and the USS Congress.

The Navy canceled the remaining ships, including those to be named for the French Marquis de Lafayette, who aided American patriot forces in the Revolutionary War; Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton; Spain’s Louisiana Governor Conde Bernardo de Gálvez y Madrid, a backer of the American Revolution; former Navy pilot Everett Alvarez Jr., who was a prisoner of war during the Vietnam War; and Capt. Bright Joy Hancock, one of the first female Navy officers, who served during World War I and II.

Also canceled was the new USS Chesapeake, named after the early American frigate captured by Britain in 1813, renamed HMS Chesapeake and later deconstructed for use as a watermill in Wickham, Hampshire, England. In recent years, the building

has housed an antiques store.

In canceling the Constellation program, Trump announced a new generation of frigates called FF(X) based on the U.S. Coast Guard’s large National Security Cutter design. The names of the future ships are to be determined.

A sidelight to the “Trump-class” battleship-naming controversy is that it could affect naming a future aircraft carrier after the president.

Twelve of the past 17 aircraft carriers have been named for presidents, according to the U.S. Naval Institute. From Franklin D. Roosevelt to George W. Bush, nearly every president has had an aircraft carrier named for them.

The exceptions are Lyndon B. Johnson, whose name is on a Zumwalt-class destroyer to be commissioned in 2027, and President Jimmy Carter, a former Navy submarine officer, who has a Seawolf-class attack submarine named for him.

Only President Richard M. Nixon, who resigned office in 1974 because of the Watergate scandal, doesn’t have a ship at sea or in the construction pipeline bearing his name.

Four of six Gerald R. Ford-class aircraft carriers are named for presidents. If the naming tradition is followed in chronological order, future carriers could be named for Presidents Barack Obama, Trump and Biden.

In reversal, horses will stay at Fort Hood, Fort Riley

By ROSE L. THAYER

Stars and Stripes

The Army will preserve two of the five ceremonial horse units that were to be cut for cost savings after determining the horses bring community engagement opportunities and capabilities that are difficult to

replicate.

The units at Fort Hood, Texas, and Fort Riley, Kan., will remain active, but the horses, mules and donkeys owned by the Army at Fort Irwin, Calif.; Fort Huachuca, Ariz.; and Fort Sill, Okla., will be put up for adoption and transferred out of

the Army by July.

“After careful consideration, the Army has determined that retaining these [Military Working Equid] programs is in the best interests of the force,” said Col. James Fuhrman, assistant deputy for Army health affairs.

The plan announced in July called for cutting all five horse units to save the Army about \$2 million annually. Keeping the two units and transforming them into official programs will cost the Army roughly \$1.2 million a year, Army spokesman Tony McCormick said.

USMC trial effort allows E-8 lateral moves

By LYDIA GORDON
Stars and Stripes

The Marine Corps broke a long-standing senior enlisted career divide this week by redesignating its first-ever master sergeants to the rank of first sergeant under a trial program.

Master Sgt. Joseph Stoker, an individual material readiness list coordinator with Marine Forces Reserve, was among the first Marines selected to laterally transition between the two E-8 ranks, the service said in a statement Dec. 31.

While master sergeants serve primarily as senior experts in their job fields, first sergeants fulfill a command leadership role, acting as the senior enlisted adviser to commanders at the company, battery or squadron

levels.

Historically, gunnery sergeants selected for advancement to E-8 were assigned by a selection board to either career track.

Prior to the trial program, Marines were locked into one track or the other once they pinned the selected rank, and they had no option to laterally transition.

The trial program is a significant milestone in the Marine Corps option and gives master sergeants greater control over their careers, Sgt. Maj. Carlos Ruiz, the service's senior enlisted leader, said in the statement.

"It advances our talent management efforts by ensuring our E-8s are placed in positions that best support both their success

and that of the Marine Corps," Ruiz said.

Another beneficiary of the program is Master Sgt. Cord Burgan, an instructor section adviser at the Staff Non-Commissioned Officer Academy in Quantico, Va.

Ruiz said Monday that Burgan had been selected as a program qualifier and pinned on the rank of first sergeant.

Announced in mid-2025, the program began reviewing eligible applicants in October and selected its first group of Marines to transition in January, with Stoker among those approved to pin on the first sergeant rank.

