

TUESDAY, MARCH 25, 2025

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

Officials face scrutiny over war plans chat

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Top U.S. intelligence officials for the Trump administration denied Tuesday that any classified information was shared in a commercial group chat that was used to discuss plans to bomb Houthi targets in Yemen and included a journalist.

Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard and CIA Director John Ratcliffe, who were among the participants in the chat over the Signal messaging app, refused to admit wrongdoing as the fallout over the scandal continued to reverberate on Capitol Hill.

They appeared before the Senate Select Intelligence Committee a day after Jeffrey Goldberg, editor-in-chief of The Atlantic magazine, revealed he was accidentally added to a group chat where Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth posted information on weapons packages, targets and timing for the airstrikes.

Ratcliffe and Gabbard denied such details were shared in the discussion, with Gabbard

deferring questions on whether they would be considered classified.

"I can attest to the fact that there were no classified or intelligence equities that were included in that chat group at any time," Gabbard said.

Ratcliffe acknowledged he was included in the chat while Gabbard refused to answer whether she participated in it, saying she was not "going to get into the specifics" because the matter was under review.

Several senators expressed doubt that there was no classified information in the discussion. If that was true, they argued, then intelligence officials should have no issues with releasing the entire text thread.

Goldberg in his story omitted details that he believed could be used to harm American personnel, including the name of a CIA official whom Ratcliffe had named in the chat. The official is an active intelligence officer, according to Goldberg.

Ratcliffe said Tuesday that the official is not operating under cover so providing their name in the chat was not inappropriate.

He also defended the use of Signal, saying

it was permissible and lawful to use to communicate and coordinate for work purposes.

"The national security adviser intended this to be, as it should have been, a mechanism for coordinating between senior level officials but not a substitute for using high side or classified communications for anything that would be classified," Ratcliffe said. "And I think that that is exactly what did happen."

He later admitted "pre-decisional strike deliberation should be conducted through classified channels."

The White House on Tuesday also argued no war plans were discussed in the Signal chat and said Goldberg was "well-known for his sensationalist spin." Hegseth also lashed out at Goldberg in comments on Monday, attacking him as "deceitful and highly discredited."

Hegseth has denied he mishandled classified information and insisted "nobody was texting war plans." Gabbard and Ratcliffe told senators Tuesday that Hegseth has the authority to determine whether information is classified or not.

US: Prospective deal will protect shipping in Black Sea

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — The United States said an agreement has been reached to ensure safe navigation in the Black Sea as it wrapped up three days of talks Tuesday with Ukrainian and Russian delegations in Saudi Arabia on prospective steps toward peace.

U.S. experts met separately with Ukrainian and Russian representatives in Riyadh, and the White House issued separate joint statements about the talks with Ukraine and Russia. It said the sides have "agreed to ensure safe navigation, eliminate the use of force, and prevent the use of commercial vessels for military purposes in the Black Sea."

Details of the prospective deal are yet to be released, but it appears to mark a revival of a 2022 agreement to ensure safe transit via Ukraine's Black Sea ports that was brokered by the United Nations and Turkey and was halted by Russia the following

year. Russia had said the agreement failed to ensure safety of its Black Sea exports.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said in televised comments Tuesday that Moscow is open to the revival of the agreement but warned that Russian interests must be protected.

In an apparent reference to the Russian demands, the White House statement on the talks with Russia noted that the U.S. "will help restore Russia's access to the world market for agricultural and fertilizer exports, lower maritime insurance costs, and enhance access to ports and payment systems for such transactions."

The White House statement also mentioned that the parties agreed to develop measures for implementing an agreement reached in President Donald Trump's calls with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to ban strikes against energy facilities in Russia and Ukraine.

After the Trump-Putin call last week, the White House said the partial ceasefire would include ending attacks on "energy and infrastructure," while the Kremlin declared that the agreement referred more narrowly to "energy infrastructure."

Meanwhile, a Kremlin official said Tuesday that the talks between U.S. and Russian officials in Riyadh the previous day would likely lead to further contacts between Washington and Moscow, but that no concrete plans have yet been made.

The three days of meetings — which did not include direct Russian-Ukrainian negotiations — are part of an attempt to hammer out details on a partial pause in the 3-year-old war in Ukraine. It has been a struggle to reach even a limited, 30-day ceasefire — which Moscow and Kyiv agreed to in principle last week — with both sides continuing to attack each other with drones and missiles.

Senate confirms Phelan as Navy secretary

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — John Phelan, an investor who said he would make up for his lack of military experience with his business acumen, was confirmed Monday by the Senate to serve as Navy secretary.

Phelan, 61, was confirmed in a 62-30 vote and will become the first person in over 15 years to lead the Navy without having served in any branch of the military. He has acknowledged his inexperience but cast it as an asset.

A founder of several investment firms, Phelan said he would draw on his management and leadership skills to reform the Navy and address subpar housing, high suicide rates, failed audits and delays and cost overruns in shipbuilding and ship maintenance.

"The Navy and the Marine Corps already possess extraordinary operational expertise within their ranks," he said. "My role is to utilize that expertise and strengthen it, step outside the status quo and take decisive action with a results-oriented approach."

