

Russia's failures imbue DOD with confidence

The Washington Post

For more than a decade, the Pentagon, pinned down in Afghanistan, followed China's rise as a global power and Russia's ambitious military modernization program with growing alarm. The consensus in Beijing, Moscow and among some in Washington was that an era of U.S. global dominance was rapidly coming to an end.

But one month into Russia's invasion of Ukraine, senior Pentagon officials are brimming with newfound confidence in American power, spurred by the surprising effectiveness of U.S.-backed Ukrainian forces, Russia's heavy battlefield losses and the cautionary lessons they believe China is taking from the war.

"Let me put it this way," said one senior Pentagon official of America's standing in the world. "Who would you switch places with? Seriously, who would you switch places with?"

It's a stunning shift in tone for a department that in August ended a 20-year war in Afghanistan with a chaotic withdrawal as an ascendant Taliban returned to power. Even though

the U.S. military has not played the primary role in the American response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, senior Pentagon officials are quick to tout the still-unfolding war as proof of America's economic, diplomatic and military strength.

The senior Pentagon official, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss internal strategy, said the last few weeks have shown the United States can marshal its "primacy in the global financial system" and its network of allies "in ways that can absolutely pummel aggressors."

The success of U.S. and NATO-trained Ukrainian forces has also bolstered the Pentagon's confidence following the embarrassing collapse of U.S.-trained militaries in Iraq and Afghanistan over the last decade. The Ukrainian military's will to fight and ability to inflict heavy losses on larger and more technologically advanced Russian force has taken many at the Pentagon by surprise.

"I think Ukraine has been able to tie the Russians in knots in large part because of what we've been able to do to help them since 2014," the senior defense official said, adding

that the failures of Afghan forces "might" have caused U.S. officials to underestimate Ukrainian troops.

Such optimism isn't universally shared. Critics have noted the Russian invasion is only one month old and that the Russians are already using their overwhelming firepower advantage to level Ukrainian cities in an attempt to secure a brutal and bloody victory. Even a partial triumph would allow Russian President Vladimir Putin to say he had stood up to the world and the flood of arms from the West.

The U.S. has also relied heavily on European allies, who have often taken the lead in leveling crippling sanctions on the Russian economy at considerable costs to themselves. It's not yet clear whether the current unity will fracture if the war drags on for months.

"We need to demonstrate our [collective] power every day, and we can only demonstrate it if we keep everybody together," said Ivo Daalder, president of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and a former U.S. ambassador to NATO. "This is not something the U.S. has traditionally done well."

'Cheap' missiles may help small nations deter China

By **SETH ROBSON**

Stars and Stripes

Anti-ship missiles could help smaller nations deter China if it seeks to use Russia's war in Ukraine to create a blueprint for conquering Taiwan or grabbing more territory in the South China Sea, according to security experts.

Any future conflict involving Beijing will likely be waged at sea, said Patricio Abinales, a professor at the University of Hawaii's School of Pacific and Asian Studies.

"There is a lot of chatter about how China could use what is happening to Ukraine to map a strategy of conquering Taiwan and projecting further its power in the South China Sea," he told

Stars and Stripes in an email Tuesday.

Outnumbered and outgunned Ukrainian forces are using weapons such as Javelin anti-tank missiles supplied by the United States and its allies to extract a heavy toll on Russian invaders.

"I think things like the use of missiles and weapons that can easily be moved around are being factored in by both [China and its potential adversaries]," Abinales said.

"It may even things up between small countries like the Philippines and Taiwan and big hegemony like China."

Missiles would be particularly useful for the Philippines, which has only a small navy con-

sisting mainly of refurbished Vietnam-War-era coast guard cutters, he said.

"If Philippine marines could now carry Stingers or other similar handy anti-ship missiles, their odds at stalling any Chinese advance become better," he said.

Ukrainian troops' battlefield success, including rumors last week that they sank a Russian amphibious assault ship, is likely having a sobering effect on China, Lyle Goldstein, director of Asia Engagement at Defense Priorities and Visiting Professor at Brown University, told Stars and Stripes by phone Friday.

Nations bordering the South China Sea such as Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam and Ma-

laysia have both shore- and sea-based anti-ship defenses, New Zealand-based security expert Paul Buchanan said in an email Wednesday.

Anti-tank Javelins and anti-ship missiles are precision-guided weapons that are relatively inexpensive compared to their targets, said former Navy Capt. Jan van Tol, a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments in Washington, D.C.

"Having large numbers of relatively cheap, well-dispersed precision-guided weapons can be a highly effective deterrent and, if necessary, warfighting asset in both land and sea domains," he said in an email Wednesday.

Japan OKs bigger budget to host US, boost accord

Associated Press

TOKYO — Japan's parliament on Friday approved a new agreement with the United States, endorsing Japanese government spending exceeding \$8 billion for hosting U.S. troops as the two sides strengthen their military alliance in the face of a growing threat from China and North Korea in the region.

The \$8.6 billion host nation support budget covers the purchase of advanced arsenals used in their joint military exercises, as well as utilities and facilities used by the U.S. troops and their Japanese employees working on American bases in the country through March 2027.

The upcoming five-year budget includes a new funding category of up to \$164 million for the purchase of advanced virtual combat training systems for joint exercises between the two forces.

