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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Dems trying to put liberal spin on defense bill

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Democratic-controlled House is moving to put a liberalized stamp on Pentagon policy with a \$725 billion measure that pares back the Trump administration's defense request and its authority to make war against Iran.

Democratic leaders hoped to regain their balance as their caucus still smarts from a fight between moderates and progressives over last month's \$4.6 billion border bill. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., took heat over her handling of that measure, but the path for the defense measure has gone far more smoothly.

The Senate passed its version of the bill last month.

The House measure, which cuts President Donald Trump's \$750 billion request by \$17 billion, is still too rich for some progressives. But the measure is stuffed with Democratic priorities such as a ban on transferring any new detainees to the Guantanamo Bay prison and a denial of Trump's request for \$88 million to build a new prison at the base.

It would ban the deployment of a new submarine-launched low-yield nuclear missile and block the administration from shifting military money to a U.S.-Mexico border wall.

"It's a bill that I think Democrats should be happy with," said Armed Services Committee Chairman Adam Smith, D-Wash. "It's not everything they want, but we need to pass it to say, 'This is our position,' to move the ball in the direction we want."

Other provisions include a 3.1% pay raise for servicemembers and authorization to procure new weapons systems and expanded health and child benefits for military families.

Pentagon in longest stretch of vacancies in top positions

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — When he resigned as defense secretary last December, Jim Mattis thought it might take two months to install a successor. That seemed terribly long at the time.

Seven months later, the U.S. still has no confirmed defense chief even with the nation facing potential armed conflict with Iran. That's the longest such stretch in Pentagon history.

There is also no confirmed deputy defense secretary, and other significant senior civilian and military Pentagon positions are in limbo, more than at any recent time.

The causes are varied, but this leadership vacuum has nonetheless begun to make members of Congress and others uneasy, creating a sense that something is amiss in a critical arm of the government at a time of global uncertainty.

William Cohen, a former Republican senator who served as defense secretary during President Bill Clinton's second term, says U.S. allies — "and even our foes" — expect more stability than this within the U.S. defense establishment.

"It is needlessly disruptive to have a leadership vacuum for so long at the Department of Defense as the department prepares for its third acting secretary in less than a year," Cohen told The Associated Press. He said he worries about the cumulative effect of moving from one acting secretary to another while other key positions lack permanent officials.

"There will inevitably be increasing uncertainty regarding which officials have which au-

thority, which undermines the very principle of civilian control of the military," Cohen said. "In addition, other countries — both allies and adversaries — will have considerable doubt about the authority granted to an acting secretary of defense both because of the uncertainty of confirmation as well as the worry that even being a confirmed official does not seem to come with the needed sense of permanence or job security in this administration."

Key members of Congress are concerned, too.

"We need Senate-confirmed leadership at the Pentagon, and quickly," Sen. Jim Inhofe, an Oklahoma Republican who heads the Armed Services Committee, said Thursday. The panel's ranking Democrat, Sen. Jack Reed, of Rhode Island, said the vacancy problem has created "disarray" in the government's largest bureaucracy.

It started with Mattis, who quit in December after a series of policy disputes with President Donald Trump that culminated in his protest of administration plans to pull troops out of Syria as they battled remnants of Islamic State.

At least outwardly, the Pentagon has managed to stay on track during this churn, and senior officials caution against concluding that the military has been harmed.

Marine Gen. Joseph Dunford, whose chosen successor as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Army Gen. Mark Milley, had his Senate confirmation hearing Thursday, told reporters that military commanders understand what their civilian leaders expect of them.

"We'll look forward to a confirmed secretary of defense in

the near future, for sure, but I don't think (the vacancies) had a significant impact over the last six months," Dunford said Tuesday. "I don't believe that there's been any ambiguity across the force about what they need to be doing and why they need to be doing it."

At Milley's Senate hearing Thursday, he was asked repeatedly about the problem of multiple and lengthy vacancies in the higher ranks of the Pentagon. His responses suggested he sees at least the potential for it to cause damage.

"It would be much better to have the nominees fully vetted and confirmed because that gives us much more effectiveness in terms of dealing with our adversaries," members of Congress and the American public, he said.

Mark Esper, who has been the acting secretary of defense since Mattis' first fill-in, former Boeing executive Pat Shanahan, abruptly resigned in June, is scheduled to testify at his confirmation hearing next Tuesday. But even that comes with complications. He is required to step aside pending Senate confirmation, and Navy Secretary Richard Spencer will move into the role of acting defense secretary until Esper is approved. Spencer would then return to the Navy.

This tangled web is unlike anything the Pentagon has ever seen. Only twice previously has the Pentagon had an acting secretary; in the longest and most recent instance, the fill-in served for two months in 1989 during the George H.W. Bush administration. No administration has ever had two acting defense secretaries, let alone three.

SEAL looking for others who took photos with enemy corpses

The San Diego Union-Tribune

SAN DIEGO — The Navy SEAL who raised nearly \$750,000 from a community of supporters to successfully fight war crimes charges in a San Diego court-martial is again asking for the public's help for one more round with the Navy.

Chief Eddie Gallagher, through an attorney, is asking the public to help him persuade a Navy admiral to reduce his jury-imposed punishment for posing with the body of a dead Islamic State fighter in 2017.

