

STARS AND STRIPES



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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

Marine head at Futenma is ousted

BY SETH ROBSON

Stars and Stripes

The Marine Corps has relieved the head of one of its most important Pacific bases due to a "loss of trust and confidence in his ability to lead his command."

Col. Mark Coppess was fired Tuesday from his job as commander of Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, Okinawa, by Marine Corps Installations Pacific chief Brig. Gen. Paul Rock, a III Marine Expeditionary Force statement said.

Futenma is home to about 3,000 Marines from the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing and other units on a southern island prefecture that is strategically important to stability in the region and deterring aggression from China and North Korea.

However, operations there have been unpopular with some locals, and an effort to relocate the base to rural northern Okinawa has been a major political and diplomatic issue for the United States and Japan.

This year, people living near Futenma have complained about falling aircraft parts and aircraft flying over schools. In January, Defense Secretary Jim Mattis apologized to his Japanese counterpart, Itsunori Onodera, for a string of mishaps, including the emergency landings of Okinawa-based Marine Corps helicopters.

Coppess took over Futenma on June 4, 2017.

Col. David Steele was to assume command of the air station on Wednesday, the Marine statement said.

Navy fails to keep close track of time spent at sea

Associated Press

BREMERTON, Wash. — The U.S. Navy isn't keeping close track of how many days servicemembers assigned to ships and boats are spending at sea, according to records recently obtained by the Kitsap Sun.

For the past five years, a number of Naval Base Kitsap-based submarines have either underreported or failed to report the number of days assigned personnel have spent at sea, the Kitsap Sun reported last week.

The newspaper in April requested the past five years of personnel data from Navy Personnel Command for all of the ships and boats based in Navy Region Northwest, including Bangor's submarines, Bremerton's aircraft carriers and Everett's destroyers.

Analysis of the data, which are current up to April 30, 2018, revealed the number of reported events for crews assigned to Bangor's submarines did not accurately reflect the number of days those units were deployed within the past five years.

The submarine command's incomplete data reporting isn't an isolated problem. It appears to be a widespread issue across the Department of Defense, according to a Government Accountability Office report published in April.

An estimated 145,000 servicemembers across all branches of the service are missing records for deployments between fiscal years 2014 and 2016, according to the report.

The report found unclear policies and a lack of a reporting enforcement system have resulted in the collection of unreliable data departmentwide, which in turn inhibits the Department of Defense's ability to effectively monitor personnel tempo and determine how the current high pace of military operations is affecting the servicemembers.

All commands and units are required to track the number of days personnel spend

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at sea, without exception, according to Department of the Navy and Department of Defense policies, as required by Congress.

However, no enforcement mechanism appears to exist to compel commands to report their data to comply with the requirement.

While all submarine commands are responsible for submitting their unit's data, limited network access while at sea can result in delayed reporting because the data are filed via a web-based application, Submarine Group Nine spokesman Lt. Cmdr. Michael Smith said.

"Nonetheless, we're looking at local policies to verify submission and ensure required (personnel tempo) reporting data is timely and accurate," Smith said.

Submarine Group Nine oversees all ballistic missile and guided missile submarines in the Pacific Northwest. It serves as the homeport for a total of 10 Ohio-class submarines in the U.S. Navy fleet.

Despite the delay and gaps in reported data for the command's submarines, Navy Personnel Command has not contacted Submarine Group Nine for updated reports, Smith said.

China warns US after B-52s fly by shoal

Associated Press

BEIJING — China lashed out at the U.S. on Wednesday after a pair of B-52 bombers flew past a Chinese-held shoal in the South China Sea amid escalating words and displays of military strength from the two major Pacific powers.

Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying warned the U.S. against “hyping up militarization and stirring up trouble,” while promising that China would take all necessary measures to defend its sovereignty.

The U.S. “doing whatever

they want is risky, and China will not be threatened by any military warships,” Hua told reporters at a daily briefing in Beijing.

This week’s flyby near Scarborough Shoal, which China took from the Philippines in 2012, came after U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis accused Beijing of “intimidation and coercion” in the South China Sea.

China claims almost the entirety of the sea despite overlapping claims from neighbors including the Philippines, Vietnam and Taiwan.

Speaking at a summit of top

security officials in Singapore last weekend, Mattis said China has deployed anti-ship missiles and surface-to-air missiles and landed nuclear capable bombers on the disputed islands.

He vowed that the Indo-Pacific would remain a “priority theater” for U.S. forces.

Last month, China announced it had dispatched warships to drive away two U.S. Navy vessels sailing close to Chinese holdings in the Paracel Island chain, where China recently announced it had landed strategic bombers on an airstrip for the first time.

That naval confrontation came shortly after the Pentagon withdrew its invitation for China to participate in multinational naval exercises near Hawaii to protest China’s military moves in the South China Sea.

Despite rising tensions, Mattis is expected to visit Beijing at an unannounced date. He said last weekend he would travel soon at China’s invitation.

China’s Defense Ministry has said it would welcome Mattis and hoped for continued exchanges with the U.S. military.

Marine questioned after car hits, kills man sleeping on road

By CAITLIN DOORNBOS
AND AYA ICHIHASHI
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — A Camp Hansen Marine struck and killed a Japanese man with his vehicle while the victim was sleeping on a motorway Wednesday in Okinawa prefecture, according to local police.

