

Lawmakers slam likely command merges

By **WYATT OLSON**
Stars and Stripes

The Republican chairmen of the Senate and House Armed Services committees pushed back Wednesday on the Pentagon's reported plans to consolidate some of the nation's combatant commands and cancel a plan to modernize the structure of U.S. Forces Japan.

"[W]e will not accept significant changes to our warfighting structure that are made without a rigorous interagency process, coordination with combatant commanders and the Joint Staff, and collaboration with Congress," Rep. Mike Rogers and Sen. Roger Wicker said in a news release Wednesday.

Citing a Pentagon briefing document and an unnamed defense official, CNN reported Wednesday that the Pentagon is considering plans to shrink the U.S. military by consolidating combatant commands, eliminating a directorate overseeing joint force development and training.

The plans would also cancel the restructuring of command and control of USFJ to better integrate with Japan's Self-Defense Forces.

The Defense Department maintains 11 combatant commands, which are composed of units from two or more service branches and are focused either on geographical area, such as U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, or function, as does the U.S. Transportation Command.

The plans call for the merging of European Command and Africa Command into a single command based in Stuttgart, Germany, CNN reported.

Closer to home, Northern and Southern commands would be consolidated into an entity called AMERICOM, the report said.

Africa Command became fully operational in 2007 and was created in response to America's growing interest in the continent as China made serious economic and diplomatic inroads there.

Northern Command focuses on homeland defense and collaboration with Canada and Mexico.

Southern Command centers on the Caribbean and Central and South America.

The Pentagon briefing document said consolidating the four commands could save about \$330 million over five years, CNN reported.

Rogers and Wicker questioned whether such small savings — in a defense budget that runs about \$800 billion each year — are worth the risk.

"U.S. combatant commands are the tip of the American warfighting spear," they said in the news release. "Therefore, we are very concerned about reports that claim DoD is considering unilateral changes on major strategic issues, including significant reductions to U.S. forces stationed abroad, absent coordination with the White House and Congress."

Such moves "risk undermining American deterrence

around the globe and detracting from our negotiating positions with America's adversaries," they wrote.

President Donald Trump has given Elon Musk and his Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE, wide latitude in slashing personnel and spending throughout the federal government, including DOD.

"At the DOD, we've been working hand-in-hand with the DOGE team," Pentagon spokesman Sean Parnell said in a video posted March 3 on the department's website.

The Pentagon is aiming to slash 50,000 to 60,000 civilian jobs in an opening salvo of budget cutting.

Halting USFJ's planned expansion with added personnel and upgrades to command and control could save about \$1.1 billion, according to the Pentagon document cited by CNN. Late last year, the Army and USFJ surveyed potential sites in central Tokyo for expansion as part of the proposed restructuring.

World military leaders discuss Ukraine peacekeepers

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Senior military officers from countries across Europe and beyond met Thursday outside London to flesh out plans for an international peacekeeping force for Ukraine as details of a partial ceasefire are worked out.

U.K. Prime Minister Keir Starmer said he didn't know whether there would be a peace deal in the Russia-Ukraine war, but "we are making steps in the right direction" as a "coalition of the willing" led by Britain and France moves into an "op-

erational phase."

"We're further forward this week than we were last week, and we are further forward last week than we were the week before," he said before the meeting of military planning chiefs from more than two dozen countries. "I hope, I want, those talks to succeed. What I do know is if they do succeed, then we need to be able to defend the deal."

Ukraine and Russia agreed in principle Wednesday to a limited ceasefire after President Donald Trump spoke with the

countries' leaders this week, though it remained to be seen when it might take effect and what possible targets would be off limits to attack.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, speaking in Norway on Thursday, said that although he originally had sought a broader ceasefire, he was committed to working with the U.S. to stop arms being directed at power production and civilian facilities.

"I raised this issue with President Trump and said that our side would identify what we

consider to be civilian infrastructure," Zelenskyy said. "I don't want there to be any misunderstanding about what the sides are agreeing on."

The tentative deal to partially rein in the three-year war came after Russian President Vladimir Putin rebuffed Trump's push for a full 30-day ceasefire. The difficulty in getting the combatants to agree not to target one another's energy infrastructure highlights the challenges Trump will face in trying to fulfill his campaign pledge to quickly end to the war.

Trump says Houthis to be ‘annihilated’

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — President Donald Trump threatened Yemen’s Houthi rebels on Wednesday that they’ll be “completely annihilated” as American airstrikes pounded locations under their control, while further pressuring the group’s main benefactor Iran.

Strikes hit Sanaa, Yemen’s rebel-held capital, as well as their stronghold of Saada in the country’s northwest on Wednesday night, the Houthi’s al-Maisrah satellite news channel reported. It aired footage showing firefighters

battling a blaze in Sanaa and damaged at what it described as a sheep farm in al-Jawf.

It also said strikes happened overnight Tuesday, though the U.S. military has not offered a breakdown of places targeted since the airstrikes campaign began. The first strikes this weekend killed at least 53 people, including children, and wounded others.

