

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 26, 2025

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

Atlantic releases Signal chat transcript

The Washington Post

The Atlantic on Wednesday published a transcript of top Trump administration officials' group chat this month discussing an imminent U.S. attack on Houthi militants in Yemen, offering a fuller accounting of the sensitive information they exchanged after the magazine's editor, Jeffrey Goldberg, was mistakenly added to the conversation that occurred over an unclassified, commercially available messaging platform.

The newly disclosed material adds fuel to a mounting controversy about the decision by several officials—including President Donald Trump's national security adviser, his secretaries of defense and state, the director of national intelligence, the CIA director and Vice President JD Vance—to discuss sensitive operational plans over the messaging app Signal, which is encrypted but not permitted by government rules for discussions of classified information, and to do

so in a group including a journalist.

The episode has infuriated Democrats, who have demanded the resignations of Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth and national security adviser Michael Waltz and put the White House in the uncomfortable position of having to defend the judgment of nearly all of the Trump administration's most senior national security figures.

The president's defenders have acknowledged that Goldberg was inadvertently included in the chat while seeking to downplay critics' assertions that the material shared over the messaging app, had it been compromised by an adversary, would have jeopardized the lives of American service members involved in the operation.

The Trump administration has vowed to take a harder line against the Houthis—who have carried out attacks on commercial ships, American naval vessels and planes and U.S. ally Is-

rael—and against Iran, which has long provided the Houthis with financial and military support.

The transcript published by the Atlantic on Wednesday includes a message sent from Hegseth at 11:44 a.m. Eastern time on March 15, the day of the Yemen operation, confirming the precise timeline of the planned strikes scheduled to commence roughly two hours later. Hegseth wrote:

TEAM UPDATE:

TIME NOW (1144ET): Weather is FAVORABLE. Just CONFIRMED w Centcom we are a GO for mission launch.

1215et: F-18s LAUNCH (1st strike package)

1345: "Trigger Based" F-18 1st Strike Window Starts (Target Terrorist is @ his Known Location so SHOULD BE ON TIME) - also, Strike Drones Launch (MQ-9s)

1410: More F-18s LAUNCH (2nd strike package)

1415: Strike Drones on Target

(THIS IS WHEN THE FIRST BOMBS WILL DEFINITELY DROP, pending earlier "Trigger Based" targets)

1536: F-18 2nd Strike Starts - also, first sea-based Tomahawks launched.

MORE TO FOLLOW (per timeline)

We are currently clean on OP-SEC.

Godspeed to our warriors.

Waltz later provided the group with information on the strikes' impact, saying a building had collapsed and that multiple targets were believed killed—including a "top missile guy" who was allegedly struck while "walking into his girlfriend's building."

In testimony before the Senate Intelligence Committee on Tuesday, Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard and CIA Director John Ratcliffe, both of whom participated in the Signal chat, asserted to lawmakers that nothing in those messages was considered classified.

Navy, USAF caution troops about social media posts

BY SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

U.S. service members can discuss politics online but must make clear they are speaking in a personal capacity and avoid implying military endorsement, the Navy and Air Force reminded troops this month.

The acting secretaries of both services issued guidance warning airmen, sailors and Marines to be mindful of how they express their opinions, especially on social media.

"Service members are permitted to use personal social media accounts to forward, like, or link to official information

provided it is done in a manner that does not express or imply [Department of the Navy] or [Department of Defense] sanction or endorsement of any personal content," states a memo issued Tuesday by Acting Navy Secretary Terence Emmert.

Troops should also avoid disclosing non-public information, including unclassified details that, when combined, could reveal classified material, according to the document.

Acting Air Force Secretary Gary Ashworth issued similar guidance in a March 17 memo.

"The First Amendment pro-

tects freedom of speech and permits the expression of ideas for all Americans," he wrote. "Service members, owing to their critical role in our national security and the duties and obligations of service, have accepted limits on their freedom of expression."

Both officials cautioned troops against engaging in political discourse that could be perceived as an official stance.

"Service members may not engage in partisan political activity while on duty and should avoid inferences that their personal political activities imply, or appear to imply, official

sponsorship, approval, or endorsement," the Navy's order states.

Troops may maintain personal social media accounts, but must ensure they are clearly identified as non-official. While using military titles or appearing in uniform is allowed, personal accounts must not use official insignia, symbols or uniforms in a way that suggests government approval.

In cases where confusion is possible, service members should include a disclaimer stating that their posts reflect personal views and do not represent those of the government.

Carriers moved to cover Mideast, Pacific

BY ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

The aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson and its strike group arrived on Guam this week for a scheduled port call as its sister ship, the USS Nimitz, prepared to depart San Diego for the Indo-Pacific.

The Carl Vinson and its escorts reached Naval Base Guam on Tuesday, the 7th Fleet announced in a news release that day. The group will likely resupply there before heading to the Middle East, where Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth ordered the carrier amid ongoing U.S. strikes against Houthi rebels in Yemen.

Hegseth also ordered the aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman to remain in the Middle East for at least another month. The

Associated Press reported Friday.

The Carl Vinson has been operating in the Indo-Pacific since November. This month, the carrier trained off the Korean Peninsula during the annual Freedom Shield exercise.