Sgt. David Hardy was driving to work on Highway 75 in Uruma about 3:20 a.m. when

he hit Morio Sakumoto, 63, who was sleeping in the roadway, an Uruma police deputy chief said. Sakumoto was later pronounced dead at a local hospital.

Hardy was taken to a police station for questioning, but the deputy chief did not know whether the Marine had been released or was still in custody Wednesday afternoon. Police said alcohol was not involved.

A Camp Hansen spokesperson could not be immediately reached for comment.

The incident is the second fatal vehicle

accident involving a Camp Hansen Marine in about a week.

Cpl. Mauricio Ambriz Camacho, 21, was in Japanese police custody Friday, just days after his car collided with a motorcycle, killing its Japanese driver. Camacho was driving in Nago city at about 2 p.m. on May 27, when he reportedly crossed the center line of a curved roadway and ran head-on into a 45-year-old Okinawan man, who died later at a local hospital, a Nago police spokesman said.

Police: Va. National Guard officer stole armored personnel carrier from base

Associated Press

RICHMOND, Va. — A soldier who was chased by police for more than 60 miles after he stole an armored personnel carrier from a National Guard base was driving under the influence of drugs, Virginia State Police said Wednesday.

Joshua Philip Yabut, 29, of Richmond, was charged with eluding police and unauthorized use of a vehicle, the Virginia National Guard said in a news release.

Yabut is a first lieutenant assigned as the company commander of the 276th Engineer Battalion and has more than 11 years of service.

He deployed to Afghanistan from 2008 to 2009 with the Illinois National Guard, according to the Guard.

The vehicle was stolen Tuesday evening from Fort Pickett and was chased by police for about two hours at speeds as high as 40 mph before the driver stopped and surrendered near Richmond’s City Hall, state police said.

The Guard said the personnel carrier was stolen during routine training at Fort Pickett and has been returned to the base in Blackstone.

The vehicle wasn’t equipped with any weapons, but Yabut had his personal weapon with him without any ammunition,

the Guard said.

Police declined to comment on Yabut’s motive for stealing the vehicle.

They said the investigation is ongoing.

Michael Finneran, a spokesman for the NASA Langley Research Center in Hampton, said Yabut worked there in a civilian job in the office of the chief information officer from 2014-17.

Yabut seemed to foreshadow the theft and chase in Twitter posts Tuesday. Hours before the vehicle drove off the base, an account confirmed by the Guard as Yabut’s tweeted a Wikipedia entry about the M113 armored personnel carri-

er, which is similar to the M577 vehicle police chased, and a screenshot of a map around the area where the vehicle eventually stopped.

Minutes after police began their pursuit shortly before 8 p.m., Yabut posted a photo and video of himself in what appears to be the stolen vehicle.

He wrote a series of odd tweets Tuesday, including: “where is this damn water buffalo” “all i wanna do is get an anime wife” and “wow I think I just discovered a large illegal spy operation in the us government.”

Yabut was being held at the Richmond jail.

US gives Humvees to Afghan army, then blows up vehicles when Taliban capture them

USA Today

American warplanes have destroyed about 40 U.S.-supplied Humvees that the Taliban captured from Afghanistan's military over the past several years, according to coalition military statistics provided to USA Today.

The statistics highlight a recurring problem: Taliban fighters have frequently attacked Afghan government outposts throughout the country, capturing U.S.-supplied equipment and then disappearing into the countryside. They have also run off with weapons and other equipment.

"In the event this type of military equipment is stolen, U.S. Forces-Afghanistan and the Afghan national defense and security forces work quickly to reacquire the equipment or eliminate it from the battlefield altogether so as not to allow the enemy an advantage," Lt. Col. Martin O'Donnell, a military spokesman, said in a statement.

If the equipment can't be recaptured with a ground attack it is destroyed from the air. The 40 Humvees were destroyed in U.S. airstrikes since January 2015,

shortly after U.S. combat forces left Afghanistan and Afghan government troops took the lead in fighting the Taliban and other insurgent groups.

The captured American equipment not only gives militants increased firepower or protection, but is often used by Taliban militants in attempts to slip past guards. Militants in a captured Humvee last month launched an attack on Afghanistan's Interior Ministry. In that attack an Afghan police officer was killed but the assault was rebuffed before a bomb-laden vehicle could get inside the compound.

"It obviously concerns us that terrorists have captured vehicles and captured uniforms, but ... I point to the alertness and the quick reaction by the Afghan security forces on the scene," Army Gen. John Nicholson said of the May 30 attack.

But even quick insurgent raids can capture expensive equipment. Staging raids to steal arms and equipment is "a pretty standard guerrilla tactic," said Seth Jones, an analyst at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a think tank in Washington, D.C.

General upholds Bergdahl sentence

WASHINGTON — A top Army general on Monday approved the sentence handed down to Pvt. Bowe Bergdahl, the former Taliban captive who was spared prison time after pleading guilty to desertion and misbehavior charges last year.