Phelan's only connection to the military is through an advisory role for the Spirit of

America, a nonprofit that works with troops and diplomats to deliver assistance to communities affected by conflict.

He was a major donor to President Donald Trump's 2024 re-election campaign and said during his confirmation hearing last month that Trump often texts him in the middle of the night to complain about rusty warships.

Trump has made shipbuilding a focus of his second term, vowing to build commercial and military ships "very fast, very soon" to keep pace with China's growing naval fleet and challenge its dominance in the commercial shipbuilding market.

China's estimated 400-ship navy is already the largest in the world while the U.S. Navy's plan to have a fleet of 315 ships by 2025 has fallen short, with the service having 296 battle-force ships as of January, according to the Congressional Research Service.

Phelan told senators that he believed the Navy was suffering from a culture of complacency and failing to take decisive action to address shipbuilding problems.

"It's almost as if we're waiting for a crisis to happen to ignite things and I think in the busi-

ness of warfare, that's a dangerous place to be," he said. "I would bring a sense of urgency to this. I would bring a sense of accountability to this."

Phelan also committed to passing a department-wide audit and growing the Navy's enlisted ranks. The Navy is on track to meet its recruiting goals for the second straight year, but it has also started accepting lower test scores and recruits without high school diplomas or GED certificates. Phelan said he would apply best practices from the Marine Corps, which has consistently met its recruiting goals, and his own experience attracting and retaining talent to improve enlistment.

Republican Sen. Roger Wicker of Mississippi, the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said he considered Phelan's nontraditional background an asset and was pleased with his track record in business.

But Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., raised concerns about Phelan's investments in defense contractors and pressed him in a letter this month to avoid any conflicts of interest while serving as Navy secretary and for at least four years after.

Teachers among employee groups exempted from DOD hiring freeze

BY COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

Teaching positions at Department of Defense Education Activity schools and on-post day care workers are among more than a dozen classes of jobs that the Pentagon has exempted from a department-wide hiring freeze, according to a department memorandum.

Jules Hurst, the acting defense undersecretary for personnel readiness, carved out about 18 classes of exemptions to the civilian hiring freeze ordered Feb. 28 by Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, according to the March 18 memo. Most of the positions focused on key support for military functions and for quality-of-life issues for service members.

The child-related exemptions included teachers and facility staff at DOD schools, instructors or support staff at child care centers on military installations and child and youth services staff positions, which include teen centers and counseling services. Those exemptions come as the Pentagon has worked in

recent years to bolster its civilian child care-focused workforce, especially in its on-post day care facilities that serve as an alternative to expensive off-post day care services.

Hegseth ordered the civilian jobs freeze last month after President Donald Trump had issued a broad civilian hiring freeze over most of the federal government in January as part of his administration's efforts to slash the size of the government.

Hurst's memo also exempted civilian workers at military depots, shipyards, arsenals and maintenance locations and civilian positions throughout Military Entrance Processing Command. Other positions exempted by Hurst included civilian mariners, positions at military medical facilities that treat patients or are essential to hospital operations, and jobs critical to "fire, life and safety" response on military installations.

Positions that fall under the Pentagon's Nonappropriated Fund umbrella — those whose salaries are not directly paid by taxpayers — were also exempted.

2nd judge issues ban on removal of trans troops

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — A federal judge in New Jersey has issued a temporary ban on the removal of two transgender men from the Air Force, following a similar ruling last week from a judge in Washington, D.C.

U.S. District Judge Christine O'Hearn after a hearing Monday said the pair have shown their separation would cause lasting damage to their careers and reputations.

She issued a two-week ban on enforcement of President Donald Trump's executive order banning transgender people from military service.

O'Hearn found that Master Sgt. Logan Ireland and Staff Sgt. Nicholas Bear Bade are likely to prevail on equal protection grounds by showing they have been singled out due to their sex and the defendants cannot justify the differential treatment.

Trump targets Venezuelan oil with new tariff

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump said Monday that he would be placing a 25% tariff on all imports from any country that buys oil or gas from Venezuela as well as imposing new tariffs on the South American country itself.

In a Truth Social post, Trump said Venezuela has been “very hostile” to the United States and countries purchasing oil from it will be forced to pay the tariff on all their trade to the U.S. starting April 2.

The tariffs would most likely add to the taxes facing China, which in 2023 bought 68% of the oil exported by Venezuela, according to a 2024 analysis by the U.S. Energy Information

Administration. Spain, India, Russia, Singapore and Vietnam are also among the countries receiving oil from Venezuela, the report shows.

But even the U.S. — despite its sanctions against Venezuela — buys oil from that country. In January, the U.S. imported 8.6 million barrels of oil from Venezuela, according to the Census Bureau, out of roughly 202 million barrels imported that month.

And on Monday, the Treasury Department issued an extension for U.S.-based Chevron Corp.’s lease to pump and export Venezuelan oil until May 27. The extension, known as a general license, exempts the country from economic sanc-

tions and allows it to continue to pump oil.

In February, Trump had announced an end to the Chevron-Venezuela relationship, in what became a financial lifeline for the South American country.

Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro responded by accusing the U.S. of violating international trade rules with an “arbitrary, illegal and desperate measure” designed to “undermine the development” of the South American nation.

“For years, the fascist right, repudiated by the Venezuelan people, has promoted economic sanctions with the hope of bringing Venezuela to its knees,” the government said. “They failed because Venezuela

is a sovereign country, because its people have resisted with dignity, and because the world no longer submits to any form of economic dictatorship.”

The U.S. president is arguing that tariffs will bring back manufacturing jobs, rather than worsen inflationary pressures and hinder growth as economists have warned. His latest anecdotal evidence came Monday as Hyundai announced at the White House that it would build a \$5.8 billion steel plant in Louisiana.

“This investment is a clear demonstration that tariffs very strongly work,” said Trump, adding that the new plant would create 1,400 jobs.

State secrets privilege invoked over Trump deportations case

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Trump administration on Monday invoked a “state secrets privilege” and refused to give a federal judge any additional information about the deportation of Venezuelan migrants to El Salvador under an 18th century wartime law — a case that has become a flashpoint amid escalating tension with the federal courts.

The declaration comes as U.S. District Judge James Boasberg weighs whether the government defied his order to turn around planes carrying migrants after he blocked deportations of people alleged to be gang members without due process.

Boasberg, the chief judge of the federal district court in Washington, has asked for details about when the planes landed and who was on board, information that the Trump administration asserts would harm “diplomatic and national security concerns.”

Government attorneys also asked an appeals court Monday

to lift Boasberg’s order and allow deportations to continue, a push that appeared to divide the judges.

Circuit Court Judge Patricia Millett said Nazis detained in the U.S. during World War II received better legal treatment than Venezuelan immigrants who were deported to El Salvador this month under the same statute.

“We certainly dispute the Nazi analogy,” Justice Department attorney Drew Ensign responded during a hearing of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit.

Millett is one of three appellate judges who will decide whether to lift a March 15 order temporarily prohibiting deportations under the Alien Enemies Act of 1798. They didn’t rule from the bench Monday.

A second judge appeared open to the administration’s argument that the migrants should be challenging their detention in Texas rather than the nation’s capital. The third judge on the panel didn’t ask any questions.

US consumer confidence falls for fourth consecutive month

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — U.S. consumer confidence fell for the fourth straight month as Americans’ anxiety about their financial futures declined to a 12-year low amid rising concern over tariffs and inflation.

The Conference Board reported Tuesday that its consumer confidence index fell 7.2 points in March to 92.9. Analysts were expecting a decline to a reading of 94.5, according to a survey by FactSet.

The Conference Board’s report Tuesday said the measure of Americans’ short-term expectations for income, business and the job market fell 9.6 points to 65.2.

It is the lowest reading in 12 years and well below the threshold of 80, which the Conference Board has said can signal a potential recession in the near future. The proportion of consumers anticipating a recession in the next year, however, held steady at a nine-month high, the board reported.

“Consumers’ optimism about future income — which had held

up quite strongly in the past few months — largely vanished, suggesting worries about the economy and labor market have started to spread into consumers’ assessments of their personal situations,” said Stephanie Guichard, senior economist at The Conference Board.

The board’s survey showed that purchasing plans for both homes and cars declined. In somewhat of a surprise given respondents’ anxiety about the future, however, intentions to buy big-ticket items like appliances increased. The board said that could reflect a desire to buy before President Donald Trump’s tariffs kick in, leading to price increases.

While inflation has retreated from the highs during the post-pandemic rebound, it has remained above the Federal Reserve’s 2% target.

Those still-elevated prices, combined with Trump’s announced tariffs on many imported goods, has Americans feeling sour about spending as concerns about the economy mount.

N. Korea: White House 'gambling' on war

BY DAVID CHOI

Stars and Stripes

President Donald Trump's administration is "gambling" on a potential war with Pyongyang by transforming his predecessor's policy on North Korea into something more "vicious," North Korea's state-run news agency said Tuesday.

Freedom Shield — a country-wide, 11-day military exercise by the U.S. and South Korea that ended Thursday — "cannot be seen as a simple follow-up or repetition" of previous drills, according to the Korean Central News Agency.

More than 12,500 South Korean troops participated and over 1,000 sorties were flown

during the exercise, according to South Korea's Ministry of National Defense and U.S. Forces Korea.

Despite Pyongyang's protests over what it called "warlike" training, U.S. and South Korean officials describe Freedom Shield as a defensive exercise covering land, air, sea and cyberspace to prepare for potential North Korean aggression. A second large-scale annual exercise, Ulchi Freedom Shield, is typically held in August.

Earlier this month, Kim Yo Jong, the sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, accused the Trump administration of continuing former President Joe Biden's "hostile policy"

against Pyongyang.

Washington's approach is "sufficient justification for [North Korea] to indefinitely bolster its nuclear war deterrent," she said in a March 2 KCNA report.

Two months into his second term, Trump has not publicly commented on any potential policy shifts toward North Korea.

During a March 13 meeting with NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte, Trump told reporters he had "a great relationship" with Kim and claimed he had prevented "a nuclear war" through negotiations with the North Korean leader during his first term.

