

Top admiral defends planned ship cuts

By CAITLIN DOORNBOS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Adm. Mike Gilday on Tuesday said there is no plan in the works to reach a 355-ship Navy, but the fleet of the future will be more capable — and lethal — as a result of the service's investment strategy.

Speaking at a virtual Sea-Air-Space event, Gilday defended the service's proposed ship cuts in 2022 while arguing the service should focus on quality — not quantity.

"We do have an investment strategy that incrementally gets us to a more capable or a more lethal fleet, but not necessarily a bigger fleet, unless we saw a rise in the top line [of the 2022 budget]," said Gilday, the chief of naval operations.

In the 2018 National Defense Authorization Act, which sets defense priorities and funding for the Pentagon each year, Con-

gress called for the Navy to reach a 355-ship fleet as soon as possible. But the service has taken few steps to begin that process.

"I still think that 355 is a good target, but the reality is that we can't really afford to have a Navy bigger than one that we can sustain," Gilday said. "Based on our current budget, I believe the analysis shows that we can afford a fleet of about 300 ships."

The Navy's proposed 2022 budget would cut 12 ships — four littoral combat ships, seven guided-missile cruisers and an amphibious transport dock ship — next year and build just eight. The Navy now has about 296 ships.

Gilday said the "most controversial" decision was cutting the cruisers, though doing so would save about \$5 billion in the next 5 years. He also said cutting the aging cruisers is important to the service's reliability, as new

issues such as the ships' analog radar systems are "approaching obsolescence" as missiles soar at speeds that evade detection.

Another issue is the unpredictability of the aging parts aboard the 3-decade-old cruisers, the admiral said, referencing a recent incident when the Navy attempted to deploy a ship "and had to bring it back twice because of because of fuel-tank cracks."

"It does have an impact on reliability, and we need to be able to provide the secretary of defense and the president reliable assets out there that they can count on to do the nation's business," Gilday said.

But he said he has hope for the Navy's near future. Within the next five years, the service should have more Virginia-class submarines and be "on the cusp of delivering" the first Constellation-class frigate and new Flight III guided-missile de-

stroyers.

The Navy is also focusing on weapons development, Gilday said, working on hypersonic missiles that fly five times the speed of sound and "investing in a longer-range weapon, the maritime strike Tomahawk, which gives us range and speed to reach out and touch an adversary."

"By 2025, we believe if we stay on path that we'll be delivering the Zumwalt class destroyers with a hypersonic missile capability," Gilday said. "In the air, half of our air wings will have a fourth- and fifth-generation [fighter jet] mix, which analysis has shown to be quite effective against our adversaries."

But while the Navy works to make the most of its nearly \$163.9 billion budget, Gilday warned if the service is not allotted more money in the future, it could have consequences for national security.

Pentagon reviews response to compromise of nuclear codes

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon is taking a rare look at whether it is prepared to deal with the theft or compromise of the portable communications system nicknamed the "nuclear football," which enables the president or a stand-in to order a nuclear attack.

In announcing the probe Tuesday, the Pentagon inspector general's office did not disclose what precipitated it, but questions about security procedures arose in the aftermath of the Jan. 6 insurrection at the Capitol.

Vice President Mike Pence was seen on security camera video being escorted to safety, along with a military aide carry-

ing the backup "nuclear football," as rioters entered the Capitol. A backup system always accompanies the vice president, in the event the president cannot communicate with the Pentagon. The "football," officially called the Presidential Emergency Satchel, enables communication with the office inside the Pentagon that transmits nuclear attack orders.

The inspector general's office said its review began this month. It gave no timeline for completing it.

"The objective of this evaluation is to determine the extent that DoD processes and procedures are in place and adequate to alert DoD officials in the event that the Presidential Emergen-

cy Satchel is lost, stolen, or compromised," Randolph R. Stone, an assistant inspector general, wrote in a July 19 letter to the director of the White House military office and the director of the Joint Staff at the Pentagon. "This evaluation will also determine the adequacy of the procedures the DoD has developed to respond to such an event."

Two Democrats who had asked the Pentagon inspector general to review the matter, Reps. Stephen Lynch, of Massachusetts, and Jim Cooper, of Tennessee, said in a joint statement that the Jan. 6 riot raised questions about whether the Pentagon was even aware that Pence's "nuclear football" was potentially in danger of falling

into the hand of insurrectionists.

"U.S. Strategic Command, which is responsible for U.S. strategic deterrence and nuclear operations, was reportedly unaware that Vice President Pence, his military aide, and the nuclear football were all potentially in danger and only came to understand the gravity of the incident several weeks later when security camera footage was played as a video exhibit during the Senate impeachment trial," they wrote to the Pentagon inspector general's office in March.

The football, born out of Cold War fears of a nuclear attack, has traveled with every president since Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Russian actions in Black Sea draw rebuke

By ALISON BATH

Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — Russian military actions in the Black Sea during a multinational exercise reflect an increasingly aggressive effort to control the region, said a top U.S. admiral and analysts calling for an assertive response from the U.S. and NATO allies.

The Kremlin has long objected to the annual Sea Breeze drills, which this year included 32 nations maneuvering in what the Russians, as one of six nations bordering the Black Sea, consider their backyard.