"I've always believed that the strength of the Marine Corps is its people, and I want to be in a position where I can guide and

mentor more Marines on a larger scale," Stoker said in the statement.

Service officials have not said how many Marines will ultimately be approved under the program, but it is expected to inform future decisions on whether lateral transitions between the two E-8 career tracks could become permanent.

Lateral transitions between ranks in the same pay grade are not new across the Defense Department.

The Army, for example, has long allowed such movement between certain ranks.

Possibilities for soldiers include switches from specialist to corporal, master sergeant to first sergeant and sergeant major to command sergeant major.

Nimitz reactors could power land-based AI data center

By GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

A pair of nuclear reactors that have propelled a U.S. Navy supercarrier to hot spots around the world for half a century could end up repurposed to power a data center in Tennessee.

HGP Intelligent Energy, based in Dallas, has proposed to the Department of Energy that the two Westinghouse A4W naval fission pressurized water reactors on the USS Nimitz be sent to the Oak Ridge National Laboratory after they are removed from the carrier during its upcoming decommissioning, deactivation and defueling. Oak Ridge is a key U.S. government center for nuclear energy research.

The reactors could generate up to 520 megawatts of power, which HGP said in a letter to the Department of Energy could be used to boost energy for power-hungry data centers at the heart of the booming artificial intelligence industry.

HGP Intelligent Energy filed a letter with the White House's Genesis Mission Office, which President Donald Trump created by executive order in November to "leverage artificial intelligence" on a scale and pace equal to the "Manhattan Project," which produced the first atomic bomb in World War II.

The proposal was first reported by Bloomberg News.

HGP said that reusing and adapting the Nimitz nuclear reactors would cost between \$1 million and \$4 million per megawatt of generating power.

A 2024 study by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology said a new large reactor built from the ground up would cost between \$8 and \$10 million per megawatt.

As part of the plan, HGP said it would cost up to \$2.1 billion in private funds to create the system to use the naval reactors. The company stated it plans to apply for a loan guarantee from the Energy Department.

New evidence sought in Guam endangered species lawsuit

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

A federal judge on Guam recently ordered the U.S. Navy to dive deeper into its record of endangered species protections at a new Marine Corps base on the U.S. island territory.

U.S. District Judge Frances Tydingco-Gatewood on Dec. 12 rejected the Navy's bid to limit disclosure to records prior to 2017 and said environmental groups suing under the Endangered Species Act are entitled to see more recent evidence.

The case began in 2023, when advocacy groups the Center for Biological Diversity and Prutehi Litekyan: Save Ritidian — now known as Prutehi Guahan — sued the Navy and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service over insufficient efforts to protect endangered animals.

The lawsuit claims construction at Camp Blaz created massive environmental impacts and that the two federal agencies have failed "to protect and conserve more than a dozen endan-

gered and threatened species at imminent risk of extinction on Guam," according to an amended complaint filed Dec. 12.

The construction of Blaz, the Marines' first new installation since 1952, is a core component of the Defense Department's planned relocation of Marines from Okinawa to Guam. The base covers more than 4,000 acres and is expected to host approximately 5,000 Marines.

The groups also said that promised mitigation efforts, such as controlling invasive species and restoring habitats, have yet to be enacted.

The Navy and Fish and Wildlife Service denied those allegations.

In the most recent ruling, the federal agencies sought to limit discovery to "administrative records," particularly environmental reviews and other data prior to the lawsuit. However the court determined that the case requires additional discovery and ordered the parties to coordinate a plan to share evidence within 30 days.

US cuts number of vaccines advised for kids

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The United States took the unprecedented step Monday of cutting the number of vaccines it recommends for every child — a move that leading medical groups said would undermine protections against a half-dozen diseases.

The change is effective immediately, meaning the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention will now recommend all children get vaccinated against 11 diseases. What's no longer broadly recommended is protection against flu, rotavirus, hepatitis A, hepatitis B, some forms of meningitis or RSV. Instead, protections against those diseases are only recommended for certain groups deemed high

risk, or when doctors recommend them in what's called "shared decision-making."

Trump administration officials said the overhaul, a move long sought by Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., won't result in families who want the vaccines losing access to them, and said insurance will continue to pay. But medical experts said the decision creates confusion for parents and could increase preventable diseases.