The roughly \$1.6 billion for the first year is included in the fiscal 2022 nation-

al defense budget — a record \$44 billion — beginning in April.

Japan's government now describes the host-nation support budget as necessary for strengthening the alliance, rather than for "kindness" as it used to be considered.

Japan has been expanding its defense budget and capability for about a decade and is now revising its key national security strategy in the face of threats from China, North Korea and now Russia.

Japan is especially concerned about Chinese military activity in waters in the East China Sea surrounding the Japanese-controlled Senkaku islands, which Beijing also claims and calls Diaoyu.

Japan has significantly expanded its joint drills with the United States as well as other partners including Australia, India, France, Britain and Germany that share concern about China's push for its territorial claims in the region, which has some of the world's busiest sea lanes.

Air Force faces uphill climb to hit recruiting goals

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — The U.S. Air Force will struggle to hit its recruiting goal this year as it confronts the toughest hiring environment in nearly a generation, the two-star general in charge of its efforts to enlist new members told Stars and Stripes.

And the long-term trends appear equally ominous, Maj. Gen. Ed Thomas said Thursday during a stop at a U.S. military base in Stuttgart.

Thomas, who is in Europe to meet with recruiters and other military officials at bases in Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom, said the push is now on to make up lost ground.

Thomas first raised the recruitment alarm in a January memo to his staff that said "we have warning lights flashing." For example, the number of possible recruits classified on a "qualified and waiting" list was about half of what it has historically been, Thomas wrote.

Now, the Air Force, like the other services, is grappling with a math problem, he said.

The Air Force recruitment goal is 27,452 new airmen by Sept. 30. Halfway into the fiscal year, 9,920 new recruits are in uniform and 5,314 have signed contracts, according to Air Force data.

For starters, there is an overall labor shortage in the U.S., where unemployment rates are at historic lows and the military is in a battle for talent with the civilian sector, Thomas said.

Then there is the aggregate effect of recruiters largely being absent for two years from schools, county fairs and other public meeting places because of the coronavirus pandemic, he said.

Studies show that there is no replacement for face-to-face meetings with potential recruits, Thomas said.

Also, research indicates that fewer young Americans have an interest in military careers, and the number has dropped sharply during the pandemic, he said.

One bright spot is the overseas military community, where Air Force recruiters are on target to meet all their goals, Thomas said.

Romania partners with US Navy in Middle East naval coalition

By J.P. LAWRENCE
Stars and Stripes

Personnel from the Romanian navy will soon join U.S. sailors at Naval Support Activity Bahrain.

Romania is the ninth country to join a maritime coalition formed to prevent attacks on commercial shipping in the Middle East, a statement by U.S. Naval Forces Central Command said Saturday.

Romanian navy personnel will serve at the headquarters of the International Maritime Security Construct, which is based in Bahrain with U.S. 5th Fleet, the statement said.

"We are excited to welcome Romania to the team," Vice Adm. Brad Cooper, commander of U.S. Naval Forces Central Command, U.S. 5th Fleet and Combined Maritime Forces, said in the statement.

The International Maritime Security

Construct, founded in 2019, includes Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, as well as non-Middle Eastern countries such as Albania, Estonia, Lithuania, the United Kingdom and the United States.

The organization's operational arm, Coalition Task Force Sentinel, recently participated in U.S.-led training exercises in the Persian Gulf, Arabian Sea, Gulf of Oman, Red Sea and the northern Indian Ocean.

This unit was founded to "deter state-sponsored malign activity and reassure the merchant shipping industry in the Bab al-Mandeb and Strait of Hormuz," the statement said.

Several transport ships were attacked in the region in 2021, including the hijacking of an asphalt tanker in the Gulf of Oman in August.

Zelenskyy criticizes West over aid delay

Associated Press

LIVIV, Ukraine — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy accused the West of cowardice as his country fights to stave off Russia's invading troops, making an exasperated plea for fighter jets and tanks to sustain a defense as the war ground into a battle of attrition.

Speaking after U.S. President Joe Biden said in a lacerating speech that Russian President Vladimir Putin could not stay in power — words the White House immediately sought to downplay — Zelenskyy lashed out Sunday at the West's "ping-pong about who and how should hand over jets" and other weapons while Russian missile attacks kill and trap civilians.

"I've talked to the defenders of Mariupol today. I'm in constant contact with them. Their determination, heroism and firmness are astonishing," Zelenskyy said in a video address, referring to the besieged southern city that has suffered some of the war's greatest deprivations and horrors. "If only those who have been thinking for 31 days on how to hand over dozens of jets and tanks had 1% of their courage."

Ukraine's ambassador to the

United States, Oksana Markarova, said on NBC's "Meet the Press" that her country had heard Biden "loud and clear."

"Now, it's all up to all of us to stop Putin while it's still local in Ukraine, because this war is not only about Ukraine," she said, but "an attack on democracy."

Russia's invasion of Ukraine, now in its 32nd day, has stalled in many areas. Its aim to quickly encircle the capital, Kyiv, and force its surrender has faltered against staunch Ukrainian resistance — bolstered by weapons from the U.S. and other Western allies.

Britain's Defense Ministry said Russia's troops are trying to encircle Ukrainian forces directly facing the two separatist-held areas in the country's east. That would cut the bulk of Ukraine's military off from the rest of the country.