The difference during this year's two-week exercise, which ended earlier this month, was the intensity of Russia's moves, the targeting of non-U.S. NATO allies and the outspokenness of high-ranking officials, analysts said.

The Russians fired warning shots at a British destroyer before Sea Breeze began and closely tailed a U.S. Navy aircraft during the exercise. The Russian military also effectively closed off the western half of the sea for its own use.

U.S. Navy Adm. Robert P. Burke called Russia's actions an effort to bully neighbors into accepting the narrative that no other nations have the right to be in the Black Sea.

"When a strike aircraft overflies a destroyer at 100 feet altitude and right over top, our (commanding officers) are making a judgment call of whether that strike fighter is on an attack profile or not," Burke, commander of U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa and Allied Joint Force Command Naples, said Tuesday at a U.S. Navy Memorial live-streamed event.

"... There is a tactical risk involved here, that tactical risk could turn into a strategic issue and that's a big concern with this increasing aggression."

Burke said Russian efforts to control the Black Sea must be met with a U.S. and NATO

strategic presence.

"We need to challenge that (Russian government) narrative and not let that become the norm," Burke said.

Moscow's protests of the Sea Breeze drills have intensified in recent years, in line with its claim to Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula, which it annexed in 2014. Most of the world does not accept that claim.

The Russian Defense Ministry is increasingly using social media to amplify its message. It posted on its Facebook page earlier this month a video of its fighters "escorting" a U.S. Navy Boeing P-8 Poseidon over the Black Sea.

The fighters did not allow the U.S. plane "to violate the state border of the Russian Federation," the post said, describing the July 6 encounter.

The U.S. maintains the right to fly over the sea in accordance with international law.

The video followed a similar post of a June 24 encounter with a Dutch ship in the Black Sea. Russia said it launched fighters and bombers to prevent the ship from entering its territorial waters.

Foreign ships do have the right to "innocent passage" in territorial waters under the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea, which Russia has ratified.

The Dutch Defense Ministry said the Russian warplanes repeatedly flew low over their frigate, carrying out mock attacks, according to news reports.

"The escalation of Russian military aggression against U.S. and NATO ships shows that Russia believes it should control access to the Black Sea and intimidate NATO navies and commercial shipping away whenever Moscow chooses," said Jorge Benitez, an expert on European security with the Atlantic Council think tank.

"Unless NATO and the U.S. raise the costs to Russia for this dangerous behavior, we

should expect that future Russian behavior will take greater risks," added Benitez, who characterized Russia's actions during Sea Breeze as simulated attacks.

Russia also used traditional media to suggest that the exercise was provocative and justified a military response.

President Vladimir Putin discussed it during his annual call-in show and suggested the U.S. was involved in the incident with the British warship, said Dmitry Gorenburg, a senior research scientist with CNA, a think tank based in Arlington, Va.

But Gorenburg doubted that Russia was prepared to engage NATO forces in an armed confrontation, characterizing Moscow's actions as a finely tuned effort to sow concern in the West.

For example, Russian video of the confrontation with HMS Defender showed that warning shots were fired but also includes audio of a Russian commander "clearly and repeatedly" telling the crew to make sure they didn't hit the British ship, Gorenburg wrote in an analysis piece for Russia Matters.

The U.S. should continue to support partners in the Black Sea and to maintain freedom of navigation without increasing presence beyond what has been the case in the last few years, Gorenburg said.

"Russia recognizes that it can't control the entire Black Sea, but it does want to be the dominant naval power there," he said.

Retired Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges, who led U.S. Army Europe, said the U.S. and NATO should take more initiative.

"The U.S. and NATO need a strategy for the greater Black Sea region that integrates efforts in all domains, including diplomatic/political, information and economy as well as military," said Hodges, who holds the Pershing Chair at the Center for European Policy Analysis.

Army reinstates suspended War College commandant

By COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Maj. Gen. Stephen Maranian was reinstated as the U.S. Army War College commandant on Wednesday, more than five months after he was suspended from the position amid a sexual as-

sault investigation, service officials said.

The Army's Criminal Investigation Command, known as CID, found "no probable cause" that Maranian committed the abusive sexual contact of which he was accused, the service said in a statement issued Wednesday. Maranian's suspension from

his job leading the War College, which is based in Carlisle, Pa., was announced Feb. 9.

Army officials in February said the alleged incident occurred before Maranian took charge of the War College in July 2020, but they declined to provide additional information about the allegations.

McConnell urges vaccinations as virus spikes

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell implored unvaccinated Americans on Tuesday to take the COVID-19 shot, issuing a stark and grave warning of a repeat of last year's rising case loads and shutdowns if people refuse to protect themselves from the coronavirus.

McConnell urged Americans to ignore the "demonstrably bad advice" coming from pun-

ditions and others against the vaccines. As cases skyrocket, he noted that nearly all the new virus hospitalizations in the United States are among people who have not been vaccinated.

"If there is anybody out there willing to listen: Get vaccinated," McConnell, R-Ky., said at his weekly press conference.

"These shots need to get in everybody's arms as rapidly as possible or we're going to be back in a situation in the fall that

we don't yearn for — that we went through last year," he said. "This is not complicated."