Specifically, he's looking for other servicemembers who have received punishment for taking photos with dead enemy combatants — and received a lesser sentence.

On July 2, a jury acquitted Gallagher of several war crimes allegedly committed during a deployment to Iraq in 2017. Seven members of Gallagher's platoon testified during the two-week trial that they witnessed one or more of their chief's alleged offenses, including that he stabbed a wounded teenage ISIS fighter in the neck and shot civilians with his sniper rifle.

After the alleged stabbing, several members of the platoon posed for photos with the dead fighter's body, including Gallagher, according to court testimony.

Although the jury acquitted Gallagher on all of the other charges, it found him guilty of posing for the photos. As punishment, the jury imposed a sentence of a reduction in rank one grade to E-6, docked his pay for two months and sentenced him to four months in jail — time Gallagher already served while on pretrial confinement.

The reduction in rank will reduce Gallagher's Navy pension.

On Tuesday, Gallagher's lead defense attorney, Timothy Parlatore, took to the "Free Eddie Gallagher — Navy SEAL Chief" Facebook page and its more than 40,000 followers. He asked any servicemember who had taken photos with dead combatants and received a lesser punishment to come forward.

The search, Parlatore said, is part of his ongoing fight to ensure Gallagher is not reduced in rank. He wants Gallagher's sentence converted from a court-martial conviction to a nonjudicial punishment, something that would not go on Gallagher's record.

Democrats seek to speak with Gen. Hyten's accuser

The Washington Post

Democrats on the Senate Armed Services Committee said Thursday that they want to hear from the Army colonel who has accused President Donald Trump's pick to become the military's No. 2 officer of sexual misconduct before they let his nomination proceed, putting them firmly at odds with the panel's Republican chairman.

The allegations against Air Force Gen. John E. Hyten prompted a probe by the Air Force criminal investigative service. Based on the results, no disciplinary actions against him were taken. Air Force officials briefed senators on the findings Wednesday.

Hyten, who was nominated in April to become the next vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has denied the allegations.

Sen. Tammy Duckworth, D-Ill., said the committee members "deserve to hear from his accuser ... because right now, they're hearing from DOD and his side."

But the panel's chairman, Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla., disagreed. When asked Thursday if he wanted to hear directly from the Army colonel, Inhofe said: "No, I don't think that's necessary. I think the examination's been very thorough."

Several members have publicly and privately raised questions about the way the investigation was conducted. In particular, they are concerned that Hyten may have received "preferential treatment," as Duckworth put it, while he was being investigated. Unlike others facing similar allegations, he wasn't removed from duty during the probe, several senators and aides said.

Inhofe dismissed those concerns when asked about them Thursday and suggested that the members harboring them were engaging in a partisan scheme.

"Let's keep in mind, a lot of people, for fairly partisan reasons, want to inflict damage on Donald Trump as well as anybody else on the Republican side," Inhofe said. "That's probably a lot of it."

But according to several lawmakers and aides, some Republicans on the panel are also concerned about the allegations.

The situation is a reminder to many on Capitol Hill of last year's confirmation process for Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, who was accused of committing sexual assault as a teenager. His accuser, Christine Blasey Ford, initially made the complaint to members of Congress anonymously, but after her identity was re-

vealed, the accusations became the focus of a public hearing featuring both Ford and Kavanaugh.

Unlike the Kavanaugh hearings, however, this matter isn't as politically charged. As an active-duty U.S. military officer, Hyten is obliged to remain apolitical. Before the accusations surfaced, his nomination carried broad support within the Pentagon's top ranks and among lawmakers on Capitol Hill. Even the prospect of a controversial confirmation might dampen the enthusiasm of lawmakers on the committee, even if they don't know what to make of the substance of the claim.

Though Armed Services Committee Democrats have not coalesced around a single strategy, many of them are advocating that Hyten's accuser receive a possibly public audience on Capitol Hill.

"They need to hear from her and General Hyten," said Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., who added that "there are a variety of ways to do it, either publicly or privately, in part depending on how she wants to give us that version of the facts."

Blumenthal said it may be necessary to delay the confirmation to ensure that the Army colonel can "be treated seriously and with respect."

The confirmation process is already on a tight timeline. Air Force Gen. Paul J. Selva, whom Hyten is due to replace, is scheduled to retire on July 31.

The Army colonel, who was relieved of her duties by Hyten after the alleged assaults for purportedly creating a toxic work environment, said she didn't tell anyone about the incidents at the time and came forward only after seeing Hyten was nominated, out of concern another person could be sexually assaulted. She has already reached out to several members of the Armed Services Committee, many of whom found her account believable, according to lawmakers and aides.

"I think she's very believable and I think she deserves to be heard," Duckworth said. "But it's up to her if she wants to do it and whether she wants to do it in a closed meeting, open meeting or if she wants to do it at all."

The colonel has said she is willing to testify to the panel about her alleged assault under oath, though preferably behind closed doors. She spoke to *The Washington Post* on the condition that her name not be used but agreed to be described by her service and rank.

Despite warning, Turkey receives Russian missile defense system

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany—The first shipment of a sophisticated Russian missile defense system arrived in Turkey on Friday, as the prospect of U.S. sanctions looms over the NATO ally.