States, not the federal government, have the authority to require vaccinations for schoolchildren. While CDC requirements often influence those state regulations, some states have begun creating their own alliances to counter Trump guidance on vaccines.

The change comes as U.S. vaccination rates have been slipping and the share of children with exemptions has reached an all-time high, according to federal data. At the same time, rates of diseases that can be protected against with vaccines, such as measles and whooping cough, are rising across the country.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services said the overhaul was in response to a request from Trump.

HHS said its comparison to 20 peer nations found the U.S. was an "outlier" in both the number of vaccinations and the number of doses it recommended to all children.

Among those left on the rec-

ommended-for-everyone list are vaccines against measles, whooping cough, polio, tetanus, chickenpox and human papillomavirus, or HPV. The guidance reduces the number of recommended vaccine doses against HPV from two or three shots depending on age to one for most children.

Dr. Sean O'Leary of the American Academy of Pediatrics said countries carefully consider vaccine recommendations based on levels of disease in their populations and their health systems.

"You can't just copy and paste public health and that's what they seem to be doing here," said O'Leary. "Literally children's health and children's lives are at stake."

Police officer deaths dropped 25% in 2025

Associated Press

Deaths of on-duty law enforcement officers in the United States decreased by nearly 25% in 2025, according to an annual report.

The report from the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund, shows a drop in all categories of fatalities, from 148 total deaths in 2024 to 111 last year.

Officer firearm fatalities dropped to 44, a 15% decrease from 52 in 2024 and the lowest number in at least a decade, according to the Fund's previous annual officer fatality reports.

"I always like to see that firearms deaths are down. They are the tip of the spear for egregious acts," said Bill Alexander, the chief executive officer of the Fund, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit that works to memorialize fallen officers, educate the public about the profession and improve officer safety.

Traffic-related deaths also decreased nearly 23% between 2024 and 2025, including both fatal traffic accidents and officers killed after being struck by a vehicle — usually during traffic stops.

Alexander said the reduction in traffic-related officer deaths can likely be attributed to an increase in the national conversation around officer safety on the road.

More states around the country have passed "move-over" laws requiring drivers to move out of the lane closest to traffic stops or accidents while passing them.

The reason behind the decrease in firearm fatalities is harder to define.

While many departments have offered increased safety training and have better equipment for firearm injuries, Alexander said luck and other unquantifiable factors have also played a role.

US plans to help Ukraine if Russia attacks again

Bloomberg News

President Donald Trump's administration will agree to support Ukraine in the event of a future Russian attack, according to a draft statement being negotiated by Kyiv's top allies.

The plan, which is subject to change and would need Washington's approval, offers binding security guarantees urgently sought by Ukrainian authorities as part of a peace deal, including a U.S. offer to back a European-led military force, according to an agreement text seen by Bloomberg News.

European and Canadian leaders met with Trump envoys in Paris on Tuesday to push forward a plan that involves monitoring a ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine, backing for Kyiv's military and assembling a multinational force to safeguard a truce, the draft said.

"These elements will be European-led, with U.S. participation, including U.S. capabilities such as intelligence and logis-

tics, and with a U.S. commitment to support the force if it is attacked," it said.

The talks in the French capital aim to build on momentum as European capitals latch on to U.S. commitments for security guarantees, potentially advancing Trump's ambition to bring Russia's nearly four-year war to an end. But the Kremlin has given little indication of whether it would accept the transatlantic diplomatic foray.

Discussions will integrate Washington's recent proposals on capabilities with plans advanced by Ukraine's main allies, a group known as the coalition of the willing.

French President Emmanuel Macron welcomed leaders at the Elysee Palace, a meeting that follows a series of discussions between national security advisers over the last month. The United States is represented by special envoy Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Tim Walz drops bid for third term as governor

MN ST PAUL — Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz, Democrats' 2024 candidate for vice president, is ending his bid for a third term as governor amid President Donald Trump's relentless focus on a fraud investigation into child care programs in the state.

Less than four months after announcing his reelection campaign, Walz said Monday that he could no longer devote the energy necessary to win another term, even as he expressed confidence that he could win.

Democratic Sen. Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota is considering running for governor, according to a person close to her. The person, who wasn't authorized to speak publicly and spoke on the condition of anonymity, said Klobuchar has not made a final decision.

Around a dozen Republicans are already in the race.