McConnell has been one of the most outspoken members of his party in urging vaccinations, speaking often in his home state of Kentucky of the need for people to get the shot. Without criticizing prominent Republicans who refuse the vaccine or mock the severity of the virus, including members of Congress, he has expressed dismay at those

who choose to go unvaccinated.

As a survivor of childhood polio, McConnell often draws on his own experience of having endured that disease and he has spoken publicly of the relief that eventually came with the development of vaccines.

On Tuesday he said "it never occurred to me" that after the COVID-19 vaccines that were quickly developed for use in the U.S., "we'd have difficulty getting Americans to get the shot."

Infrastructure bill at risk as GOP set to filibuster

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Senate Republicans were expected on Wednesday to reject an effort to begin debate on a bipartisan infrastructure deal that senators brokered with President Joe Biden, though supporters are hoping they'll get another chance in coming days.

Democratic Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer scheduled a procedural vote that he described as a step to "get the ball rolling" as talks progress. But Republican senators say they want to view an analysis of the bill's costs, how it's paid for and a more detailed legislative text first.

The measure is projected to cost about \$1 trillion over five years with about \$579 billion of that above previously expected levels.

"We've told him we're not ready, so we're gonna vote no, but we will be ready by the end of this week. And we've always thought that," said Sen. Rob Portman, R-Ohio, a lead negotiator, during an interview on CNBC. "We still have four or five issues we're discussing with the White House and negotiating with our Democratic colleagues."

Lawmakers are asking Schumer to delay the vote until

Monday, or hold a do-over. But with Democrats anxious to follow up with a \$3.5 trillion bill focused on health care, climate and social programs, it's unclear how events will unfold.

Schumer said senators are in the fourth week of negotiations after reaching agreement on a broad framework for infrastructure spending with the White House. He said that the vote is not meant to be a deadline for having every detail worked out.

"My colleagues are well aware that we often agree to move forward with debates on issues before we have the text in hand," Schumer said. "We've done it twice this year already."

Republican leader Mitch McConnell, of Kentucky, called the vote a "stunt" that would fail, but emphasized senators were "still negotiating in good faith across the aisle."

"Around here, we typically write the bills before we vote on them," he said.

Senators from the bipartisan group emerged upbeat Tuesday from another late-night negotiating session with Biden aides at the Capitol, saying a deal was within reach and a failed vote Wednesday would not be the end of the road.

Trump inaugural committee head was allegedly UAE agent

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — The chair of former President Donald Trump's 2017 inaugural committee was arrested Tuesday on charges alleging he secretly conspired to influence U.S. policy to benefit the United Arab Emirates, even while he was seeking a position as an American diplomat.

Tom Barrack, 74, of Santa Monica, Calif., was among three men charged in federal court in Brooklyn, N.Y., with acting as unregistered foreign agents as they tried to influence U.S. policy on the UAE's behalf while Trump was running in 2016 and later while he was president.

The indictment goes to the heart of the United States' long-time close relationship with the UAE and directly ties its de facto ruler, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, to Barrack's charges.

Besides conspiracy, Barrack was charged with obstruction of justice and making multiple false statements during a June 2019 interview with federal agents. Also charged in a seven-count indictment were Matthew Grimes, 27, of Aspen, Colo., who is a former executive at Barrack's company, and Rashid al Malik, 43, a businessman

from the United Arab Emirates who prosecutors said acted as a conduit to that nation's rulers.

One of Trump's close personal friends for decades, Barrack is the latest in a long line of the former president's associates to face criminal charges, including his former campaign chair, his former deputy campaign chair, his former chief strategist, his former national security adviser, his former personal lawyer and his company's long-time chief financial officer.

Barrack and Grimes were arrested in Southern California while al Malik was at large, believed to be living somewhere in the Middle East, authorities said. In court papers, prosecutors said al Malik was living in Los Angeles for years before fleeing the U.S. three days after an April 2018 interview by law enforcement. The UAE, which hosts thousands of U.S. troops and aircraft on the Arabian Peninsula, did not respond to requests for comment Wednesday on the indictment.

At an initial hearing in Los Angeles federal court, Barrack's lawyer, Ronak D. Desai, agreed that his client could remain detained until a hearing next Monday after prosecutors submitted written arguments saying he should be denied bail as a risk to flee.

US life expectancy falls by year and a half

Associated Press

NEW YORK — U.S. life expectancy fell by a year and a half in 2020, the largest one-year decline since World War II, public health officials said Wednesday. The decrease for both Black Americans and Hispanic Americans was even worse: three years.

The drop spelled out by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is due mainly to the COVID-19 pandemic, which health officials said is responsible for close to 74% of the overall life expectancy decline. More than 3.3 million Americans died last year, far more than any other year in U.S. history, with COVID-19 accounting for about 11% of those deaths.

Black life expectancy has not fallen so much in one year since the mid-1930s, during the Great Depression. Health officials

have not tracked Hispanic life expectancy for nearly as long, but the 2020 decline was the largest recorded one-year drop.

The abrupt fall is “basically catastrophic,” said Mark Hayward, a University of Texas sociology professor who studies changes in U.S. mortality.