The first batch of the S-400 system landed at Murted Air Base in Ankara, Turkey's defense ministry announced on Twitter.

The arrival of the equipment brings to fruition a deal between Moscow and Ankara that has been in the works for two years, despite repeated protests from Washington.

The Trump administration has warned Turkey it faces potential penalties under the U.S.

Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act. The U.S. also has said it will bar Turkey from receiving F-35 fighters it has ordered, over concerns the jets' technology could be compromised by the Russian system.

NATO also has raised concerns about Turkey's deployment of the S-400, which would not be compatible with other alliance systems.

For its part, Turkey says it acquired the system to meet its defense needs, but hasn't described any particular threat it aims to counter.

The S-400 is a long-range system designed to counter missiles and fighter planes. Turkey's last encounter with such a threat came in 2015

when a Turkish F-16 shot down a Russian fighter that crossed into Turkish airspace.

Tensions soared between Moscow and Ankara at the time, but only briefly. By 2017, the two countries were deep into negotiations over the \$2.5 billion missile defense deal.

What comes next isn't clear. At a meeting of the G-20 in Japan last month, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said President Donald Trump assured him no sanctions would be levied, although administration officials have said otherwise.

The Trump administration urged Turkey to opt for the Patriot system instead, but Erdogan gave no indication he intended to give up the S-400s.

DOD budget could ban Confederate naming

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

The Defense Department might be prohibited from naming assets after Confederate symbols should an amendment added to the House defense budget make its way into the final version of the law.

The amendment, added Thursday to the National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2020, was submitted by Rep. Gregory W. Meeks, D-N.Y. The annual legislation is expected to clear the House during a vote Friday.

The Army and Navy are now the only branches of the military with any assets named after symbols of the Confederacy, according to a September 2017 Congressional Research Service report on Confederate symbols on federal land.

There are 10 Army bases, all named in honor of Confederate army officers during the ramp up to train soldiers for World War I and World War II. They are all located in southern states, and include Fort Benning, Ga., Fort Gordon, Ga., Fort Polk, La., Fort Bragg, N.C., and Fort Hood, Texas.

The Navy operates one ship, a guided-missile cruiser named the USS Chancellorsville, commissioned in 1989 in honor of a Civil War battle.

"These odes to the Confederacy are symbols for a time of racial subjugation and state-sanctioned segregation, used to legitimize racism and the institutional segregation of African-Americans," Meeks said in a statement following the amendment's passage.

While the amendment doesn't require existing bases be renamed, it would prohibit the defense secretary from naming future assets after someone who served or held a leadership position in the Confederacy or after a city or battlefield made significant because of a Confederate victory.

Khalilzad: US not 'cutting and running'

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Amid talk of a U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, the U.S. envoy talking to the Taliban said Thursday that America is not "cutting and running" from its longest war and that women will continue to have seats in peace talks to end nearly 18 years of fighting.

Zalmay Khalilzad addressed an audience in Washington on a video link from Qatar, where a two-day all-Afghan conference concluded Tuesday with a statement that offered a road map for the country's future. The Washington event was heavily focused on raising the voices of women who fear any peace accord with the Taliban will roll back gains they've made and return them to the days of repressive Taliban rule.

"We would like to leave a very positive legacy here," said the U.S. envoy, who was born in Afghanistan. "We are not cutting and running. We're

not looking for a withdrawal agreement. We're looking for a peace agreement. And we're looking for a long-term relationship and partnership with Afghanistan."

The Taliban refuse to meet with the current Afghan government, but there are ongoing discussions about peace.

Khalilzad has held eight rounds of U.S. talks with the Taliban, and there have been all-Afghan meetings, including the last one in Doha, the capital of Qatar, where Afghans from all walks of life met to discuss grievances and find common ground about the future for their nation.

A statement released at the end of the conference said that a postwar Afghanistan would have an Islamic legal system, protect women's rights "within the Islamic framework of Islamic values" and ensure equality for all ethnic groups.

Alice Wells, acting assistant secretary of state for Central and South Asian Affairs, who

attended the event at Georgetown University, said no current or future Afghan government should count on international donor support if it "restricts, represses or relegates Afghan women to second-class status."

In his talks with the Taliban, Khalilzad said there has been progress on four fronts: getting assurances from the Taliban that Afghanistan will not become a staging ground again for militant groups like al-Qaida or Islamic State; the withdrawal of U.S. troops, which currently number 14,000; having an all-Afghan dialogue to reach agreement on a peaceful future; and a permanent ceasefire to end the fighting.

He wants the U.S. talks with the Taliban to reach fruition by Sept. 1, which would allow the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops. That would open the door to more difficult negotiations.

Acosta resigns amid scrutiny of Epstein deal

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Labor Secretary Alexander Acosta said Friday he is resigning following renewed scrutiny of his handling of a 2008 secret plea deal with wealthy financier Jeffrey Epstein, who is accused of sexually abusing dozens of underage girls.

President Donald Trump, with Acosta at his side, made the announcement as he left the White House for a trip to Wisconsin and Ohio. The president said Acosta had been a “great” labor secretary.

“I hate to see this happen,” Trump said. He said he did not ask Acosta to leave the

Cabinet.