15-year-old charged in first homicide of 2026

AL BIRMINGHAM — A 15-year-old has been charged in Birmingham's first homicide of the new year.

The teen was charged with capital murder during a robbery and certain persons forbidden to possess a firearm.

Two other suspects remain held pending formal charges, Sgt. LaQuitta Wade said Sunday.

The victim has been identified as Morgan Brown. He was a 33-year-old father of a young daughter. Brown's family said he doted on his daughter and described him as a loving person.

Wade said the preliminary in-

vestigation indicates Brown was robbed and fatally shot by the suspects, who immediately fled the scene.

Open carry ban deemed unconstitutional

CA SACRAMENTO — A federal appeals panel has ruled that a California law prohibiting open carry of firearms in heavily populated counties is unconstitutional.

The ruling was issued Friday by two judges on a three-judge panel for the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. The judges found that the state's policy of limiting open carry to counties with a population of less than 200,000 is inconsistent with the Second Amendment.

"California's legal regime is a complete ban on open carry in urban areas — the areas of the state where 95% of the people live," they said in the decision.

The dissenting judge said California could limit open carry in more populated areas because it allows for concealed carry throughout the state.

Judge dismisses Louisville police reform proposal

KY LOUISVILLE — A federal judge in Kentucky has dismissed Louisville's proposed settlement with the U.S. Department of Justice over police reforms after the department withdrew its support of the plan.

The Justice Department announced in May it was canceling proposed consent decrees with Louisville and Minneapolis that sought to curb police bias and abuses after the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor.

Justice Department officials

under President Joe Biden's administration conducted a multi-year investigation in Louisville prompted by the fatal shooting of Taylor and police responses to public protests in 2020.

New DOJ leadership accused the Biden Justice Department of using flawed legal theories to judge police departments and pursuing costly and burdensome consent decrees.

Man who broke windows at VP's home detained

OH CINCINNATI — A man who broke windows at Vice President JD Vance's Ohio home and caused other property damage was detained early Monday, the U.S. Secret Service said.

William D. DeFoor, 26, is facing federal charges for allegedly damaging government property, engaging in physical violence against property in a restricted area and assaulting, resisting or impeding federal officers, according to the U.S. Attorney's office in Ohio's southern district.

DeFoor was detained after midnight by Secret Service agents assigned to Vance's home, east of downtown Cincinnati, agency spokesperson Anthony Guglielmi said in a statement. The vice president and his family were not at the home, his office said.

The Secret Service saw a man running along the front fence of Vance's residence and breach the property line, according to an affidavit filed Monday. The man had a hammer and vandalized an unmarked Secret Service vehicle on his way up the home's driveway before moving toward the front of the home and breaking its glass windows,

the affidavit says.

DeFoor is accused of causing around \$28,000 in damage, the affidavit says.

Resident sows sunflowers where home once stood

CA ALTADENA — Misi Dowd-Figueroa brought life back to the fire-ravaged plot where her home once stood — one sunflower at a time.

The registered nurse and mother of three lost her 1898 farm-style house in the Eaton Fire, one of two deadly wildfires that tore through the Los Angeles area last January, obliterating entire neighborhoods and displacing tens of thousands.

A year later, many are still grappling with grief and sorrow. Few have been able to rebuild so far, and the rest face no shortage of challenges.

"The Altadena I know and love is gone," Dowd-Figueroa said, referring to the suburb devastated by the fire. "Everything burned down — my dentist, my pharmacy — all of it's gone. But there's still something about Altadena that feels like Altadena now, even though there are no homes."

Dowd-Figueroa is among those who decided to stay. Her healing started with tiny seeds that gave her hope and eventually turned her barren property into a flourishing garden.

For several months, while Dowd-Figueroa and her husband took steps toward eventually building a new home, the garden flourished, blanketing a large swath of the lot with a colorful display of approximately 500 flowers — bright orange and red ones, as well as yellow ones with giant heads.

— From wire reports

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Strong ground games propel Indiana, Oregon

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Fernando Mendoza spent all season stealing headlines and collecting awards.

Indiana running backs Roman Hemby and Kaelon Black were content doing the dirty work in the shadows of their Heisman Trophy-winning quarterback, propelling the top-ranked Hoosiers into college football's version of the Final Four.