Meanwhile, the Nimitz and its strike group were in San Diego on Tuesday as part of their summer deployment. U.S. 3rd Fleet spokesman Lt. Mohammad Issa told Stars and Stripes that night.

The carrier departed its home-port, Naval Base Kitsap in Bremerton, Wash., on Friday, according to a Monday news release from the fleet.

"Exercises and port visits will play an important role during this deployment in strengthening ties with allies and partners through

collaboration, trust, and shared commitment to advance a shared vision for a secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific region," Issa said.

The deployment may be the last for the Nimitz, the oldest active U.S. aircraft carrier, before its planned decommissioning next year. Issa declined to confirm if this would be its final deployment, citing security concerns.

Separately, the submarine tender USS Emory S. Land arrived in Australia's Northern Territory on Tuesday for a scheduled port call, according to a 7th Fleet news release. The tender pulled into Darwin, about 2,000 miles southwest of Guam, on its 17th stop since its deployment began May 17.

The Emory S. Land last visited

the Australian naval base HMAS Stirling near Perth in August, where its crew performed maintenance on a U.S. nuclear-powered submarine alongside Australian sailors.

That visit was part of the 2021 AUKUS agreement, which aims to establish one British and four U.S. submarines in Australia as Submarine Rotational Force-West at HMAS Stirling.

The ship's Darwin visit is not related to AUKUS, said Submarine Group 7 spokesman Lt. David Palencia.

"U.S. Navy port visits to Australia and participation in military and humanitarian exercises emphasizes the expanding wealth of knowledge and coordination between our two nations," he told Stars and Stripes on Wednesday.

4 US soldiers die in training accident in Lithuania

Staff and wire reports

WARSAW, Poland — NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte said Wednesday that four U.S. soldiers who went missing while training in Lithuania have died, but that he did not yet know the details.

A U.S. official would say only the four soldiers from the 1st Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division, were involved in a training accident. The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, would not comment on the status of the soldiers.

Lithuanian public broadcaster LRT reported four U.S. soldiers and a vehicle were reported missing Tuesday afternoon during an exercise at the General Silvestras Zukauskas training ground in Pabrade, a town located less than 6 miles from the border with Belarus. A Lithuanian media outlet said they were traveling in an M88 recovery vehicle, a large

tracked armored vehicle used to recover other tanks.

The Baltic countries of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia are all NATO members and have had chilly ties with Russia, a key ally of Belarus, since declaring independence from the Soviet Union in 1990.

Relations soured further over Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda has been one of the most outspoken supporters of Ukraine in its fight against Russian President Vladimir Putin's forces.

The 1st Armored Brigade was among the first units to deploy to Europe in the aftermath of Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The unit returned to the Continent in January to begin another nine-month rotation.

Units within the brigade train in Lithuania, Poland and other parts of NATO's eastern flank.

NATO chief warns Russia to expect 'devastating' reaction if Poland struck

Associated Press

WARSAW, Poland — NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte warned Russia on Wednesday that the alliance would always stand by Poland or any other member and that its reaction to an attack would be "devastating."

Rutte spoke during a visit to Warsaw, the Polish capital, in brief comments made alongside Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk. Tusk said it was important to be prepared for any outcome of talks between Russia and the United States aimed at ending the 3-year-old war in Ukraine.

NATO members along the eastern flank of the 32-member alliance, particularly Poland and the Baltic states, are worried that the talks could end with a settlement that is favorable to Russia. They fear such an outcome would allow Russian President Vladimir Putin to rebuild his forces and threaten other countries in the region in the coming years.

Rutte said that neither Putin nor anyone else should assume they could get away with something like that.

"If anyone were to miscalculate and think they can get away with an attack on Poland or on any other ally, they will be met with the full force of this fierce alliance. Our reaction will be devastating. This has to be very clear to Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin and anyone else who wants to attack us," Rutte said.

Rutte's warning comes as President Donald Trump's return to power has shaken previous security assumptions, and has pushed Europe to try to wean itself off its security dependence on the U.S., with ambitious new investments in weapons.

Trump seeking to overhaul US elections

Associated Press

NEW YORK—President Donald Trump on Tuesday signed a sweeping executive action to overhaul elections in the U.S., including requiring documentary proof of citizenship to register to vote in federal elections and demanding that all ballots be received by Election Day.

The order says the U.S. has failed “to enforce basic and necessary election protections” and calls on states to work with federal agencies to share voter lists and prosecute election crimes. It threatens to pull federal funding from states where election officials don’t comply.

The move, which is likely to face swift challenges because states have broad authority to

set their own election rules, is consistent with Trump’s long history of railing against election processes.

He often claims elections are being rigged, even before the results are known, and has waged battles against certain voting methods since he lost the 2020 election to Democrat Joe Biden and falsely blamed it on widespread fraud.

The order’s documentary proof of citizenship requirement signals that the president is not waiting for congressional Republicans to pass their long-anticipated Safeguard American Voter Eligibility Act, or SAVE Act, which has aimed to do the same thing.

Republicans have defended

that measure as necessary to restore public confidence in elections. Voting in federal elections by noncitizens is already illegal and can result in felony charges and deportation.