Acosta said his resignation would be effective in seven days. Acosta said he didn’t think it was right for his handling of Epstein’s case to distract from his work as secretary of labor.

“My point here today is we have an amazing economy, and the focus needs to be on the economy and job creation,” Acosta said.

Acosta was the U.S. attorney in Miami when he oversaw a 2008 nonprosecution agreement with Epstein. Epstein avoided federal charges, pleaded guilty to state charges and served 13 months in jail. Similar charges recently filed against Epstein by federal prosecutors in New

York had put Acosta’s role in the 2008 deal under renewed scrutiny.

Top Democratic lawmakers and presidential candidates had demanded that Acosta resign over his handling of the agreement, which a federal judge has said violated federal law because Acosta did not notify Epstein’s victims of the arrangement. The Justice Department has been investigating. Trump had initially defended Acosta but said he’d look “very closely” at his handling of the 2008 agreement.

The deal came under scrutiny earlier this year following reporting by the Miami Herald.

Epstein, 66, reached the deal to secretly end a federal sex abuse investigation involving at least 40 teenage girls that could have landed him behind bars for life. He instead pleaded guilty to state charges, spent 13 months in jail, paid settlements to victims and is a registered sex offender.

Acosta had attempted to clear his name and held a news conference — encouraged by Trump — to defend his actions. In a 50-plus-minute lawyerly rebuttal, Acosta argued his office had secured the best deal it could at the time and was working in the victims’ best interests.

Bid ends for citizenship question on 2020 census

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Just a week after insisting that he was “absolutely moving forward,” President Donald Trump abandoned his effort to insert a citizenship question into next year’s census.

He directed federal agencies to try to compile the information using existing databases instead.

“It is essential that we have a clear breakdown of the number of citizens and noncitizens that

make up the U.S. populations,” Trump declared in a Rose Garden announcement, insisting that he was not backing down.

But the decision was clearly a reversal, after the Supreme Court blocked his effort by disputing his administration’s rationale for demanding that census respondents declare whether or not they are citizens. Trump had said last week that he was “very seriously” considering an executive order to try to force the question. But

the government has already begun the lengthy and expensive process of printing the census questionnaire without it, and such a move would surely have drawn an immediate legal challenge.

Instead, Trump said Thursday that he would be signing an executive order directing every federal department and agency to provide the Commerce Department with all records pertaining to the number of citizens and noncitizens in

the country.

Late Thursday, Justice Department lawyers sent a copy of the executive order to the judge presiding over a challenge to the citizenship question in Manhattan federal court, saying they will confer with lawyers for the plaintiffs to see how to proceed in the case.

Trump’s order said the Supreme Court “has now made it impossible, as a practical matter, to include a citizenship question on the 2020 decennial census questionnaire.”

Military bases brace for storm in New Orleans area

BY ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

With Tropical Storm Barry churning across the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico, the military in Louisiana is preparing for its potential landfall this weekend as a hurricane.

The storm developed into a tropical storm on Thursday and is expected to become a category 1 hurricane by Saturday morning before making landfall along the central coastline of Louisiana, accord-

ing to the National Weather Service.

The Louisiana National Guard, as directed by Gov. John Bel Edwards, has been authorized to activate up to 3,000 soldiers and airmen, according to a release from the state’s guard.

“The Louisiana National Guard is taking a proactive and aggressive approach in dealing with the preparations ahead of Tropical Storm Barry,” said Maj. Gen. Glenn H. Curtis, adjutant general of the Loui-

siana National Guard. “This will allow our guardsmen to be more successful in their priority missions immediately following the storm — search and rescue operations and commodities distribution.”

In addition to high-water vehicles and boats staged in more than 20 communities, the National Guard has helicopters ready to support search and rescue, evacuation and reconnaissance missions as needed.

Additional assets are being moved and staged in the New

Orleans area and large quantities of drinking water, blankets and sandbags have been moved, delivered or positioned for distribution following the storm.

Meanwhile, Naval Air Station Joint Base New Orleans has brought all of its aircraft inside and tied down one C-130 airplane, said Navy MC1 Micah Blechner, spokesman for the base. The base operated Friday with mission-essential personnel only.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Cactus pierces man's windshield; driver fine

AZ TUCSON — Arizona authorities said a driver escaped injury when his car's windshield was pierced by the trunk of a saguaro cactus during a wreck Wednesday on the outskirts of Tucson.

Pima County sheriff's Deputy Daniel Jelineo said the black sports car struck the cactus while crossing a median before ending up on the other side of a road and that the cactus ended up slamming into the car's windshield.

The broken-off cactus ended up partially inside the car, with the rest jutting over car's hood.

Jelineo said deputies detained the driver for further investigation after observing signs of impairment.

Man recovering from rabid bobcat attack

PA FRANKLIN — A Pennsylvania man is recovering after he was attacked by a rabid bobcat that was hiding under his home's front porch.

Alex Fink told KDKA-TV he was reaching into the crawl space outside his home last weekend when the animal attacked. He said the bobcat's face was covered in porcupine quills.

Fink's arms, head and upper torso were scratched and bitten by the animal. He said he was trying to kick it off him and punch it but all he could hear was "crunch, crunch, crunch" as the bobcat bit him. He said he thought the attack would never end, but he managed to escape and was taken to a hospital.