Now, less than a week after dominating Alabama on the ground, the Indiana dynamic duo hopes to replicate that performance against No. 5 Oregon in Friday night's Peach Bowl.

"You see the guys we have up front, they work really hard and they make my job and Kaelon's job really easy," Hemby said Monday. "We just try to outphysical our opponents. We really want to make it a four-quarter fight to where we kind of impose our will and, at some point in the game, we feel like we could potentially break the defense or make that play that helps us win."

The surprise, to some, has been just how much the Football Bowl Subdivision's third-highest scoring offense, 41.6 points per game, has actually relied on the running game.

While Mendoza and the passing attack certainly have driven this season's narrative, Indiana's ground game sometimes went unnoticed.

The Hoosiers rush for 220.7 yards per game — 10th nationally and No. 1 among the teams still fighting for a national championship. They've topped the 300-yard mark six times and had two more with more than 200 including the 215 they logged in last week's 38-3 rout over No. 9 Alabama.

It's also a big reason undefeated Indiana has the nation's top third-down conversion percentage at 56.5%. Perhaps more important — the Hoosiers have only one fumble all season.

"It just comes from wanting to be better," Black said, referring to the backfield's internal motivation. "Being around a great group

of guys, a great group of teammates, you just have the want to be better in your life and also on the football field. And now that we're in this position, we have no choice but to be better."

Still, Hemby and Black are hardly household names.

Hemby played four seasons at Maryland, averaging 4.9 yards per carry while rushing for 2,347 yards. This year, he's at 5.2 yards and hit the 1,000-yard mark for the first time with 8 yards against Alabama. He earned a third team all-Big Ten selection from the media, but not the coaches.

Black was solid, not spectacular, in four seasons at James Madison but blossomed after following coach Curt Cignetti to Bloomington. This season, he has 157 carries, 898 yards and eight TDs — all career bests with top-seeded Indiana (14-0). Yet he was left off the all-conference list.

The two backs already understand the challenge Oregon (13-1) poses. In their first meeting, the Hoosiers ran 27 times for a paltry

111 yards or 3.0 yards per carry, their third-lowest single game average all season. And on tape, they think the Ducks look even better now.

So does linebacker Bryce Boettcher, who acknowledged having some mental mistakes in Round 1 but played a key role in Oregon's 23-0 shutout over No. 4 Texas Tech in the Orange Bowl.

On the other hand, the Ducks know how hard it will be to replicate that effort, especially with Indiana's secret weapon — Mendoza's ability to buy time and scramble for first downs — and against an offensive line that has proven to be one of the nation's best.

"They're smart, fast and physical," Boettcher said, describing the Hoosiers' linemen. "In the run game, they play physical and they do their job. They don't have a lot of unblocked hats. I know in the screen game, they get out and they're elite at kind of retracing and blocking for the receiver in the screen game, which was present in our last game."

Miami coach Cristobal dismisses increasing hype

Associated Press

CORAL GABLES, Fla. — Mario Cristobal doesn't want to hear any of the incessant "The U Is Back" stuff.

Yes, Miami is in the College Football Playoff semifinals after being given almost no chance of making the 12-team field after a pair of losses around the midseason point and hearing plenty of pundits saying the Hurricanes don't belong. Yes, they've tied a school record with 12 wins. Yes, they're two wins from what would be their first national championship since the 2001 season — and one victory away a title-game appearance that would just happen to come on their home field.

Save it, at least around Cristobal. None of those words matter to him right now. Saturday was just another day in Coral Gables, which is consistent with what he's been preaching since he returned to his alma mater four seasons ago. Miami (12-2, No. 10 CFP) takes on Mississippi (13-1, No. 6 CFP) in the Fiesta Bowl on Thursday night in Glendale, Ariz.

"There aren't really distractions. You cre-

ate your own distractions," Cristobal said Saturday. "And I think the mentality — the DNA of our guys as it gets stronger and better, as our older guys realize that it's their time, it's their legacy and that they have to take control of the locker room and how we think and how we go about things — I think all that has improved in a dramatic fashion."

"We hammer it every single day and so far, we feel like we're getting a pretty good result. But you get on it, and you stay on it. I think if you come off it for a second, you're going to leave a window open and you're going to let a rat in there."

Ah, the rat.

