

Biden weighs strikes on Iranian proxies

The Washington Post

President Joe Biden faces mounting pressure to strike Iranian proxies that have repeatedly attacked — and injured — U.S. troops in Iraq and Syria this month, but he is weighing any decision to retaliate against his broader concern that the war in Gaza could be on the precipice of erupting into a regionwide tempest, according to U.S. officials and others familiar with the administration's deliberations.

Biden said Wednesday that he warned Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, that if Tehran continues to "move against" U.S. forces in the Middle East, "we will respond."

The president's disclosure, delivered while standing beside Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese in the White House Rose Garden, followed reports that nearly two dozen

American troops were hurt within the past eight days after 14 or more aerial assaults on their bases in Iraq and Syria. An additional attack was recorded Wednesday, after three rockets were launched at a U.S. outpost in northeast Syria and one landed inside, a defense official said. No one was reported injured.

A senior administration official, who like some others interviewed for this report spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss U.S. government calculations, said that "nothing has changed about our prerogatives" to protect deployed service members, but "we're also not blind to the fact that there are other forces at work now, and we want to be informed by what else is going on in the region."

As the administration has surged combat power and defensive equipment to the Middle East, Republicans in Con-

gress have implored Biden to respond to the attacks.

They were joined on Wednesday by retired Gen. Joseph Votel, whose final posting, as the head of U.S. Central Command, afforded him firsthand insight into Iran's support for militia groups throughout the Middle East. Votel, whose reputation as a nonpartisan military commander earned him admirers in Democratic and GOP administrations, said during an online panel discussion that the United States has "unfortunately" allowed the attacks to become "a little bit of a norm" by not responding to them uniformly.

"We will have to do that," Votel said. "I think we are at the point where we can probably do that now, and we should." With the additional military assets dispatched to the region, he added, "we can and should respond more directly to these threats on our troops."

Iranian proxies have harassed deployed U.S. forces for years, flying self-detonating drones into remote outposts and, at times, provoking an American response. That happened in March, when Biden directed retaliatory airstrikes after an American contractor was killed and other U.S. personnel were wounded by such an attack in Syria. The president said then that Tehran should "be prepared for us to act forcefully to protect our people."

The deliberations now are complicated by the Oct. 7 cross-border rampage in Israel by Hamas militants based in Gaza. The assault killed more than 1,400, compelling Israel to declare war. Hamas is part of the broader network receiving training and weapons from Iran, prompting concerns that other heavily armed proxy forces, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, could join the conflict.

Israeli troops and tanks briefly raid northern Gaza

Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — Israeli troops and tanks briefly raided northern Gaza overnight, the military said Thursday, engaging with Hamas fighters and targeting anti-tank weapons in order to "prepare the battlefield" before an expected ground invasion.

The raid came after more than two weeks of devastating airstrikes in the small, densely-populated territory — with more than 250 in the past 24 hours — and as the U.N. and other world leaders warn of a dire humanitarian crisis getting worse.

Israel has imposed a suffocating siege on Gaza since Hamas' bloody rampage and hostage-

taking across southern Israel ignited the war. Residents are running out of food, water and medicine, and U.N. workers have barely any fuel left to support their relief missions across Gaza, where more than 1 million Palestinians have been displaced.

The rising death toll in Gaza is unprecedented in the decades-long Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Health Ministry in Hamas-ruled Gaza said Thursday more than 7,000 Palestinians have died in the conflict, a figure that could not be independently verified. Even greater loss of life could come if Israel launches a ground offensive aimed at crushing Hamas, which has ruled Gaza since 2007 and survived four

previous wars with Israel.

Israeli airstrikes in the southern city of Khan Younis leveled more than eight homes belonging to an extended family, killing at least 15 people. Ambulances raced to the scene as dust from the collapsing buildings hung in the air.

The blast zone was a chaotic wasteland of crumbled concrete and twisted metal. Rescuers carried wounded people covered in gray dust. The body of a boy was dug out from beneath a concrete slab, where his head had come to rest next to the foot of another person entombed in the wreckage.

The Israeli military says it only strikes militant targets and ac-

cuses Hamas of operating among civilians in an attempt to protect its fighters. Palestinian militants have fired thousands of rockets into Israel since the war began. One struck a residential building in the central city of Petahtikva, without wounding anyone.

Hamas' military wing said Thursday that Israeli bombardment has so far killed about 50 of the at least 224 hostages the militants abducted during its Oct. 7 assault. There was no immediate comment from Israeli officials, who have denied previous, similar claims.