Killers other than COVID-19 played a role. Drug overdoses pushed life expectancy down, particularly for whites. And rising homicides were a small but significant reason for the decline for Black Americans, said Elizabeth Arias, the report’s lead author.

Other problems affected Black and Hispanic people, including lack of access to quality health care, more crowded living conditions, and a greater share of the population in lower-paying jobs that required them to keep working when the pandemic was at its

worst, experts said.

Life expectancy is an estimate of the average number of years a baby born in a given year might expect to live. It’s an important statistical snapshot of a country’s health that can be influenced both by sustained trends such as obesity as well as more temporary threats like pandemics or war that might not endanger those newborns in their lifetimes.

For decades, U.S. life expectancy was on the upswing. But that trend stalled in 2015, for several years, before hitting 78 years, 10 months in 2019. Last year, the CDC said, it dropped to about 77 years, 4 months.

Other findings in the new CDC report:

■ Hispanic Americans have longer life expectancy than white or Black Americans, but had the largest decline in 2020. The three-year drop was the largest

since the CDC started tracking Hispanic life expectancy 15 years ago.

■ Black life expectancy dropped nearly three years, to 71 years, 10 months. It has not been that low since 2000.

■ White life expectancy fell by roughly 14 months to about 77 years, 7 months. That was the lowest the lowest life expectancy for that population since 2002.

■ COVID-19’s role varied by race and ethnicity. The coronavirus was responsible for 90% of the decline in life expectancy among Hispanics, 68% among white people and 59% among Black Americans.

■ Life expectancy fell nearly two years for men, but about one year for women, widening a long-standing gap. The CDC estimated life expectancy of 74 years, 6 months for boys vs. 80 years, 2 months for girls.

Massive wildfires in West send haze across the US

Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. — Wildfires in the American West, including one burning in Oregon that’s currently the largest in the U.S., are creating hazy skies as far away as New York as the massive infernos spew smoke and ash into the air in columns up to six miles high.

Skies over New York City were hazy Tuesday as strong winds blew smoke east from California, Oregon, Montana and other states. Oregon’s Bootleg Fire grew to 606 square miles — half the size of Rhode Island.

Fires also grew on both sides of California’s Sierra Nevada. In Alpine County, the so-called California Alps, the Tamarack Fire caused evacuations of several communities and grew to 61 square miles with no containment. The Dixie Fire, near the site of 2018’s deadly Paradise

Fire, was more than 90 square miles and threatened tiny communities in the Feather River Valley region.

The smoke on the U.S. East Coast was reminiscent of last fall when multiple large fires burning in Oregon in the state’s worst fire season in recent memory choked the local skies with pea-soup smoke but also impacted air quality several thousand miles away.

“We’re seeing lots of fires producing a tremendous amount of smoke, and ... by the time that smoke gets to the eastern portion of the country where it’s usually thinned out, there’s just so much smoke in the atmosphere from all these fires that it’s still pretty thick,” said David Lawrence, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service. “Over the last two years we’ve seen this phenomenon.”

China’s military blasts dam in order to divert floods

Associated Press

BEIJING — China’s military has blasted a dam to release floodwaters threatening one of its most heavily populated provinces, as the death toll in widespread flooding rose to at least 25.

The dam operation was carried out late Tuesday night in the city of Luoyang, just as severe flooding overwhelmed the Henan provincial capital of Zhengzhou, trapping residents in the subway system and stranding them at schools, apartments and offices.

Another seven people were reported missing, provincial officials said at a news conference.

A video posted on Twitter by news site The Paper showed subway passengers standing in chest-high muddy water as torrents raged in the tunnel outside.

Transportation and work have been disrupted throughout the province, with rain turning streets into rapidly flowing rivers,

washing away cars and rising into people’s homes.

At least 10 trains carrying about 10,000 passengers were halted, including three for more than 40 hours, according to Caixin, a business news magazine. Sections of 26 highways were closed due to the rain, the Transport Ministry said on its social media account.

A blackout shut down ventilators at the First Affiliated Hospital of Zhengzhou University, forcing staff to use hand-pumped airbags to help patients breathe, according to the city’s Communist Party committee. It said more than 600 patients were being transferred to other hospitals.

Henan province has many cultural sites and is a major base for industry and agriculture. It is crisscrossed by multiple waterways, many of them linked to the Yellow River, which has a long history of bursting its banks during periods of intensive rainfall.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Shellfish illnesses linked to heat wave

WA SEATTLE — Washington health officials are warning of a spike in shellfish-related illnesses believed to be connected to last month's heat wave.

The Washington Department of Health has reported 52 cases of vibriosis in July, surpassing the highest number of cases recorded for the month, the Seattle Post-Intelligencer reported.

Health officials advise three rules for consuming shellfish: check the state's safety maps before harvesting, chill shellfish immediately and cook at 145° F for 15 seconds to kill bacteria. Shellfish should be gathered as the tide goes out. Any shellfish exposed to the sun for over an hour should not be harvested.

Fake workers stole widow's jewelry

FL MIRAMAR — A woman who claimed to be a worker with Florida Power & Light is accused of stealing more than \$25,000 in jewelry from the home of an 81-year-old South Florida widow, police said.