Moscow has claimed its focus is on wresting from Ukraine the entire eastern Donbas region, which has been partially controlled by Russia-backed separatists since 2014. A high-ranking Russian military official said Friday that troops were being redirected to the east from other parts of the country.

The leader of one separatist-controlled area of Donbas said Sunday that he wants to hold a vote on joining Russia, words that may indicate a shift in Russia's position. Leonid Pasechnik, the head of the self-proclaimed Luhansk People's Republic, said it plans to hold a referendum on becoming part of Russia "in the nearest time."

Russia has supported the separatist rebels in Luhansk and neighboring Donetsk since an insurgency erupted there shortly after Moscow annexed the Crimean Peninsula from Ukraine in 2014. In talks with Ukraine, Moscow has demanded Kyiv acknowledge the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk.

Kyrylo Budanov, the head of Ukrainian military intelligence, accused Russia of seeking to split Ukraine in two, like North and South Korea.

"The occupiers will try to pull the occupied territories into a single quasi-state structure and pit it against independent Ukraine," Budanov said in a statement released by the Defense Ministry. He predicted that guerrilla warfare by Ukrainians would derail such plans.

Ukraine has said that to defeat

Russia, the West must provide fighter jets and not just missiles and other military equipment. A proposal to transfer Polish planes to Ukraine via the U.S. was scrapped amid NATO concerns about being drawn into direct fighting.

In his pointed remarks, Zelenskyy accused Western governments of being "afraid to prevent this tragedy. Afraid to simply make a decision."

"So who is in charge of the Euro-Atlantic community? Is it still Moscow, thanks to its scare tactics?" he asked. "Our partners must step up their aid to Ukraine."

His plea was echoed Sunday by a priest in the western city of Lviv, which was struck by rockets a day earlier. The aerial assault illustrated that Moscow, despite assertions that it intends to shift the war eastward, is willing to strike anywhere in Ukraine.

"When diplomacy doesn't work, we need military support," said the Rev. Yuri Vaskiv, who reported fewer parishioners in the pews of his Greek Catholic church, likely because of fear.

Referring to Putin, he said: "This evil is from him, and we must stop it."

Biden lashes out at Putin, calls for Western resolve for freedom

Associated Press

WARSAW, Poland — President Joe Biden delivered a forceful and highly personal condemnation of Russia's Vladimir Putin on Saturday, summoning a call for liberal democracy and a durable resolve among Western nations in the face of a brutal autocrat.

As he capped a four-day trip to Europe, a blend of emotive scenes with refugees and standing among other world leaders in grand settings, Biden said of Putin: "For God's sake, this man cannot remain in power."

It was a dramatic escalation in rhetoric — Biden had earlier called Putin a "butcher" — that the White House found itself quickly walking back. Before Biden could even board Air Force One to begin the flight back to Washington, aides were clarifying that he wasn't calling for an immediate change in government in Moscow.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov quickly denounced Biden, saying "it's not up to the president of the U.S. and not up to the Americans to decide who will remain in power in Russia."

While Biden's blunt language grabbed headlines, in other pieces of his roughly 30-minute speech before Warsaw's iconic Royal Castle he urged Western allies to brace for what will be a turbulent road ahead in a "new battle for freedom."

He also pointedly warned Putin against invading even "an inch" of territory of a NATO nation.

The address was a heavy bookend to a European visit in which Biden met with NATO and other Western leaders, visited the front lines of the growing refugee crisis and even held a young Ukrainian girl in his arms as he sought to highlight some of the vast aspects of

the war that will likely define his presidency.

"We must remain unified today and tomorrow and the day after, and for the years and decades to come. It will not be easy," Biden said as Russia continued to pound several Ukrainian cities. "There will be costs, but the price we have to pay, because the darkness that drives autocracy is ultimately no match for the flame of liberty that lights the souls of free people everywhere."

Biden also made the case that multilateral institutions like NATO are more important than ever if the West and its allies are going to successfully push back against autocrats like Putin.

During his campaign for president, Biden talked often about the battle for primacy between democracies and autocracies. In those moments, his words seemed like an abstraction. Now, they have an urgent resonance.

19K forced to evacuate from Colo. wildfire

Associated Press

BOULDER, Colo. — Authorities issued an evacuation order for 19,400 people Saturday near a fast-moving Colorado wildfire in rolling hills south of the college town of Boulder, not far from the site of a destructive 2021 blaze that leveled more than 1,000 homes.

The wildfire was fueled by wind earlier in the day and had grown to 122 acres with no containment, Boulder Fire-Rescue spokesperson Marya Washburn said. The Boulder Office of Emer-

gency Management said an overnight shelter was opened after evacuation orders covered 8,000 homes and 7,000 structures. No structures had been damaged.

Winds and temperatures have died down, Washburn said. Officials expect to be dealing with the fire for several days due to heavy fuels, said Boulder Fire-Rescue Wildland Division Chief Brian Oliver.

The fire is in an area where a blaze destroyed 1,000 homes last year in unincorporated Boulder County and suburban Superior

and Louisville. Superior town officials told residents in an email that there were no immediate concerns for the community.

The 2021 blaze burned Alicia Miller's home, where she could see smoke from Saturday's fire rising in the background. She posted a photo on Twitter and referenced climate change, which has made the U.S. West warmer and drier in the past 30 years and will continue to make weather more extreme and wildfires more destructive, according to scientists.