Gen. Robert Abrams, the chief of U.S. Army Forces Command, upheld the sentence handed down by the judge, Army Col. Jeffery R. Nance, in November at the conclusion of a weeklong sentencing hearing in Bergdahl's court-martial, FORSCOM spokesman John Boyce said Tuesday in a statement. Abrams was the convening authority in the court-martial, the senior official who oversees the case and must review and approve the judge's findings.

Nance sentenced Bergdahl to

forfeit \$10,000 in pay and receive a drop in rank from sergeant to E-1 private and a dishonorable discharge, which stops him from receiving any medical or other benefits offered to most veterans. The judge could have sentenced him to as much as life in prison. Prosecutors had requested Bergdahl serve 14 years confinement.

Bergdahl, 32, walked off his post in eastern Afghanistan's Paktika province on June 30, 2009, and was captured and held for about five years by Taliban-linked militants in Pakistan before he was released to the United States in a controversial prisoner exchange for five Taliban commanders who had been held in the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba.

From staff reports

GAO criticizes DOD office on timetable to fix F-35 defects

Bloomberg

The Defense Department office that oversees the F-35 program was criticized by a government watchdog for its plans to delay fixing critical deficiencies on the fighter until after a decision to start full-rate production is made — a move that won't come before October 2019.

The F-35 — the world's most expensive weapons program — had 966 "open deficiencies" as of January, the Government Accountability Office said in an annual report released Tuesday. Of those, at least 180 "will not be resolved before full-rate production" under the Pentagon office's current plans, according to the report.

The production decision would commit the U.S. to building 77 or more of the Lockheed Martin aircraft per year over the next 12 years, up from 70 this year. Output would peak at 105 aircraft in 2023 at an annual cost of \$13.4 billion and stay at that rate for six years. That makes it imperative for the Pentagon to fix the deficiencies before a decision about production — the most profitable phase for Lockheed — is made, the report said.

The troubled \$406.5 billion F-35 is a next-generation fighter scheduled to end its 17-year development phase this year. Starting in September, the program is supposed to proceed to intense combat testing that's likely to take a year, an exercise that is already at least 12 months late. Combat testing is necessary before the plane can be approved for full-rate production.

Over the past year, the Pentagon "has made progress in completing the F-35 development program," GAO said. "However, in its rush to cross the finish line, the program has made some decisions that

are likely to affect aircraft performance and reliability and maintainability for years to come."

The GAO report broke down the shortfalls into two categories. Category 1 deficiencies are defined as "those that could jeopardize safety, security, or another critical requirement," while Category 2 deficiencies "are those that could impede or constrain successful mission accomplishment." The report cited 111 Category 1 and 855 Category 2 deficiencies.

"If reliability targets are not met, the military services and the taxpayer will have to settle for aircraft that are less reliable, more costly, and take longer to maintain," according to the GAO report. "Given that the program's long-term affordability is already in question, ensuring the aircraft is reliable by each variant's planned maturity is paramount."

F-35 program office spokesman Joe DellaVedova said via email that, as with past GAO assessments, this one was completed with the office's "full cooperation and unfettered access to information. There were no surprises in the report and the items mentioned are well-known," he said.

"The program already has actions in work for the GAO's recommendations to address deficiencies and identify steps to meet reliability and maintainability requirements," he said. Officials expect the F-35 Program "to resolve all critical deficiencies prior to entering" combat testing "with either a fix," a service-approved work-around "or a formal acceptance of the deficiency."

Lockheed spokeswoman Carolyn Nelson said via email that the Bethesda, Md.-based company "is working closely with the Joint Program Office to prioritize and correct all of these areas."

Experts: Summit goal must be full denuclearization

By CLAUDIA GRISALES
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Days ahead of the summit between President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, two former top U.S. advisers urged the president not to give up crucial demands during the high-stakes meeting in Singapore.

The June 12 summit now appears to have softened the Trump administration's demands for North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons, the advisers told senators Tuesday.

"We are in a materially different place than where we were a year ago, or even six months ago ... tensions are materially down," Joseph Yun, a senior adviser at the federally funded think tank U.S. Institute for Peace, testified before a Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee hearing. "Related to that, however, is the concern now on whether the administration is now placing the bar too low on denuclearization."

Yun, who left his post as U.S. special representative for North Korea policy in March, and Victor Cha, who was recently considered a nominee to become U.S. ambassador to South Korea, argued Tuesday that the summit's ultimate goal still should be Kim's steps toward complete denuclearization.

Cha, a senior adviser at the Washington think tank Center for Strategic and International Studies, said the U.S. must be leery of giving up too much too soon in negotiations. It should aim for security assurances for the U.S., policies that facilitate broader U.S. strategic objectives in Asia, coordination with allies, support for a peace dialogue on the peninsula and requirements for North Korea to address its human rights abuses, he said.

"A summit is not a strategy, and a summit without a strategy is dangerous," warned Cha, who in January was withdrawn from consideration to be a U.S. ambassador apparently after he disagreed with White House interest in a limited strike against North Korea.

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Republicans and Democrats alike appear to have escaped calamity in a crucial day of coast-to-coast primary battles as they fight to shape the political battlefield for the fall. There was an especially big sigh of relief from the GOP on Wednesday after the party avoided being entirely shut out of California's November election of a new governor.