The conflict has threatened to ignite a wider war across the region.

Military sees drop in suicides in 2022

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The number of suicides among U.S. military members and their families dipped slightly in 2022, compared with the previous year, as the Defense Department tries to build prevention and treatment programs to address what has been a steadily growing problem over the past decade, The Associated Press has learned.

While the total number of deaths decreased overall, suicides among active-duty troops went up slightly, fueled by spikes in the Marine Corps and the Air Force. And because the overall size of the active-duty force is smaller now, the rate of suicides per 100,000 service members inched up, according to U.S. officials.

The officials said the suicide rate for the National Guard and the Reserve decreased. The relatively stable numbers across the force come on the heels of a sharp drop in suicides in the Air Force, the Marines and the Navy from 2020 to 2021, and a similar decline for Army soldiers in the first six months of 2022.

Officials spoke on condition

of anonymity to describe the findings before the report's public release. They said due to the decreasing size of the active-duty force, they believe the rate of suicides, rather than the number, is a more accurate measure. More broadly, they said changes in the suicide rate were not statistically significant and are not enough to determine yet if prevention and treatment programs are working.

Instead, defense officials said the long-term trend still points to increasing deaths, although the relative stability in the numbers for 2022 gives them some cautious encouragement.

Historical similarities in who dies by suicide and how they do it continue. Young, male troops still make up the vast majority of the suicides — at 93%. And 70% of the time, troops use a firearm. But the department has so far shied away from any major gun safety changes.

An independent committee recommended earlier this year that the department implement a series of gun safety measures to reduce suicides in the force, including waiting periods for

the purchase of firearms and ammunition by service members on military property.

The panel said the department should also raise the minimum age for service members to buy guns and ammunition to 25 and should require anyone living in military housing to register all privately owned firearms. In addition, the panel said the department should restrict the possession and storage of privately owned firearms in military barracks and dorms.

Last month, however, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin released a new campaign to address suicides in the force, and the department chose not to implement the key firearm changes suggested by the panel. Instead, the Pentagon said it would "incentivize" secure firearm storage, provide more storage locations and do more public education on how to safely store guns — similar to steps that officials have talked about in the past.

The Defense Department officials said there are a number of legal challenges to enacting some of the gun safety measures.

Austin, however, did agree to enact a number of recommendations made by the panel, including efforts to modernize suicide prevention training, expand counseling, reduce the stigma of seeking mental health assistance and increase the number of staff and health providers.

According to the latest data, there were 492 suicides among active duty, Guard and Reserve troops, down from 524 in 2021. And suicides among family members dropped from 202 in 2020 to 168 in 2021.

For the active duty, there were 331 suicides in 2022, compared with 328 in 2021. Of those, Army suicides dropped from 175 in 2021 to 135 in 2022. The Marine Corps saw the biggest increase, from 43 to 61, followed by the Air Force, which increased from 51 to 64, and the Navy went from 59 to 71. The Space Force had none.

The Army National Guard also saw a large decrease, from 105 to 82, while the Air Guard remained the same, at 15. The Reserves dipped from 76 to 64, with only the Air Force Reserves showing an increase.

Congress urges more financial assistance for troops

CQ-Roll Call

WASHINGTON — A bicameral and bipartisan bloc of 20 members of Congress is urging Armed Services leaders to write a final NDAA that provides more financial help for U.S. troops who have low incomes and often suffer food insecurity.

The group of lawmakers, in a Monday letter, called for an NDAA that rewrites the eligibility rules for the so-called basic needs allowance program. The coalition wants service mem-

bers' basic housing allowances to no longer count as income under the basic needs program.

Nearly 1 in 4 active-duty service members — or about 286,800 people, not counting their family members — are beset by food insecurity, according to the most recent Pentagon survey of the force. Of those, about 120,000 deal with "extreme food insecurity," the department found.

But the basic needs allow-

ance from income calculations fiscal 2022 NDAA, is helping only about 2,400 troops — or just 0.8% of the 286,800 reportedly in need, CQ Roll Call disclosed in January, citing figures provided by the Defense Department.

The reason for the meager participation rates, the authors of Monday's letter said, is that counting the housing allowance in service members' incomes makes most needy military families ineligible.

Excluding the housing allow-

ance from income calculations would result in 21 times as many military families receiving aid under the basic needs allowance, Rand Corp. said in a study earlier this year.

The House's fiscal 2024 NDAA would for the second straight year drop the requirement to include housing payments as income under the program. But the Senate's NDAA, for the second straight year, does not follow suit. And the Senate's approach has become law so far.