"I feel exhausted by all of this, and I just feel like enough as far as these fires and disasters," she said. She pointed to a recent Texas wildfire that left a deputy dead and homes destroyed. "... So I'm standing there and it's just kind of a repeat."

Saturday's fire started around 2 p.m. and burned protected wildland near the National Center for Atmospheric Research, Boulder police said. Authorities have called it the NCAR fire and its cause is not yet known, said Washburn.

FDA to approve 2nd booster shot for those 50 and older

Bloomberg News

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration is poised to clear a fourth dose of the mRNA coronavirus vaccine for adults age 50 and older, looking to shore up protections for more vulnerable groups, a person familiar with the matter said.

The authorization could come as early as next week and, for most Americans, it would mean

a second booster shot of either the Pfizer-BioNTech or Moderna vaccines. Currently, only immunocompromised people are eligible in the United States for the additional dose.

Unlike with previous authorizations, the FDA is expected to stop short of a full recommendation, meaning the option would be open for people who want the shot. The development

was reported earlier by The New York Times.

The move comes as the Biden administration is warning of waning supplies in its fight against the virus and is calling on Congress to authorize new funding.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention would have to make a final ruling on any recommendation by the FDA.

A recent report by the CDC found that protection against COVID-19 waned slightly in the months following a third dose of the vaccine. The booster shot resulted in a 91% decrease in hospitalizations for people who received the booster two months prior to getting sick, and 78% for those who received the booster four or five months prior to contracting the virus.

Ginni Thomas texts reveal fears, motive to overturn election

The Washington Post

"Release the Kraken and save us from the left taking America down."

What more does anyone need to know about the many text messages

ANALYSIS

sent by Virginia "Ginni"

Thomas to then-White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows in the weeks after the 2020 election? A dozen words sum up everything.

That the spouse of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas was imploring the president's highest-ranking adviser to do all he could to overturn the 2020 election may seem beyond extraordinary. It is, but it is more than that.

The messages once again show how former President Donald

Trump's conspiracies, lies and obsessions infected the Republican Party (and in many quarters still do), from its rank-and-file base to some of its most establishment figures. The more that is known about the events between Election Day 2020 and the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol, the clearer it is just how extensive the efforts to overturn the election were and how high up they went.

The Ginni Thomas text messages, first revealed by The Washington Post and CBS News, are among the many documents that Meadows turned over to the House committee investigating the Jan. 6 riot before he stopped cooperating with the committee. They show the fervor with which believers in Trump could embrace the wildest of conspiracy theories, as well as their apoc-

alyptic vision of what they believed the inauguration of President Joe Biden could mean for the country.

The text messages have put Justice Thomas in an uncomfortable ethical position. Once again, partisan politics has splashed on to the high court. He was the lone dissenter in the court's ruling that Trump had to turn over documents to the House committee. His reasons for the dissent were never publicly explained. He is now under much greater pressure to recuse himself from any future decisions related to these matters, and some Democrats are calling on him to resign.

The shock value of the Thomas-Meadows texts almost goes without saying. The underlying implications are more troublesome. Ginni Thomas was not someone

in a Proud Boys cell or living on the fringes of the Republican Party. She has operated for years in the most rarefied circles within the conservative movement.

If not true conservative royalty, the Thomases come awfully close to it. Justice Thomas' record as one of the most conservative members of the Supreme Court is indisputable. His wife has collected accolades of her own as an activist on the far right. They have said many times their professional lives are kept separate, though their causes are certainly shared.

Now it's known just how much Ginni Thomas pushed senior officials in the government to embrace allegations that were unproven at the time and ultimately disproved, claims that embodied some of the most outlandish of the ideas that were circulating then.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Fentanyl hidden in speaker delivered to home

RI PROVIDENCE — Authorities have arrested a Providence woman they said retrieved a package from her porch containing what she thought was more than 4.5 pounds of fentanyl hidden inside a speaker, federal prosecutors said.

Rosangeles Bueno, 40, faces several drug charges and is being held pending a hearing in U.S. District Court in Providence, according to the U.S. attorney's office in Providence.

The package that originated in California was deemed to be suspicious, authorities said. It was opened and found to contain a brick-like object inside a speaker.

The fentanyl was removed and replaced by another substance then delivered to Bueno's home. She was spotted by surveillance exiting the residence, checking the surrounding area, and retrieving the package, authorities said.

Casino to pay \$8M for serving chemicals

NV LAS VEGAS — A jury in Las Vegas has awarded \$8 million to a middle school special education teacher who sued after being permanently injured when he was served cleaning solvents instead of tap beer at a casino bar.

Lon Enwright, 38, used to also work as a wine steward at Las Vegas Strip restaurants but lost his sense of taste due to the December 2018 injury at a Barley's Casino & Brewing Co. in Henderson, his attorney, Andre Lagomarsino, said.

Enwright's negligence law-

suit said he was sickened and experienced convulsions after he asked for a sample of Honey Blonde ale on tap and was served caustic chemicals commonly used to clean beer taps and lines.

His lawyers said bar employees knew the beer lines were out of service for cleaning.