Republicans had feared that Democrats would win both of the governor's spots in California's unique top-two primary system. With no one to support at the top of the state ticket, the concern was that GOP voters would sit the election out, giving Democrats a big advantage in House races across the state that could help swing control of Congress.

There was less Democratic talk of a November "blue wave" on Wednesday. And President

Donald Trump, crediting "the Trump impact," said there might be "a big Red Wave" instead. But that seemed to be more of a presidential boast than a realistic analysis of the California results.

While some Golden State contests remained too close to call Wednesday, Republicans managed to get business executive John Cox on the November ballot for governor. Lt. Gov. Gavin Newsom, a Democrat, easily captured the top spot to succeed term-limited Jerry Brown in the deeply Democratic state's top office. There will be no Republican candidate in the other big statewide race, for U.S. Senate.

Democrats were fighting to avoid their own calamity in California's many competitive House districts and appeared to have largely succeeded. The concern in their case was that so many candidates would divide the Democratic vote and let Republicans take the top

two spots in some House races. After more votes were counted on Wednesday, the Democrats appeared to have avoided being shut out in nearly all of the state's battleground contests.

Nationwide, Tuesday night was a big night for women, as female candidates for governor advanced, including Democrat Michelle Lujan Grisham in New Mexico and Republican Kristi Noem in South Dakota. Female Republican governors in Alabama and Iowa will try for their first full terms after succeeding men who resigned.

California's handful of competitive House races — more than a half-dozen Republican-held seats may be in play — has made it hotly contested territory in the fight over control of the House, drawing big money and the spotlight on the biggest primary night of midterms. Democrats need to pick up 23 seats nationwide to retake the House.

Obama-era move aided Iran on money

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Obama administration secretly sought to give Iran access — albeit briefly — to the U.S. financial system by sidestepping sanctions kept in place after the 2015 nuclear deal, despite repeatedly telling Congress and the public it had no plans to do so.

An investigation by Senate Republicans released Wednesday sheds light on the delicate balance the Obama administration sought to strike after the deal as it worked to ensure Iran received its promised benefits without playing into the hands of the deal's opponents. Amid a tense political climate, Iran hawks in the U.S., Israel and elsewhere argued that the United States was giving far too much to Tehran and that the windfall would be used to fund extremism and other troubling Iranian activity.

The report by the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations revealed

that under President Barack Obama, the Treasury Department issued a license in February 2016, never previously disclosed, that would have allowed Iran to convert \$5.7 billion it held at a bank in Oman from Omani rials into euros by exchanging them first into U.S. dollars. If the Omani bank had allowed the exchange without such a license, it would have violated sanctions that bar Iran from transactions that touch the U.S. financial system.

The effort was unsuccessful because American banks — themselves afraid of running afoul of U.S. sanctions — declined to participate. The Obama administration approached two U.S. banks to facilitate the conversion, the report said, but both refused, citing the reputational risk of doing business with or for Iran.

Issuing the license was not illegal. Still, it went above and beyond what the Obama administration was required to do under the terms of the nuclear

agreement.

Last month, President Donald Trump declared the U.S. was pulling out of what he described as a "disastrous deal."

The license issued to Bank Muscat stood in stark contrast to public statements from the Obama White House, the Treasury and the State Department, all of which denied that the administration was contemplating allowing Iran access to the U.S. financial system.

Former Obama administration officials declined to comment for the record. However, they said the decision to grant the license had been made in line with the spirit of the deal, which included allowing Iran to regain access to foreign reserves that had been off-limits because of the sanctions. They said public comments made by the Obama administration at the time were intended to dispel incorrect reports about nonexistent proposals that would have gone much farther by letting Iran actually buy or sell things in dollars.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Officials help recover lost wedding ring

PA PHILADELPHIA — Philadelphia officials helped save the day for a Pennsylvania couple who lost an heirloom wedding ring in a sewer grate.

Steve Brown was in the city with his wife, Erin, when the ring slipped off his finger and rolled into the grate. He said the ring was originally his grandfather's, and it was engraved with his grandparents' initials.

The couple tried using duct tape and clothes hangers to recover the ring Saturday with no success.

Steve Brown said a Philadelphia police officer made a call to the Pennsylvania utility company PECO. A worker opened the grate, and after nearly an hour of searching grabbed the ring.

Public library system ends overdue fines

MD BALTIMORE — One of the nation's oldest public library systems has eliminated all fines on overdue books and other materials.

Enoch Pratt Free Library President Heidi Daniel told The Baltimore Sun that the move is a goodwill gesture to the community, erasing \$186,000 in unpaid penalties for 26,000 people. It also reinstates membership for 13,000 borrowers whose cards have been blocked.

The system will continue charging borrowers to replace books never returned.

Ice cream maker, brewery create beer

NY ELMSFORD — A brewing company in New York has teamed with Carvel to create "Fudgie the

Whale" cake-themed beer.

The stout beer is brewed with the ice cream cake maker's signature chocolate and fudge and is 6 percent alcohol by volume. Captain Lawrence Brewing Co. said the beer pairs well with smoked foods and also chocolate desserts.

The beer is based on Carvel's Fudgie the Whale, a famed chocolate ice cream cake formed in the shape of a whale.

The beer will be available only at Captain Lawrence's beer hall in Elmsford.