Trump and Kim held their first summit in Singapore in 2018, followed by a second in Vietnam the following year. They also met at the Demilitarized Zone dividing North and South Korea in 2019.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio, after a Feb. 15 meeting with South Korean Foreign Minister ChoTae-yul, "reaffirmed America's commitment to the complete denuclearization of [North Korea] while expressing the Trump administration's openness to dialogue," according to a State Department news release.

The Biden administration also sought North Korea's denuclearization while offering Kim a chance to negotiate.

Firefighters battle Carolina blazes; NJ fire contained

Associated Press

Dry conditions, wind and trees downed by Hurricane Helene fueled wildfires in North Carolina and South Carolina, where evacuation orders were in effect Tuesday.

About 80 miles west of Charlotte, N.C., officials ordered mandatory evacuations for roughly 165 properties in rural Polk County. Three fires there have burned at least 9 square miles. The North Carolina For-

est Service says two of the fires are uncontained as of Monday night.

The Black Cove Fire is one of the larger blazes. Officials said a downed power line sparked that fire, but the causes of the other two fires are under investigation.

Neighboring Henderson County issued voluntary evacuation orders and opened an emergency shelter. Volunteer fire departments were on

standby, Henderson County spokesperson Mike Morgan told WLOS-TV.

Two fires were burning in the mountains of South Carolina. The fires in Table Rock State Park and nearby Persimmon Ridge have burned a combined 2.3 square miles, the South Carolina Forestry Commission said.

Officials said both fires were ignited by human activity and neither were contained as of

Monday night.

A forest fire burning in New Jersey's million-acre Pine-lands region was 100% contained on Monday morning, the New Jersey Forest Fire Services said in a post on X. The fire was first spotted Saturday and burned through about 3.5 square miles.

That blaze led authorities to evacuate two campgrounds in Wharton State Forest, officials said.

Trump to nominate acting CDC director for position

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump will nominate Susan Monarez, the acting director of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and a longtime federal staffer, to the permanent position, a White House official confirmed Monday.

Trump abruptly withdrew the nomination of his first pick, David Weldon, earlier this month.

Monarez has been serving as

the CDC's acting director since January and came from another federal agency, the Advanced Research Projects Agency for Health.

Monarez, 50, holds a doctorate in microbiology and immunology from the University of Wisconsin, and her postdoctoral training was in microbiology and immunology at Stanford University.

"As an incredible mother and dedicated public servant, Dr. Monarez understands the im-

portance of protecting our children, our communities, and our future," Trump said in the post on Monday afternoon. "Americans have lost confidence in the CDC due to political bias and disastrous mismanagement."

Earlier this month, the White House withdrew the nomination of Weldon, a former Florida congressman, to lead the CDC. Weldon told the media his nomination was withdrawn because "there were not enough votes to get me confirmed."

Weldon was closely aligned with Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who for years has been one of the nation's leading anti-vaccine activists.

The CDC is based in Atlanta and has a core budget of more than \$9 billion. It was created nearly 80 years ago to prevent the spread of malaria in the U.S. Its mission was later expanded, and it gradually became a global leader on infectious and chronic diseases and a go-to source of health information.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Jewelry swallowed during man's arrest is recovered

FL ORLANDO — Detectives have recovered four diamond earrings from a suspected thief two weeks after he gulped the Tiffany & Co. jewelry worth nearly \$770,000 during his arrest on the side of a highway in the Florida Panhandle, authorities said Friday.

The last of the four earrings stolen from the Tiffany store in Orlando was recovered from the suspect last week, the Orlando Police Department said.

Three of the earrings were recovered two days before that, along with two other unidentified diamond earrings. The suspect was transferred from a jail to a hospital while detectives waited to collect the evidence, police officials said in a statement.

The four stolen earrings matched the serial numbers from the jewelry taken from the Tiffany store last month, detectives said.

Two teens are fatally shot in parking lot at a mall

MA BROCKTON — Two teenagers were fatally shot outside of a mall in Massachusetts following reports of a fight, a district attorney said Sunday.

Police in Brockton responded to the Westgate Mall parking lot at about 7 p.m. Saturday. There were reports of several teens fighting, Plymouth County District Attorney Tim Cruz posted on X.

"During this altercation, a fatal shooting took place," Cruz wrote. "The victims were a 15-

year-old male and an 18-year-old female."

The investigation was active, he said.

The teens were not identified and no arrests were announced.

Sheriff's deputy fatally struck by fleeing vehicle

LA SLIDELL — A Louisiana sheriff's deputy was fatally struck by a fleeing vehicle as he put a spike strip down on a highway during a pursuit early Sunday near New Orleans, authorities said.

Sgt. Grant Candies was deploying the device used to disable vehicles when he was struck and killed on Interstate 10 in the Slidell area, the St. Tammany Parish Sheriff's Office said in a news release.

The pursuit began when a deputy tried to stop a vehicle and the driver fled at high speed, the sheriff's office said.

The pursuit ended when the fleeing vehicle with five people inside crashed into a New Orleans Police officer's vehicle in the east part of the city, the statement added.