Drugs left at site leads to smuggling ring at jail

MS BILOXI — A drug smuggling ring that included inmates at a county jail in Mississippi has been busted, authorities said.

Ronnie Earhart, 41, of Bay-side Park, Miss., and Hancock County jail inmate Mindi Saucier were arrested on charges of conspiracy and possession with intent to distribute illegal drugs, Sheriff Ricky Adam said in a news release. The Sun Herald reported. Another inmate, Valerie Black, also faces a conspiracy charge, he said.

Earlier this month, narcotics agents received information indicating that inmates were getting drugs while in the general public on work details, then distributing them throughout the jail. Agents staked out a work detail in Bay St. Louis and saw Earhart drive into the parking lot and drop off a package near a trash bin before leaving. Saucier, an inmate on the work detail, retrieved the package and was confronted by agents.

Authorities investigate woman with Nazi armband

CA LAGUNA WOODS — A woman wearing a Nazi armband in public threatened an elderly Jewish man who confronted her, according to police in Southern California who

are seeking to have the woman charged with a hate crime.

Orange County Sheriff's Department spokesperson Jaimee Blashaw said deputies investigated the incident in Laguna Woods in which a man in his 80s said he confronted the woman wearing a red armband with a swastika.

Blashaw said the woman made antisemitic comments and threatened the man. She said two witnesses intervened and one took the armband from the woman.

Blashaw declined to name the woman involved as she has not been arrested yet.

Crews find man dead under 10 feet of corn

IA WILLIAMSBURG — Rescue crews called to a grain bin in eastern Iowa found a man dead, buried under 10 feet of corn, authorities said.

Emergency responders were called to the grain bin near Williamsburg, the Iowa County Sheriff's Office said in a news release.

Arriving crews worked for an hour before finding the man buried. He was declared dead at the scene. Officials did not immediately release the man's name.

Man charged after his dogs mauled a woman

SC ABBEVILLE — A South Carolina dog owner has been charged in connection with a severe attack that led the victim to have her arms amputated.

The man was arrested, according to the Abbeville County Sheriff's Office. He was charged with three counts of owning a

dangerous animal that attacked and injured a human, a rabies control violation and a count of dangerous animals not permitted beyond premises unless restrained.

Kyleen Waltman, 38, was attacked while walking to her home in Honea Path, her sister, Shenna Green, told news outlets.

Waltman lost both arms and her colon and may have to have her esophagus removed, her family wrote in an online post requesting prayers and donations. She was in critical but stable condition.

The sheriff's office said Abbeville Animal Control immediately took possession of the dogs — two pit bulls and a mixed breed — on the day of the attack.

Hearst Castle to reopen after pandemic, damage

CA SAN SIMEON — California's famous Hearst Castle will reopen to the public in May after a two-year closure due to the pandemic and severe rainstorm damage that prompted a \$13.7 million renovation.

The steep, curvy access road to the palatial home that media mogul William Randolph Hearst built on ranch land overlooking the Pacific was damaged by atmospheric rivers — storms fueled by long and wide plumes of moistures pulled in from the Pacific — in 2021.

The San Luis Obispo County castle designed by architect Julia Morgan includes a 115-room main house, as well as guesthouses, pools and cultivated gardens, according to the California State Parks. Construction dates back to 1919.

— From wire reports

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and Military News

Duke extends Coach K's farewell tour

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Mike Krzyzewski slowly climbed up the ladder, bowed to the adoring Duke fans and then pointed to his players to give them the credit before cutting the final string of the net.

Coach K's farewell tour will end at his record-setting 13th Final Four.

The Blue Devils delivered their most complete performance of this NCAA Tournament run to extend the career of their Hall of Fame coach for one more weekend after beating Arkansas 78-69 on Saturday night in the West Region final.

"To see the joy, I can't explain it, because, you know, I'm a grandfather, I've lived through my daughters, I'm living through my grandchildren but now I'm living through these guys," Krzyzewski said on the court before cutting down the net. "Holy mackerel!"

A.J. Griffin scored 18 points, West Region MVP Paolo Banchero added 16 and second-seeded Duke (32-6) frustrated fourth-seeded Arkansas (28-9) on the offensive end to get back to the Final Four for the first time since Krzyzewski won his fifth championship in 2015.

Coach K will try to follow the path of the only coach to win more NCAA men's titles as

John Wooden won his 10th championship in his final season at UCLA in 1975. Krzyzewski broke the tie he had with Wooden for most Final Four appearances with the Blue Devils' commanding win over the Razorbacks.

"It's an honor. Coach Wooden, if he kept coaching, would probably have 24," Krzyzewski said. "But it's a heck of a thing. We've won a lot in the tournament, and we've won a lot of games, but Final Fours are big, obviously, then national championships. That's what you put banners up for."

Duke's upcoming matchup in New Orleans next Saturday will be historic either way — either its first NCAA Tournament meeting with archrival North Carolina or an unfathomable tangle in the national semifinals with 15th-seeded Saint Peter's.

"It's going to be an honor for us to go against whoever is the regional champion of that region," Krzyzewski said. "There's no greater day in college basketball than when those four regional champions, four champions, get in one arena and play. It's the greatest day for college basketball, and we're honored to be a part of it."

