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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

After threatening veto, Trump signs \$1.3T budget

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump signed a \$1.3 trillion spending measure Friday, averting a government shutdown at midnight, just hours after saying he was considering a veto.

Trump complained that the legislation does not fully fund his plans for a border wall with Mexico and does not address some 800,000 “Dreamer” immigrants who are now protected from deportation under a program that he has moved to eliminate. He said he signed it in order to provide needed money for the military.

Earlier on Friday, Trump cast doubt on whether he would back the massive spending bill, saying he was “considering” a veto. Then, adding to the made-for-TV drama, he scheduled a news conference. Telegraphing the outcome, an internal White House television feed advertised the event this way: “President Trump Participates in a Bill Signing.”

With Congress already on recess, Trump had said on Twitter that he was weighing a veto. He said that young immigrants now protected in the U.S. under Barack Obama’s Delayed Action for Childhood Arrivals “have been totally abandoned by the Democrats (not even mentioned in Bill) and the BORDER WALL, which is desperately needed for our National Defense, is not fully funded.”

Several advisers inside and outside the White House had characterized the tweet as Trump blowing off steam.

Trump’s tweet had been at odds with what top members of Trump’s administration and House Speaker Paul Ryan said Thursday, and with a formal

statement of administration policy, which said Trump was supportive of the measure.

It came hours after the Senate early Friday morning passed the \$1.3 trillion spending package aimed at keeping the government open past midnight. With Congress already out of town, the government will head toward a shutdown if Trump does not sign the bill Friday.

Trump has been increasingly frustrated with the media coverage of the bill, as conservative lawmakers and other critics have railed against it on cable news and in private calls. His tweet was cheered by the conservative House Freedom Caucus, which voted against the spending bill along with two dozen Republicans in the Senate.

Rep. Mark Meadows, R-N.C., chairman of the freedom caucus and a friend of the president, said in a tweet that the group would “fully support” a veto, adding that Congress should pass a short-term budget resolution while Trump and congressional leaders “negotiate a better deal for the forgotten men and women of America.”

Sen. Bob Corker, R-Tenn., also egged Trump on. “Please do, Mr. President,” he tweeted. “I am just down the street and will bring you a pen. The spending levels without any offsets are grotesque, throwing all of our children under the bus. Totally irresponsible.”

The House easily approved the spending package Thursday, 256-167, a bipartisan tally that underscored the popularity of the compromise, which funds the government through September. It beefs up military and domestic programs, delivering federal funds to every corner of the country.

Bill bans government credit card use in strip clubs, casinos

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The omnibus spending bill approved by Congress includes language that would explicitly ban U.S. troops and civilians working for the Defense Department from using government funding on expenses incurred in casinos or strip clubs.

The language states that no federal money “may be used for Government Travel Charge Card expenses by military or civilian personnel of the Department of Defense for gaming, or for entertainment that includes topless or nude entertainers or participants.”

It follows the release of a Defense Department inspector general report in 2015 that said that in a 12-month period ending June 30, 2014, \$952,258 was spent improperly using government charge cards in casinos and \$96,576 was spent in “adult entertainment establishments.” The numbers would have been even higher, but some transactions were declined by credit card companies, the watchdog found.

Using government charge cards in such establishments already is not allowed under Defense Department regulations. A Pentagon spokesman, Navy Cmdr. Patrick Evans, said Thursday that the department was reviewing the matter.

The language was included in the spending bill after the inspector general issued a follow-up report in August 2016 at the request of the Senate Armed Services Commit-

tee that found more problems in the Pentagon’s travel-card program. The watchdog found then that commanders and officials overseeing travel cards did not take appropriate action when notified by the Defense Department inspector general of findings in the first audit, and the inspector general detailed specific examples of misuse. The travel card program, the inspector general said, “remained vulnerable to continued misuse.”

In one case, the inspector general flagged five potential travel-card transactions involving casinos by a civilian employee at the Defense Threat Reduction Agency. During an investigation, the cardholder “stated that he thought personal use was acceptable as long as the bill was paid,” the report said.

The agency issued the employee a letter of reprimand in May 2014, but the inspector general found afterward that the same person continued to violate the rules. Those violations included withdrawing between \$104.50 and \$504.50 on three occasions near casinos in Charles Town, W.Va., and twice at a casino in Black Hawk, Colo.

The cardholder was allowed continued access to classified information despite the ongoing misuse of his travel card and after being reprimanded, the watchdog found. The Defense Threat Reduction Agency was not aware of the continued misuse until notified by the inspector general.

DOD wants more plutonium triggers for warheads

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The U.S. military is concerned that the government isn't moving quickly enough to ramp up American production of the plutonium cores that trigger nuclear warheads as the Trump administration proceeds with a \$1 trillion overhaul of the nation's nuclear force.

Questioning about production of the warhead cores was expected to figure into a testimony that Energy Secretary Rick Perry was slated to give Thursday to the Senate Armed Services Committee, a rare appearance by the top energy official at the Senate body that oversees the military.

Plutonium cores often are called plutonium pits because they rest inside nuclear bombs like pits inside stone fruits.

At issue is the Pentagon's demand that the National Nuclear Security Administration — overseen by the Department of Energy — be able to produce 80 plutonium pits per year by 2030 to sustain the military's nuclear weapons. Roughly the size of a grapefruit, plutonium pits that trigger warheads sometimes need to be replaced as they degrade or end up destroyed during evaluation.