Voting rights groups have expressed concerns that the requirement could disenfranchise people. An estimated 9% of U.S. citizens of voting age, or 21.3 million people, do not have proof of citizenship readily available, according to a 2023 report by the Brennan Center for Justice and other groups.

Trump’s order directs federal agencies including the Department of Homeland Security, the Social Security Administration and the State Department to share with election officials fed-

eral data that could help them identify noncitizens on their rolls.

It also says the attorney general should “prioritize enforcement of federal election integrity laws” in states that don’t share information about suspected election crimes with the federal government.

The order aims to require votes to be “cast and received” by Election Day and says federal funding should be conditional on state compliance. Currently, 18 states and Puerto Rico accept mailed ballots received after Election Day as long they are postmarked on or before that date, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Social Security nominee faces Senate hearing

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump’s nominee to lead the Social Security Administration faced questions Tuesday at his confirmation hearing about efforts by the Department of Government Efficiency to close field offices and cut back on phone service at the beleaguered agency.

Frank Bisignano, a self-professed “DOGE person,” was called to account for recent upheaval at the Social Security Administration, which provides benefits to roughly 72.5 million people, including retirees and children.

The agency has taken center stage in the debate over the usefulness of DOGE cuts to taxpayer services and their effect on Social Security, the social welfare program long regarded as the third rail of national politics — touch it and you get shocked.

During the 2 1/2-hour hearing before the Senate Finance Committee, Democratic Sen. Eliza-

beth Warren of Massachusetts illustrated a scenario of a person with limited internet access and mobility issues being turned away from an understaffed Social Security office hours away from home.

She ended with a question for Bisignano: “Isn’t that a benefit cut?”

Bisignano responded, “I have no intent to have anything like that happen under my watch.”

Bisignano, a Wall Street veteran and one-time defender of corporate policies to protect LGBTQ+ people from discrimination, has served as chairman of Fiserv, a payments and financial services tech firm since 2020.

He told CNBC in February that he is “fundamentally a DOGE person” but “the objective isn’t to touch benefits.”

The hearing follows a series of announcements of mass federal worker layoffs, cuts to programs, office closures and a planned cut to nationwide Social Security phone services.

GOP tries to fight back against court rulings

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Angry over the crush of court rulings against the Trump administration, Republicans in Congress are trying to slap back at the federal judiciary with proposals to limit the reach of its rulings, cut funding and even impeach judges, tightening the GOP’s grip on government.

House GOP leaders say all options are under consideration as they rush to rein in judges who are halting President Donald Trump’s actions at a rapid pace. In many cases, the courts are questioning whether the firings of federal workers, freezing of federal funds and shutting of long-running federal offices are unlawful actions by the executive branch and Elon Musk’s Department of Government Efficiency.

In perhaps the most high-profile case, Judge James E. Boasberg ordered plane loads of deported immigrants to be turned around, raising the ire of

Trump, who called for his impeachment, and billionaire Musk, who is funneling campaign cash to House Republicans backing impeachment efforts.

House Speaker Mike Johnson said Tuesday that “desperate times call for desperate measures” without mentioning impeachment.

“We do have authority over the federal courts, as you know,” the Republican speaker said. “We can eliminate an entire district court. We have power of funding over the courts, and all these other things.”

Not yet 100 days into the new administration, the unusual attack on the federal judiciary is the start of what is expected to be a protracted battle between the co-equal branches of government, unmatched in modern memory. As the White House tests the judiciary, the Congress, controlled by the president’s own party, appears ready to back him up.

High court upholds Biden rule requiring ghost gun serial info

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Supreme Court on Wednesday upheld a Biden administration regulation on the nearly impossible-to-trace weapons called ghost guns, clearing the way for continued serial numbers, background checks and age verification requirements to buy them in kits online.

The 7-2 opinion found that existing gun law allows regulation of the kits increasingly linked to crime.

Sales of the homemade firearms known as ghost guns grew exponentially after kits came onto the market that let people easily build them at home, Justice Neil Gorsuch wrote in the majority opinion. “Some home hobbyists enjoy assembling them. But criminals also find them attractive,” he said.

The number of ghost guns found at crime scenes around the country has also soared, according to federal data. Fewer than 1,700 were recovered by law enforcement in 2017, but that number grew to 27,000 in 2023, according to Justice Department data.

Since the federal rule was finalized, though, ghost gun numbers have flattened out or declined in several major cities, including New York, Los Angeles, Philadelphia and Baltimore, according to court documents. Manufacturing of miscellaneous gun parts also dropped 36% overall, the Justice Department has said.

Ghost guns are any privately made firearms without the serial numbers that allow police to trace weapons used in crime. The 2022 regulation was focused on kits sold online with

everything needed to build a functioning firearm — sometimes in less than 30 minutes, according to court documents.

Ghost guns have been used in high-profile crimes, including a mass shooting carried out with an AR-15-style ghost gun in Philadelphia that left five people dead.

Police believe a ghost gun used in the slaying of United Healthcare’s CEO in Manhattan was made on a 3D printer rather than assembled from a kit of the kind at the center of the Supreme Court case.