Pennsylvania Game Commission officers put the bobcat down, and tests showed it was rabid.

Game warden Jason Amory told WPXI-TV the bobcat also attacked a puppy.

Dog chases bear from neighbor's yard

NJ WEST MILFORD — A New Jersey man is promising to give his neighbor's dog a steak for chasing a black bear from his backyard.

Mark Stinziano told WABC-TV his home security camera captured what happened Tuesday night when the bruin decided to snack on the bird feeder behind his West Milford home.

The video shows the bear pulling down the bird feeder when the neighbor's dog, Riley, races into the yard. Riley slammed into the startled bear, which scrambled to escape.

Riley's owner, Alan Tlusty, said his dog always chases the bear whenever he sees him in the yard.

Pastor holds church intruder at gunpoint

FL TAMPA, FLA. — Authorities said a Tampa pastor held an intruder at his church at gunpoint until police arrived to arrest him.

Seminole Heights Baptist Church Pastor Brant Adams told Fox 13 that the suspect broke a glass to get inside the church early Thursday morning. The broken glass set off an alarm.

Adams said he and church deacon Jack Young were immediately notified. Adams lives nearby so he grabbed his gun and found the man inside the church. He said he yelled for the man to get down and he held him on the ground until police arrive.

No one was injured. Police haven't released the suspect's name.

Suspect drives into off-duty officer

MO INDEPENDENCE — Authorities said a suspected shoplifter drove into an off-duty police officer while fleeing from a Kansas City area Walmart store.

KMBC-TV reported that police in Independence said the officer was taken to a hospital for evaluation. Issues arose around 7:15 p.m. Tuesday as the person tried to leave the store. Police say that when the officer tried to stop the person, the suspect ran, jumped into a vehicle and hit the officer while driving away.

Investigators said they found the vehicle, and one person was taken into custody.

Man struck, killed while getting mail

ME WHITEFIELD — Police in Maine said a man was killed when he was hit by a vehicle while getting his mail.

The Kennebec Journal reported Christopher Simpson, 64, died at the scene in Whitefield on Tuesday evening. Police said he was struck by a vehicle driven by Eric Sroka, 38, of Nobleboro.

Lincoln County Sheriff's Office Lt. Brendan Kane said Sroka came around a bend and wasn't able to avoid Simpson. Authorities said neither speed nor alcohol was believed to be a factor.

Kane said an investigation into the crash is still going on.

Developer nixes condo plans to save surf spot

HI KAILUA-KONA — A Hawaii developer has agreed to cancel a planned condominium project to preserve a

surfing area, a report said.

Property owner Kilohana Makai LLC agreed to work toward construction of a public space rather than the proposed five-story residence near the Banyans, a popular surfing spot on the north side of Holua Bay, West Hawaii Today reported Wednesday.

Kilohana Makai representatives met in a second mediation session Monday with Simmy McMichael and Keawe K.K.K. Alapai, who are involved in a case challenging the condominium plans.

Kilohana Makai will work over the next year to 15 months to convert the 14,450-square-foot lot on the Big Island into a community space, said company spokesman Bill McCowatt.

Injured cat rescued from under police SUV

NJ NORTH HALEDON — A stray injured kitten that lodged itself in the undercarriage of a police SUV has been rescued and should make a full recovery.

North Haledon police said an officer was flagged down Tuesday by a man who had found the kitten in the road. When the man put the cat down to see if it was injured, the frightened animal darted underneath the SUV and got stuck.

The officer was near the town's Public Works Department, so he slowly drove there to get help. The SUV was placed on a lift at the DPW garage, and staffers soon spotted the kitten's black-and-white paw protruding from the undercarriage.

The cat — named Cuffs by police — was safely removed, and a veterinarian determined it had a broken pelvis that it likely suffered before it got lodged in the SUV.

From wire reports

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Serena's long memory serves her well

Associated Press

WIMBLEDON, England — There are, of course, many reasons why Serena Williams has been as successful as she's been, for as long as she's been.

The serve. The returns. The groundstrokes. The court coverage. And more.

A little insight into one aspect of the way she approaches matches arrived via her answer to a question looking ahead to Saturday's Wimbledon final against No. 7-seeded Simona Halep.

Williams, who can collect her eighth title at the All England Club and 24th Grand Slam singles trophy overall, was asked why she's been able to accumulate a 9-1 head-to-head mark against the Romanian.

"The biggest key with our matches is the loss that I had. I never forgot it. She played unbelievable," Williams said. "That makes me know that level she played at — she can get there again. So I have to be better than that."

Doesn't matter, apparently, that the result came all the way back in 2014, in a relatively inconsequential round-robin

meeting at the season-ending championships. Or that Williams soundly beat Halep later at that same tournament. Or that Williams won their only matchup this season, at the Australian Open in January.

Williams enters her 11th final at the All England Club well aware that she has lost her past two championship matches at Grand Slam tournaments — against Angelique Kerber at Wimbledon and against Naomi Osaka at the U.S. Open, both in 2018.

The latter descended into chaos after Williams was penalized a game for a heated argument with the chair umpire. She said in a first-person essay she wrote for Harper's Bazaar that she met with a therapist and wrote to Osaka to apologize for the whole episode. As for the loss to Kerber at the All England Club?