The only U.S. facility capable of producing the pits at the moment, Los Alamos National Laboratory, is just coming back on line after suspending production years ago because of safety concerns. The lab recently restarted its operation but is still producing only research-and-development pits that are unsuitable for U.S. weapons. The facility must be expanded to meet the Pentagon's requirements.

Air Force Gen. John E. Hyten, who oversees U.S. nuclear forces as the head of Strategic Command, voiced worries about whether the nation's nuclear establishment will be able to meet the requirement, despite assurances from officials at the Energy Department and NNSA that they will prioritize the matter.

"I still have concerns," Hyten said in Senate testimony earlier this week. He said he was "very nervous" that the requirement might be met only "just in time."

Afghans shift to Black Hawks as sanctions impact Russian helos

BY PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN

Stars and Stripes

KANDAHAR AIR FIELD, Afghanistan — The nascent Afghan air force is in a race against the mechanical failure of its Russian-made helicopters as it works with its U.S. allies to operate new Black Hawks at a time when the Taliban may be the strongest it's been since before the 16-year war began.

Russian Mi-17 helicopters form the backbone of Afghanistan's air force. Afghan airmen are so familiar with the Mi-17 that they need very little international advice to use them effectively.

However, because the U.S. supports the Afghan military financially, the Russian helicopters won't be getting fixed much longer.

Sanctions against Russian arms manufacturers have made servicing the Mi-17 fleet increasingly difficult, the U.S. military says, and that means the Russian helicopters are unlikely to remain sustainable beyond next year.

Afghanistan's ability to transport troops and supplies would drop without viable helicopter squadrons, crippling its fight against insurgents and its goal of operating with less support from allies.

Afghanistan received its first Black Hawks six months ago. Since then, 11 have been delivered, with a total of 159 expected to arrive by 2024. The aircraft are former U.S. military UH-60A models upgraded to a more powerful UH-60A+ variant.

Plans are now on course for 16 pilots and 16 enlisted aircrew to finish the Black Hawk mission qualification program in May. The goal is to have eight crews of four — two pilots and two enlisted aircrew — operating during this year's fighting season, which begins in the spring. They'll be based at Kandahar Air Field and will be used for operations in Kandahar and Helmand provinces, officials said, performing the same functions as the Mi-17.

So far, "the transition has been phenomenal," said Air Force Col. Armando Fiterre, commander of the 738th Air Expeditionary Advisory Group, which trains and advises the Afghan air force at Kandahar Air Field. "Afghans are great fighters and they have taken to the UH-60 likes ducks to water."

Critics have called the Black Hawk transition politically motivated and said that it could hurt Afghan forces in the short term as it fights the Taliban and other groups.

Fiterre played down those concerns. "The political reality is that the Russian supply system is not keeping up with the demand of what we need," he said. "I'm not here to bash the Mi-17. It's a great helicopter. It can be the

best helicopter in the world, but if you can't sustain it, it does you no good.

"The UH-60 affords us that opportunity to tap into a reliable logistical chain, the U.S. military logistical chain, to supply the aircraft," he added.

The Black Hawk also brings several tactical advantages, U.S. officials said. At Forward Operating Base Shorab, in the Helmand Valley, operators can fit two Mi-17 helicopters comfortably on the helipad area and three in a pinch, said Air Force Maj. Ted Rogers, director of operations for the 441st Air Expeditionary Advisory Squadron.

Rogers said they can fit five of the more compact Black Hawks, meaning they can launch more independent missions at once.

The Black Hawk "gives you greater flexibility in the battlespace, so I can move troops faster, I can move more troops in a bigger lift package," Rogers said. "It's going to be a greater capability for the Afghan military."

Also, because the Black Hawk doesn't have to be sent to Russia for major maintenance like the Mi-17, "it's much easier to keep it flying in the field," Rogers added.

However, there is a learning curve for the new pilots and crews. U.S. officials at Kandahar told Stars and Stripes that some former Mi-17 pilots were finding it "hard to break habits" acquired during years of flying Russian helicopters. They said English, which is needed to understand the technical manuals, remains a hurdle for some trainees, as well.

The Black Hawk isn't the only aircraft able to take over traditional Mi-17 functions. The American-made Cessna 208 Caravan has been part of the Afghan air force for a number of years, and U.S. advisers are encouraging the Afghans to do more with it.

Afghan C208 pilot Capt. Naween, who is training to become an aircraft commander, said, "Of course airdrop is useful. We can supply ammunition, water, food, everything." But despite hours of practice, he's never been asked to do those things during an actual operation.

U.S. officials hope that will change as time runs out on the Mi-17's sustainability. As Afghanistan receives more Black Hawks and more Afghans are trained on the aircraft, squadrons will be established at bases across the country.

But for now, Fiterre said, the focus is creating a smooth "cultural shift" from Russian to U.S. aircraft. "It's an actual training and skills-set change that needs to occur," he said. "It's a cultural change."

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Trump to decide policy for trans troops

USA Today

WASHINGTON — A new policy on transgender troops is slated to go into effect Friday after months of consideration and court challenges, and it likely will restrict their service.

In August, President Donald Trump sent Defense Secretary Jim Mattis a memo ordering him to propose changes to the Obama-era policy that allows transgender troops to serve openly and to receive medical treatment, including sexual reassignment surgery.