Police in Miramar arrested Rachel Demetrio, 49, on charges that include burglary and grand theft from a person 65 or older. Her partner is still being sought, police said.

On June 25, a man who claimed to work for the power company knocked on Diane Reeves' door and asked her to go into the backyard with him to show her where work would be done.

He told her to wait and he

would send his partner to speak to her. Demetrio then showed up, spoke to Reeves and again asked her to wait in the yard. After 10 minutes she went into the house and realized she'd been robbed, Reeves said.

Second suspect jailed in robbery of duck hunters

NC BURGAW — A second suspect was arrested in connection with the armed robbery of a group of duck hunters in North Carolina, authorities said.

The Pender County Sheriff's Office said Tyrese Daquan Lee, 26, was taken into custody, WECT reported. Lee faces multiple charges, including armed robbery and assault with a deadly weapon inflicting serious injury, according to the sheriff's office.

In January, the sheriff's office said the four hunters were returning to their vehicles when they encountered the two suspects. According to the sheriff's office, the suspects shot one of the victims, then took the group's money and weapons.

According to the sheriff's office, the shooting victim suffered non-life-threatening injuries.

Officials: Biker seriously injured in gator attack

FL STUART — An alligator attacked and seriously injured a man at a Florida park, officials said.

The attack occurred at Halpatiokee Regional Park in Stuart, according to a Martin County Sheriff's Office Facebook post.

The man was riding a bike when he lost control and fell

down an embankment toward a body of water, officials said. The 9-foot alligator grabbed the man, but he was eventually able to break free. Officials said the man crawled away and was assisted by a bystander.

Rescue workers drove the man to meet a medical helicopter, officials said. A professional trapper was called to capture the alligator.

Forest castle's stairs crumble after heavy rain

NH CHESTERFIELD — Since the 1960s, visitors along a New Hampshire forest trail could see stone stairs and archways, remnants of a country house that was referred to as a "castle."

The top section of stairs recently collapsed in Madame Sherri Forest in West Chesterfield, named after a Ziegfeld Follies costume designer who lived in the house and threw parties for New York's theatrical elite in the 1930s, the Brattleboro (Vt.) Reformer reported. The house was lost in a fire in 1962.

The land is owned by the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests.

Madame Sherri, who was born Antoinette Bramare in 1878 in Paris, built her castle in 1929. She eventually abandoned the home and died in 1965 in Brattleboro, Vt., at age 87.

Livestreaming, speeding driver convicted in death

CO BRIGHTON — A 24-year-old man was convicted of vehicular homicide after prosecutors say he hit a car while driving around 120 mph during a Facebook live-

stream showing him speeding.

A jury in Adams County found Bryan Kirby guilty this week in the 2018 crash, District Attorney Brian Mason said. He was also found guilty of reckless manslaughter and leaving the scene of fatal accident.

Kirby was accused of driving as fast as 167 mph during the livestream on a highway near Denver while making comments to viewers about his speed. At the end, he rapidly crossed from the left lane to the right and crashed into a sedan from behind, Mason said.

The driver of the sedan died at the scene, he said.

Scallop harvest likely to decline again this year

ME PORTLAND — Fishermen are harvesting fewer scallops off the East Coast as the population of the valuable shellfish appears to be on the decline.

Sea scallops are one of the most profitable resources in the Atlantic, and the U.S. fishery was worth more than \$570 million at the docks in 2019. Fishermen harvested more than 60 million pounds that year.

But fishermen harvested about 43.5 million pounds in 2020 after a projection that they would collect more than 51 million pounds, according to National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration data. They're expected to harvest about 40 million pounds this year, NOAA said.

NOAA officials cautioned that the scallop population is not in peril, and 40 million pounds is still a lot of scallops.

— From wire reports

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Bucks claim first NBA title in 50 years

Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — Giannis Antetokounmpo had the Larry O'Brien Trophy in one arm, the NBA Finals MVP trophy in the other and there was a cigar on the table in front of him.

All the work it took to lift the Milwaukee Bucks from a team that won 15 games when he was a rookie to one with 16 wins this postseason was finally finished.

"This is time to celebrate," Antetokounmpo said.

Milwaukee waited 50 years for that.

Antetokounmpo ended one of the greatest NBA Finals ever with 50 points, 14 rebounds and five blocked shots as the Bucks beat the Phoenix Suns 105-98 on Tuesday night to win an entertaining series 4-2 and cap off a joyous return to a fan-filled postseason after last year's NBA bubble.

It was the third game this series with at least 40 points and 10 rebounds for Antetokounmpo, a dominant debut Finals performance that takes its place among some of the game's greatest. Antetokounmpo finished with 35.2 points, 13.2 rebounds and 5.0 assists per game while shooting 61.8%, the first player in Finals history to reach those numbers.

He shot 16-for-25 from the field and made an unbelievable

17 of 19 free throws — a spectacular showing for any shooter, let alone one who was hitting just 55.6% in the postseason and was ridiculed for it at times.

"People told me I can't make free throws and I made them tonight. And I'm a freaking champion," Antetokounmpo said.

He hopped around the court waving his arms with 20 seconds remaining to encourage fans to cheer, but there was no need. Their voices had been booming inside and outside for hours by then, having waited 50 years to celebrate a winner after Lew Alcindor — before becoming Kareem Abdul-Jabbar — and Oscar Robertson led Milwaukee to its first championship in 1971.