"I don't remember much. I just remember I was tired and Angie played unbelievable. I actually was sad, but I was also proud of myself. There was nothing I could do in that match. I did everything I could. Physically I just wasn't there," Williams said

Thursday after easily winning her semifinal 6-1, 6-2 against Barbara Strycova.

"I remember after that, I just trained and I trained and I trained to get physically more fit. So I'm definitely at a different place," Williams said. "Yeah, I didn't have the preparation coming into Wimbledon of training for two weeks, even. So that would have been nice."

She's been dealing with those sorts of issues since returning to the tour last year after taking time off while having a baby.

Now her daughter, Olympia, is nearly 2; Williams held her in an arm while cooling down on a stationary bike at the All England Club this week.

Following a third-round loss at the French Open on June 1, Williams underwent treatment in Paris before resuming preparations about 1½ weeks before Wimbledon began.

"I'm in a different place, because I wasn't really playing a month ago, like, at all," said Williams, who said her partnership with Andy Murray in mixed doubles at Wimbledon helped her volleying in singles. "So it's all kind of coming together."

Djokovic reaches his sixth Wimbledon final

Associated Press

WIMBLEDON, England — Novak Djokovic watched his Wimbledon semifinal opponent's shot hit the net tape, pop in the air and slide over for a winner that tied things at a set apiece.

Centre Court spectators stood and cheered, perhaps thinking Roberto Bautista Agut was ready to keep this one tight, after all. Walking to his change-over chair, Djokovic nodded and waved at the crowd, sarcastically encouraging folks to get louder, as if to say, "Yeah, good for him and good for you. Enjoy it while you can."

Soon enough, the defending champion was bellowing and shaking his fist after putting away an overhead to go up a break in the third set. Moments later, he was ending a 45-stroke baseline exchange — the longest on record at Wimbledon, where such stats date to 2006 — with a backhand winner to save a break point. Djokovic eventually overcame Bautista

Agut 6-2, 4-6, 6-3, 6-2 Friday to reach his sixth final at the All England Club.

"I had to dig deep," Djokovic said.

In Sunday's final, he will seek a fifth Wimbledon title and 16th Grand Slam trophy overall when he faces either Roger Federer or Rafael Nadal.

The two great rivals faced each other later Friday in their first meeting at Wimbledon since the epic 2008 final won by Nadal, 9-7 in the fifth set as darkness descended.

"Of course I will watch it," Djokovic said of the day's second semifinal. "My coaches will probably see the whole match. I'll definitely see parts of it. I'm a fan of that matchup, as well. Federer-Nadal is one of the most epic rivalries of all time. So it's fantastic to see them play today."

The opening semifinal was played under a cloudy sky and with a breeze that topped 10 mph, occasionally bothering the No. 1-seeded Djokovic.

It was his 36th career appearance in the final four at a major tournament — and the debut in that round for Bautista Agut, who was seeded 23rd.

The Spaniard was supposed to meet a half-dozen of his buddies on the island of Ibiza this weekend for his bachelor party. Instead, those pals were sitting in a guest box at Centre Court on Friday.

"He was not really overwhelmed, so to say, with the stadium and with the occasion. He played really well," Djokovic said. "First set, he was still probably managing his nerves and he made some uncharacteristic unforced errors. But later on, at the beginning of the second, he established himself."

After a flat forehand return winner off a 107 mph serve on the very first point, Bautista Agut certainly did lose his way for a bit. Djokovic won 14 of the next 18 points while pulling out to a 3-0 lead — and he didn't need to produce much magic to do so. Just one of those initial 14

points came via his own winner; 10 resulted from Bautista Agut's unforced errors.

But the second set saw a shift. Djokovic stopped his until-then successful tactic of offering some variety and heading to the net when he could. His forehand also became problematic, while Bautista Agut couldn't seem to miss a shot.

Bautista Agut already beat Djokovic twice earlier this season. Could he do it again?

No, largely because Djokovic rediscovered his best abilities. He came up bigger in the longest points, eventually holding a 29-17 edge when they lasted at least 10 strokes.

Once his volley winner found the net tape and trickled over to cap the third set — turnabout was fair play, in this instance, after the way the previous set ended — the outcome seemed inevitable. Djokovic broke to lead 2-1 in the fourth, and again for 4-1, then needed a handful of match points to seal the victory.

Thunder, Rockets trade All-Star PGs

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — Russell Westbrook and James Harden are together again, and Chris Paul is leaving Houston to make that reunion happen.

A person with knowledge of the situation said the Oklahoma City Thunder traded Westbrook to the Houston Rockets for Paul in a swapping of top point guards. The Thunder also are getting first-round picks in 2024 and 2026, plus the right to swap first-rounders in two other seasons, according to the person, who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity Thursday.

Paul is a nine-time All-Star, Westbrook an eight-time selection. Paul has 9,181 career assists, the most among active players. Westbrook has 138 triple-doubles, tied with Magic Johnson for second-most in NBA history behind only Oscar Robertson's 181. Both members of Houston's new glitzy backcourt are recent MVPs: Westbrook won it in 2017, Harden won it in 2018. And the trade means that the NBA's two highest scorers over the last five seasons — Harden with 11,958 points, Westbrook with 10,025 — are now teammates.