At least 18 dead in Maine mass shooting

Associated Press

LEWISTON, Maine — Authorities carried out a massive search Thursday for a man who they say killed 18 people and wounded 13 at a bowling alley and bar in Maine that sent panicked patrons hiding under tables and behind bowling pins and gripped the entire state in fear.

Frightened residents stayed locked in their homes Thursday in cities as much as 50 miles away under a shelter-in-place advisory.

The shooting suspect, Robert Card, is considered armed and

dangerous, authorities told a news conference. A warrant has been issued charging him with eight counts of murder. That number will rise when the other 10 victims have been identified, said Maine State Police Col. Col. William Ross.

A U.S. official said Card, a 40-year-old Army reservist, had been taken by police for an evaluation after military officials became concerned he was acting erratically in mid-July.

The official said commanders in the Army Reserve's 3rd Battalion, 304th Infantry Regiment

became concerned in mid-July that Card was acting erratically while the unit was training at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in New York.

The official said military commanders became concerned about Card's safety and asked for the police to be called. New York state police took Card to the Keller Army Community Hospital at West Point for evaluation, the official said.

Card enlisted in the Army Reserve in December 2002 and was a petroleum supply specialist who had achieved the rank of ser-

geant first class, a spokesperson for the service said. He was assigned to a training facility in Saco, Maine.

A police bulletin document that had been circulated to law enforcement officials as Card was identified as a person of interest in the attack, said he had been committed to a mental health facility for two weeks in the summer of 2023. It did not provide details about his treatment or condition but said Card had reported "hearing voices and threats to shoot up" the military base.

Judge keeps Trump's \$10K fine for gag order violation

Associated Press

NEW YORK — A New York judge reaffirmed Thursday a \$10,000 fine he'd imposed on Donald Trump over an out-of-court comment that the former president made during his civil business fraud trial.

The development came after Trump's lawyers urged Judge Arthur Engoron to rethink the penalty. The judge fined Trump on Wednesday after finding that his comments to TV cameras outside the courtroom violated a gag order that bars participants in the trial from commenting publicly on the judge's staff.

Outside court Wednesday, the Republican presidential front-runner complained that Engoron, a Democrat, is "a very partisan judge with a person who's very partisan sitting alongside him, perhaps even much more partisan than he is."

The comment came weeks after Engoron imposed the gag order in the wake of a Trump social media post that disparaged the judge's principal law clerk. She sits next to Engoron, and Trump's lawyers had groused a bit earlier about the clerk's facial expressions and role in the case.

Summoned Wednesday to the

witness stand to explain his comment, Trump said he was talking not about the clerk but about witness Michael Cohen—his former lawyer and fixer who was testifying against him at the time.

On Wednesday, Engoron called Trump's contention "not credible," noting that the clerk is closer to him than is the witness stand.

Trump's lawyers insisted Thursday that he was talking about Cohen. They pointed out that right after his reference to the person "sitting alongside" the judge, Trump said: "We are doing very well, the facts are speaking very loud. He is a totally discredited witness"—a reference to Cohen.

Trump lawyer Christopher Kise argued that it meant the person "alongside" the judge was also Cohen. "To me, the 'he' in that sentence is referring to the person in the immediately preceding sentence," Kise said.

Engoron agreed to look at the entirety of the remarks and reconsider the penalty.

About an hour later, he said he was standing by the fine, pointing to what he called "a brief but clear transition" between the mention of the person "alongside" the judge and the comment about the "discredited witness."

Autoworkers, Ford reach deal in step toward ending strike

Associated Press

DETROIT — The United Auto Workers union said Wednesday that it reached a tentative contract agreement with Ford which could be a breakthrough toward ending the nearly 6-week-old strikes against Detroit automakers.

The four-year deal, which still has to be approved by 57,000 union members at the company, could bring a close to the union's series of strikes at targeted factories run by Ford, General Motors and Jeep maker Stellantis.

The Ford deal could set the pattern for agreements with the other two automakers, where workers will remain on strike. The UAW called on all workers at Ford to return to their jobs and said that will put pressure on GM and Stellantis to bargain. Announcements on how to do that will come later.

"We told Ford to pony up, and they did," President Shawn Fain said in a video address to members. "We won things no one thought possible." He added that Ford put 50% more money on the table than it did before the strike started on Sept. 15.

UAW Vice President Chuck

Browning, the chief negotiator with Ford, said workers will get a 25% general wage increase, plus cost of living raises that will put the pay increase over 30%, to above \$40 per hour for top-scale assembly plant workers by the end of the contract.