"For the city, I'm sure it means everything," said Khris Middleton, the other player left from that 15-67 team in 2013-14. "They've seen the work that we put in over the years for them to get to this point."

In a season played largely without fans, the Bucks had 65,000 of them packed into the Deer District outside, a wild party that figured to last deep into the Midwestern night. The party wasn't bad inside, either: Confetti rained down inside as fans chanted "Bucks in six! Bucks in six!" — a hopeful boast by former player that turned out

to be a prophetic rallying cry.

"I hope they enjoyed it just like we are now," Middleton added.

The Bucks became the fifth team to win the NBA Finals after trailing 2-0 and the first to do it by winning the next four games since Miami against Dallas in 2006.

Chris Paul scored 26 points to end his first NBA Finals appearance in his 16th season. Devin Booker added 19 points, but shot just 8-for-22 and missed all seven three-pointers after scoring 40 points in each of the last two games.

"There's just a pain that goes with your season being over," Suns coach Monty Williams said. "But I've never dealt with this and so I'm grateful, like I said, but I know this is going to hurt for a while."

The teams that came into the NBA together as expansion clubs in 1968 delivered a fine Finals, with the last three games all in the balance deep into the fourth quarter.

The Bucks won them largely because of Antetokounmpo, a two-time MVP in the regular season who raised his game even higher in the Finals and was voted the unanimous NBA Finals MVP.

He was the star of these Finals in every way, from his pow-

erful play on the court to his humble thoughts in interviews to taking time after Tuesday night's win to find children to high-five amid the celebrations. He teared up afterward talking about the sacrifices his family endured while he grew up in Greece.

He did all this after missing the final two games of the Eastern Conference finals with a hyperextended left knee, an injury he feared could be serious enough to end his season.

Just think what people would have missed.

What started as a gradual rise for Antetokounmpo and the Bucks sped up in the last few years, and they thought they might be here the last two seasons. They had the NBA's best record in 2018-19 but blew a 2-0 lead against Toronto in the Eastern Conference finals.

They came back with the best record again last season, but never regained their momentum after the season was suspended because of the coronavirus pandemic in March. They were eliminated in the second round by Miami in the bubble.

The Bucks traded for Jrue Holiday before this season, and even though they weren't quite as strong in the regular season, they were finally NBA Finals ready.

LaVine cleared; US awaits three players from Finals

Associated Press

USA Basketball expects to have its full 12-man roster available for Sunday's matchup against France, the first game for both teams in the Tokyo Olympics.

Zach LaVine has been cleared to exit the health and safety protocols that stemmed from a coronavirus testing-related issue, and will fly to Japan and rejoin the team on Thursday. And the plan is that the three players from the NBA Finals — Khris Middleton and Jrue Holiday from the newly crowned champion Milwaukee Bucks and Devin Booker from the Phoenix Suns — will be in place on Saturday.

"I've got to celebrate this and then get on a flight and represent my country," Holiday said in Milwaukee, where the Bucks clinched the title.

The rest of the American roster worked out in Japan for the first time on Wednesday, a day after its flight from Las Vegas. The likelihood remains that the team — which has already seen JaVale McGee and Keldon Johnson added in place of Kevin Love and Bradley Beal — will have just one full practice together before its games start to count.

"There's not a whole lot you can do when they get here the day before," U.S. coach Gregg Popovich said Wednesday from To-

kyo. "Luckily, it's basketball. Try to keep it simple and take care of what we think we can take care of. ... The good thing is, they'll be in shape. I don't know how the plane's going to affect them, because it's not an easy flight."

The Americans arrived in Tokyo with just eight players from the 12-man roster because of LaVine's situation and the NBA Finals.

"We're looking forward to the challenge," Olympic veteran Kevin Durant said. "Adding three guys, two champions, newly crowned champions and another guy who's been on that stage and knows what it's all about to win big games and play big games ... it's going to help."

Sweden stuns US women in soccer opener

Associated Press

TOKYO — Sweden didn't have to bunker down on defense against the Americans this time.

Stina Blackstenius scored a pair of goals and the Swedes stunned the United States at the Olympics with a 3-0 victory Wednesday in the women's soccer tournament.

The Americans, ranked No. 1 in the world and the favorites to win gold in Tokyo, were riding a 44-match unbeaten streak heading into the match. But Sweden, ranked No. 5, has been the U.S. team's nemesis of sorts in recent years. The Swedes bounced the Americans from the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Games in the quarterfinals, the earliest U.S. Olympic exit ever, by making a defensive stand.

This April, Sweden played the U.S. to a 1-1 draw in Stockholm, which snapped a winning streak dating back to January 2019 when the Americans lost to France in the run-up to the World Cup. It was the U.S. team's only draw this year.

"Did we expect this result tonight? No," said U.S. forward Megan Rapinoe, who did

not start but came on as a substitute in the 64th minute with the score 2-0. "It's frustrating, and it's frustrating that it's Sweden. They found a lot of space on us. I don't even know how many goals we have given up this whole year. I don't remember the last time we gave up a goal. So to give up three is not great."