Finalized at the direction of then-President Joe Biden, the “frame and receiver” rule requires companies to treat the kits like other firearms by adding serial numbers, running background checks and verifying that buyers are age 21 or older.

Gun groups challenged the rule in court in the case known as *Garland v. VanDerStok*. Most crimes are committed with traditional firearms, not ghost guns, they argued. It’s legal for people to build their own firearms at home, the challengers said, arguing that the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives overstepped its authority by trying to regulate the kits.

The Supreme Court majority disagreed, pointing out that the law gives the ATF the power to regulate items that can be quickly made into working firearms.

“The ‘Buy Build Shoot’ kit can be ‘readily converted’ into a firearm too, for it requires no more time, effort, expertise, or specialized tools to complete,” Gorsuch wrote, referring to a specific product.

CBO: US may hit debt limit by August without deal

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The United States is on track to hit its statutory debt ceiling — the so-called X-date when the country runs short of money to pay its bills — as early as August without a deal between lawmakers and the White House, according to a Congressional Budget Office report Wednesday.

By that time, the government would no longer have enough of a financial cushion to pay all its bills after exhausting its “extraordinary measures” the accounting maneuvers used to stretch existing funds.

Washington would risk defaulting on its debt unless Congress and Republican President Donald Trump agree to lift the borrowing limit or abolish the debt ceiling concept altogether.

The debt limit was reinstated Jan. 2, following its suspension by Congress in the Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023.

“The Treasury has already

reached the current debt limit of \$36.1 trillion, so it has no room to borrow under its standard operating procedures,” according to the CBO report.

An analysis released on Monday by the Bipartisan Policy Center estimates that the U.S. could run out of cash by mid-July if Congress did not raise or suspend the nation’s debt limit.

Trump had previously demanded that a provision raising or suspending the debt limit — something that his own party routinely resists — be included in legislation to avert the last potential government shutdown. “Anything else is a betrayal of our country,” Trump said in a statement in December. That deal did not address the limit.

After the debt limit was reinstated, in one of her last acts as treasury secretary, Janet Yellen said Treasury would institute “extraordinary measures” intended to prevent the U.S. from reaching the debt ceiling.

Palestinians protest Hamas in rare public show of outcry

Associated Press

CAIRO — Palestinians chanted against Hamas during anti-war protests in the Gaza Strip, witnesses said Wednesday, in a rare show of public anger against the militant group that has long repressed dissent and still rules the territory 17 months into the war with Israel.

Videos that appeared to be authentic showed hundreds of people taking part in a protest in the heavily destroyed northern town of Beit Lahiya on Tuesday.

People held signs saying “Stop the war,” “We refuse to die” and “The blood of our children is not cheap.”

There were calls for more protests on Wednesday. At least one was held in the hard-hit Shijaiyah neighborhood of Gaza

City, where dozens of men chanted “Out, out out! Hamas get out!”

“We are sick of the bombing, killing and displacement,” said Ammar Hassan, who took part in the protest on Tuesday.

He said it started as an anti-war protest with a few dozen people but swelled to more than 2,000.

“It’s the only party we can affect,” he said by phone. “Protests won’t stop the (Israeli) occupation, but it can affect Hamas.”

The militant group has violently cracked down on previous protests. This time no outright intervention was apparent, perhaps because Hamas is keeping a lower profile since Israel resumed its war against it.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Judge blocks ban, allows drag show at Texas A&M

TX COLLEGE STATION—A drag show scheduled for this week at Texas A&M University can go on as scheduled despite a Board of Regents ban on such performances, a federal judge ruled Monday.

The ruling from Houston-based U.S. District Judge Lee Rosenthal blocked a university ban on drag performances on free speech grounds.

The ruling blocks the ban while the broader legal case over it moves forward.

Postmaster General resigns after 5 years

DC WASHINGTON — The head of the beleaguered U.S. Postal Service, Louis DeJoy, resigned Monday after nearly five years in the position, leaving as President Donald Trump and Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency have floated the idea of privatizing mail service.

DeJoy had said last month he planned to step down but hadn't set a date. He leaves an agency with an uncertain future. Trump has said he is considering putting USPS under the control of the Commerce Department in an attempt to stop losses at the \$78 billion-a-year agency, which has operated as an independent entity since 1970. It has struggled at times to balance the books with the decline of first-class mail.

Deputy Postmaster General Doug Tulino will take on the role until the Postal Service Board of Governors names a

permanent replacement for DeJoy.

DeJoy's tenure was marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, surges in mail-in election ballots and efforts to stem losses through cost and service cuts.

Judge blocks release of an ex-Minnesota senator

MN ST. PAUL — A judge on Monday blocked the release of a former Minnesota state senator charged with soliciting a minor, after prosecutors leveled fresh allegations that he tried to obstruct the FBI's investigation from jail.

U.S. Magistrate Judge Shannon Elkins ruled that Justin Eichorn should remain jailed instead of being released to a halfway house on Tuesday as previously scheduled. A pretrial hearing is scheduled for Wednesday, when the issue will be addressed again.

Eichorn, 40, a Republican from Grand Rapids, has not publicly commented since his arrest during a sting operation in Bloomington last Monday.