Previously Ford, Stellantis and General Motors had all offered 23% pay increases. When the talks started, Ford offered 9%.

Assembly workers will get 11% upon ratification, almost equal to all of the wage increases since 2007, Browning said.

Typically, during past auto strikes, a UAW deal with one automaker has led to the other companies matching it with their own settlements.

GM said in a statement it is "working constructively" with the union to reach an agreement as soon as possible. Stellantis also said it's committed to reaching a deal "that gets everyone back to work as soon as possible."

Browning said temporary workers will get more in wage increases than they have over the past 22 years combined. Temporary workers will get raises over 150% and retirees will get annual bonuses, he said.

New House speaker facing same tests

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Republican Mike Johnson is the new speaker of the House, but the ally of Donald Trump inherits many of the same political problems that have tormented past GOP leaders, tested their grasp of the gavel and eventually chased them out of office.

When the House convenes Thursday it will be a bustle of activity, making up for lost time during the weeks of chaos since the ouster of Kevin McCarthy. But the goodwill toward Johnson blurs the political fault lines challenging the Louisianan's ability to lead the GOP majority as it faces daunting issues ahead.

By Nov. 17, Congress must fund the government again or risk a shutdown. President Joe Biden wants an additional \$105 billion in military and humanitarian aid for Israel and Ukraine. And Republicans are eager to resume their impeachment inquiry into Biden over his son's business dealings.

"This has been a grueling process," Johnson said Wednesday after he took the gavel. "The challenge before us is great but the time for action is now, and I will not let you down."

Johnson, 51, swept through on the first ballot with support from all Republicans anxious to put the past weeks of tumult behind and get on with business.

He was quickly sworn into office, second in line to the presidency.

A lower-ranked member of the House GOP leadership team, Johnson emerged as the fourth Republican nominee in what had become an almost absurd cycle of political infighting since McCarthy's ouster as GOP factions jockeyed for power.

While not the party's top choice for the gavel, the deeply

religious and even-keeled Johnson has few foes and an important GOP backer: Trump.

Biden called to congratulate the new speaker and said it's "time for all of us to act responsibly" to fund the government and provide aid for Ukraine and Israel.

"We need to move swiftly," the president said.

In the House, far-right members had refused to accept a more traditional speaker, and moderate conservatives didn't want a hard-liner. But the affable Johnson, who has been in office less than a decade, drew lawmakers together through his evangelical faith, his conservative roots and Trump's nod after more seasoned leaders had failed.

Rep. Matt Gaetz, R-Fla., who led the small band of eight hard-liners who ousted McCarthy, said, "You watch and see how much this House of Representatives can actually get done under Mike Johnson."

Democrats quickly criticized Johnson as an extreme conservative, a strict opponent of abortion access and an architect of Trump's legal effort to overturn the 2020 presidential election he lost to Democrat Biden.

"Republicans have chosen a MAGA acolyte to push an extreme agenda in the House at the expense of middle-class families," said Rep. Suzan DelBene, the chair of the Democrats' campaign committee, referring to Trump's Make America Great Again campaign slogan.

Anxious and exhausted, Republican lawmakers are desperately trying to move on.

Lawmakers quickly reconvened to get back to work, approving a resolution saying the House "stands with Israel" and "condemns Hamas' brutal war."

US economy boosted to strong 4.9% last quarter

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The nation's economy expanded at a robust 4.9% annual rate from July through September as Americans defied higher prices, rising interest rates and widespread forecasts of a recession to spend at a brisk pace.

The Commerce Department said the economy expanded last quarter at the fastest pace in more than two years — and more than twice the 2.1% annual rate of the previous quarter.

Thursday's report on the nation's gross domestic product — the economy's total output of goods and services — showed that consumers drove the acceleration, ramping up their spending on everything from cars to restaurant meals. Even though the painful inflation of the past two years has soured many people's view of the economy, millions have remained willing to splurge on vacations, concert tickets and sports events.

Last quarter's robust growth, though, may prove to be a high-water mark for the economy before a steady slowdown begins

in the current October-December quarter and extends into 2024. The breakneck pace is expected to ease as higher long-term borrowing rates, on top of the Federal Reserve's short-term rate hikes, cool spending by businesses and consumers.

The growth figures for the third quarter revealed that federal, state, and local governments ramped up their spending, and businesses built up their stockpiles of goods in warehouses and on shelves, which helped drive growth higher. The economy managed to accelerate despite the Fed's strenuous efforts to slow growth and inflation by raising its benchmark short-term interest rate to about 5.4%, its highest level in 22 years.