Sweden's offense deserved all the credit. Blackstenius' header into the far corner off a cross from Sofia Jakobsson in the 26th minute gave the team a first-half lead.

The U.S., which came out stale, had its best chance of the opening half in the final moments when Rose Lavelle's shot hit the post. Coach Vlatko Andonovski made changes for the second half, subbing in Carli Lloyd for Alex Morgan and Julie Ertz for Sam Mewis.

But Blackstenius scored again in the 54th minute, beating goalkeeper Alyssa Naeher, as the Americans continued to struggle. Lina Hurtig added the final goal in the 72nd.

Sweden goalkeeper Hedvig Lindahl acknowledged the win over the favorites was encouraging, but it's still just the beginning of the tournament. Ahead are group games

against Australia and New Zealand.

"I know for a fact that you can go very far in a tournament even if you lose to the USA or whoever you play in the first game," Lindahl said. "So in the end I don't know how much it means, but for sure we showed the world and ourselves that we can play well against a team like the U.S. or any team."

The loss was the first for the U.S. under Andonovski, who took over when former coach Jill Ellis stepped down following the team's World Cup victory in France. Late in the match, Andonovski sat expressionless on the bench.

The Swedes were without Magda Eriksson because of injury. The team said she has been training, but because of the compact schedule of the tournament, she was held out of the opener. Tokyo is Sweden's seventh Olympics.

After getting eliminated by Sweden on penalties in the quarterfinals five years ago, U.S. goalkeeper Hope Solo famously called the Swedes cowards for their defensive tactics. Sweden went on to win the silver medal, losing to Germany 2-1 in the final.

Osterman strikes out 9, US tops Italy in softball

Associated Press

FUKUSHIMA, Japan — Cat Osterman looked ahead, not behind, in the start of the United States' quest to regain the Olympic softball gold medal, 13 years after she lost the championship game.

A 38-year-old left-hander and one of two remaining players from 2008, Osterman pitched one-hit ball for six innings and struck out nine to beat Italy 2-0 on Wednesday in searing heat and wilting humidity as the Olympics got underway.

"Today was about today," she said. "If I use '08 as motivation, then I'm selfish. This is not about me. This is not about a silver medal that happened. This is about this team and allowing these athletes that are younger than me to be able to live out an Olympic dream and hopefully get to that top step on the podium. So today was totally about how are we going to beat Italy and how am I going to help this team

get started."

Michelle Moultrie singled in a run in the fourth inning for the top-ranked U.S., which lost the title to Japan 3-1 at the 2008 Beijing Games. Janie Reed, the wife of Los Angeles Dodgers reliever Jake Reed, added a sacrifice fly in the fifth.

"There's a lot that goes on with just trying to get into a groove of: I've always done this. It's the same game I've always played," said Moultrie, a 31-year-old outfielder who joined the national team in 2011.

Osterman walked none, hit two batters and gave up her only hit to Andrea Filler, a single leading off the fourth. The last remaining player from the 2004 gold medalists and pitching 2½ months before her intended retirement, Osterman improved to 6-1 in Olympic play with 66 strikeouts in 38 innings.

"The body doesn't recover as fast," she said. "Coachie likes to remind me sometimes I'm not as

flexible, so I have to adjust my pitches a little bit. But I think the biggest thing is my mentality and my competitiveness has stayed the same."

Monica Abbott, a 35-year-old lefty who relieved in the 2008 gold medal game, struck out the side in the seventh for the save. She may start Thursday morning's game against Canada, part of an entire Olympics played with no fans.

"It's kind of sad that there can't be any spectators, especially no foreign spectators," Abbott said. "This is an event that doesn't happen all the time, so it's disappointing not to have people in the stands — but also not having Japanese fans when Japan is such a softball-loving country."

Players sweated off pounds on the artificial turf.

"We trained in Midland, Texas, where the turf was 150 degrees," U.S. coach Ken Eriksen said. "So we're prepared for Fukushima at 145 degrees."

Loser Greta Cecchetti, a pitcher for Texas A&M Corpus Christi, allowed two runs and four hits in four-plus innings.

Valerie Arioto led off the fourth with an infield hit up the middle, beating the throw from second baseman Andrea Filler. Ali Aguilar sacrificed, and Moultrie grounded a single on the artificial turf past Filler and into right field, sending Arioto sliding across the plate.

Alexia Lacatena, an 18-year-old from Stanhope, N.J., who will pitch for the University of Kentucky next spring, relieved and allowed a sacrifice fly to Reed, whose husband made his big league debut on July 6 and had six appearances before he was optioned Tuesday to Triple-A Oklahoma City.

Italy's last nine batters were retired in order.

"(In) '08 we didn't have a bad tournament," Osterman said. "We just had a game that didn't go our way."

Bell hits 100th homer as Nats win third straight

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Josh Bell hit his 100th career home run and the Washington Nationals rallied past the Miami Marlins 6-3 for their third straight win. The Marlins lost their fourth in a row.

After Adam Duvall's three-run homer gave Miami a 3-2 lead in the top of the sixth, the Nationals quickly answered in the bottom half.