The Blue Devils were in control for most of the second half, using a 10-0 run after Arkansas had cut the deficit to five points early

in the half to open up a big cushion. The spurt came following a timeout when Krzyzewski once again switched his team to an uncharacteristic zone after having success doing that in the Sweet 16 against Texas Tech.

"I think going zone helped," said defensive anchor Mark Williams, who had 12 points, 12 rebounds and three blocks. "I think it gave them a different look, slowed them up a little bit."

Jaylin Williams ended that run with an emphatic dunk over Banchero for a three-point play but it wasn't nearly enough for the Razorbacks, who didn't cut the deficit into single digits until the final minute of the game.

Williams led Arkansas with 19 points and 10 rebounds and JD Notae had 14 points before fouling out. The Razorbacks shot 41.9% for the game but felt proud after turning their season around following an 0-3 start in the Southeastern Conference.

"We all wanted to get further in this, but the fight this team has showed all year has been incredible," Williams said. "For the way that we started off conference, nobody would have expected us to get this far. So I just think that this team just kept fighting the whole year, the whole year, but, of course, we didn't get where we wanted."

Villanova in 7th Final Four with win over Houston

Associated Press

SAN ANTONIO — Villanova coach Jay Wright has won national championships with well-balanced and fundamentally sound teams, yet even he knew staying in contention for another title was going to take a rugged and exhaustive effort.

Ugly at times, the final result was beautiful for the Wildcats, who are going to their third Final Four in the past six NCAA Tournaments.

Jermaine Samuels had 16 points and 10 rebounds as Villanova grinded out a 50-44 win over a gritty and athletic Houston team in the South Region final Saturday.

"You just knew watching this team defensively, like you weren't going to come out and just outscore them," Wright said. "We really weren't talking as

much at the end about how we were going to score. We were talking about how we were going to stop them."

Caleb Daniels added 14 points for the Wildcats (30-7), and fifth-year senior Collin Gillespie's only made field goal was a clutch shot late, even though Villanova led throughout to clinch the first spot in this year's Final Four in New Orleans.

"It was like playing against our own selves. They were just as physical as we were," Daniels said. "It was a literal street fight, every possession trying to get a rebound."

The Wildcats shot 28.8% from the field (15 of 52). The Cougars were only slightly better at 29.8% (17 of 57), missing their last five shots and 10 of 11 overall after cutting an 11-point second-half deficit to two. They made

only one of their 20 attempted three-pointers in their lowest-scoring NCAA tourney game ever.

"We had it turned, we kept getting stops. We were getting stop, stop stop, we just weren't scoring on the other end," Houston coach Kelvin Sampson said. "I remember telling them in the huddle, I think it was a four-point game there ... and we kept getting stops that somebody's going to make a big shot. But we didn't. Credit Villanova."

The Wildcats, seeking their fourth championship overall, will play either Kansas, the only No. 1 seed remaining, or 10th-seeded Miami in a national semifinal next Saturday. They have won two championships in Wright's 22 seasons, in 2016 and 2018.

Taze Moore had 15 points and

10 rebounds for the Cougars (32-6), who were denied making consecutive Final Four appearances for the first time since 1982-84 during the Phil Slama Jama era. The starting five was completely changed from last season, including Moore and two other senior newcomers.

After Villanova missed three shots on the same possession — and was still without any second-chance points in the game — Moore got the long rebound on the break. After initially slowing things down, Moore scored on a drive against Gillespie, getting Houston within 42-40 with 5:25 left.

As a senior, Samuels goes into the Final Four after being named MVP of the South Region. He is averaging 17.5 points a game in this NCAA tourney — so far.

Perez sparks Wolfpack past Irish

Associated Press

BRIDGEPORT, Conn. — Raina Perez decided to come back for one more season and hopefully lift N.C. State to new heights. The senior guard did just that, helping the Wolfpack advance to their first regional final in 24 years.

The senior guard stole the ball at mid-court and made a go-ahead layup with 14 seconds left to send the top-seeded Wolfpack to a 66-63 comeback win over No. 5 Notre Dame on Saturday.

It's the Wolfpack's first trip to the Elite Eight since 1998, when they reached the Final Four.

N.C. State had lost in the Sweet 16 the previous three tournaments and looked as if it was going to make it four straight until the late rally led by Perez and Kai Crutchfield, who also came back for the extra COVID year granted by the NCAA.

"For this group, it would have been hard

for me to face the fact they they all came back and we still didn't get over the hump," coach Wes Moore said. "That makes me feel really good and I'm so excited for our program to do this, kind of break through. It took a while four years of the Sweet 16 to get through that wall."

It wasn't the first time that Perez came up huge for the Wolfpack on a big stage. She hit the game-winning jumper to lift them to the ACC tournament championship last season.

Trailing 59-51 early in the fourth quarter, N.C. State rallied, scoring 15 of the final 19 points capped by Perez's layup. The Irish had one last chance, but Maddy Westbeld missed a three-pointer from the wing and Perez hit both free throws for the final margin.

"We practice this and knew I could do it," Perez said of the free throws. "I'm just so happy I knocked them down."

The Wolfpack had gotten within 63-62

when Elissa Cunane made the first of two free throws with 36 seconds left. After a Notre Dame timeout, the Irish got the ball inbounds in the backcourt and Dara Mabrey was stripped near midcourt by Perez, who took it in for the layup and the lead. It was their first lead since the 7:43 mark of the second quarter.