He means rat poison, a term his old boss — former Alabama coach Nick Saban — used at times in the final years of his coaching career. Rat poison, in Saban-speak, is what is detrimental to teams that start believing their hype and losing focus on the controllables like working as hard as possible every day.

And every coach left in the race for this CFP title knows exactly what Cristobal means — since they all worked for Saban.

Cristobal worked under Saban with the Crimson Tide from 2013 through 2016. Ole Miss coach Pete Golding was with Saban for five seasons, from 2018 through 2022. Oregon coach Dan Lanning was a graduate assistant on Saban's staff in 2015. And Indiana coach Curt Cignetti did his time under Saban from 2007 through 2011.

All four of those coaches left Alabama with at least one national title from their time with the Tide. They have a chance to win their own now.

"I think most people who went through and were fortunate enough to be around coach Saban understand, number one, (the) lifeblood of the program is recruiting," Golding said Saturday. "And then you've got to have sound schemes on both sides. You want to keep stability within those schemes for the development of players. And there's a toughness component, a competitive character component to hold these guys accountable and hold them to a high standard. And I think that's pretty consistent with whoever is playing right now."

Montana State clinches FCS title in OT

Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Montana State finally found a way to answer when it mattered most for the program's first national championship since 1984.

A year ago, the Bobcats missed winning their first title in 40 years when a slow start doomed them in a shootout loss to North Dakota State. Two years ago, their season ended in Bozeman in the quarterfinals on a blocked extra point in overtime against the Bison.

They started this season losing the first two — at Oregon and a double-overtime loss at home to South Dakota State.

So when Myles Stansted's extra point went through the uprights in overtime for a 35-34 victory over Illinois State on Monday night in the Football Championship Subdivision title game, Montana State chucked helmets in the air while sprinting around with a heavy contingent of Bobcats fans celebrating with them.

"To be able to clear that hur-

dle and know that yes this '25 group accomplished what hadn't been done in a long time," said coach Brent Vigen, who's already thinking ahead with a young, Montana-laden team featuring only nine seniors. "You know, we're building for more."

The Bobcats (14-2) capped a season that featured not one, but two wins over in-state rival Montana over a four-week span. Beating the Grizzlies in the semifinals put Montana State back into the title game for the second straight season, third in five years under Vigen and the fourth berth overall.

The Bobcats topped that accomplishment with their 14th straight win in a thrilling finish in the first overtime in the 48 years of this title game. They led 21-7 at halftime and 28-14 in the third. They needed Jhase McMillan's block of Michael Cosentino's 38-yard field goal attempt with 57 seconds left in regulation to keep it tied at 28.

In overtime, Justin Lamson tied it with a 14-yard touch-

down pass to Taco Dowler on fourth-and-10. Hunter Parsons blocked the extra point attempt after Tommy Rittenhouse threw a 10-yard TD pass to Dylan Lord to give Illinois State its only lead at 34-28 to open overtime.

Stansted's kick started the celebration of the end of a long title drought. Along with the 1984 I-AA championship, Montana State also won the 1976 NCAA Division II title and 1956 NAIA championship.

"What a hard-fought game, and these things aren't supposed to come easily, I guess," Vigen said.

Lamson, who didn't join the Bobcats until June, said the OT touchdown was a great play call.

"Taco was wide open," Lamson said. "I got hit so I was just trying to give him a chance and the rest is history, and Myles did his thing and that was the game."

Illinois State (12-5) already made history as the first FCS team to win four straight road

games to advance through the playoffs to this championship game. That included a win over this postseason's No. 1 seed and North Dakota State — winners of 10 of the last 14 FCS championships including last year.

This was the Redbirds' first time in this game since 2014, and they leave empty-handed.

"Just couldn't find one more play," Illinois State coach Brock Spack said. "We needed to make one more play to win. When you look at a game that's a one-point loss like that, there's probably 10, 15, maybe 20 plays in the game if you make just one of them, you win. Wasn't able to do that, and we came up short."

Lamson finished with 280 yards passing and two TDs. He also ran for two more scores. Dowler had eight catches for 111 yards.

Rittenhouse finished with 311 yards passing and four TDs. Victor Dawson ran for 126 yards, and Lord had 13 catches for 161 yards receiving and two TDs.

Becht follows Campbell to Penn St., Grunkemeyer exits

Associated Press

Rocco Becht has announced he will follow coach Matt Campbell from Iowa State to Penn State, giving the Nittany Lions a veteran quarterback to replace Ethan Grunkemeyer.