Remnants of old Army fort are discovered

IL CHESTER — Anthropology students at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale discovered remnants of an army fort near the community of Chester that was once visited by the Lewis and Clark expedition.

In a news release, SIU Carbondale said the students were searching the area after concluding that Fort Kaskaskia, occupied by the U.S. Army in 1803, didn't stand atop the site of a fort the French occupied a half-century earlier as was long believed.

The discovery of an American uniform army button, early 1800s chimney brick and other objects led them to conclude that the fort stood about 300 meters away.

Cops: Woman hit worker with burger

CT MIDDLETON — Police said a Connecticut woman was so angry by a mishandled Wendy's order that she allegedly hit the cashier with her burger.

The Connecticut Post reported Holly Bartolotta, 50, of New Britain, was charged with second-degree breach of peace

after she allegedly caused a disturbance Friday at the Middletown fast food eatery.

Police said Bartolotta was upset because a staff member got her burger order wrong, so she swore and threw it at the employee. She also allegedly hit another customer.

Transient's foot set on fire in assault

CA SAN DIEGO — San Diego police are investigating an assault in which a transient set another transient's foot on fire.

Officer John Buttle said the 57-year-old victim got into an argument with another man Sunday afternoon.

The assailant threw the victim down, poured gas on his foot and set it ablaze.

The victim was taken to a hospital. His injuries were described as not life-threatening.

Mall brawl ends in arrest of 7 teens

NJ HAMILTON TOWNSHIP — Police said one police officer was injured and seven teenagers arrested after a fight broke out in a New Jersey mall food court.

The Hamilton Township Police Department said the fight started as security officers were escorting individuals who were gathering in the food court out of the mall Saturday night. NJ.com reported the fight quickly escalated, with chairs and other debris getting thrown around the court.

Five teenage boys and two 18-year-olds were charged with disorderly conduct. One Hamilton Township police supervisor was assaulted during the altercation and quickly treated for his injury.

Hundreds of snakes, mice found in home

WI WEST BEND — Police investigating a sexual assault suspect discovered hundreds of snakes, mice and other small animals, including some that had died, in the foul-smelling basement of his southeastern Wisconsin home.

West Bend police said officers found 160 snakes and more than 250 mice as well as geckos and frogs in the house on May 31. The snakes ranged from 6 inches to 2 feet in length.

Many were in poor health. Several dead snakes and mice were also removed.

A 42-year-old man was arrested on preliminary charges of sexual assault, domestic abuse and battery. He was expected to be charged with additional criminal and civil code violations.

Company that saved Twinkies buys Necco

MA BOSTON — A company that once rescued the Twinkies brand is now taking over the maker of Necco Wafers.

The family business of billionaire Dean Metropoulos said it paid \$17.3 million for the New England Confectionery Co., or Necco.

It's a surprise ending to a federal bankruptcy auction that initially left Necco to an Ohio company.

Spangler Candy Co. made the highest bid last week, but court records say it refused to close without a price reduction.

Instead, a deal closed on May 31 to sell Necco to a Connecticut-based branch of Metropoulos' company, which made the second-highest bid.

From wire reports

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Warriors' run sparks dynasty debate

Associated Press

OAKLAND, Calif.—Stephen Curry and coach Steve Kerr's Golden State Warriors have repeatedly said they want to build something special for the long haul, to compete for championships year after year.

LeBron James considers his familiar NBA Finals opponent among the best teams ever.

Where the Warriors stack up if they win a third championship in four years will make for a dynasty debate. And their domination doesn't appear to be ending anytime soon, so if they keep winning Golden State will have its place in history.

"As a fan of the NBA, you could go down the list of the teams that won multiple years and just dominated the league for stretches of time," Curry said.

The Warriors are trying to join Bill Russell's Celtics, the Bulls led by Michael Jordan and the Lakers' trio of title runs fueled by George Mikan in the 1950s, Magic Johnson and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar in the '80s, and Shaquille O'Neal and Kobe Bryant nearly 20 years ago as the only franchises in NBA history to capture three championships in four years.

The Warriors are halfway there, holding a 2-0 lead against the underdog Cavs as the series shifts to Cleveland for Game 3 on Wednesday.

"Listen, Golden State is one of the best teams I've ever played. It's one of the best teams that's ever been assembled," said James, who is playing in his eighth straight NBA Finals and fourth in a row against Golden State.

Curry, sharp-shooting Klay Thompson, fiery Draymond Green and 2015 Finals MVP Andre Iguodala make up an All-Star-studded squad trying to repeat after James thwarted that quest two years ago when the Cavs stopped the defending champs. Kevin Durant bolted from Oklahoma City to join the cast last season.

"You look at it, they've got four Hall of Famers on their team in Klay, Dray, Steph and KD. They've got a Finals MVP that comes off their bench," James said in reference to Iguodala. "... I don't know where they will fall in my book, but they will have a nice chapter."

Not everybody is ready to crown the Warriors as a dynasty, not just yet anyway. Not even if they win the title this year.

"I don't like to go dynasty stuff, they've been the team of the decade," said Gary Payton, the longtime Seattle SuperSonics point guard who played 17 seasons through 2007. "That's what it is. They've been doing their thing. When we get into a dynasty is Michael Jordan and them winning six, that's a dynasty. The Golden State Warriors (would have) won three out of four, that's great.