Mattis made his recommendation on transgender service to the White House in Febru-

ary. If Trump does not accept it, the Pentagon will revert to its pre-2016 practice that effectively banned transgender troops from service on medical grounds, according to the memo.

Mattis, since taking charge at the Department of Defense, has emphasized the readiness of troops to deploy and fight. In February, the Pentagon established a policy that dismisses troops if they cannot deploy for a period of one year. Presumably, that principle could affect transgender troops who require medical care that could not be provided in a war zone.

Trump upended the policy

on transgender military service in July. He announced, via Twitter, that transgender troops were no longer welcome in the military, and that the government no longer would pay for their surgeries.

Trump's twitter announcement was not coordinated with the Pentagon, and leaders there scrambled to reassure transgender troops that they would not be kicked out and that their medical care would not be interrupted.

Federal courts have ruled that the Pentagon must allow transgender troops to volunteer for service. Several transgender recruits have signed up since becoming eligible Jan. 1.

A RAND Corp. study commissioned by the Department of Defense in 2016 found that there could be several thousand transgender troops among the active-duty force of 1 million. The report also determined that their medical treatment would have a minimal impact on military readiness.

The current policy for transgender troops was established in 2016 by then-Defense Secretary Ash Carter. It allows transgender servicemembers to serve openly and to seek medical attention, and allowed for recruits who have been stable in their genders for 18 months to join the military.

Lawyers for Marine call stabbing death accident

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — The defense team of a Marine accused in a fatal stabbing on a California Marine Corps base argued Thursday that the death was a tragic accident and the two friends were playing around with a knife.

Pfc. Raymond W. Begay faces charges of murder and obstruction of justice in the death of Pfc. Ethan Barclay-Weberpal, 18, who died the morning of Jan. 16 after being stabbed while sitting in formation with a platoon of Marines at the School of Infantry at Camp Pendleton, north of San Diego.

Several troops testifying for the defense said the death was an accident at a preliminary hearing Thursday at Camp Pendleton, according to the Orange County Register. The hearing — known as an Article 32 in the Uniform Code of Military Justice — allows the defense and the prosecution to introduce evidence and arguments. Both sides must submit written arguments as well. The convening authority then will determine what level of court-martial is ordered.

Begay immediately admitted to training instructors that he stabbed Barclay-Weberpal, witnesses testified. Defense attorneys said Begay should be charged with involuntary manslaughter, not murder.

"This was just dumb kids doing dumb things," testified defense wit-

ness Pfc. Rhett Glubka. "I don't think he (Begay) thought about what could have happened."

The family of Barclay-Weberpal, of Janesville, Wis., listened via teleconference.

Lance Cpl. Gavin Shorter testified that he was behind Begay when the stabbing occurred.

'This was just dumb kids doing dumb things. I don't think he (Pfc. Raymond Begay) thought about what could have happened.'

Pfc. Rhett Glubka
defense witness

Shorter testified that he saw Begay reach over Barclay-Weberpal's right shoulder and place the knife into the left side of his chest but "I don't believe it was intentional, sir," he told Maj. Nelson Candelario, one of three members of Begay's defense team. "There was no anger, no argument, no conflict. We were all good friends."

He said the other Marines saw blood coming from Barclay-Weberpal's chest and tried to tug at his shirt to cover it up, but "we didn't think it was fatal and we didn't want to get into trouble. After we

got out of formation, we were going to help him."

Shorter said Begay was known to play with knives and had made stabbing motions at inanimate objects such as mattresses and lockers. He described Begay as a level-headed kid — a "solid Marine." He also said Begay appeared pale and scared and "just shook-up" after the incident.

Shorter testified that Begay was playing around with a knife before he stabbed Barclay-Weberpal.

Maj. Tanzania Jaysura, lead trial prosecutor, said she had testimony from at least three other Marines who said Begay was known to have threatened to stab other Marines and that some had told him to stop because it made them uncomfortable. She said she also had testimony showing Begay left the bleacher area after the stabbing to wash blood from his knife.

"The knife was not the type of knife that retracts and opens to the front and witnesses will say they saw him play with the knife before the stabbing and that words were exchanged and that he intentionally put the knife into Barclay-Weberpal's left chest, into his heart," Jaysura said.

She said the left ventricle of his heart was punctured with only one stab wound.

"It was a deep puncture wound," she said. "Rather than getting help, he went to put the knife away — that's where we believe we have obstruction of justice."

Poll: Americans split on '03 Iraq invasion

By WYATT OLSON

Stars and Stripes

Fifteen years after U.S. troops invaded Iraq in March 2003, Americans are split over whether the use of military force was the right decision, new polling shows.

Nearly half of Americans — 48 percent — say President George W. Bush's administration's decision to invade the country was wrong, according to a survey conducted among 1,466 adults March 7-14 by the Pew Research Center.

Forty-three percent told pollsters it was the right decision.

The Bush administration

maintained that Iraq, led by dictator Saddam Hussein, possessed weapons of mass destruction and that the regime posed an imminent threat to the U.S. and its allies.

Some U.S. officials said Hussein was supporting al-Qaida, the group responsible for the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

No evidence of weapons of mass destruction was found after the invasion.

According to a Defense Department tally, 4,411 service-members died in Operation Iraqi Freedom, and another 31,957 were wounded.