Becht stated his decision in a social media post late Sunday. Grunkemeyer posted at about the same time that he would enter the transfer portal, and multiple media outlets reported Monday that he will reunite with James Franklin at Virginia Tech.

Becht started 39 straight games for Campbell with the Cyclones, the longest active streak among Big 12 quarterbacks and fourth-longest in the nation among quarterbacks. He will continue to work with his Iowa

State offensive coordinator, Taylor Mouser, for his final season of eligibility.

Becht, who led the Cyclones to the Big 12 championship game in 2024, completed 60% of his passes this season for 215 yards per game with 16 touchdowns and nine interceptions. He has been one of the steadiest quarterbacks in the country the past three years, and he had a Bowl Subdivision-best streak of 22 games with at least one touchdown pass.

Grunkemeyer is first in line to take over as Virginia Tech quarterback for Kyrion Drones, who has exhausted his eligibility. Grunkemeyer, who was thrust into action after Drew Allar broke his ankle at midseason, led Penn State to four straight wins to end the season. He finished

with a program-record 69.1% completion rate and threw for more than 200 yards in three games. He has three seasons of eligibility.

North Texas quarterback Drew Mestemaker and running back Caleb Hawkins are also on the move and following their coach, with both committing to Oklahoma State with coach Eric Morris. The two freshmen helped lead the Mean Green to a school-record 12 wins, and they missed out on a College Football Playoff berth only after losing to Tulane in the American Conference championship game.

Mestemaker, the national passing leader after never starting a varsity game at quarterback in high school, changed the picture on his X profile to himself

in an Oklahoma State uniform. Hawkins, who ran for 1,434 yards and a national-best 25 touchdowns, posted a photo with him in a Cowboys uniform and wrote "100% committed."

Morris was introduced as Oklahoma State's coach last month after three seasons at North Texas.

Nebraska thought it had found its replacement for Dylan Raiola in Notre Dame's Kenny Minchey according to various reports. ESPN reported Monday night, however, that he changed his commitment to go to Kentucky instead.

Minchey was backup to C.J. Carr and played 87 snaps over six games for the Fighting Irish. Minchey has two seasons of eligibility.

Kerr tossed, Curry fouls out in loss to Clippers

Associated Press

INGLEWOOD, Calif. — Kawhi Leonard had 24 points and 12 rebounds, rookie Kobe Sanders added 20 points, and the Los Angeles Clippers edged the Golden State Warriors 103-102 on Monday night in a wild game that included Warriors coach Steve Kerr getting ejected and Steph Curry fouling out for the first time since 2021.

Kerr was ejected with 7:57 remaining in the game after becoming irate when the Clippers' John Collins wasn't called for goaltending. A shouting Kerr pursued the referees along the sideline and had to be restrained by his assistants before getting tossed.

Curry scored 27 points but was just 4-for-15 from 3-point range and 9-for-23 overall before fouling out with 42 seconds remaining in the game.

James Harden was a late scratch for the Clippers because of right shoulder soreness. But they got double-figure scoring from all five starters, including

Sanders, whose points were a career high. Collins added 18 points and Kris Dunn had 16. Ivica Zubac had 11 rebounds.

Jimmy Butler added 24 points for the Warriors but missed a 16-footer before time expired.

Rockets 100, Suns 97: Kevin Durant scored 26 points and his 3-pointer with 1.1 seconds to go lifted Houston to a home win over Phoenix.

The game was tied when Durant drained the 27-footer to give the Rockets the victory over his former team.

Booker scored 27 points and Brooks had 15 for the Suns, whose two-game winning streak ended.

Pistons 121, Knicks 90: Cade Cunningham had 29 points and 13 assists as host Detroit beat New York.

It was the first meeting between the teams since May 1, when the Knicks eliminated the Pistons 116-113 in Game 6 of their first-round playoff series.

Cunningham had 14 points and seven assists as the Pistons built a 64-54 halftime lead.

Celtics 115, Bulls 101: Anfernee Simons scored 27 points, Payton Pritchard had 21 and Boston held Chicago to 33 points in the opening half of a home victory.

Neemias Queta added 13 points and 13 rebounds for Boston, which won its fourth straight game and for the eighth time in nine games.