As the strikes hit, Trump wrote on his Truth Social website that “tremendous damage has been inflicted upon the Houthi barbarians.”

“Watch how it will get progressively worse — It’s not even a fair fight, and never will be,” Trump added. “They will be completely annihilated!”

Meanwhile, Trump again warned Iran not to arm the Houthis, claiming without offering evidence that Tehran “has lessened its intensity on Military Equipment and General Support to the Houthis.”

“Iran must stop the sending of these Supplies IMMEDIATELY,” he wrote.

Iran has long armed the Houthis, who are members of Islam’s

minority Shiite Zaydi sect that ruled Yemen for 1,000 years until 1962. Tehran routinely denies arming the rebels, despite physical evidence, numerous seizures and experts tying the weapons to Iran. That’s likely because Tehran wants to avoid sanctions for violating a United Nations arms embargo on the Houthis.

Iran’s state-run IRNA news agency acknowledged Trump’s comments and cited remarks previously made by Iran’s ambassador to the United Nations, Amir Saeed Irvani, that said Trump made “baseless accusations.”

DOD reviews plans to cut troops deployed to Gitmo

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Military officials are reviewing plans that would cut the number of U.S. troops deployed to the Guantanamo Bay naval base in Cuba to handle detained migrants by as much as half, because there are no detainees there now and the program has stumbled during legal challenges, The Associated Press has learned.

U.S. officials said the mili-

tary’s Southern Command was asked to give Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth a plan that would outline how many troops are actually needed and what additional space may be required if more detainees are sent there.

That plan, said officials, is expected to recommend that a number of the troops be sent home — and one official said the decision could trim the force to 450 troops.

The officials spoke on condi-

tion of anonymity because the decisions are not yet finalized.

Southern Command is preparing options that would address the fact that there have been no migrants transferred to the base since early March, but the administration has warned that future “high-threat” detainees may be sent to the base.

U.S. authorities have transferred at least 290 detainees to Guantanamo since February. But on March 11, the 40 people

still housed there were flown off the base to Louisiana.

The base is best known for housing foreigners associated with the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, but it has a separate facility used for decades to hold migrants intercepted trying to reach the U.S. by sea. That use had been expanded recently to include some of the migrants swept up in President Donald Trump’s broader campaign to secure the southern border.

Webpages on famous minority troops to be restored

BY CAITLYN BURCHETT

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Webpages detailing the history of legendary minority service members will be restored to the Defense Department’s online platforms after the content was pulled following an agency-wide examination of material for diversity, equity and inclusion, the Pentagon said Wednesday.

Content about baseball and civil rights icon Jackie Robinson, as well as the Tuskegee Army, the Navajo code talkers

and a Native American Marine who famously helped raise the flag at Iwo Jima, were among the webpages removed amid the Defense Department’s campaign to scrub material singling out contributions by women and minority groups.

President Donald Trump’s administration has made a push in the first months of his second term to purge the federal government of content it considers to be related to diversity, equity and inclusion, commonly known as DEI.

“We are pleased by the rapid compliance across the department with the directive removing DEI content from all platforms,” said John Ullyot, the Pentagon press secretary. “In the rare cases that content is removed — either deliberately or by mistake — that is out of the clearly outlined scope of the directive, we instruct the components [to] correct the content so it recognizes our heroes for their dedicated service alongside their fellow Americans, period.”

Such content will be restored,

he said. It is unclear whether the restored webpages will mention the race or sex of the troops or celebrate them as trailblazing minorities.

Calling DEI “discriminatory equity ideology,” Ullyot said, it divides the force, erodes unit cohesion and interferes with the services’ core mission.

The Pentagon issued a memo dated Feb. 26 that ordered the removal of all DOD news and feature articles, photos, and videos that promote diversity, equity and inclusion.

Barges could speed a Chinese invasion of Taiwan

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

China has built at least six barges capable of forming a bridge hundreds of feet long, an ability that could play a key role in a potential invasion of Taiwan, according to defense experts.

The barges, which were first reported in January by Naval News citing undisclosed sources, are equipped with hydraulic pylons that allow them to rise out of the water.

Their ability to connect and form a bridge could enable China to move large numbers of troops or vehicles over unconventional terrain, including coastal roads or sea walls, according to naval analyst Thomas Shugart.

"I did not see these things coming — that they were going to build something quite like this," Shugart, a senior adjunct fellow at the Center for a New

American Security, said by phone Tuesday.

Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense confirmed China's development of the barges and said the ministry was working to "gather intelligence about its functions and limits," spokesperson John Chun-En Wang said by email Tuesday.

Adm. John Aquilino, the former head of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, said in March 2024 that Chinese President Xi Jinping had ordered his military to be prepared for an invasion of Taiwan by 2027.

China considers Taiwan a breakaway province that must be reunified with the mainland, by force if necessary.

Shugart, a retired Navy captain, said the construction of the barges suggests Beijing is moving forward with that timeline.

He added that China's massive shipbuilding capability

could allow for the production of significantly more barges soon.

Mark Cancian, a retired Marine Corps colonel and senior adviser at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said the barges address a major challenge for amphibious forces: quickly moving equipment from ships to shore.