Support for military intervention in Iraq has declined considerably during the past 15 years, according to Pew.

In late March 2003, Pew found that 71 percent supported the decision to invade, compared with 22 percent who said it was wrong. A year later, only 55 percent of those polled thought it was the right decision. By 2007, public opinion on the war had turned "decidedly negative," according to Pew.

The majority of those identifying either as Democrats or Republicans initially were more supportive of the war.

Today, a 61 percent majority of Republicans and GOP-

leaning independents say the decision to use force was right, compared with only 27 percent of Democrats or those leaning Democratic, Pew found.

During the first decade of the war, a majority of Americans viewed the Iraq War as successful. That optimism has dwindled since 2014, just as the terrorist group Islamic State drove Iraqi troops out of western Iraq and captured the major city of Mosul. The group has been largely eradicated from the country since.

Today, a slim majority of 53 percent of Americans say the U.S. "mostly failed" in achieving its goals in Iraq, Pew found.

President replaces McMaster

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Charging ahead with the dramatic remaking of his White House, President Donald Trump said he would replace national security adviser H.R. McMaster with the former U.N. Ambassador John Bolton, a foreign policy hawk entering an administration facing key decisions on Iran and North Korea.

After weeks of speculation about McMaster's future, Trump and the respected three-star general put a positive face on the Thursday departure, making no reference to the growing public friction between them. Trump tweeted that McMaster had done "an outstanding job & will always remain my friend." He said Bolton will take over April 9 as his third national security adviser in just over a year.

The national security shake-up comes as the president is increasingly shedding advisers who once eased the Republican establishment's concerns about the foreign policy and political novice in the White House. McMaster is the sixth close adviser or aide to announce a departure in a turbulent six weeks, joining ally Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who was uncer-

emoniously fired last week.

The White House has said the president is seeking to put new foreign policy leaders in place ahead of a not-yet-scheduled meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. Bolton is likely to add a hard-line influence on those talks, as well as deliberations over whether to pull out of the Iran nuclear deal.

The White House said McMaster's exit had been under discussion for some time and stressed it was not due to any one incident, including this week's stunning leak about Trump's recent phone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

McMaster had briefed Trump before the Putin call — and his team drafted all-caps instructions telling Trump not to congratulate the Russian leader on his re-election victory. Trump did it anyway.

An internal investigation into the leak is underway, said a White House official who — like others interviewed about the announcement and the White House shake-up — demanded anonymity to discuss internal matters.

In a statement released by the White House, McMaster said he would be requesting retirement from the U.S. Army effective this summer, adding that

afterward, he "will leave public service."

McMaster had told confidants he would leave the post if at any point he lost credibility on the international stage, according to three White House officials. The feverish speculation about an impending exit sped up the decision for him to depart, the officials said, in part because McMaster believed foreign partners were beginning to doubt his influence.

Chief of staff John Kelly and Defense Secretary Jim Mattis had been pushing Trump to get rid of McMaster and had been escalating their campaign in recent weeks. It had appeared McMaster's departure was imminent last week — but White House officials insisted the speculation was false.

"Just spoke to @POTUS and Gen. H.R. McMaster — contrary to reports they have a good working relationship and there are no changes at the NSC," White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders tweeted late last Thursday night.

McMaster never developed a personal rapport with Trump, who chafed at his long-winded briefing style, according to a White House official and a person close to the president.

Victim of Md. shooting at school dies

Associated Press

A teenage girl who was shot when a classmate opened fire inside their Maryland high school has died, authorities said Friday.

The St. Mary's County Sheriff's Office said Jaelynn Willey, 16, died at 11:34 p.m. Thursday. Earlier that night, her family said she would be taken off life support at the University of Maryland Prince George's Hospital Center. Melissa Willey told news reporters Thursday night that her daughter was brain dead and had "no life left in her."

The mother, holding a young baby, said, "On Tuesday ... our lives changed completely and totally forever. My daughter was hurt by a boy who shot her in the head and took everything from our lives."

The teen was shot Tuesday by Austin Rollins, 17, at Great Mills High School in St. Mary's County.

Rollins died after shooting Willey. A school resource officer got there within a minute and fired a shot at Rollins, but it's not yet clear whether Rollins was killed by the officer's bullet or took his own life.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Lottery changes 'Luck Yeah!' campaign

NH CONCORD — The New Hampshire Lottery Commission has replaced its "Luck Yeah!" ad campaign with "Win Time" over concerns that the original phrase sounded like profanity.

WMUR-TV reported at least one state official, Republican Executive Councilor Russell Prescott, criticized the phrase last month after it started showing up online and in television commercials.

But Lottery Executive Director Charlie McIntyre defended the ads. He had said the word "luck" is an inherent part of the business. He apologized if it was insensitive. But, he added, "certainly, it is effective."

McIntyre had said Prescott's complaint was the first he had heard but noted the ad was designed to make viewers pay attention.

Man in jail for tossing chairs flips court table

IN COLUMBUS — A southern Indiana man already serving prison time for hurling courtroom chairs at a judge and others was hauled away from a court after flipping a table.

The Republic reported Wednesday marked the most recent violent outburst from Jordan Rhoades, 21, of Columbus. He was being sentenced after reaching a plea deal in a battery case in which he, according to authorities, threw metal rods from a cell door at Bartholomew County jail deputies in September.