N.C. State (32-3) advanced to the regional final Monday night, where it will face second-seeded UConn.

Cunane scored 16 points and Crutchfield added 14 for the Wolfpack, who avenged an earlier loss to the Irish on Feb. 1. That was N.C. State's most recent loss of the season and only defeat in conference play.

"It's a hump we had to get over and the girls are determined and I'm determined and we made it happen," said Crutchfield of reaching the regional final.

Olivia Miles scored 21 points and Westbeld added 13 for Notre Dame (24-9).

Bueckers, Williams lead UConn to Elite 8

Associated Press

BRIDGEPORT, Conn. — Over the past 25 years, UConn has been known for putting together lengthy scoring runs that turn tight games into blowouts.

Paige Bueckers and the Huskies put together a classic one to begin the second half against Indiana on Saturday and move into the program's 16th consecutive regional final.

Bueckers' three-pointer to open the third quarter began the 16-0 onslaught, and the Huskies ran away from Indiana 75-58 in the Bridgeport Regional.

"We started pushing the ball in transition more; we got a few easy buckets there," Bueckers said. "I thought we played with a lot better pace and just a lot better energy."

Bueckers and Christyn Williams each scored 15 points and Azzi Fudd had 13 to lead UConn, which faces top-seeded North Carolina State on Monday night in an attempt to earn a 14th straight trip to the Final Four.

But it was in the lane where the Huskies dominated. Olivia Nel-

son-Ododa had a double-double with 10 points and 14 rebounds, and Connecticut (28-5) outscored the Hoosiers 46-32 in the paint. UConn also outrebounded Indiana 39-27, including 15-2 on the offensive end.

"Throughout the season, rebounding has been a point of emphasis, especially from the coaches," Nelson-Ododa said. "Just going out there today, staying in an aggressive mentality and just keep attacking, keep crashing the boards was really huge for us."

Ali Patberg, in her seventh year of college basketball thanks to transfer and COVID-19 rules, had 16 points for the third-seeded Hoosiers, who finish their season at 24-9. Grace Berger had 13 points and Mackenzie Holmes added 12 for Indiana.

"I'm not a good loser," Patberg said. "So this is not how I envisioned going out. But I'm just thankful that Coach (Teri) Moren believed in me five years ago and gave me an opportunity to wear Hoosier on my chest. I just hope that the time I had at IU, people

just remember how hard I played and I was a good teammate and worked as hard as I could."

Wichita Regional

Louisville 76, Tennessee 64: Hailey Van Lith had 23 points and six assists, Emily Engstler had 20 points and 10 rebounds, and the No. 1-seeded Cardinals held off the Volunteers in Wichita, Kan., to reach the Elite Eight for the fourth consecutive time.

Kianna Smith also had 12 points for Louisville (28-4), which blew most of an early 15-point lead before pulling away late in the fourth quarter to set up a date with No. 3 seed Michigan for a spot in the Final Four.

The Cardinals have become one of the nation's dominant women's programs under coach Jeff Walz — much like Tennessee was for so many years under Pat Summitt — but are still chasing their first national championship.

Rae Burrell led the fourth-seeded Volunteers (25-9) with 22 points, but she didn't get a whole lot of help from her team, which

had 18 turnovers. Jordan Walker contributed 10 points but had five of the turnovers.

Michigan 52, South Dakota 49: Naz Hillmon had 17 points and 10 rebounds and Laila Phelia scored the go-ahead layup in the final minute for the No. 3 Wolverines, who beat the No. 10-seeded Coyotes in Wichita, Kan., to reach the Elite Eight for the first time.

Phelia scored 14 points and Leigha Brown added 10 for Michigan (25-6).

"We have players that came in here with this vision and this belief that they could do something incredibly special," Wolverines coach Kim Barnes Arico said. "They wanted to be a part of that Block M and that excellence, and here we are sitting at the table going to the Elite Eight. It's just a dream like you could never imagine, but it's people that came together and created something incredibly special. It's awesome."

South Dakota (29-6) was trying to become just the fifth double-digit seed to ever reach the Elite Eight.

Morant-less Grizzlies trounce Bucks

Associated Press

MEMPHIS, Tenn. — De'Anthony Melton had 24 points, Desmond Bane added 20 and the Memphis Grizzlies continued to win in the absence of scoring leader Ja Morant, beating the Milwaukee Bucks 127-102 on Saturday night.

Dillon Brooks scored 19 points and Jaren Jackson Jr. had 16 and two blocks to help Memphis win its fourth straight and eighth in the last nine games. Melton was 8 of 11 from the field, going 6 of 9 from three-point range.

"I'm just trying to go out there and hoop," Melton said. "Have fun with it. Play with confidence and do what the team needs me to do."

Morant is nursing a sore right knee and is not expected to return until near the end of the regular season.

Giannis Antetokounmpo led Milwaukee with 30 points, 11 rebounds and four blocks, scoring 18 points in the third quarter when Milwaukee tried to make a run. Khris Middleton added 16 points. The defending champion Bucks lost for only the third time in the last 13 games.

Milwaukee dropped into a tie for third with Boston in the Eastern Conference, a half-game behind Philadelphia and Miami.