The police officer was injured as he entered the interstate to join the pursuit, police said in a statement.

It said the officer and the occupants of the fleeing vehicle were taken to the hospital. The officer has been released and the others were in stable condition, police said.

Hundreds scramble for a shot at a dozen free eggs

NY NEW YORK — Hundreds of people lined up Friday morning at three sites

in New York City, some arriving more than an hour early, for the opportunity to snag one of the nation's hottest commodities: a dozen free eggs.

People were bundled up against the windy cold as they stood outside a Harlem restaurant, patiently waiting to be handed a carton. Less than 10 minutes later, the 100 cartons were gone, leaving many empty-handed.

"I heard from the news that they will be giving around, like, 1,500 eggs, or something like that. OK? And I just came because I needed some eggs, and then I'm waiting here in the line, and I don't see anything," said Jackeline Tejava, who was in a line that stretched around the block. "They say that the eggs are gone, but it hasn't been not even more than 20 people, so I don't know what happened."

The giveaway was organized by FarmerJawn, a 128-acre Pennsylvania farm that's focused on providing organic food to underserved communities.

FarmerJawn held other egg giveaways Friday in Brooklyn and Queens. The group also handed out free cartons in New York last month.

First black Republican congresswoman dies

UT SALT LAKE CITY — Former U.S. Rep. Mia Love of Utah, a daughter of Haitian immigrants who became the first Black Republican woman elected to Congress, died Sunday.

She was 49.

Love's family posted news of her death on Love's X account.

She had undergone recent

treatment for brain cancer and received immunotherapy as part of a clinical trial at Duke University's brain tumor center. Her daughter said earlier this month that the former lawmaker was no longer responding to treatment.

Love died at her home in Saratoga Springs, Utah, according to a statement posted by the family.

Utah Gov. Spencer Cox referred to Love as a "true friend" and said her legacy of service inspired all who knew her.

Wife of slain fire captain is arrested in Mexico

CA SAN DIEGO — A month after an official with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection was found slain at her home, the woman's wife has been arrested in Mexico on suspicion of murder, authorities said.

Investigators had named Yolanda Olejniczak Marodi as the prime suspect in the Feb. 17 stabbing death of Cal Fire Capt. Rebecca Marodi, 49, in Ramona, near San Diego.

Olejniczak Marodi was arrested Saturday at a hotel in Mexicali, just south of the U.S. border, according to officials in Mexico.

Mexican state security agents transferred her to U.S. marshals and she was returned to the United States, according to a statement from the San Diego County Sheriff's Office.

She will be booked into custody in San Diego, and the investigation into Marodi's killing remains ongoing, the statement said.

— From wire reports

STARS AND STRIPES®

Single source convenience, reliably independent. Visit www.stripes.com.

Reporting World, National and Military News

USC women's title hopes take huge hit

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — If Southern California wants to win its first national championship in 41 years, the Trojans will have to find a way to get it done without star guard JuJu Watkins.

They notched their 30th win for the first time since 1986 by walloping ninth-seeded Mississippi State 96-59 in the second round of the NCAA Tournament on Monday night. But they lost Watkins to a season-ending right knee injury in the first quarter.

Watkins was streaking down the court on a fast break with two Bulldogs defenders nearby when her knee bent awkwardly as she planted her right foot. She immediately crumpled to the court. Watkins had to be carried off, unable to put any weight on her leg. She will have surgery and then rehabilitate, USC said, without specifying her injury.

The sight of Watkins writhing in pain on the court, holding her injured knee while her team-

mates stood around her and coach Lindsay Gottlieb rushed to the 19-year-old's side shocked the crowd of 7,808 at Galen Center.

"JuJu is a generational talent," Mississippi State guard Jerkaila Jordan said. "She's changed the game in so many ways at such a young age. Seeing her go down was really tough. I said my prayers for her."

Losing Watkins just five minutes in on a non-contact play turned the home fans angry and they booed the Bulldogs the rest of the game. At halftime, they jeered the MSU cheerleaders' routine.

"You had to be here to feel it," Gottlieb said. "I don't know if people saw that through the TV, but it was a palpable thing."

Top-seeded USC, meanwhile, was all business. Buoyed by the raucous crowd, the Trojans hit buzzer-beating shots at the end of the first, second and third quarters and ran their lead to 46 points in the fourth.

"I wouldn't say this is our defining moment," said Kiki Iriafen, who scored a season-high 36 points.

"It's what we expect of ourselves. We expect to win in this tournament regardless if it's going our way, we have people, we don't have people. That's the standard here."

Next up is the Sweet 16 in Spokane, Wash., where USC (30-3) plays fifth-seeded Kansas State (28-7) on Friday.

The Trojans have yet to know what it's like playing without one of the biggest stars in college basketball. Watkins started all 34 games as a freshman, leading USC to the Elite Eight and boosting attendance with strong support from her nearby community of Watts.

"I hope she can at some point see just the significance that she has here that goes so far beyond just her talent and abilities," Gottlieb said. "That's what's really generational about it, the way she's galvanized everyone, and the way that her team had

her back and also really is a team."