"Being able to drive directly onto the beach speeds up the flow of equipment and allows the force ashore to expand rapidly and defend itself," he said by email Tuesday.

"They might also allow an invasion force to use shoreline that is otherwise unsuitable," he added.

Cancian noted that the barges could serve other purposes, such as delivering supplies to islands in the South China Sea.

"However, their usefulness in an invasion stands out," he wrote.

Tzu-yun Su, director of Taiwan's Institute for National Defense and Security Research, described the barges as "very innovative" but also "fragile."

Taiwan has prepared for various scenarios, including amphibious landings, and has positioned heavy artillery inland to defend its beaches, he said by email Tuesday.

Photos and video of the barges have circulated on social media in recent days, including footage that appears to show China testing them on a beach.

Cancian said he could not confirm the video's authenticity but expressed confidence that the barges exist and that verified imagery would surface sooner or later.

Shugart said independent satellite images show an assembly of vessels consistent with the video on the coast of southern China near Zhanjiang.

S. Korean official: Hegseth won't visit on Pacific trip

By DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth is not expected to stop in South Korea during his upcoming Indo-Pacific trip, a South Korean defense official said this week, as the country remains in political turmoil following the impeachment of its president.

Hegseth will leave Seoul off his itinerary due to a "scheduling adjustment" by the United States, Ministry of National Defense spokesman Jeon Ha Gyu said at a press conference Monday.

The Office of the Secretary of Defense did not immediately respond to an email requesting details on Hegseth's itinerary and the countries he plans to visit.

Lloyd Austin, Hegseth's predecessor, made stops in Hawaii, Japan, South Korea and India during his first overseas trip in

March 2021.

Hegseth's first foreign trip as defense chief took him to Europe, where he visited U.S. troops in Germany and Poland and met with NATO leaders in Brussels. Since his confirmation in January, he has spoken separately with his South Korean and Japanese counterparts, pledging to strengthen military ties.

South Korea has been navigating a political crisis since December, when President Yoon Suk Yeol was impeached following a short-lived martial law attempt on Dec. 3 that led to the resignation of his national defense minister, Kim Yong-hyun.

Yoon's position is now held in an acting capacity by Choi Sang-mok, the minister of economy and finance. Vice Minister of National Defense Kim Seon-ho is serving as acting defense minister.

Israel strikes targets across Gaza as it restores blockade

Associated Press

DEIR-AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip — Israeli strikes killed at least 85 Palestinians across the Gaza Strip overnight and into Thursday, according to local health officials. Hours later, Hamas fired three rockets at Israel without causing casualties, in the first such attack since Israel ended their ceasefire with a surprise bombardment of Gaza on Tuesday.

The Israeli military meanwhile restored a blockade on northern Gaza, including Gaza City, that it had maintained for most of the war. It warned residents against using the main highway to enter or leave the north and said only passage to the south would be allowed on the coastal road.

It also announced an additional ground operation in northern Gaza near the already largely destroyed town of Beit Lahiya, where strikes have killed dozens over the past 24 hours.

Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians returned to what remains of their homes in the north after a ceasefire took hold in January. Israel resumed heavy strikes across Gaza on Tuesday, shattering the truce that had facilitated the release of more than two dozen hostages. Israel blamed the renewed fighting on Hamas because the militant group rejected a new proposal that departed from their signed agreement.

The Trump administration, which took credit for helping to broker the ceasefire, has voiced full support for Israel. More than 400 Palestinians were killed on Tuesday alone, according to Gaza's Health Ministry.

The military said three rockets were fired out of Gaza on Thursday, with one intercepted and two falling in open areas. Hamas claimed the attack and said it had targeted Tel Aviv.

Trump to shut down Department of Education

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump planned to sign an executive order Thursday afternoon calling for the shut-down of the U.S. Education Department, according to a White House official, advancing a campaign promise to eliminate an agency that's been a long-time target of conservatives.

Trump has derided the Education Department as wasteful and polluted by liberal ideology. However, completing its dismantling is likely impossible without an act of Congress, which created it in 1979.

A White House fact sheet said

the order would direct Secretary Linda McMahon "to take all necessary steps to facilitate the closure (of) the Department of Education and return education authority to the States, while continuing to ensure the effective and uninterrupted delivery of services, programs, and benefits on which Americans rely."

Trump's Republican administration has already been gutting the agency. Its workforce is being slashed in half, and there have been deep cuts to the Office for Civil Rights and the Institute of Education Sciences, which gathers data on the nation's academic progress.

Advocates for public schools said eliminating the department would leave children behind in an American education system that is fundamentally unequal.

Trump's order is "dangerous and illegal" and will disproportionately hurt low-income students, students of color and those with disabilities, said Rep. Bobby Scott of Virginia, the top Democrat on the House Committee on Education and the Workforce.

The department "was founded in part to guarantee the enforcement of students' civil rights," Scott said. "Champions of public school segregation ob-

jected, and campaigned for a return to 'states' rights."