Westbrook and Harden were Thunder teammates for three seasons, the last of those being the 2011-12 campaign when that duo and Kevin Durant took Oklahoma City to the NBA Finals. They lost in five games to LeBron James, Dwyane Wade and the Miami Heat, and Harden departed that summer for Houston — where he's been an All-Star ever since.

But when the Thunder agreed last week to trade Paul George to the Los Angeles Clippers — in a move that essentially sealed 2019 NBA Finals MVP Kawhi Leonard's decision to leave Toronto for the Clippers — it became clear quickly that Westbrook would be on the move as well. And this trade, when completed, will mean that Thunder general manager Sam Presti has added eight first-round picks to the team's stockpile in the last week or so.

Oklahoma City got five first-round future picks in the George trade. The Thunder are getting two more in this trade, and got a 2020 first-rounder in the deal that sent Jerami Grant to Denver.

It's the latest bold transaction in a wild offseason of movement.

Paul and Harden were teammates for two seasons in Houston. The Rockets had

a 3-2 lead over Golden State in the 2018 Western Conference finals when Paul injured a hamstring, and the Warriors rallied to win that series in seven games on the way to the NBA title. This past season, Houston was ousted in the second round by the Warriors.

The 34-year-old Paul is owed roughly \$125 million over the final three years of his contract, including a \$44.2 million option for 2021-22. Westbrook, who turns 31 early next season, is owed \$171 million over the final four years of his existing deal.

Paul has called Oklahoma City home before. He played his first two NBA seasons with the New Orleans-Oklahoma City Hornets while the team was displaced from Louisiana by the damage caused by Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

"Every game we played, I've never seen fan support like that," Paul told The Oklahoman for a story in February 2014 about his time in Oklahoma City.

The trade will become final after NBA approval, which is standard procedure.

Rangers' Lynn gets MLB-best 12th victory

Associated Press

ARLINGTON, Texas — Lance Lynn had more strikes thrown than words used post-game to describe his major league-best 12th victory, one that got the Texas Rangers off to the kind of start their manager had hoped for coming out of the All-Star break.

The short answers have become as common for the big right-hander as his impressive outings on the mound.

Lynn matched his season high with 11 strikeouts in seven strong innings and the Rangers beat the AL West-leading Houston Astros 5-0 in the only game Thursday night when Major League Baseball resumed its schedule.

"It was a good game. We scored runs, played good defense. They didn't score any runs, we won," Lynn said in one of his longer responses to five questions in his postgame

talk with reporters that lasted about 75 seconds.

Lynn (12-4) won his fifth consecutive start, and is 8-1 over his last 11 starts. He scattered six hits (five singles and a double) and walked two while throwing 75 of 110 pitches for strikes.

"He's going to fill the zone up, keep everybody on their toes and try to get them to put the ball in play by throwing strikes," catcher Jeff Mathis said. "That's what we've come to expect of him and he's been doing it lately."

Houston (57-34) still has a seven-game division lead over Oakland, with the Rangers (49-42) eight games back in third place.

Astros lefty Framber Valdez (3-5) didn't make it out of the first inning, when Texas jumped ahead with four runs.

"We've seen this out of him," manager AJ Hinch said. "The good version is really good.

And the version that struggles, it's tough for him to manage innings and get out of innings."

Lynn, who signed a \$30 million, three-year free agent deal over the winter after pitching for Minnesota and the New York Yankees last year, is 8-0 in 10 home starts for the Rangers.

"He seems to be throwing harder this year," Astros right fielder Josh Reddick said. "He's already got such a heavy fastball that gets on you pretty quick. And once you add a little more velo to that, it's going to be a little bit harder task."

Lynn has thrown at least 100 pitches in 10 consecutive starts, the second-longest streak in the majors this season — Washington's Max Scherzer had 12 games in a row with at least 100 pitches until last month.

"That's something that he prides himself (on)," manager Chris Woodward said. "I don't consider him like most pitch-

ers. He's got a lot of old school ... if he were pitching back in the [19]70s or '80s, he'd probably go 170 pitches. That's just his mentality."

Jose Leclerc and Chris Martin each pitched an inning to wrap up the fourth shutout for the Rangers this season. It was the sixth time Houston was held scoreless.

TKO to chin: Astros short-stop Alex Bregman left with a lacerated chin after a groundball took a nasty hop and hit the All-Star just below the mouth in the third inning. Bregman was shifted toward the middle of the infield when he went to field a grounder hit by Shin-Soo Choo.

"It sounds like he got four stitches in his chin. He was bleeding when I got out there," Hinch said. "I'm sure it hurt."

Indians' pitcher Carrasco not letting cancer slow him down

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Carlos Carrasco's smile remains bright, his mood and outlook as positive as ever.

Outwardly, the Indians' right-hander doesn't seem different. He's determined not to let cancer change him.

"I never put anything bad on my mind," Carrasco said. "Everything's good. So I don't feel different. I just push myself to work more and get stronger."