During a Feb. 9, 2017, hearing, Rhoades hurled a chair that hit a prosecutor on the leg and threw other chairs in an outburst recorded on surveil-

lance video. He was sentenced last year to six years in prison after he pleaded guilty to battery resulting in bodily injury to a public safety officer.

Peace be with you, but use sanitizer

ME PORTLAND — The Roman Catholic Diocese of Portland said it's OK to shake hands at Mass again, though churchgoers still should be mindful of the presence of influenza.

The diocese, which includes all of Maine, announced protocols to avoid spreading flu in January. Those included suspending sharing of consecrated wine during communion and holding hands during the Lord's Prayer. The diocese also discouraged parishioners from shaking hands while greeting.

The diocese said Wednesday that Bishop Robert Deeley decided to lift the protocols. However, he also said parishioners should use judgment based on the status of influenza in their local area.

The Maine Center for Disease Control & Prevention said influenza's still widespread in the state. Maine has seen six deaths, 77 hospitalizations and 380 positive tests during the past week.

Restaurant that took 10 years to build closes

NY HEMPSTEAD — A New York restaurant that took more than 10 years to build has closed after two years in operation.

Newsday reported Wednesday Barto has closed. The 140-seat restaurant served a variety of dishes in a lavish environment complete with a red Venetian chandelier.

The restaurant's design had

prompted the newspaper to call it one of the most romantic restaurants on Long Island.

Barto was a project led by Donald and Anne Finley, a couple who also own Bayville's Shipwreck Tavern and the Jekyll and Hyde club in Manhattan.

It is unclear what led to the restaurant's closing. The couple have not responded to requests for comment.

Police cite man who shot finger while asleep

NE OMAHA — Police said a 30-year-old Omaha man accidentally shot his pinky finger after falling asleep while holding his new handgun.

The Omaha World-Herald reported that the accident happened early Tuesday. Police said the man told officers he was sitting on a couch in his house when he "must have fallen asleep" holding his newly purchased 9 mm pistol in his right hand. He told officers he awoke about 4:30 a.m. to a loud bang and realized he had shot his left pinky finger.

The man's wife and children were asleep at the time and weren't hurt. The man was taken to a hospital, where he was told the wound would require surgery.

Police cited the man on suspicion of having an unregistered firearm and unlawful discharge of a firearm.

Man arrested after woman found in trunk

WY CASPER — A Wyoming man has been charged with kidnapping after police found a 95-year-old woman bound with duct tape in the trunk of a vehicle.

Casper police said they ar-

rested Kyle Martin, 20, on Tuesday and took a second man into custody Wednesday.

The Casper Star-Tribune reported McClure was charged with six felonies, including aggravated kidnapping, conspiracy to commit aggravated kidnapping and aggravated robbery.

Circuit Court Judge Steven Brown set bail at \$500,000 cash or surety.

According to police, officers arrested Martin after he fled in a vehicle. The woman was found about six hours later when one of Martin's relatives told police to search the trunk.

KTWO-AM reported that she was being treated for cuts at a local hospital.

Ex-beauty queen avoids jail in pot-smuggling try

OH LIMA — A former Miss Kentucky who tried to smuggle a small amount of marijuana into an Ohio prison for her boyfriend won't have to spend time behind bars.

The Lima News reported Kia Hampton, 28, of Louisville, Ky., received probation Wednesday during a hearing in Allen County, Ohio. Authorities said Hampton was found with a marijuana-filled balloon at the Allen-Oakwood Correctional Institution in May 2017.

While prosecutors pushed for a prison sentence, the judge said Hampton seemed remorseful. She could have received three years in prison.

Hampton was crowned Miss Kentucky in 2010 and became the first black woman to represent the state in the Miss USA pageant.

She told the judge Wednesday she wants a "fresh start" and attributed her behavior to "foolishness."

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Elite Eight awaits ninth-seeded K-State

Associated Press

ATLANTA — Barry Brown Jr. darted into the lane, blowing by everybody in blue, and delivered a rare burst of offense just in the nick of time.

He wasn't done, either.

As Kansas State celebrated yet another upset in the bracket-busting South, knocking out Kentucky's latest group of fabulous freshmen, Brown leaped over the press table like Superman and waded into the arms of the purple-clad fans.

Xavier Sneed scored 22 points and Brown came through with the shot of the game, banking one in with his left hand before he sprawled out on the court to give gritty K-State a 61-58 victory over Kentucky in the South Regional semifinals Thursday night.

"We knew they were going to try to block the shot with their length," Brown said. "They were blocking shots all night. Once I got away from my guy, I just wanted to go to the basket."

Demeaned by many pundits as the worst team still alive in the NCAA Tournament, ninth-seeded K-State got the last

laugh against a program that holds eight national titles.

Next up: the regional final against No. 11 seed Loyola, which continued its stunning run in the tournament with a 69-68 victory over Nevada.

Yep, it's 9 vs. 11 in the Elite Eight for the first time in tournament history, with a trip to the Final Four on the line.

Just the way it should be in a regional that became the first in NCAA history to have the top four seeds knocked out the very first weekend, including No. 1-ranked Virginia.

Sneed wasn't around at the end — he was among three players from Kansas State (25-11) to foul out — but Brown seized the moment with 18 seconds remaining.