The White House has not spelled out formally which department functions could be handed off to other departments or eliminated altogether. At her confirmation hearing, McMahon said she would preserve core initiatives, including Title I money for low-income schools and Pell grants for low-income college students. The goal, she said, would be "a better functioning" department.

The department sends billions of dollars a year to schools and oversees \$1.6 trillion in federal student loans.

Judge denies peace institute request to stop DOGE

The Washington Post

A federal judge on Wednesday denied an emergency request by the U.S. Institute of Peace to temporarily stop Elon Musk's U.S. DOGE Service from dismantling the independent organization after DOGE staffers raided its headquarters with help from law enforcement officers this week.

U.S. District Judge Beryl A. Howell said during a court hearing that the plaintiffs — several ousted board members — did not show they would be irreparably harmed if they were

not reinstated and DOGE staffers were allowed to remain in the institute's offices.

The judge sharply criticized the Trump administration for enlisting the Office of the U.S. Attorney for the District of Columbia, the FBI and D.C. police to assist in the takeover of the institute. She said she was denying the plaintiffs' request for a temporary restraining order because there was "confusion in the complaint on a number of levels."

"I'm very offended by how DOGE has operated at the insti-

tute," Howell said. "But that concern about how this has gone down is not one that can sway me in my consideration of factors of the TRO."

Staffers from DOGE, which stands for Department of Government Efficiency, seized control of the institute's headquarters Monday, acting on an executive order from President Donald Trump targeting nonexecutive branch foreign aid and peacemaking agencies for elimination. D.C. police, responding to trespassing calls, helped them enter.

The institute's president, George Moose, was removed from the building. Trump administration official Kenneth Jackson was installed as acting president in his place. USIP's headquarters is owned by the institute, not the government, and its employees are not government workers.

The institute, a registered nonprofit, was founded by Congress 40 years ago to help resolve violent international conflicts and frequently hosts government officials for policy discussions.

Blizzard conditions hit in the Midwest, Great Plains

Associated Press

OMAHA, Neb. — Another storm system affected millions of people in the middle of the U.S. on Wednesday, leaving parts of the Midwest and Great Plains under blizzard conditions and a broad swath of neighboring states at risk of high winds and wildfires.

Roughly 72 million people were under a wind advisory or warning, with winds gusting over 45 mph, according to

Bryan Jackson, a National Weather Service meteorologist.

At least 42 people died over the weekend when dynamic storms unleashed tornadoes, blinding dust and wildfires, uprooting trees and flattening hundreds of homes and businesses across eight states.

A band from southwestern Kansas to central Wisconsin was expected to bring as little as 2 inches of snow or as much as a foot.

Blizzard conditions early Wednesday led to near-zero visibility in south-central Nebraska, the state patrol said via Facebook, urging people to stay off the roads. There were road closures of more than 160 miles of I-80 from Lincoln to Lexington and nearly 70 miles of I-29 along the Nebraska-Iowa border. Stalled cars, jackknifed semitrailers, crashes and downed power lines contributed to the chaos.

Around the Iowa-Illinois border, more than an inch of snow was falling per hour, while gusts were as high as 30 mph, according to the National Weather Service.

Heavy snow and high winds knocked down tree branches and snapped utility poles. Power was knocked out to more than 140,000 customers in Nebraska, Iowa, Missouri, Arkansas, Tennessee and Indiana, according to Power-Outage.us.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Doctor who worked with youths pleads no contest

M PONTIAC — A doctor who worked with youth hockey teams in the Detroit area pleaded no contest Tuesday to sexual assault and other crimes involving 13 people, including some teenagers.

Zvi Levran, who was known as the “hockey doctor,” built relationships with players when they were teens and continued to see some of them as adults, authorities said.

Victims testified that Levran groped them when they sought sports physicals or treatment for injuries and showered with them after workouts. One man said Levran performed oral sex during an appointment for a hip injury.

The plea “ensures Levran’s victims will not be re-traumatized by the burden of testifying at trial. It also spares them any further uncertainty about the outcome of this case,” Oakland County prosecutor Karen McDonald said.

A no-contest plea in Michigan is treated as a conviction at sentencing. Levran, 68, pleaded no contest to 28 crimes including third-degree criminal sexual conduct, the most serious, the prosecutor’s office said.

Governor signs bill to ban gun conversion devices

AL MONTGOMERY — A day after Alabama lawmakers approved a ban on Glock switches and other conversion devices that convert semi-automatic weapons into machine guns, Gov. Kay Ivey signed the measure into law.

A bipartisan coalition pushed the Alabama legislation after

several mass shootings last year, including the shooting deaths of four people outside a Birmingham nightclub in September. The devices are already banned under federal law, but there’s currently no state law that bans them.

The Alabama Senate voted 24-2 to accept the House of Representatives changes to the bill.

Possessing or selling the devices would be a Class C felony punishable by up to 10 years in prison.

State carries out its first nitrogen gas execution

LA ANGOLA — Louisiana used nitrogen gas to put a man to death Tuesday evening for a killing decades ago, marking the first time the state has used the method as it resumed executions after a 15-year hiatus.