He resigned after he was charged with attempted coercion and enticement of a minor to engage in prostitution, a felony that carries a mandatory minimum sentence of 10 years.

Court: Attorney can be censured for outburst

CO DENVER — An Aurora attorney who cursed at and insulted school district employees during a special education meeting violated professional conduct rules and can be publicly censured, the Colorado Supreme Court ruled

Monday.

Igor Raykin was in a virtual meeting with a Mesa County Valley School District 51 student, their parents and district staff in May 2022 when he "directed several inappropriate expletive-laden outbursts" at district employees, according to court records.

Raykin, a lawyer with the firm Kishinevsky & Raykin, is known for representing Colorado students in lawsuits against school districts and other educational institutions, including a \$5 million class-action suit against the University of Colorado system over student fees during the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the District 51 meeting, Raykin repeatedly cursed at district staff and told them to shut up. When a staff member tried to mute him, he responded by unmuteing himself and said, "Every time I unmute myself, I'm going to say (expletive) again. That's how I am going to start every sentence," court records show.

Ex-Trump defense lawyer named to state post

NJ TRENTON — President Donald Trump on Monday named his one-time defense attorney and current White House counselor Alina Habba to be the top federal prosecutor in New Jersey.

Habba, 41, takes over the interim post from John Giordano, whom the president said he's naming to be the U.S. ambassador for the southwestern African country of Namibia.

A partner in a small New Jersey law firm near Trump's Bedminster golf course, Habba

served as a senior adviser for Trump's political action committee, defended him in court in several civil lawsuits and acted as a spokesperson last year as he volleyed between court-rooms and the campaign trail.

Suit: Ex-cop 'training' was assault on firefighters

NJ TOMS RIVER — Three former and current volunteer firefighters have filed a lawsuit against an ex-New Jersey police officer and fire official, accusing him of subjecting them to abuse under the guise of training exercises.

According to the 95-page complaint, obtained by NJ Advanced Media, Robert Sinnott would often carry out this abuse at the firehouse in Toms River, in full view of other members with Silverton Volunteer Fire Company #1. It allegedly included handcuffing and groping trainees during police reenactments and simulations, and it was not uncommon for the exercises to turn violent and sexually explicit.

Sinnott, who served as a police officer in Island Heights for more than 20 years before moving to Toms River, was also the assistant chief with Silverton Volunteer Fire Company #1.

His accusers claimed he used his leadership roles to groom and subject them to ongoing harassment, adding that his background in law enforcement enabled him to avoid getting into any legal trouble.

What's more, any effort the plaintiffs made to report the abuse was met with retaliation and sometimes even efforts to conceal the allegations.

—From wire reports

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Dodgers' title, spending makes them targets

Associated Press

Shohei Ohtani was in the batter's box for the season's first pitch March 18, arriving at the Tokyo Dome coronated a World Series champion.

Twenty-nine other teams will be trying to dethrone his Los Angeles Dodgers, who flexed their financial might again during the offseason hoping to become the first repeat champion since the 1998-2000 New York Yankees.

Blake Snell and prized rookie Roki Sasaki joined a pitching staff headed by Yoshinobu Yamamoto, who started the opener in his native Japan against the Chicago Cubs. Ohtani and the Dodgers have been the key to Major League Baseball boosting Asian audiences; they opened last season against San Diego in Seoul, South Korea.

"We'd normally spread things among the teams a little differently," baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred said. "We felt like we had a unique oppor-

tunity with a unique person and are trying to do everything we can to capitalize on it."

MLB increased revenue to a record \$12.1 billion last year, up from \$11.6 billion in 2023. Attendance increased 0.9% to an average of 29,568, the highest since 2017 and the first increase in consecutive years since 2011-12, and Manfred predicts MLB will top 70 million for the third straight year. LA's five-game World Series win over the New York Yankees averaged 15.81 million viewers, the Fall Classic's high since 2017.

Three of the four League Championship Series teams were among the biggest spenders: The Dodgers were second in payroll and luxury tax at \$374 million, trailing only the New York Mets at \$430 million and \$400,000 ahead of the Yankees.

At the bottom, the Athletics spent just \$66 million during their last year in Oakland, and the increased disparity has led to renewed talk of owners seek-

ing a salary cap when the current five-year labor contract expires after the 2026 season.

"There's no reason for us to be focused on collective bargaining," Manfred said. "We haven't even formulated a bargaining position."

Mets owner Steve Cohen, flush with his hedge fund fortune, made the biggest offseason move when he lured outfields Juan Soto from the Yankees with a record \$765 million, 15-year contract.

"I'll compete under any circumstance," Cohen said. "You tell me the rules, and I'll compete against them."

Teams with lesser resources know payroll doesn't always equate with success through multiple playoff rounds and player attrition as bodies buckle under data-driven maximum effort. The only top spenders to win titles since the current luxury tax started have been the 2020 Dodgers, 2018 Boston Red Sox and 2009 Yankees.

Ballpark demotions

The A's left the Oakland Coliseum, where they had played since moving from Kansas City in 1968, and will spend at least three seasons at 14,000-capacity Sutter Health Park in West Sacramento before moving to a planned ballpark in Las Vegas.