"He's the guy you've got to go through. He can make plays," K-State coach Bruce Weber said. "He missed a couple of them there down the stretch, but he made a big one at the end."

Brown's basket made it 60-58, but Kentucky still had a shot.

Two of them, in fact.

Quade Green put up an airball from beyond the arc and Kansas State rebounded, draw-

ing a foul that sent Amaad Wainright to the line for two free throws. He made only one, giving Kentucky (26-11) one more chance to force overtime.

Shai Gilgeous-Alexander got a decent look at the basket. His shot rimmed out as the horn sounded.

"I just see a lot of grit, a lot of guys that love each other," Brown said. "We play defense the right way and just play for each other."

John Calipari was denied a shot at his fifth Final Four in nine seasons as Kentucky's coach. Fears that his young players would "drink the poison" — the belief that they had an easy path to San Antonio thanks to all the upsets — turned out to be well founded.

"We didn't play particularly well for us but still had a chance to win," Calipari said. "The game was physical. ... It kind of got us a little out of rhythm and it wears you down. I think Shai got a little worn down."

P.J. Washington led Kentucky with 18 points. Gilgeous-Alexander was just 2-for-10 shooting, scoring most of his 15 points at the foul line.

With a predominantly blue-

clad crowd cheering on Kentucky at Philips Arena — yep, it was definitely "Cat-lanta" — Kansas State raced out to a 13-1 lead before the game was 4 minutes old.

Kentucky finally woke up, closing the gap to 33-29 by half-time. But both teams struggled offensively, and every time it looked like the perennial powerhouse might be on the verge of taking control, K-State had a response.

"We got great stops," Weber said. "It was such a gutsy performance. Persistence. Relentless. We are playing with all little guys, everyone fouled out, and we kept battling and found a way to win."

A remarkable victory, indeed, considering K-State shot just 35 percent from the field, attempted 15 fewer free throws than Kentucky and was out-rebounded 38-29. Brown, with 13 points, and Sneed were the only players in double figures, but defense carried the day again for Weber's team.

"We just kept grinding," the coach said. "We said, 'Keep grinding, keep fighting.' We've got a chance to go to the Final Four now."

Loyola tops Nevada to continue Cinderella run

Associated Press

ATLANTA — With Loyola-Chicago's captivating NCAA Tournament run hanging in the balance, it was Marques Townes' turn to deliver another memorable finish.

Townes had scored only a combined 15 points in Loyola's first two NCAA Tournament games, but that didn't concern Ramblers coach Porter Moser. Townes had the ball in front of the Loyola bench in the final seconds Thursday night with the shot clock about to expire.

With Loyola clinging to a one-point lead and only 6.3 seconds remaining, Townes nailed the decisive three-pointer to help clinch a 69-68 win over Nevada in the NCAA South Regional semifinal.

"He was a warrior," Moser said.

Townes, who had 18 points, charged down the court, pumping his fist, following the shot.

"I'll probably remember it for the rest of

my life," Townes said. "I mean, it doesn't really get any better than that."

Following a timeout, Nevada's Caleb Martin answered with a three, but this time the Wolf Pack couldn't extend their string of second-half comebacks in the tournament.

"Got to give so much credit to Nevada, they never quit," Moser said. "Those guys keep coming at you, coming at you. ... I was blessed we made a couple of plays at the end, got a couple of stops."

The win leaves the No. 11th-seeded Ramblers, the biggest surprise in a regional that has lost its top four seeds, one victory from a Final Four appearance. Loyola (31-5), which has won three tournament games by a combined four points, will face fellow underdog Kansas State in Saturday's regional final.

Not bad for a program that hadn't been in the Sweet 16 in 33 years.

On a team that shares the spotlight, this was Townes' moment. He made each of his

two threes and led Loyola with five assists. He said he was fine after banging knees with Nevada's Jordan Caroline at the end of the game.

"I think Marques Townes is the best player on the court tonight," said Loyola guard Clayton Custer. "I don't even think it was close, either. ... This is unbelievable. Feels like a dream."

Martin led Nevada (29-8) with 21 points. Twin brother Cody Martin had 16. Caroline added 19.

"We get a stop on the three they shot at the buzzer and maybe we're sitting up here with a win," said Nevada coach Eric Musselman.

Caleb Martin bemoaned his missed defensive opportunity before Townes' big three.

"I should have denied the catch," Martin said of Loyola's pass to Townes. "I just got lost and it was costly."

Streaking Michigan wallops Texas A&M

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Michigan took all the drama out of this NCAA Tournament victory, burying Texas A&M under a barrage of three-point shots.

After reaching the round of 16 with an improbable buzzer-beater, the Wolverines shot 62 percent from the floor and routed the Aggies 99-72 in the West Regional semifinals on Thursday night to advance to the Elite Eight for the third time in six years.

Next up the Wolverines will face No. 9 seed Florida State on Saturday at Staples Center for a trip to the Final Four.

The Wolverines (31-7) dominated from start to finish, hitting 14 three-pointers — 10 in the first half when they led by 29 points — and extending their winning streak to 12 games.

"Felt like we ran into a buzz saw," Aggies coach Billy Kennedy said. "It seemed like everything they shot went in."

Muhammad-Ali Abdur-Rahkman scored 24 points, Moe Wagner added 21 points and Charles Matthews had 18 points as third-seeded Michigan had five players in double figures.