"It's coming to be a dynasty. If you win a couple more, then you're talking about a dynasty. So three of them is in the right stage and the right movement to becoming a dynasty, yes."

The defending champions are playing in a fourth straight finals chasing a repeat they couldn't pull off in 2016 after capturing the franchise's first title in 40 years during 2014-15 with Kerr as a rookie head coach.

TNT analyst and former player Charles Barkley wants nothing to do with dynasty talk regarding the Warriors.

"We don't have any dynasties. It's been a long time since we've had a dynasty," Barkley said. "The Bulls won six, the Spurs won five. We've had a lot of really good teams. I think the only dynasty is the Spurs."

They've been great for 20 years. The Warriors are not going to win. Winning two in four years is not a dynasty."

Golden State would love nothing more than to continue building momentum as the franchise approaches the opening of its new San Francisco arena, Chase Center, in summer 2019 if all remains on schedule. That leaves one last season at Oracle Arena.

B.J. Armstrong earned titles alongside Jordan with the Bulls from 1991-93. If the Warriors win another, they will join dynasty status in Armstrong's mind.

"They're right there," Armstrong said. "For them to have a sustained level of excellence like they've had, I don't take that for granted and I think anyone who's played or observed this game knows how difficult that is for one, let alone to be able to get here four times and have an opportunity to win three speaks for itself ..."

"If they win this one, they're right up there with all of the teams for a dynasty-type caliber situation up here in Golden State."

No White House visit for Warriors, Cavs stars

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Stephen Curry and LeBron James spoke their minds last year. They have not changed their minds this year.

No matter whose team wins the NBA championship, neither superstar will be at the White House anytime soon.

On the day when the Philadelphia Eagles were supposed to be there to commemorate winning the Super Bowl — a visit that was canceled by President Donald Trump and had the White House accusing players who weren't planning on attending of abandoning their fans — Curry and James were among those speaking out at the NBA Finals in support of the Eagles.

"I'm not surprised. It's typical of him," James, the Cleveland star, said Tuesday of Trump's decision to cancel. "I know no matter who wins this series, no one wants the invite anyway. So it won't be Golden

State or Cleveland going."

On the eve of Game 3 of the Warriors-Cavaliers series, politics dominated the conversation.

Curry raised Trump's ire last year when he said he wouldn't go to the White House, prompting the President to disinvite him and the champion Golden State Warriors.

Curry said Tuesday that he spoke with a current Eagles player about the team's decision-making process and how it went deeper than disagreeing with Trump policies and the ongoing issue of some NFL players choosing not to stand for the pregame playing of "The Star-Spangled Banner."

"It's an important conversation, but you can't control what other people try to do, or try to control the narrative or things like that," Curry said.

Curry said the team has been on the same page after his comments last year and Trump's subsequent revoking of the

Warriors' invitation. "And every team that's won a championship since then has gone through that."

There has been clear tension between many star athletes and the current administration throughout the Trump presidency. Trump has often blasted the NFL players who have kneeled for the national anthem, a protest that started in 2016 when San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick did so to raise awareness of racism — more specifically, the killing of black men by police.

Trump said the Eagles' event was called off because some of their players "disagree with their President because he insists that they proudly stand for the National Anthem, hand on heart, in honor of the great men and women of our military and the people of our country."

No Eagles players kneeled during the anthem last season.

Muguruza, Halep in French Open semis

Associated Press

PARIS — After Angelique Kerber's final backhand bounced out of bounds on Court Suzanne Lenglen, Simona Halep turned to her box and pointed to her head.

Coming from a player whose mental strength has often been questioned, the gesture spoke volumes.

The top-ranked player indeed showed solid nerves to turn things up after a really bad start in her French Open quarterfinal on Wednesday. After 2 hours and 14 minutes, Halep rallied past the 12th-seeded Kerber 6-7 (2), 6-3, 6-2 and reached the French Open semifinals for the third time.

"It was really about the mental," Halep said. "So I think that's why I won today. My head won it."

Halep got off a sluggish start and trailed 4-0 in the opening set. She fought back to force a tiebreaker but briefly lost her focus to drop the set after losing five consecutive points.

"After the first set I just stayed strong, I did not give up at all," Halep said. "I missed a lot at the beginning of the match. I tried to do too much. Then I changed a little bit of tactics and it worked."

Halep broke at the start of the second set and then Kerber dropped her serve again in the ninth game. In the decider, Halep came to the net more often to finish points and opened up a 4-1 lead. She broke again in the eighth game to seal the match.

Halep is still chasing her first Grand Slam title after several near-misses. She led Jelena Ostapenko by a set and

3-0 in last year's final at Roland Garros, but then fell apart and eventually lost to the unseeded Latvian in her second French Open final.

Halep next faces third-seeded Garbine Muguruza, who thrashed Maria Sharapova 6-2, 6-1 in a matchup of past French Open champions.

"I don't feel I'm favorite for this match, because she's played better than I have this year," Muguruza said. "She loves clay. She loves Roland Garros. She's shown it."

The No. 3-seeded Muguruza had lost all three previous meetings against Sharapova, who won two of her five Grand Slam titles at Roland Garros.