This year was supposed to be about winning it all. It still could be, but the picture looks a lot different without Watkins.

Iriafen, a Stanford graduate transfer, showed what she can do without her running mate, shooting 16-for-22 to go with nine rebounds.

USC had five players in double figures, including three freshmen. One of them, Kaleigh Heckel, along with sophomore Malia Samuels, ran the offense in Watkins' absence. They combined for nine assists, five steals and two turnovers. Heckel also scored 13 points and had six assists.

The Trojans won their first two tournament games by a combined 83 points.

"We will make sure that we're pouring into this team, to JuJu and keeping us together because as you saw we are capable of a lot of greatness," Gottlieb said. "That's what will continue to be the message to our team."

Terrapins outlast Crimson Tide in double overtime

Associated Press

COLLEGE PARK, Md. — Sarah Te-Biasu made a tying 3-pointer late in the fourth quarter, then scored eight of her 26 points in the second overtime to help fourth-seeded Maryland outlast fifth-seeded Alabama 111-108 on Monday to advance to the Sweet 16 of the women's NCAA Tournament.

The Terrapins (25-7) advance to play top-seeded South Carolina, but to get there they had to overcome a career-high 45 points by the Crimson Tide's Sarah Ashlee Barker — and a 17-point Alabama lead in the third quarter.

After Te-Biasu forced the first overtime with her 3-pointer, Barker was fouled shooting a 3 with 0.7 seconds left in OT. She

calmly swished all three attempts to tie it at 96 and send the game to a second extra session.

North Carolina 58, West Virginia 47: Alyssa Ustby scored 16 of her 21 points in the second half to help the Tar Heels (29-7) beat the Mountaineers.

The Tar Heels will face Duke in a regional semifinal in Birmingham, Ala. — the first meeting between the rivals in the women's tournament.

Birmingham Regional 3

Texas 65, Illinois 48: Madison Booker scored 20 points and the No. 1-seeded Longhorns (33-3) used a smothering defense to earn a victory over the No. 8 Illini (22-10), sending Texas to the Sweet 16 for the fourth time in the five seasons.

Texas will meet Southeastern Conference rival and fifth seed Tennessee (24-9) in Birmingham, Ala., on Saturday.

Spokane Regional 1

N.C. State 83, Michigan State 49: Aziaha James scored 26 points and the second-seeded Wolfpack (28-6) made a program NCAA Tournament-record 15 shots from 3-point range in a win over the seventh-seed Spartans.

The Wolfpack will meet LSU in a Sweet 16 matchup Friday in Spokane, Wash.

LSU 101, Florida State 71: Mikaylah Williams scored 28 points and Aneesah Morrow added 26 points and 11 rebounds, leading Flau'Jae Johnson and the Tigers (30-5) to a ru-

naway win over the Seminoles.

Spokane Regional 4

Oklahoma 96, Iowa 62: Skylar Vann scored 17 points, Payton Verhulst added 16 and the third-seeded Sooners (27-7) cruised into the Sweet 16 by dispatching the No. 6 Hawkeyes.

Oklahoma will play UConn on Saturday in Spokane, Wash.

UConn 91, South Dakota State 57:

Paige Bueckers matched her career high with 34 points, and the No. 2 Huskies (33-3) reached their 31st consecutive Sweet 16 by defeating the No. 10 Jackrabbits (30-4).

Bueckers, a senior who is expected to be the top overall pick in the WNBA Draft, is trying to bring UConn its 12th national title and first since 2016.

3-point flurry helps Pacers top T-wolves

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Tyrese Haliburton had 24 points and 11 assists, and Obi Toppin made six 3-pointers and added 20 points to help the Indiana Pacers defeat the Minnesota Timberwolves 119-103 on Monday night.

The Pacers have won five straight and seven of eight to stay ahead of the Bucks in the chase for the Eastern Conference's No. 4 seed. Haliburton extended his career-best streak to 11 straight games with double-doubles on a night six Pacers players scored at least 10 points.

Haliburton made three of Indiana's 13 3s.

Naz Reid led the Timberwolves with 20 points and Anthony Edwards added 17 despite being a game-time decision with a hand injury.

Rudy Gobert finished with 16 points and 16 rebounds as Minnesota lost for the third time in four games.

Magic 118, Lakers 106: Franz Wagner had 32 points and eight assists, Paolo Banchero added 30 points and seven rebounds and host Orlando sent Los Angeles to its

third straight loss.

Luka Doncic scored 32 points and LeBron James added 24 points and eight assists for the Lakers, who have lost seven of their last 10.

Anthony Black came off the bench and finished with 17 points, five rebounds and six assists for the Magic.

Austin Reaves scored eight of his 17 points in the first quarter for LA, which led by nine points late in the first half, but was outscored 34-18 in the third quarter.

Raptors 112, Wizards 104: Jakob Poeltl had 21 points and 11 rebounds, and Toronto won at Washington to stop a four-game slide.

Immanuel Quickley had 21 points and seven assists for the Raptors. Scottie Barnes finished with 13 points, 10 rebounds and eight assists.

Washington lost its fifth consecutive game. Jordan Poole scored 23 points for the Wizards, and AJ Johnson had 17.