"The ballpark is charming," Manfred said. "I do think that fans are going to have an opportunity to see Major League Baseball all season long in a really intimate environment."

The Tampa Bay Rays were forced from Tropicana Field in St. Petersburg this season following damage caused by Hurricane Ian and will play home games across Tampa Bay at 11,000-capacity Steinbrenner Field, the Yankees' spring training base.

"The opportunity to play on the Tampa side could give insights into the Tampa Bay market as a whole that could be useful for the club moving forward," Manfred said.

New venues, major reunions in place for MLB season

Associated Press

CHICAGO — The major leagues have already gone to Tokyo to start the season, with trips to Tennessee and West Sacramento lined up in the coming months. There are some old friends on the schedule, and quite possibly, a chilly reception or two on the way.

Here are some dates to remember for the upcoming season:

Opening Day — Thursday, March 27

New York Mets at Houston Astros: Juan Soto makes his Mets debut when they visit Jose Altuve and the Astros on opening day. Soto signed a record \$765 million, 15-year contract in free agency, giving New York a boost after they made a surprising run to the NL Championship Series. He should help anchor a dangerous lineup for the Mets. Houston traded Kyle Tucker to the Cubs in December, but it is well-positioned for another playoff run after signing Christian Walker in free agency.

Soto returns — Friday, May 16

New York Mets at New York Yankees:

Soto plays his first game at Yankee Stadium since signing with the Mets in free agency. Soto was traded from the Padres to the Yankees in December 2023, and the four-time All-Star hit .288 with 41 homers and 109 RBIs in his lone season with the Bronx Bombers. After the Yankees were spurned by Soto, the AL East champions bolstered their roster by adding Max Fried, Devin Williams, Cody Bellinger and Paul Goldschmidt.

Tito returns — Monday, June 9

Cincinnati Reds at Cleveland Guardians: Terry Francona manages his first game back in Cleveland since taking over the Reds in October. Francona was in Cleveland's dugout for 11 years, including just barely losing the 2016 World Series to the Chicago Cubs, before stepping down at the end of the 2023 season because of health reasons. After he departed, Stephen Vogt directed the Guardians to the AL Central title and an appearance in the AL Championship Series. The former big league catcher was voted AL Manager of the Year.

All-Star Game — Tuesday, July 15

Atlanta's Truist Park hosts the All-Star Game four years after the event was moved to Denver's Coors Field over objections to changes in Georgia's voting rights laws. Atlanta also hosted the 1972 Midsummer Classic at Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium and the 2000 All-Star Game at Turner Field. The AL has won 10 of 11 after a 5-3 victory over the NL in last year's game at Texas.

Speedway Classic — Saturday, Aug. 2

Atlanta Braves at Cincinnati Reds: There will be some serious speed and power on hand when Elly De La Cruz and the Reds take on Ronald Acuña Jr. and the Braves at Bristol Motor Speedway in Tennessee. An attendance record is a possibility at a venue that can fit 146,000. De La Cruz had a major league-best 67 steals last year, to go along with 25 homers and 76 RBIs. Acuña is coming back after he missed most of last season because of a left knee injury. His last season saw him join the 40-40 club in 2023, hitting 41 homers and swiping a major league-high 73 bags on his way to the NL MVP award.

Jets top Caps in OT, clinch playoff spot

Associated Press

WINNIPEG, Manitoba — Nikolaj Ehlers scored on a breakaway 1:28 into overtime and the Winnipeg Jets clinched a playoff spot, beating the Washington Capitals 3-2 on Tuesday night in a matchup of the NHL's top two teams.

Josh Morrissey and Mason Appleton also scored for the Jets, who swept the two-game season series with the Capitals — both wins coming in overtime. Connor Hellebuyck finished with 27 saves.

Alex Ovechkin scored his 889th goal, leaving him six short of breaking Wayne Gretzky's NHL record, and Andrew Masnigapanne also scored for the Capitals. Logan Thompson had 22 saves.

The Eastern Conference-leading Capitals were in a line change in overtime when Ehlers grabbed the puck and fired a wrist shot past Thompson for his 24th goal of the season.

Ovechkin had tied the game 2-2 with a one-timer that went through Hellebuyck's pads with four minutes left in the third period.

"I'm glad he got the goal," said Jets coach Scott Arniel, who was an assistant with the Capitals from 2018-22. "I'm glad he's getting closer to whatever that number is. At the end of the day, that's him. It doesn't take much. The puck is on his stick, off his stick. I thought we did a really good job for most of the game of trying to limit him. He had a lot of chances, and he had a few on the power play, but I thought we did a really good job of staying over top of him. He doesn't need much time or space."

With three goals in his past five games, the 39-year-old is back in range to pass Gretzky's mark of 894 that long seemed unapproachable this spring.

Based on his career and season average, Ovechkin is on pace to get 895 in Washington's penultimate game of the regular

season April 15 at the New York Islanders.

Ovechkin has 36 goals this season and is on track to reach 40 for a 14th time, also the most in league history, despite missing 16 games because of a broken left fibula. The spotlight will continue to get brighter as he inches closer to Gretzky.