"My shot went in early and it gives you the confidence to take the next one," Abdur-Rahkman said. "I think everyone had that confidence today."

Abdur-Rahkman made four three-pointers and both of his free throws, and had five rebounds and seven assists.

"This senior right here played his tail off in every single way," Michigan coach John Beilein said.

The Wolverines were good in the first half and even better in the second. The rout was on by halftime with Michigan leading 52-28 after shooting 57 percent from the floor. In the second half, the Wolverines improved to 68 percent from the floor.

"It was kind of hard to see because I was just wondering when they were going to miss,"

Aggies guard Admon Gilder said.

Michigan won its second-round game to reach the Sweet 16 on freshman Jordan Poole's long three at the buzzer against Houston.

The Aggies (22-13) never made a run, going long stretches without a basket in the first half while Michigan was scoring on nearly every trip down the floor.

"We weren't focused," said freshman guard T.J. Starks, who had five turnovers. "We didn't show up."

Tyler Davis led the seventh-seeded Aggies with 24 points.

Having beaten defending national champion North Carolina by 21 points to get to Los Angeles, Texas A&M's stay was short.

"That's the nature of this game, the nature of this tournament," Kennedy said. "You can be high one minute and low the next."

The Aggies have yet to reach an Elite Eight, and Michigan made sure they never had a chance.

Poole hit the Wolverines' first three-pointer two minutes into the game. During one stretch, they made threes on three consecutive possessions that extended their lead to 25-10 and had the predominantly Michigan crowd chanting, "Let's go Blue!"

"Everywhere we go we have a huge fan base and it feels like a home game," said Wagner, a junior from Germany.

Wagner connected on all three of his three-point attempts, the first one coming on Abdur-Rahkman's kickout from the paint, one of 21 assists for the Wolverines.

"We've been playing within ourselves all year and not looking at the opponent too much," Wagner said. "We've been believing all year we can beat anyone if we play our best basketball."

Seminoles score upset of No. 4 Gonzaga to advance

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Terance Mann grabbed the basketball with both hands and screamed, relishing his turn to be the high-scoring hero while Florida State steadily pulled away from Gonzaga.

If he doesn't get the opportunity again, the junior guard will be just fine with it. These surprising Seminoles are thriving on balance, discipline and tremendous teamwork during an upset run that has stretched all the way to the brink of the Final Four.

Mann scored 18 points and the ninth-seeded Seminoles advanced to the Elite Eight for just the third time in school history with a 75-60 victory over the fourth-seeded Zags on Thursday night in the West Regional semifinal.

Mann was the only double-digit scorer for the Seminoles (23-11) as they coolly knocked off a third straight higher-seeded opponent in the NCAA Tournament — one with a 16-game winning streak, no less.

"I'm sure there was a lot of nines and eights and sevens and fives on that box score?" Mann asked, and he was right: Five Seminoles contributed at least seven points apiece.

"It's just about whoever's on the court is going to give you their whole effort," Mann said. "It's amazing to be on a team like this and know that if you're not doing it, somebody else will pick you up."

Florida State is in the Elite Eight for the first time since 1993 with a chance at its first Final Four berth since 1972 — coincidentally, just down Figueroa Street at the recently demolished Los Angeles Sports Arena. It's an incredible run out West for a team that went 9-9 in ACC play and lost its conference tournament opener.

Coach Leonard Hamilton's best postseason run in his 16 years at Florida State is extended to Saturday, when the Seminoles will face third-seeded Michigan for a trip to the Final Four in San Antonio. The Wolverines advanced with a 99-72

rout of Texas A&M.

"We knew we were capable of this," said guard P.J. Savoy, who had six points. "As long as we stuck with our program, we knew we had the kind of athletes that not too many other teams have seen before."

Maintaining a lead down the stretch at Staples Center, Florida State halted Gonzaga's push for a second straight Final Four berth by last year's tournament finalist.

Florida State followed up its stunning comeback against top-seeded Xavier last weekend with a steady, dominant second half against Gonzaga. The Seminoles jumped to a 13-point lead early in the second half and never let their margin dip below four, with Mann providing the biggest buckets along the way.

Rui Hachimura scored 16 points and Zach Norvell Jr. added 14 for the Zags (32-5), who hadn't lost since Jan. 18. Already playing without injured forward Killian Tillie, the Zags struggled when forwards Johnathan Williams and Hachimura got into early foul trouble.

"Every time we thought we had something going forward, they took it right back and got a big stop or a big bucket," Gonzaga forward Corey Kispert said. "A credit to how tough they are, and how many close games they've played in. Really frustrating on our end, because those things usually happen for us down the stretch."

The Seminoles' 11-man rotation, defensive energy and balanced scoring have all been a nightmare for three straight opponents. On both ends of the court, this is a prime example of a team coming into its best form at the perfect time in March.

Meanwhile, foul trouble, poor outside shooting and sub-par ball movement all doomed the Zags, who didn't rise to the March challenge as impressively as last season's team did. That impressive run would have been hard to top, and they didn't.

NBA roundup

Walker, Hornets rip Grizzlies

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Kemba Walker was surprised to learn his Charlotte Hornets had just recorded the sixth-largest win in NBA history.

"That's not something you see every day," Walker said after his 46 points led the Hornets to a 140-79 victory Thursday night over the Memphis Grizzlies. "We played well. We knew these guys were short-handed with no Mike Conley and Marc Gasol, who are two awesome players. But we just handled our business."