Tres Barrera doubled and scored the tying run on a two-out single by pinch-hitter Yadiel Hernandez off Richard Bleier (2-1). After Alcides Escobar was hit by a pitch, Trea Turner and Juan Soto followed with RBI singles off Anthony Bender.

Dodgers 8, Giants 6: Pinch-hitter Will Smith connected for a three-run homer in the bottom of the ninth inning, and Los Angeles rallied from five runs down to defeat visiting San Francisco in a game that featured seven home runs.

Chris Taylor and Matt Beaty drew walks from Tyler Rogers (1-1) before Smith hit an 0-1 slider into the stands in left-center for the third walk-off homer of his career.

Rays 9, Orioles 3: Francisco Mejía had a homer and five RBIs, Randy Arozarena also homered and host Tampa Bay spoiled John Means' return from a left shoulder strain with a win over Baltimore.

Yankees 6, Phillies 4: Aroldis Chapman allowed a run in the ninth inning before recording his first save in over a month, and host New York hit four homers to power past Philadelphia.

Diamondbacks 11, Pirates 6: Josh Reddick's two-run single broke a tie with two outs in an eight-run seventh inning, and host

Arizona beat Pittsburgh for its first three-game winning streak since late April.

Reds 4, Mets 3: Joey Votto and Aristides Aquino homered on consecutive pitches, Wade Miley worked effectively into the seventh inning and host Cincinnati snapped a four-game losing streak with a win over New York.

Athletics 6, Angels 0: Matt Olson homered for the second straight game, James Kaprielian tossed six scoreless innings and host Oakland swept a two-game series from Los Angeles.

Royals 5, Brewers 2: Ryan O'Hearn and Jorge Soler homered as Kansas City won at Milwaukee in a game that began early to give local fans a chance to watch their team in the NBA Finals.

Astros 9, Indians 3: Jose Altuve celebrated the 10th anniversary of his major league debut with a leadoff homer, and made the milestone twice as nice with a second shot on his next at-bat, leading host Houston over Cleveland.

White Sox 9, Twins 5: Jose Abreu doubled and tripled early, then homered to cap a five-run rally in the eighth inning that vaulted host Chicago over Minnesota.

Tigers 4, Rangers 1: Robbie Grossman and Eric Haase homered as host Detroit extended its winning streak to five games with a rain-delayed win over Texas.

Cubs 7, Cardinals 6: Javier Baez and Ian Happ triggered a six-run rally in the ninth inning and Chicago won at St. Louis.

Mariners 6, Rockies 4: Marco Gonzales earned his first win in three months and Dylan Moore homered to lead Seattle to a win at Colorado.

Braves sparked by Toussaint, Freeman in win

Associated Press

ATLANTA — Freddie Freeman homered off Yu Darvish in the sixth inning, Touki Toussaint allowed one run and three hits in his season debut, and the Atlanta Braves beat the San Diego Padres 2-1 on Tuesday night.

Toussaint, who missed the first 3½ months rehabbing a right shoulder strain, retired the first seven batters he faced before walking Victor Caratini in the third. He didn't allow a hit until Manny Machado doubled with one out in the fourth. Now 1-0, Toussaint walked two and struck out five in 6⅓ innings overall.

"I think everybody knows that's been my biggest problem, not throwing strikes," Toussaint said. "Mike Maroth in Triple-A was like, 'Man, you just need to throw the ball in the zone and let guys get themselves out.' That's basically what I did. See how many strikes I could throw and go from there."

The Padres tied it 1-1 in the fourth when Jake Cronenworth was hit by a pitch, advanced to third on Machado's double and scored on Tommy Pham's sacrifice fly. Wil Myers flied out on a broken-bat flare as Toussaint escaped a bases-loaded jam.

"That fastball had teeth on it," Braves manager Brian Snitker said. "He's got an innate ability to spin the ball, but it's just about command and throwing the ball over the plate. He doesn't have to spot up. With the action on his pitches, he doesn't have to be perfect."

Freeman made it 2-1 by taking Darvish deep over the wall in left field with an opposite-field shot, his 22nd homer. The All-Star first baseman and reigning NL MVP has five homers in his last seven games.

Brisbane picked to host 2032 Olympics with no rival bid

Associated Press

TOKYO — Brisbane was picked Wednesday to host the 2032 Olympics, the inevitable winner of a one-city race steered by the International Olympic Committee to avoid rival bids.

The Games will go back to Australia 32 years after the popular 2000 Sydney Olympics. Melbourne hosted in 1956.

"We know what it takes to deliver a successful Games in Australia," Prime Minis-

ter Scott Morrison told International Olympic Committee members in an 11-minute live video link from his office.

When the award was later confirmed, with Brisbane winning the vote 72-5, Morrison raised both arms in the air and gave two thumbs up.

The victory led to a fireworks display in Brisbane that was broadcast to IOC members in their five-star hotel in Tokyo.

Brisbane follows 2028 host Los Angeles in

getting 11 years to prepare for hosting the Games. Paris will host in 2024.

The 2032 deal looked done months before the formal decision at the IOC meeting, which was held ahead of Friday's opening ceremony of the Tokyo Games.

The IOC gave Brisbane exclusive negotiating rights in February. That decision left Olympic officials in Qatar, Hungary and Germany looking blindsided with their own stalled bidding plans.