Jessie Hoffman Jr., 46, was pronounced dead at 6:50 p.m. at the Louisiana State Penitentiary, authorities said, adding the nitrogen gas had flowed for 19 minutes during what one official characterized as a “flawless” execution.

It was the fifth time nitrogen gas was used in the U.S. after four executions by the same method — all in Alabama.

Hoffman was convicted of the murder of Mary “Molly” Elliott, a 28-year-old advertising executive who was killed in New Orleans.

2 guilty in conspiracy in 53 tractor-trailer deaths

TX SAN ANTONIO — Two smugglers charged after 53 immigrants died in the back of a sweltering tractor-trailer with no air conditioning were found guilty Tues-

day after a two-week trial. The 2022 tragedy in San Antonio was the nation’s deadliest smuggling attempt across the U.S.-Mexico border.

Jurors in federal court in San Antonio took only about an hour to convict Felipe Orduna-Torres and Armando Gonzales-Ortega, finding that they were part of a human smuggling conspiracy that resulted in death and injury. They face up to life in prison and have a June 27 sentencing date.

The immigrants had come from Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico and had paid between \$12,000 and \$15,000 each to be smuggled into the U.S, according to an indictment in the case. They had made it as far as the Texas border city of Laredo when they were placed into a tractor-trailer with broken air conditioning for a three-hour drive to San Antonio.

As the temperature inside the trailer rose, those inside screamed and banged the walls of the trailer for help or tried to claw their way out, investigators said. Most eventually passed out. When the trailer was opened in San Antonio, 48 people were already dead. Another 16 were taken to hospitals, where five more died.

State senator resigns after solicitation arrest

MN ST. PAUL — A Minnesota state senator who was caught in a sting operation resigned under fire Thursday after he was charged with soliciting a minor for prostitution.

Republican Justin Eichorn, of Grand Rapids, submitted his resignation in a letter to Gov. Tim Walz, Senate Minority Leader

Mark Johnson said in a statement.

“This is the right thing to do for his family and the Senate,” Johnson said.

Eichorn, 40, has been jailed since his arrest Monday in Bloomington in an undercover operation targeting commercial sex involving juveniles.

Investigators had placed multiple ads online offering sex for money, according to the charging documents. Eichorn exchanged text messages with an undercover officer purporting to be a 17-year-old girl for several days until they arranged a meet-up, where he was arrested.

Harvard offers free tuition for many families

MA CAMBRIDGE — Dreaming of going to Harvard University?

Well, the university has made things a little easier with an announcement Monday that students whose families make up to \$200,000 won’t pay tuition. The university said the plan goes into effect for the 2025-26 academic year and is aimed at making Harvard more affordable, especially for middle income students. Those students could also get additional financial aid to cover other expenses.

Harvard University President Alan Garber said the plan also means students whose families make less than \$100,000 will pay nothing, meaning their tuition as well as other expenses like food and housing will be covered. Tuition in the current school year at Harvard is \$56,500, but it rises to \$82,866 if you include food, housing and other expenses.

— From wire reports

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Xavier rallies past Texas in First Four

Associated Press

DAYTON, Ohio — Marcus Foster scored 22 points and Zach Freemantle added 15 while overcoming foul trouble as Xavier rallied past Texas 86-80 in the First Four on Wednesday night.

The Musketeers (22-11) erased a 13-point deficit in their biggest comeback win this season and advanced into the main bracket of the NCAA Tournament to play No. 6 seed Illinois on Friday night in a Midwest Region game at Milwaukee.

"That's one of the greatest games I've ever been a part of," Xavier coach Sean Miller said. "I thought we beat an excellent Texas team. They are disciplined. They have depth and talent. We knew it was going to be a great challenge to beat a really good team from the SEC. I'm really proud of our team."

Tre Johnson led the Longhorns (19-16) with 23 points in a matchup of No. 11 seeds. Trammon Mark scored 16.

Freemantle hit a turnaround

jumper to break a 78-all tie with 1:48 remaining and his two free throws extended Xavier's lead to 82-79 with 1:09 left. Johnson missed a fadeaway jumper, and Dailyn Swain's putback of Freemantle's missed 3-pointer upped the margin to five with 20 seconds to play.

Chendall Weaver made one of two free throws for Texas before Freemantle's dunk sealed it. Xavier closed the game on a 16-6 run over the final six minutes.

Freemantle arrived at Xavier in 2019. He sat out last season because of injury and returned for a fifth season of competition with the hope of playing in his first NCAA Tournament.

"Storybook, maybe not," he said. "Obviously, we would have liked to maybe win by a little more. But any win we can get is a great thing. It was a very hard-fought game. That's a very good team we just played, and I'm just thankful to be a part of it."

Foster shot 8-for-9 from the

field, including 4 of 5 on 3s, and finished with eight rebounds.

Freemantle, who averaged 19.8 points during the Musketeers' seven-game winning streak to close the regular season, had two points and two fouls in the first half. He picked up his fourth foul with 7:10 left.

Texas led 47-39 at halftime. It was the first time Xavier trailed at the break since a Jan. 29 loss at Creighton.