Did they ever.

With Walker leading the charge with the ninth 40-point game of his career, the Hornets roared ahead 12-2 in the first 4½ minutes, were ahead 37-14 after one quarter, 75-42 at halftime and by a game-high 65 points (137-72) with 1:45 left before taking the 61-point win.

Only Cleveland's 68-point win over Miami in 1991, Indiana's 65-point victory over Portland in 1998, the Los Angeles Lakers' 63-point rout of Golden State in 1972, Golden State's 62-point win over Sacramento in 1991 and the old Syracuse Nationals' 62-point win over the New York Knicks in 1960 were larger in league history.

Charlotte's largest previous win in franchise history came by 52 points (136-84) at home against Philadelphia on Feb. 27, 1992.

Pelicans 128, Lakers 125: Anthony Davis capped a 33-point performance with two clutch free throws and a game-sealing steal in the final seconds, Rajon Rondo had 24 points and 10 assists, and host New Orleans erased an 11-point, fourth-quarter deficit to beat Los Angeles.

Rockets 100, Pistons 96 (OT): James Harden scored 21 points, including 10 of his team's 12 points in overtime, to shake off a tough four quarters and lift host Houston over Detroit.

76ers 118, Magic 98: Joel Embiid had 17 points and nine rebounds in just 20 minutes and surging Philadelphia moved closer to a playoff berth with a victory over host Orlando.

Jazz 119, Mavericks 112: Donovan Mitchell scored 26 points and visiting Utah got back on the winning track by beating Dallas.

Kings 105, Hawks 90: Justin Jackson scored 11 of his season-high 20 points in the third quarter and host Sacramento beat Atlanta in a game that was delayed due to protesters who were locked arm-in-arm surrounding entrances to Golden1 Center.

Sports briefs

Spieth, Reed win matches

Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas — Jordan Spieth and Patrick Reed play some of their most spirited golf against one another in the Presidents Cup and Ryder Cup, remarkable only because they're on the same team.

Now they're opponents. And the stakes in the Dell Technologies Match Play are personal.

The loser goes home.

The most intriguing match that came out of the draw at the start of the week was packed with significance Thursday when Spieth and Reed won matches for the second straight day to set up a showdown on the skirts of Hill Country in Texas.

They were set to play Friday, one of four matches between players who have yet to lose this week at Austin Country Club.

Former franchise owner Huizenga dies

MIAMI — H. Wayne Huizenga, a college dropout who built a business empire that included Blockbuster Entertainment, AutoNation and three professional sports franchises, has died at 80.

Valerie Hinkell, a longtime assistant to Huizenga, said Friday when reached at the family residence that he died Thursday night at his home. She gave no details on cause of death.

Starting in 1968, Huizenga built Waste Management Inc. into a Fortune 500 company. By 1983, it was the largest waste disposal company in the U.S.

The model worked again with Blockbuster Video, which he started in 1985.

Huizenga was the founding owner of baseball's Florida Marlins and the NHL's Florida Panthers. He bought the NFL's Miami Dolphins and their stadium for \$168 million in 1994, but had sold all three teams by 2009.

NHL roundup

Kopitar's four goals lead Kings past Avs

Associated Press

DENVER (AP) — Anze Kopitar became the first Kings player with a four-goal game since 1993, Jonathan Quick stopped 29 shots and Los Angeles picked up another valuable road win by cruising past the Colorado Avalanche 7-1 on Thursday night.

Kopitar was so efficient that he picked up his fourth career hat trick with 7:33 remaining in the second period. He added another goal early in the third. This was the first four-goal game by a Kings player since Luc Robitaille accomplished the feat on Nov. 25, 1993, at Quebec.

Tobias Rieder had two goals and Jake Muzzin scored his first goal since Feb. 3 for the Kings.

Lightning 7, Islanders 6: J.T.

Miller scored twice, Brayden Point had a goal and two assists, and high-scoring Tampa Bay held off host New York.

Sharks 2, Golden Knights 1 (OT): Logan Couture scored 39 seconds into overtime to send host San Jose to its season-high sixth straight victory.

Blue Jackets 4, Panthers 0: Sergei Bobrovsky stopped 33 shots for his fifth shutout of the season, Cam Atkinson had a goal and an assist, and host Columbus beat Florida for its 10th straight victory.

Capitals 1, Red Wings 0: Philipp Grubauer made 39 saves for his third shutout of the season, and Brett Connolly scored on a third-period breakaway to lift visiting Washington past Detroit.

Maple Leafs 5, Predators 2: Auston Matthews had a goal in his return from a shoulder

injury that sidelined him for 10 games and visiting Toronto beat Nashville..

Hurricanes 6, Coyotes 5: Jeff Skinner scored his second goal with 1:58 left, and host Carolina beat Arizona despite giving up a weird goal when the puck stuck in goalie Cam Ward's skate.

Oilers 6, Senators 2: Connor McDavid had two goals and two assists and visiting Edmonton eliminated Ottawa from playoff contention.

Flyers 4, Rangers 3: Travis Konecny scored twice, Claude Giroux had three assists and host Philadelphia beat New York.

Canucks 5, Blackhawks 2: Alexander Edler scored twice, Jacob Markstrom made 39 saves and visiting Vancouver beat Chicago to stop a seven-game slide.