Mavericks 120, Nets 101: Naji Marshall scored 22 points off the bench to lead visiting Dallas to a rout of Brooklyn.

P.J. Washington and Spen-

cer Dinwiddie finished with 16 each, Brandon Williams scored 15 and Kai Jones added 13. Anthony Davis, in his first game back after missing six weeks with a groin injury, had 12 points in 27 minutes.

Nic Claxton led the Nets with 19 points.

Pelicans 112, 76ers 99: Karlo Matkovic had a season-high 19 points and eight assists, and Antonio Reeves had five 3-pointers and 17 points as host New Orleans beat Philadelphia.

Two-time All-Star Zion Williamson missed his third straight game for the Pelicans. He has been sidelined since hurting his back in a hard fall in a game against Minnesota on Wednesday. CJ McCollum, who scored 40 points in a loss to Detroit on Sunday, did not play.

Justin Edwards and Jared Butler scored 19 points apiece as the Sixers dropped their fifth straight and finished a six-game trip 1-5.

Bulls 129, Nuggets 119: Coby White scored 37 points to lead visiting Chicago over Denver.

Josh Giddey had 26 points

and nine assists for the Bulls, who finished their season-long road trip 4-2.

Jamal Murray had 28 points and Peyton Watson scored a career-high 24 points for the Nuggets, who played their fifth straight game without three-time MVP Nikola Jokic. Jokic is expected to return from his left ankle injury during a five-game homestand.

Suns 108, Bucks 106: Devin Booker made a mid-range jumper with 1.7 seconds remaining to lift host Phoenix over Milwaukee for its fourth straight win.

The Suns stayed in the final position for the Western Conference play-in tournament with eight games remaining in the regular season.

Celtics 113, Kings 95: Jayson Tatum had 25 points, seven rebounds and eight assists before suffering a hard foul and leaving in Boston's victory at Sacramento.

Kristaps Porzingis had 16 points and seven rebounds after missing Sunday's win in Portland. Payton Pritchard scored 20 points and Derrick White added 12 points and eight assists for the Celtics.

Stars' Oettinger stops 32 shots in shutout of Wild

Associated Press

DALLAS — Jake Oettinger shut out his home-state team stopping 32 shots, Wyatt Johnston and Matt Duchene scored 58 seconds apart late in the second period and the Dallas Stars beat the Minnesota Wild 3-0 on Monday night.

Oettinger, who grew up about 20 miles south of the Twin Cities in Lakeville, Minn., is 7-0-2 in regular-season play against the Wild and has an eight-game home winning streak beginning in late January.

Johnston deflected a shot from the blue line by Thomas Harley for a power-play goal at

15:01 of the second. Duchene also scored through a screen, from the right circle at 15:59.

Mason Marchment added an empty-net goal in the final minute.

Filip Gustavsson made 26 saves for Minnesota. Gustavsson allowed only two goals last week going 3-0-0 to be selected the NHL's First Star of the Week.

Blue Jackets 4, Islanders 3 (SO): Adam Fantilli scored in regulation and then got the only goal in the shootout, leading visiting Columbus to a win against New York to end a six-game skid.

Boone Jenner and Kirill Marchenko also scored in regulation for the Blue Jackets, and Elvis Merzlikins made 30 saves.

Pierre Engvall, Kyle Palmieri and Anders Lee scored for the Islanders.

In the second round of the shootout, Fantilli made a move to his backhand and beat Sorokin. Bo Horvat then missed high and wide left on his attempt.

Canucks 4, Devils 3 (SO): Jonathan Lekkerimaki scored in regulation and got the deciding goal in the fourth round of the shootout, and visiting Vancouver beat New Jersey.

Pius Suter scored twice for

the Canucks, who improved to 3-1 in shootouts this season. Thatcher Demko finished with 22 saves in his first start since a lower body injury on Feb. 8.

Timo Meier had two goals and Erik Haula also scored for the Devils, and Jacob Markstrom had 25 saves.

Red Wings 5, Utah 1: Alex Lyon made 16 saves in relief of injured starter Petr Mrazek, powering visiting Detroit to a victory over Utah.

Elmer Soderblom, Marco Kasper, Austin Watson, Alex DeBrincat and Tyler Motte all scored to help the Red Wings snap a six-game road skid.

New rules may be needed for starting pitching

Associated Press

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. — Bold decisions to change Major League Baseball's longstanding rules quickened the pace of games and revived the popularity of stealing bases over the last few years.

A similarly creative move may be needed to help starting pitching regain the relevance it enjoyed as recently as a decade ago.

Only four pitchers (Seattle's Logan Gilbert, Kansas City's Seth Lugo, San Francisco's Logan Webb and Philadelphia's Zack Wheeler) threw as many as 200 innings last season, down from 34 in 2014.

During that same 2014 season, all 30 major league teams got over 900 innings from their starting pitchers and five had over 1,000. Last year, only four teams had their starters pitch at least 900 innings, led by Seattle with 942%.