Muguruza has not dropped a set so far in this year's tournament as she seeks a second championship in Paris and third major trophy overall. The

Spaniard won the French Open in 2016 and Wimbledon last year.

"I think she did a lot of things better than I did. I think she was the aggressive one," Sharapova said. "She had a lot more depth in the ball. I think my shots were a lot more forced. She served a lot better than I did."

Sharapova looked far from her best right from the start, double-faulting three times to get broken in the opening game. She ended up with six double-faults and 27 total unforced errors, 12 more than Muguruza.

In men's play, Rafael Nadal was playing Diego Schwartzman bidding to reach his 11th semifinal at Roland Garros. Two past U.S. Open champions met in the other men's quarterfinal: No. 3 Marin Cilic against No. 5 Juan Martin del Potro.

Justify, early favorite, draws No. 1 post for Belmont

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Something Bob Baffert always dreads has come true ahead of the Belmont Stakes: Justify drew the No. 1 post for the colt's bid to sweep the Triple Crown.

The Kentucky Derby and Preakness winner was made the early 4-5 favorite in the 10-horse field for Saturday's race.

Baffert is not a fan of the inside post for his horses, no matter what the race.

"I never do like to draw the rail, but my horses seem to live in it," he said Tuesday. "We have it, we can't change it. We'll deal with it."

And history may be on Justify's side.

Since 1905, a leading 23 horses have won from the No. 1 post. The last to win from there was Empire Maker in 2003 when he spoiled Funny Cide's Triple Crown bid.

"He is so talented, I think he can dictate the race," Hall of Fame trainer D. Wayne Lukas said of Justify. "That is the thing that makes him very

tough to beat. He can pick his spots. He is the key to how all of us run."

Justify won the first two legs of the series from the No. 7 post. He ran on sloppy tracks both times and the forecast for Saturday calls for a 60 percent chance of rain.

This time the No. 7 hole went to Tenfold. The colt was a fast-closing third in the Preakness and is 12-1 for the Belmont.

Hofburg was made the 9-2 second choice. Trained by Hall of Famer Bill Mott, the colt finished seventh in the Kentucky Derby and skipped the Preakness.

The only other horses with single-digit odds are Preakness runner-up Bravazo and Vino Rosso, both at 8-1. Vino Rosso finished ninth in the Derby and didn't run in the Preakness.

Baffert is seeking a second Triple Crown victory in four years. American Pharoah ended a 37-year drought when he completed the sweep in 2015. He broke from the No. 1 post in the Preakness.

In the 2010 Kentucky Derby,

Baffert had the favorite with Lookin At Lucky, who broke from the No. 1 hole. The colt was pinned to the rail and had nowhere to go until a late run helped him finish sixth. He won the Preakness.

"Everybody is always joking in my family, [wife] Jill is always saying, 'They should just put you in the one hole and just draw the rest of the race,'" Baffert said. "I had a feeling I was due for the one."

Jockey Mike Smith will need to use Justify's speed to get him away from the starting gate before the rest of the field comes over on him along the rail.

"It's all you can hope for," Baffert said. "He is on the inside, so he can sort of dictate what's going to go, what's happening."

Justify and Bravazo, trained by Lukas, are the only two horses that will have run in all three Triple Crown races. Bravazo was sixth in the Derby and came running late to finish a half-length behind Justify in the Preakness.

"One of these horses or two

maybe has to run a little bit better than you would expect them to [to win], mine included," Lukas said.

Gronkowski is a 12-1 long shot, no doubt attractive odds for his part-owner Rob Gronkowski, the New England Patriots tight end. He and teammate Tom Brady have wagered together at the Derby in past years.

The Britain-based colt is a newcomer to the Triple Crown trail. He got sick and missed the Derby and has been waiting to make his U.S. debut in the grueling Belmont.

The field for the 150th Belmont in post position order with jockeys and odds: Justify, Smith, 4-5; Free Drop Billy, Robby Albarado, 30-1; Bravazo, Luis Saez, 8-1; Hofburg, Irad Ortiz Jr., 9-2; Restoring Hope, Geroux, 30-1; Gronkowski, Jose Ortiz, 12-1; Tenfold, Ricardo Santana Jr., 12-1; Vino Rosso, John Velazquez, 8-1; Noble Indy, Javier Castellano, 30-1; Blended Citizen, Kyle Frey, 15-1.

Nats' Scherzer fans 13, gets 10th win

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Max Scherzer kept throwing strikes and the Tampa Bay Rays kept making outs.

It was just another efficient outing for the Washington Nationals ace, who pitched eight strong innings Tuesday in a 4-2 victory to become the first 10-game winner in the majors this season.

Scherzer (10-1) won his ninth consecutive decision, striking out 13 while throwing 81 of his 99 pitches for strikes.

"I looked up at one time and he had 86 pitches (and) 70 strikes," Tampa Bay manager Kevin Cash said. "It's absurd. Guys just don't do that. There's a lot of good pitchers in this league, but for a guy to just sit

there and pound the strike zone the way he did and not give up hard hits, it's just really telling about how special a pitcher he is."

Scherzer struck out Johnny Field, Christian Arroyo and Daniel Robertson on a combined nine pitches in the sixth inning. It was the third nine-pitch/three-strikeout inning in Nationals history and the first since Scherzer did it against Philadelphia on May 14, 2017.