"It is what it is," Ovechkin said. "It's a fun time, obviously, but yeah you just have to enjoy it. It's a special moment, obviously. Everybody's watching. Everybody's paying attention to that."

Sabres 3, Senators 2: Tage Thompson scored the go-ahead goal 1:23 into the third period, and Lindy Ruff became the NHL's second coach to win 600 games with one franchise in Buffalo's victory over visiting Ottawa.

Jack Quinn and Jacob Bernard-Docker also scored for the Sabres, and James Reimer stopped 30 shots in winning two straight starts for the first time this season. Ruff is in the first season of his second stint in Buffalo, and improved his record with the franchise to 600-467-90 with 78 ties.

Ruff trails only Al Arbor, who won 740 games with the New York Islanders.

Brady Tkachuk and David Perron scored power-play goals for the Senators. Anton Forsberg stopped 21 shots in an outing the Senators blew two one-goal leads.

Maple Leafs 7, Flyers 2: William Nylander and John Tavares each had two goals and two assists as host Toronto beat Philadelphia.

Bobby McManus, David Kampf and Max Domi also scored for the Maple Leafs, and Matthew Knies had two assists. Anthony Stolarz made 17 saves.

Ryan Poehling and Sean Couturier scored for the Flyers, who lost their sixth straight. Samuel Ersson had 23 saves.

Lightning 6, Penguins 1: Nikita Kucherov had a goal and two

assists to lead Tampa Bay over visiting Pittsburgh.

Anthony Cirelli scored twice in the first period, Brandon Hagel and Ryan McDonagh both had a goal and an assist for the Lightning. Brayden Point also scored for Tampa Bay. Andrei Vasilevskiy finished with 14 saves.

Tristan Jarry started in net for the Penguins but was pulled 16 minutes into the first period after allowing four goals on seven shots. Alex Nedeljkovic stopped 18 shots in relief. Bryan Rust scored for Pittsburgh.

The Lightning scored four goals in the first period in the span of 3:47 to race out to the lead and never looked back.

Predators 3, Hurricanes 1: Luke Evangelista scored twice, Juuse Saros stopped 34 shots in his 200th career win, and Nashville won at Carolina.

Michael Bunting also scored for the Predators, who won for just the second time in seven games.

Taylor Hall scored for the Hurricanes, who lost their second straight after an eight-game win streak. Pyotr Kochetkov had 13 saves.

Blues 6, Canadiens 1: Philip Broberg and Robert Thomas each had a goal and three assists, and St. Louis beat visiting Montreal to extend its active NHL-best winning streak to seven games.

Broberg recorded four points in a game for the first time. Coupled with Minnesota's regulation home loss to Vegas, St. Louis is now two points back of the first wild-card spot in the Western Conference.

Jordan Kyrou got his 31st goal of the season, Dylan Holloway, Alexandre Texier and Zack Boudreault also scored and Jordan Binnington made 24 saves for the Blues, who are five points up on the Vancouver Canucks for the second wild card.

Golden Knights 5, Wild 1: Jack Eichel posted his fifth ca-

reer hat trick as visiting Vegas defeated Minnesota.

Brett Howden also scored and Noah Hanifin and Mark Stone each had two assists for the Golden Knights. Adin Hill made 23 saves for Western Division-leading Vegas, which won its fourth straight.

Marcus Johansson scored a goal and Marc-Andre Fleury stopped 33 shots for the Wild, who lost for the second time in two nights.

Avalanche 5, Red Wings 2: Nathan MacKinnon had a goal and an assist, Jonathan Drouin and Martin Necas had two assists apiece, and Colorado rolled past visiting Detroit.

Devon Toews had a goal and two assists, and Cale Makar, Valeri Nichushkin and Logan O'Connor also scored for the Avalanche, who improved to 11-1-1 in their past 13 games.

MacKinnon, the NHL's points leader, has a point in each of his past 22 home games, tying the longest home point streak in the NHL this season.

Flames 4, Kraken 3 (OT): Nazem Kadri scored his second goal of the game 3:58 into overtime, sending Calgary to a victory over visiting Seattle.

Adam Klapka and Rasmus Andersson also scored for the Flames, who have won four straight. They are four points behind streaking St. Louis for the final playoff spot in the Western Conference, with three games in hand.

Kings 3, Rangers 1: Kevin Fiala scored twice, Darcy Kuemper stopped 22 shots, and Los Angeles beat visiting New York.

Phillip Danault also scored as the Kings extended their home point streak to 15 games (12-0-3). Los Angeles is the second team in the NHL to have a home streak of at least 15 games, joining Washington (11-0-5).

J.T. Miller scored for New York, and Igor Shesterkin finished with 30 saves.

Heat rout Warriors in Butler's return

Associated Press

MIAMI—Some fans cheered his introduction. Many jeered him. And whenever he got the ball over the next four quarters, there was plenty of booing from all sides of the arena.

In the end, Jimmy Butler's return to Miami couldn't have gone better for the Heat.

The Heat paid tribute to Butler's 5½ seasons with the team with a pregame video on Tuesday night, shown in the arena as part of the introduction of the Golden State Warriors' starting lineup for the game. Those were about the only highlights for the Warriors, with Butler scoring 11 points in a 112-86 loss.