While this shift has been years in the making, the numbers themselves provide a cold slap of reality to longtime fans who remember seeing Bob Gibson throw three complete games in the 1967 World Series or Jack Morris pitching 10 shutout innings in Game 7 of the 1991 Fall Classic.

Going back to the days of Cy Young and Walter Johnson, part of the game's beauty was watching a pitcher work his way through a lineup three or four times.

With every team having multiple relievers who can come out of the bullpen and throw in the high 90s, what could prompt teams to let their starters work deeper into games?

"Outside of just changing rules to incentivize managers to keep guys in games longer," Los Angeles Dodgers manager Dave Roberts said.

Roberts' Dodgers exemplified the bullpen emphasis during their run to the 2024 World Series title. Their starting pitchers worked as many as six innings in just two of their 16 postseason games.

Texas' Nathan Eovaldi went 5-0 with five postseason quality starts (defined as going at least six

innings while allowing no more than three earned runs) a year earlier while helping the Rangers win their first World Series championship. Yet even he understands how much things have changed for starting pitchers since he made his big-league debut in 2011.

"Bullpens are a lot different now than they were back then," Eovaldi said. "You've got a lot more guys who aren't just eight- and ninth-inning guys. They can come in, in the sixth or seventh, go multiple innings. They all have multiple pitches now as well. I think that's one of the fascinating things about the bullpen. You don't have guys who are just a two-pitch mix anymore. They've got three or four pitches coming out, and two of them are really, really elite."

And that's why there seems only one way to get starters working more innings.

"Putting in rules that you have to," San Francisco Giants manager Bob Melvin said. "We've created our own monster. It is what it is."

Possible changes

MLB Commissioner Rob Manfred has said it's too early to explore rules changes.

"Our focus right now is training methods, particularly offseason training methods," Manfred said. "It's going to be somewhere between education and recommendations. It's very hard to tell people you can't do X, Y and Z, right? They're grown men and there's no way to monitor it during the offseason."

One problem is the lack of a clear consensus on what rule changes could work best.

For instance, MLB had the Atlantic League experiment in 2021 and 2023 with a rule change that would force a team to lose its designated hitter if its starting pitcher didn't finish at least five innings.

Instituting that kind of rule could be a tough sell in the majors, where some of the league's most bankable stars such as Shohei Oh-

tani and Bryce Harper have received ample playing time at DH the last few years. Fans paying to see those stars likely wouldn't be happy to see them get removed as collateral damage from an early pitching change.

MLB hasn't announced any similar types of rules experiments in the minors this season.

The maximum number of pitchers allowed on MLB rosters was lowered from 14 to 13 in 2022, though that limit rises to 14 when rosters expand from 26 to 28 on Sept. 1. A more extreme rule change would be to require starters to work at least five or six innings unless they get injured, throw a certain number of pitches or allow a particular number of runs.

Texas manager Bruce Bochy said he wouldn't mind seeing the minor leagues try out more rule changes designed at lengthening starting pitchers. He wants those pitching prospects to get accustomed to working deeper into games.

"That's the way it used to be with starters," Bochy said. "Now I think the mentality can be, Hey, I've done my job. I've thrown four or five innings."

Giants pitcher Robbie Ray says the history of the game shows that starters can adapt to longer outings.

"I think starting pitchers are capable of doing it," said Ray, who won the 2021 AL Cy Young Award with Toronto. "It's just a matter of kind of training our bodies to do that again because what's been expected of us has changed over the years."

Restoring endurance

A 62-page MLB study released in December showed how the focus on rising velocities and maximum effort on each pitch had resulted in more injuries among pitchers. That study also revealed that starts of five or more innings dropped from 84% to 70% in the majors from 2005-24 and from 68.9% to 36.8% in the minors.

"Because we're trying to create

this engine and this repetitive thought of just pure stuff each and every pitch, yeah, starters are going to fatigue sooner," Cleveland Guardians pitching coach Carl Willis said. "And at the same time, we're training them that way. We're training them to do so."

"Everybody still talks about wanting to go out for the sixth, wanting to go out for the seventh and getting deep into games. I don't know that we're training them to do that, and I don't know how we are kind of teaching nowadays can allow that to happen."

A change in approach could allow those starters to get that endurance. Right now, it's the older guys who seem more used to that workload.

The MLB leader in quality starts last season was the 34-year-old Wheeler, who had 26. Lugo, 35, had 22 quality starts to tie for second place.

Even so, the 2024 season did offer some encouraging signs for the future of starting pitching.

MLB pitchers threw 5.22 innings per start last season. That represented the most since 2018, though it was still far off the 2014 average of 5.97.

The 2024 season also featured an MLB average of 85.5 pitches per start, the highest since 2019. Starters haven't thrown as many as 90 pitches per appearance since 2017.

Perhaps it's inevitable that the pendulum swing at least a little more toward getting starters to work longer. The recent focus on relievers puts more pressure on them, causing bullpens to break down.

There's one obvious method to change that.

"I don't think necessarily the game is going to all of a sudden turn back the other way, but there's a huge push to understand how you can keep a bullpen healthy," Milwaukee Brewers manager Pat Murphy said. "And one of the biggest ways is those starters getting through that first bulk and getting you into the sixth or seventh."