"I thought we had one of our better first halves of the year," Texas coach Rodney Terry said. "Give them credit. They made big plays, big shots, and finished the game down the stretch."

The Musketeers were down by 13 in the first half and still trailed by 10 with 16 minutes remaining. Jerome Hunter's 3-pointer tied the score at 65 with eight minutes left.

A 3-pointer by Oklahoma transfer John Hugley put the Musketeers ahead 75-74 with 5:07 to go.

It was the fourth time since

1990 the teams met in the NCAA Tournament, with each school winning twice.

The Longhorns took advantage of early foul trouble for Xavier and got to the rim at will in the first half, scoring 26 of 47 points in the paint. The Musketeers adjusted defensively and allowed only 10 points in the paint after halftime.

What changed?

"I would just say our defensive intensity, getting more deflections," Foster said. "When we get deflections, it's hard to beat us. So we really just locked in on that. We understood that we really didn't have much of a problem on offense, but a problem on defense. Once we addressed that, things started to go our way."

University of Dayton Arena is located about an hour's drive from Xavier's campus, resulting in a partisan Musketeers crowd. Dayton playing in the NIT on Wednesday night gave Xavier fans an opportunity to scoop up more seats.

Mount St. Mary's tops American, earns date with Duke

Associated Press

DAYTON, Ohio — Dola Adabayo and Jedy Cordilla each scored 22 points as Mount St. Mary's defeated American University 83-72 in an NCAA Tournament matchup of No. 16 seeds at the First Four on Wednesday night.

The Mountaineers (23-12) earned a date with No. 1 seed Duke on Friday in an East Region game at Raleigh, N.C.

"Today when we walked out there for the national anthem, it was a little bit of a holy cow moment for me," Mountaineers coach Donny Lind said. "Now to get to move on with this group and let them keep playing and to go down to Raleigh and play Duke is awesome. We've got to get ready and give them every-

thing we've got."

Geoff Sprouse led American (22-13) with 18 points on six 3-pointers off the bench. Elijah Stephens scored 12.

"This is going to hurt for a while, but I'm going to flip the page," Eagles coach Duane Simpkins said. "We've got six very good freshmen coming in, and we're going to start to develop a game plan of how to get better. We'll be back."

American leading scorer Matt Rogers injured his right knee four minutes into the game.

Rogers attempted to play through the pain, but with 5:28 remaining in the first half he fell to the court, was helped off and did not return. Rogers, who averages 17 points per game, fin-

ished with seven points in eight minutes. He watched the second half from the bench on crutches.

"Yeah, I feel terrible for him," Lind said. "His versatility really stood out, and his will. He plays really, really hard. He's emotional in a great way for their team."

Both teams were shooting better than 60% and went a combined 8 of 19 from 3-point range through the first 10 minutes. Dallas Hobbs beat the buzzer with a 3 to put Mount St. Mary's ahead 48-38 at halftime.

Hobbs finished with 17 points.

"I was nervous," Hobbs said. "It's safe to say this was the biggest game I've played in in my life."

Mount St. Mary's was missing leading 3-point shooter Carmelo Pacheco, who hasn't played since breaking a finger in the regular-season finale.

But the Mountaineers stayed hot from long range in the second half. Malcolm Dread's 3-pointer put them ahead 64-51 with 11:26 left.

"Obviously, offense was clicking pretty well for us," Lind said.

Mount St. Mary's improved to 3-6 in the NCAA Tournament. Up next, the Blue Devils.

"It means a lot to the university," Hobbs said. "As far as playing Duke next, our mentality is the same thing, just going in and following the game plan, follow what Coach says, and hopefully go out there and get a win."

SEC's historic year wasn't by accident

Associated Press

Porter Moser spent three seasons in the Big 12 before shepherding Oklahoma to the Southeastern Conference, making the longtime coach uniquely suited to compare the erstwhile best conference in America to the current king of college hoops.

"The thing is, there is no bottom," Moser explained. "That's what we felt in the Big 12 the last couple years. But the athleticism with the ages is the difference. The athleticism, in my opinion, I've never seen in any league in any era. The length, age, shooters, skill levels of the teams in the SEC this year — it's unbelievable."

Unbelievable is a good way to describe Selection Sunday.

The expanded SEC landed a record 14 teams in the 68-team bracket, populating it with the overall No. 1 seed (Auburn), another No. 1 seed (Florida) and four more among the top four seeds in their respective regions. The total was a full three more than the previous record, held by the Big East, back when it was considered the dominant league in the country.

Buzz Williams was a part of that league, back when he was with Marquette. Then he moved to the ACC at Virginia Tech, which never seemed a whole lot easier. But these days? Every night, Williams knows his boys at Texas A&M are in for a fight.

"I do think what's transpiring is historic. And I don't think that when you're living in it, you're clapping as a fan or as a media

member going, 'This is really cool,'" Williams said. "You're trying to figure out how to not suffocate yourself from the burden that you feel that (every) possession can move the needle."