Nets 110, Heat 95: Kevin Durant scored 23 points, Seth Curry added 17 and the Brooklyn sent host Miami to its season-worst fourth consecutive loss.

Andre Drummond had 13 points and 11 rebounds for the Nets, who got 11 points from Kyrie Irving — who will play his first home game of the season for the team on Sunday — and 10 from Nic Claxton.

Raptors 131, Pacers 91: Pascal Siakam scored 23 points and host Toronto routed depleted Indiana in a game delayed 70 minutes in the first half because of a speaker fire that forced the evacuation of fans.

Scottie Barnes added 19 points in the Raptors' biggest margin of victory this season. Oshae Brissett led Indiana with 21 points.

Bulls 98, Cavaliers 94: Zach LaVine scored 26 points, DeMar DeRozan added 20 and Chicago won at Cleveland to stay alone in the No. 5 spot in the Eastern Conference.

The Bulls held the Cavs to just 35 points in the first half and won on the road for the first time since March 9, snapping a five-game slide. Chicago, which is 4-8 in March, came in with a one-game lead over Cleveland for the fifth playoff spot.

Nuggets 113, Thunder 107: Nikola Jokic

scored 35 points and missed a triple-double by two assists and host Denver outlasted Oklahoma City. Jokic had 12 rebounds. He made all six of his shots from the floor and all six of his free throws in the second half. Aaron Gordon added 20 points.

Spurs 107, Pelicans 103: Dejounte Murray had 15 points, 13 assists and 11 rebounds, Keldon Johnson punctuated his 21-point night with a break-away dunk in the final seconds and San Antonio won at New Orleans to bolster its postseason hopes.

The Spurs are a game behind the Pelicans for the final Western Conference play-in spot.

Kings 114, Magic 110 (OT): Donte DiVincenzo and Harrison Barnes hit three-pointers in the final minute of overtime and Sacramento won at Orlando.

Davion Mitchell led the Kings with 22 points and seven assists, Barnes added 19 points and DiVincenzo had 16 points and eight rebounds.

Rockets 115, Trail Blazers 98: Alperen Sengun scored 27 points and Houston won at Portland to sweep a two-game set there.

Jalen Green added 25 points for the Rockets, tied with Orlando at 20-55 for the worst record in the NBA.

Bruins top Islanders to win Bergeron's 1,200th game

Associated Press

BOSTON — David Pastrnak and Brad Marchand each had a goal and an assist during a four-goal second period for the surging Bruins, carrying them to a 6-3 victory over the New York Islanders on Saturday.

Boston captain Patrice Bergeron played in his 1,200th game. He became the 120th player in NHL history to reach that milestone. He returned to the lineup Saturday after missing the previous four games with an elbow infection.

"I told him we need you around for 1,300, by the way, and beyond," Bruins coach Bruce Cassidy said of the 36-year-old Bergeron, who can become a free agent at the end of the season.

"Credit to him to play for one organization that long," Cassidy said. "Obviously, that tells you a

little bit about both sides. He loves it here and we love having him."

Lightning 2, Red Wings 1 (OT): Brayden Point scored on a power play at 2:28 of overtime and visiting Tampa Bay beat Detroit to snap a three-game losing streak.

Point scored on a rebound of Steven Stamkos' shot. Stamkos tied it on a power play with 4:38 left in regulation. Anthony Cirelli assisted on both goals.

Flames 9, Oilers 5: Matthew Tkachuk had two goals and two assists, Johnny Gaudreau set a career high with five assists and host Calgary beat Edmonton.

Leon Draisaitl had a hat trick to lead the Oilers (36-25-5). Derick Brassard and Ryan Nugent-Hopkins also scored for Edmonton.

Golden Knights 5, Blackhawks 4 (OT): Evgenii Dadonov

scored for host Vegas at 2:05 of overtime after the team overcame a three-goal deficit in the third period against Chicago.

Dadonov scored for the second time in two games since returning to the Golden Knights' roster after the NHL negated a trade that sent him to Anaheim because of his no-trade clause.

Canadiens 4, Maple Leafs 2: Paul Byron broke a tie with 2:28 left, Jake Allen made 49 saves and host Montreal beat Toronto.

Capitals 4, Devils 3: Nicklas Backstrom scored the go-ahead goal and added an assist on the night host Washington celebrated his 1,000th career point and beat New Jersey.

Panthers 4, Senators 3 (SO): Aleksander Barkov had the tying goal late in the third period and scored the shootout winner, helping visiting Florida overcome a three-goal deficit and

beat Ottawa.

Hurricanes 7, Blues 2: Andrei Svechnikov scored twice on his 22nd birthday and Seth Jarvis also had two goals as visiting Carolina beat St. Louis.

Wild 3, Blue Jackets 2 (OT): Jared Spurgeon scored 1:24 into overtime and host Minnesota beat Columbus, providing Marc-Andre Fleury a victory in his debut with the Wild.

Canucks 4, Stars 1: Elias Pettersson had two goals and a pair of milestones as visiting Vancouver rallied past Dallas.

Sharks 4, Ducks 1: Timo Meier had a hat trick, Marc-Edouard Vlasic added a goal, and host San Jose defeated Anaheim.

Kings 4, Kraken 2: Jordan Spence scored his first NHL goal and captain Anze Kopitar had a goal and an assist as host Los Angeles beat Seattle.