Raptors 118, Hawks 100: Rookie Collin Murray-Boyles scored 17 points as host Toronto beat Atlanta.

Murray-Boyles added seven rebounds and seven assists for Toronto (22-15) in place of injured starter Jakob Poeltl (back strain).

Hornets 124, Thunder 97: Brandon Miller scored 28 points, and visiting Charlotte stunned NBA-leading Oklahoma City.

Kon Knueppel added 23 points for the Hornets, who had lost three of four before handing Oklahoma City its worst loss of the season. It was the only time this season the Thunder failed to score 100 points.

Shai Gilgeous-Alexander had 21 points for his 108th straight game with at least 20, the second-longest streak in NBA history.

Nuggets 125, 76ers 124 (OT): Bruce Brown scored 19 points and got the winning bucket in overtime on a goaltending call on Joel Embiid, and Jalen Pickett had 29 points to lead short-handed Denver to a road win over Philadelphia.

Embiid was whistled for the decisive goaltend when he tried to block Brown's running layup with 5.3 seconds left.

Trail Blazers 137, Jazz 117: Deni Avdija had 33 points, nine assists and eight rebounds in three quarters, falling just short of his second consecutive triple-double, and host Portland routed Utah.

Shaedon Sharpe scored 29 for the Trail Blazers, who have won three straight games and five of six.

Lauri Markkanen scored 22 points for the Jazz, who have dropped four in a row and eight of 10.

Sourdif scores 1st hat trick in Caps victory over Ducks

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Justin Sourdif scored his first NHL hat trick and added two assists and the Washington Capitals beat the Anaheim Ducks 7-4 on Monday night.

Alex Ovechkin scored twice, Ryan Leonard had a goal and an assist, John Carlson also scored and Connor McMichael had four assists for the Capitals, who ended a two-game slide. Charlie Lindgren made 41 saves in the win.

Chris Kreider, Alex Killorn, Jacob Trouba and Beckett Sennecke scored for the Ducks, who have lost six straight.

Kreider opened the scoring just 6:33 into the first period, ending a 15-game goal drought.

Sourdif evened the score, firing home a drop pass from Con-

nor McMichael in the slot. Three minutes later, the rookie struck again, beating Petr Mrazek glove side to give Washington a 2-1 lead going into the second.

Sourdif picked up where he left off, finding Ryan Leonard, who banked in a shot off Mrazek to make it 3-1. Just 1:36 later, Leonard returned the favor, setting up Sourdif for a tap-in for his third goal of the game. Ovechkin then rifled home a wrister from the left circle to end a four-game goal drought.

Mammoth 3, Rangers 2 (OT): Sean Durzi scored 1:06 into overtime and visiting Utah beat New York for their second win in three games.

Dylan Guenther and Michael Carcone scored for Utah, and Karel Vejmelka had 22 saves.

Vincent Trocheck and Alexis

Lafrenière scored goals, and Artemi Panarin and Mika Zibanejad each had two assists for the Rangers, who lost for the fourth time in five games (1-2-2).

Red Wings 5, Senators 3: James van Riemsdyk had a goal and two assists to lead Detroit to a road win over Ottawa Senators to snap a two-game losing skid.

Coming off back-to-back losses to the Pittsburgh Penguins, the Red Wings were determined to take defeat their divisional rivals in the first of four meetings between the two clubs.

Kraken 5, Flames 1: Shane Wright scored the go-ahead goal early in the third period and Philipp Grubauer made 41 saves to lead visiting Seattle past Calgary.

The victory moved the Kraken into third place in the Pacific

Division, one point behind Vegas and Edmonton. Seattle is even in games with the Golden Knights and has two games in hand on the Oilers.

Adam Klapka scored for Calgary (18-20-4), and Dustin Wolf stopped 23 shots.

Kings 4, Wild 2: Andrei Kuzmenko had a goal and an assist, and host Los Angeles held on to beat Minnesota.

Warren Foegele, Kevin Fiala and Adrian Kempe also scored, and Darcy Kuemper stopped 33 shots for the Kings, who beat the Wild for the second time in three nights and got just their fourth win in 12 games (4-6-2).

Jared Spurgeon had a goal and an assist, and Ryan Hartman also scored for Minnesota, which snapped a six-game point streak (3-0-3)