Scherzer joins Hall of Famers Lefty Grove, Randy Johnson, Sandy Koufax and Nolan Ryan as the only pitchers to accomplish the feat twice.

"I honestly didn't know I had it; then I walked off the field and I was like 'Wait a second, I think that was it,'" Scherzer said.

Sean Doolittle pitched the ninth for his 15th save.

Scherzer, who has struck out 25 over 16 innings in his last two starts, scattered five hits to Tampa Bay and did not allow a runner past second base until pinch hitter Brad Miller's two-out double in the eighth.

"Twenty-five out of 28 first-pitch strikes," Washington manager Dave Martinez said. "That's pretty much as good as it gets. He was awesome tonight."

Washington first baseman Matt Adams' solo homer to lead off the second opened the scoring. Juan Soto then singled, moved to third on Michael A. Taylor's single and slid under Wilson Ramos' tag when first baseman C.J. Cron threw home on Wilmer Difo's grounder.

Soto and Difo were central to a fourth-inning rally. Two batters after Soto worked a walk, Difo tripled to right-center and made it 4-0 when he slid under Tampa Bay starter Nathan Eovaldi's tag after a wild pitch.

Eovaldi (1-1) gave up four runs in five innings in his second start back from Tommy John surgery.

"I feel like I was ahead in most of the counts tonight," Eovaldi said. "I just couldn't put them away. I just couldn't get that splitter going, and the cutter wasn't as good as it was in that opening start."

Ramos, a National from 2010 to 2016, received an ovation before his first at-bat and went 0-for-4 in his first game in Washington since departing as a free agent.

MLB roundup

Andujar's grand slam helps Yankees down Blue Jays

Associated Press

TORONTO — Miguel Andujar first got manager Aaron Boone's attention at spring training.

Two months into his rookie season, Andujar's impressive hitting is getting attention all around the major leagues.

Andujar hit his first career grand slam, CC Sabathia pitched seven innings to snap a five-start winless streak and the New York Yankees beat the Toronto Blue Jays 7-2 on Tuesday night.

Aaron Hicks added a three-run blast as the Yankees won for the sixth time in seven games. New York is 30-9 since a 9-9 start.

Andujar connected off right-hander Seunghwan Oh (1-2) in the seventh, his seventh home run of the season.

"I feel really excited for that," Andujar said. "Another record for my career."

Andujar leads all big league rookies with 29 extra-base hits this season.

Diamondbacks 3, Giants 2:

Madison Bumgarner (0-1) tossed six solid innings in his long-awaited season debut but was outpitched by Patrick Corbin (6-2) as visiting Arizona snapped San Francisco's five-game winning streak.

Angels 1, Royals 0: Andrew Heaney (3-4) pitched a one-hitter on his 27th birthday to lead host Los Angeles past Kansas City.

Red Sox 6, Tigers 0: J.D. Martinez hit his 20th home run, Steven Wright (2-0) pitched seven sharp innings in his first start of the season and host Boston blanked Detroit.

Dodgers 5, Pirates 0: Joc Pederson, Yasiel Puig and Cody Bellinger hit home runs and surging Los Angeles won its fourth straight and 14th in the last 18 by beating host Pittsburgh.

Twins 4, 3; White Sox 2, 6: Jose Abreu hit a two-run homer in the first inning of the second game of a doubleheader to spoil Zack Littell's (0-1) major league debut and help visiting Chicago

bounce back from a late lapse in the opener.

In the first game, Eduardo Escobar hit a three-run homer with two outs in the eighth against Nate Jones (2-2) as the Twins ruined a stellar start by White Sox right-hander Reynaldo Lopez.

Orioles 2, Mets 1: Alex Cobb delivered his best performance since signing a rich contract with Baltimore late in spring training, helping his team break a seven-game losing streak by beating host New York.

Indians 3, Brewers 2: Corey Kluber (9-2) scattered seven hits in seven strong innings and moved into a tie for the American League lead with his ninth win, leading host Cleveland past Milwaukee.

Rockies 9, Reds 6: Chris Iannetta hit a two-run homer off Anthony DeSclafani (0-1) in his return to the mound, and Carlos Gonzalez added a three-run shot to power visiting Colorado past Cincinnati.

Mariners 7, Astros 1:

Kyle Seager, Mike Zunino and Jean Segura all homered off Dallas Keuchel (3-8) early to back up another solid start by James Paxton and lead visiting Seattle to its fifth straight win.

Rangers 7, Athletics 4: Adrian Beltre led off the eighth inning with a tiebreaking homer, one of host Texas' season-high five on the night.

Phillies 6, Cubs 1: Zach Eflin (2-2) pitched into the eighth inning, Nick Williams homered and visiting Philadelphia snapped a three-game slide with a win over Chicago.

Marlins 7, Cardinals 4: Brian Anderson and J.T. Riddle homered to help a shaky Jose Urena (1-7) get his first win of the season as visiting Miami stopped a six-game losing streak by beating St. Louis.

Braves 14, Padres 1: Freddie Freeman homered among his four hits, Dansby Swanson and Nick Markakis also went deep and visiting Atlanta routed San Diego.