Diagnosed with chronic myeloid leukemia last month, the 32-year-old Carrasco spoke to media members Thursday for the first time since his life took a dramatic, unexpected turn. As he dealt with so many unknowns, Carrasco said he's never once asked "why me" after learning of his condition.

"I'm not that kind of person," he said. "If it's happened, it's for a reason."

Carrasco said he first knew something was wrong after he took his annual physical at the start of spring training in Arizona. But after more blood work was done, doctors at The Cleveland Clinic told him he had a treatable form of leukemia but that he could continue pitching as long as he felt up to it.

He's barely slowed down.

Carrasco has been throwing bullpen sessions, doing some recent workouts at Lake County (A) while Cleveland hosted the All-Star Game.

While he everything feels normal when he's on the mound, Carrasco doesn't know if he'll be able to pitch for the Indians again this season.

"Man, I don't know," he said. "I'm just here. I'm just going to take it day by day. I don't know. I don't have the answer, but I'm glad to be here around my teammates."

Carrasco said he's been overwhelmed by the support he's received from teammates, coaches and Cleveland's fans.

During his interview session, manager Terry Francona stood just a few away from the popular starter, another sign of the club's devotion.

On Tuesday night, Carrasco felt all of baseball's love.

During the fifth inning of the All-Star Game, Carrasco walked on the field for Major League Baseball's "Stand Up To Cancer" salute along with Francona and All-Star teammates Francisco Lindor, Carlos Santana, Shane Bieber and Brad Hand.

As the group stood in the third-base coach's box, Carrasco held a sign that read: "I Stand" while the other Indians

held placards that said: "Cookie," Carrasco's nickname.

When the group was shown on the ballpark's giant scoreboard, the crowd erupted with loud cheers.

Francona described the powerful moment as perfect.

"Holy smokes," he said. "You talk about putting an exclamation point on it. It was incredible."

Indians pitcher Mike Clevinger, who was sitting in one of the dugout suites, said seeing Carrasco embraced like that was special.

"As hard as it was to watch, it was really moving," Clevinger said. "It was good to see him feel that. I know he knew how much support was out there, but to really feel that not just from the league, but feel it from across America, behind the scenes even when you looked at Twitter afterward."

"That was big for him and definitely big for us."

When he arrives each day at Progressive Field, Carrasco said he's quickly greeted with hugs from teammates.

Shortly after the Indians learned about his condition, a meeting was held without him at which Lindor, Santana and others pledged to win for their ailing teammate.

"Everyone from the team, if I could show you, I had like 300, maybe 500 texts from them every day, asking how did I feel," Carrasco said. "They are special to me. They feel like home. They feel like family. They always send me a text, even the guys that played here before, they send me a text every day. It feels great."

Carrasco chose not to disclose the type of medical treatment he's receiving.

In the meantime, the Indians are working off Carrasco and being mindful not to rush him.

"There isn't a plan and I don't mean that like we don't care," Francona said. "But the idea is for him to do as much as he can — or as much as he can tolerate — because it will be good for him. Other than that, we're not pushing him. We're just trying to be supportive."

And as his teammates have backed him, Carrasco has returned the love.

For Monday's All-Star Home Run Derby, Carrasco wore a customized jersey with the names Santana, Lindor, Bieber and Hand on the back.

"The way they've been supporting me, I just came to the game to support them, too," he said. "Why not?"

Briefly

Groenewegen sprints to Tour stage victory

Associated Press

CHALON-SUR-SAONE, France — Dylan Groenewegen won the longest stage of the Tour de France in a sprint as Giulio Ciccone kept the yellow jersey on Friday.

The Dutch sprinter edged Australian rival Caleb Ewan and former world champion Peter Sagan of Slovakia to claim his fourth career stage win of the Tour.

Squeezed between the crossing of the Vosges and Massif Central mountains, the 230-kilometer trek (142.9 miles) took the peloton from Belfort to Chalon-sur-Saone in central-east France.

A Tour rookie, Ciccone seized the yellow jersey on Thursday following a long breakaway during the race's first mountain stage.

WR Hill hit with paternity suit

OLATHE, Kan. — Kansas City Chiefs wide receiver Tyreek Hill's former fiancée has gone to court seeking to prove that he is the father of her newborn twins and to require him to pay child support.

The Kansas City Star reported that Crystal Espinal filed a petition Thursday in Johnson County, Kansas, District Court. Her petition also seeks to establish supervised parenting time for Hill.

The Chiefs suspended Hill on April 25 over allegations that his 3-year-old son was abused, which Hill denies. The local district attorney said in June that an investigation was no longer active because he couldn't prove who injured the boy.

Online court records did not indicate that Hill had an attorney in the paternity case. The Chiefs did not immediately return a telephone message early Friday seeking comment.

■ In other NFL news:

Walt Michaels, the former New York Jets coach who retired following the 1982 season after leading the team to the AFC title game, has died. He was 89.

The Jets said Thursday that Michaels died Wednesday. The team did not immediately provide a cause or location.

The former Cleveland Browns linebacker was the defensive coordinator of the Jets' Super Bowl-winning team in the 1968 season. He was head coach from 1977-82, going 39-47-1 and making the playoffs in the 1981-82 seasons. The Jets reached the AFC title game after the 1982 season before losing to the Miami Dolphins in a rain-soaked Orange Bowl.