So how exactly did the SEC reach this point? How did a league known for fall Saturdays in the South — the Iron Bowl, the Egg Bowl, the "World's Largest Outdoor Cocktail Party" — become the epicenter of winters on the hardwood?

Starting to ascend

A good place to start is 2016, when Greg Sankey took over as the commissioner. The SEC landed only three schools in the NCAA Tournament that year, and Sankey was unwilling to accept any excuses from coaches, athletic directors and administrators.

One of his first calls was to Mike Tranchese, the old Big East commissioner, who came aboard as a consultant. The next was to Dan Leibovitz, a former coach with NBA ties, who became associate commissioner in charge of basketball. When Leibovitz took over the Big East, Sankey brought in Garth Glissman, who had been vice president of basketball operations for the NBA.

In other words, Sankey brought in basketball minds to lead a basketball resurrection.

Then, that group convinced schools that winning in football and basketball wasn't an either-or proposition. They could suc-

ceed in both of college athletics' most lucrative games, provided they did a few seemingly simple things:

■ They invested in them. More than half of the teams in the current 16-team configuration have built new arenas or undertaken transformative renovations since Sankey was hired, and others have invested in player dormitories and practice facilities.

■ They hired the right coaches and paid them well. The common denominator has been track records as winning head coaches, either in other power conferences — such as Rick Barnes at Tennessee and Chris Beard at Mississippi — or from the mid-major level, such as Missouri's Dennis Gates, Todd Golden at Florida, Nate Oats at Alabama and Mississippi State's Chris Jans.

■ They recruited the right players, transfers and freshmen alike. Three of the league's biggest stars got their start elsewhere: Auburn's Johni Broome at Morehead State, Florida's Walter Clayton Jr. at Iona and Alabama's Mark Sears at Ohio. Looking ahead to next season, 14 of the league's 16 teams have at least one top-100 freshman recruit.

Navigating new era

The coaches have managed to navigate a brave new world of the transfer portal and name, image and likeness compensation in college sports, keeping their best players with proper

packages while bringing in others with robust support from alumni and administrators.

"When Vanderbilt wins, it strengthens our connection to the university and to each other, as alumni and supports," said Mark H. Carter, a businessman who recently pledged a \$1.5 million matching gift to the school to support NIL initiatives.

"If we, in turn, invest in recruiting and holding onto the best of the best, we can do great things for the university," Carter said. "When the whole world is watching Vanderbilt, the return on investment is exponential."

On Sunday, the Commodores received their first NCAA Tournament bid in eight years. Vanderbilt deserved it, too, beating the likes of Seton Hall (Big East), Virginia Tech and Cal (ACC) and TCU (Big 12).

Madness arrives

It's hard to argue the SEC didn't deserve its 14 tournament bids when considering its teams combined to go 30-4 against the ACC, 14-2 against the Big 12, 10-9 against the Big Ten and 5-4 against the Big East.

"I thought it was a record non-conference success rate for all the teams in our league," Beard said. "Then when the league starts, it's just been a bloodbath. It's short-term memory. Two-game winning streak and free breakfast burritos in the morning; lose a couple games and fans think the world's falling apart."

Lorentz scores short-handed winner as Leafs top Avs

Associated Press

TORONTO — Joseph Woll made 38 saves and Steven Lorentz scored short-handed early in the third period as the Toronto Maple Leafs topped the Colorado Avalanche 2-1 on Wednesday night.

Auston Matthews, with his

fourth in the past three games, had the other goal for Toronto.

Valeri Nichushkin scored for Colorado, and Mackenzie Blackwood stopped 24 shots.

The Leafs won their second straight after thumping the Calgary Flames 6-2 on Monday following an ugly 1-4-1 stretch.

The Avalanche, meanwhile, saw their 8-0-1 run come to an end — including a 7-4 victory over Toronto on March 8 in Denver — and lost in regulation for the first time since Feb. 23.

Wild 4, Kraken 0: Ryan Hartman, Matt Boldy and Liam Obergren scored 1 minute, 42 sec-

onds apart in the first period as Minnesota beat visiting Seattle.

Filip Gustavsson made 34 saves for his fifth shutout of the season, Boldy added an empty-net goal, and Minnesota moved within two points of third-place Colorado in the Central Division.

Siakam, Pacers rally late past Mavericks

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Pascal Siakam scored 29 points, Benedit Mathurin scored 16 of his 23 points in the fourth quarter and the Indiana Pacers rallied from an 11-point deficit in the final six minutes to beat the short-handed Dallas Mavericks 135-131 on Wednesday night.

The Pacers retook the lead with 14.7 seconds left when Siakam stole the ball and a wide open Andrew Nembhard knocked down a 3-pointer to make it 131-130. Indiana closed it out at the free-throw line.

Nembhard finished with 22 points and eight assists while Tyrese Haliburton sat out with a back injury. Mathurin also had seven rebounds.

P.J. Washington Jr. finished with 26 points to lead the Mavericks, who had six of their eight available players score in double figures. Jaden Hardy had 24 points and Kai Jones added 18 points and 11 rebounds points for Dallas, which has lost nine of 10.