"I got a lot of love for this city, for the fanbase here," Butler said afterward. "The video was nice. I won't say there was a lot of emotions, though."

Butler appeared to watch the roughly 40-second pregame video, as he said he would, though added that it didn't matter to him whether the Heat did one or not. He got the full-

throated introduction from Heat public-address announcer Michael Baiamonte — "Jim ... my ... Butlerrrrr" — just as he did when he played for Miami and waved to acknowledge the sounds from the stands.

Butler is insisting that there's no hard feelings between he and the Heat now, a month and a half after he was traded to the Warriors following a contentious breakup that saw him suspended by Miami three times in his final weeks with the team.

The video included a slew of Butler's highlights, including the iconic image of him, exhausted, slumped over a court-side barrier during a game in the NBA bubble in 2020.

"The energy in the building was great," Heat coach Erik Spoelstra said. "If you're a competitor, you love this kind of environment. We didn't do any kind of extra motivational speech."

It was an important game for the Heat, who are fighting to regain standings ground that was

lost in a 10-game losing streak that ended earlier this week. It was one of their most inspired efforts of the season, never trailing, holding the Warriors to 40% shooting and connecting on a wild 68% of their 3-point tries.

"Was this like a regular game? Yeah, I think so," Heat guard Tyler Herro said. "The circumstances, who was coming in here, we were ready a little more. But for me, it was a regular game."

Butler was unhappy with the Heat over not getting an extension and had issues with his role in his final weeks in Miami. The Heat were unhappy with him missing about 25% of his games with the club and how he took his complaints public in the final months.

Butler got his extension — two years, \$111 million — from the Warriors, and Golden State is now 16-4 in his first 20 appearances. In fairness, two of those four losses, including Tuesday's loss, came with Stephen Curry out of the Warriors' lineup.

Butler was suspended for a total of 14 Heat games before the trade. But the Heat have a tradition of welcoming back players who were All-Stars or champions with the team; Butler was an All-Star who led Miami to three Eastern Conference finals berths and two trips to the NBA Finals.

He was booed when he touched the ball at the start, though there were some cheers when he scored Golden State's first basket of the contest. Not much else went Butler's way, and when the final buzzer sounded he greeted a couple friends courtside before heading toward the Warriors' locker room.

The Warriors had an off day in Miami on Wednesday, giving Butler another day with his kids — the family is still in South Florida — before his team leaves for New Orleans.

"This one's over with," Butler said. "Put it behind us, go eat some food and enjoy the sunshine tomorrow."

Towns lifts Knicks over Mavericks with triple-double

Associated Press

NEW YORK—Karl-Anthony Towns had 26 points, 12 rebounds and 11 assists for his first triple-double in more than three years, helping the New York Knicks defeat the Dallas Mavericks 128-113 on Tuesday night.

OG Anunoby had 35 points, and Josh Hart added 16 points, 12 rebounds and 11 assists for his ninth triple-double of the season. New York (45-26) shot 59.6% and won its second straight.

Naji Marshall had a career-high 38 points, and Brandon Williams chipped in 22 points. The Mavericks (35-38) fell for the 10th time in 13 games.

Pistons 122, Spurs 96: Marcus Sasser scored a career-high

27 points in 26 minutes off the bench and Detroit routed visiting San Antonio for its second consecutive victory without injured star Cade Cunningham.

Tobias Harris added 15 points and eight rebounds for the Pistons, who pulled within a percentage point of Milwaukee for fifth place in the Eastern Conference. Jalen Duren had 14 points and seven assists, and Asuar Thompson finished with 14 points and six rebounds.

Magic 111, Hornets 104: Paolo Banchero scored 32 points, Franz Wagner had 26 and Orlando used a late run for a win at Charlotte.

LaMelo Ball led the Hornets with 25 points and nine assists, while Josh Green and Nick Smith Jr. had 13 points each.

Rockets 121, Hawks 114:

Jalen Green scored 32 points and had 11 rebounds as Houston beat visiting Atlanta.

Fred VanVleet shot 5-for-14 from the field, including 3-for-8 from 3-point range, and went 8-for-8 from the line to add 21 points. Tari Eason had 14 rebounds.

Grizzlies 140, Jazz 103:

Desmond Bane scored 21 points, Jaren Jackson had 19 and Memphis, playing without Ja Morant, used a dominant second half for a win at Utah.

The Grizzlies have floundered since residing near the top of the standings earlier in the season. Once injuries hit, especially Morant's ailments (currently a hamstring strain), Memphis has dropped out of

most championship contender conversations.

Thunder 121, Kings 105:

Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 32 points to lead Oklahoma City to its seventh straight win and 60th of the season with a victory at Sacramento.

Chet Holmgren added 18 points and 10 rebounds, and Alex Caruso scored 15 for the NBA-leading Thunder.

Cavaliers 122, Trail Blazers 111:

Darius Garland had 27 points and eight assists to lead Cleveland to a win at Portland.

Portland's Scoot Henderson and Shaedon Sharpe each had 18 points in the loss.

Cleveland (58-14) has a five-game lead over Boston for first place in the Eastern Conference with 10 games left to play.