Rockets 116, Magic 108: Jalen Green scored 26 points, Alperen Sengun had 22 points and 12 rebounds, and visiting Houston extended its winning streak to a season-best eight games, beating Orlando.

Fred VanVleet added 19 points for the Rockets, who maintained their second-place position in the Western Conference, ahead of —

among others — the surging Los Angeles Lakers and Golden State Warriors.

Pistons 116, Heat 113: Cade Cunningham banked in a 3-pointer with less than a second remaining, giving visiting Detroit a win over Miami and sending the Heat to their ninth consecutive loss.

Cunningham had his ninth triple-double of the season — 25 points, 12 rebounds and 11 assists for the Pistons, who trailed for most of the second half and never led by more than two until the final second.

Pelicans 119, Timberwolves 115: Zion Williamson scored 29 points and CJ McCollum added 18 for visiting New Orleans as the Pelicans surprised Minnesota a win.

The Timberwolves have lost two straight after winning eight in a row. Minnesota is in a battle with Golden State for the No. 6 seed in the Western Conference. Wednesday's loss drops the Wolves a full game behind the Warriors.

Thunder 133, 76ers 100: Jaylin Williams scored a career-high 19 points and had 17 rebounds and 11 assists for his second career triple-double, and visiting Oklahoma City cruised past injury-depleted Philadelphia with Shai Gilgeous-Alexander and three other starters sidelined.

Aaron Wiggins scored 26 points for the Western Conference-leading Thunder, who clinched the Northwest Division title and moved closer to wrapping up the No. 1 seed in the Western Conference.

Spurs 120, Knicks 105: Sandro Mamukelashvili scored a career-high 34 points on 13-for-14 shooting in 19 minutes to become the first player in NBA history to score 34 points while playing less than 20 minutes as host San Antonio upended New York.

Mamukelashvili, who was 7 for 7 from 3-point range, had 13 points, seven rebounds and an assist in eight minutes in the first half as the Spurs rolled to a 28-point lead.

Jazz 128, Wizards 112: Kyle Filipowski scored 21 points, Keyonte George added 20 and host Utah snapped a season-worst 10-game skid with a victory over Washington.

Collin Sexton had 18 points and Brice Sensabaugh scored 17 for the Jazz in a matchup of the worst teams in each conference. The Wizards entered having won six of 11 to leave Utah with the league's worst record.

Lakers 120, Nuggets 108: Luka Doncic had 31 points, nine rebounds and seven assists in just three quarters of work, and host Los Angeles routed Denver in a matchup of injury-depleted Western Conference conten-

ders.

Nikola Jokic (elbow) and Jamal Murray (ankle) missed their second straight games for the Nuggets, while LeBron James (hamstring) and Rui Hachimura (knee) continued their longer-term absences for the Lakers.

Suns 127, Bulls 121: Devin Booker scored 41 points, including 20 in the fourth quarter, and host Phoenix held off Chicago.

Kevin Durant had 26 points and eight assists and Nick Richards had 18 points, nine rebounds and three blocks as the Suns won for the third time in their last four games.

Trail Blazers 115, Grizzlies 99: Deni Avdija had 31 points, 16 rebounds and eight assists to lead host Portland to a victory over Memphis.

The Trail Blazers moved within two games of the Dallas Mavericks for 10th place in the Western Conference and the final spot in the play-in tournament.

Kings 123, Cavaliers 119: DeMar DeRozan scored 27 points and host Sacramento handed Cleveland its third straight loss.

Evan Mobley scored 22 of his 31 points in the final 15 minutes for the Cavaliers, but it wasn't enough to help Cleveland get back on the winning track. The Cavs have matched their longest skid of the season following a 16-game winning streak.

Celtics set to be sold for pro sports record \$6.1B

Associated Press

The Boston Celtics are being sold for what would be a record-setting initial valuation of \$6.1 billion to a group led by Symphony Technology Group managing partner William Chisholm, the sides said Thursday.

The sale — if approved by the NBA's board of governors after a thorough vetting process — would be the richest in U.S. major pro sports history. That process would likely not be completed until the summer, at the earliest.

The \$6.1 billion valuation — which would seem to be a minimum, since that is just the

initial number — would break the mark set when a group led by Josh Harris bought the NFL's Washington Commanders for \$6.05 billion in 2023. Sportico and ESPN were among those first reporting the agreement for the sale of the reigning NBA champions.

Boston Basketball Partners LLC announced last summer that it intended to sell the majority of the Celtics either late last year or early this year, then would sell the balance of its shares in 2028. Wyc Grousbeck, whose family leads the ownership group, is expected to remain the Celtics' governor through the 2027-28 season.

Grousbeck's group bought the Celtics for \$360 million in 2002.

"My partners and I have immense respect for Wyc, the entire Grousbeck family and their indelible contributions to the Celtics organization over the last 23 years," Chisholm said in a release announcing the agreement, the details of which were confirmed by the agencies representing both sides involved in the sale. "We look forward to learning from Wyc and partnering with Brad Stevens, Joe Mazzulla and the talented team and staff to build upon their success as we work to bring more championships home to Boston."