Several Fed officials acknowledged in speeches last week that the most recent economic data showed growth picking up by more than they had expected. Still, most of the policymakers signaled that they will likely keep their key rate, which affects many consumer and business loans, unchanged when they meet next week.

Jobless aid claims rises slightly over past weeks

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The number of Americans applying for jobless benefits rose last week but remains historically low as the labor market continues to show strength amid high interest rates and inflation.

Jobless claim applications rose by 10,000 to 210,000 for the week ending Oct. 21, the Labor Department reported Thursday. The previous week's applications were the fewest in eight months.

Jobless claim applications are considered a proxy for layoffs.

The four-week moving average of claims, which smooths out some of the week-to-week volatility, rose by 1,250 to 207,500.

Overall, 1.79 million people were collecting unemployment benefits the week that ended Oct. 14, about 63,000 more than the previous week.

In an effort to stem persistent inflation, the Federal Reserve has raised its benchmark interest rate 11 times since March of 2022. The goal is to cool the economy and labor market and bring down rising wages, which it says feeds inflation.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Poison specialist charged in wife's death

MN MINNEAPOLIS — A poison specialist and former medical resident at Mayo Clinic in Minnesota is charged with fatally poisoning his wife, a 32-year-old Mayo Clinic pharmacist who died days after she went to a hospital in August with stomach distress.

Authorities say Connor Bowman, 30, tried to stop the autopsy on his wife, Betty Bowman — arguing she should be cremated immediately and claiming she had a rare illness, which hospital tests did not confirm. The medical examiner's office halted the order for cremation, citing suspicious circumstances, according to a criminal complaint, and an autopsy showed Betty Bowman died from toxic effects of colchicine, a medicine used to treat gout.

Medical records indicate she was not diagnosed with gout and had not been prescribed the medicine, a criminal complaint states, adding that Connor Bowman had been researching the drug prior to his wife's death.

Connor Bowman was charged Monday with second-degree murder.

Swastika found on playground equipment

IL DOWNERS GROVE — A suburban Chicago elementary school district has asked police for extra patrols after a swastika was found carved into a piece of playground equipment early Tuesday.

Superintendent Kevin Russell of Downers Grove Grade School District 58 sent parents a

letter confirming a swastika was found on the playground at Lester Elementary School. He called the finding “deeply disturbing,” WBBM-TV reported.

“The swastika serves as the most notorious symbol of hate and antisemitism and has no place in our community,” Russell wrote. He said the swastika was reported to Downers Grove Police and has since been removed.

The discovery occurred amid a rise in anti-Muslim and anti-semitic hate crimes in Illinois following the start of the Israel-Hamas war. Gov. J.B. Pritzker said hate crimes against Arabs, Muslims and Jews have increased in Illinois since then.

Shortages prompt city to close 3 fire stations

GA ATLANTA — The city of Atlanta has temporarily closed three of its more than 30 fire stations because of truck breakdowns and a shortage of firefighters.

Atlanta Fire Rescue Chief Roderick Smith told a City Council committee of the closures on Monday.

Smith told the committee that the department had 17 fire trucks out of service on Monday, including eight of 31 fire engines and nine of 15 ladder trucks. Many of the trucks are being repaired, but those repairs can take months.

Some other trucks, while still running, don't have their full capabilities.

Firefighters have seen the number of emergency calls double compared to last year, Smith said.

The chief said Atlanta has 11 fire vehicles that have been or-

dered but not delivered because of manufacturing backlogs.

Man pleads not guilty to threatening ex-speaker

MT BILLINGS — A Montana man pleaded not guilty Tuesday to federal charges that he threatened to assault and murder former House Speaker Kevin McCarthy.

Richard Lee Rogers, of Yellowstone County in southern Montana, is charged with threats to injure and murder a member of Congress, which carries a 10-year prison sentence and \$250,000 fine. He faces a second charge of making harassing telephone calls.

The threats allegedly happened Feb. 3, several weeks after Republicans elected McCarthy as speaker.

Rogers has no prior criminal history, according to U.S. Magistrate Judge Timothy Cavan, who allowed the defendant to remain free under conditions including no drugs or alcohol and no access to firearms.

Police rescue 8 children, detain mother

CA ANDERSON — Authorities rescued eight children in California on Saturday after they were abducted by their biological mother and found roughly 1,500 miles from their foster homes in Arkansas, police said.

The 36-year-old mother had lost her custodial rights, according to police in Anderson.

Law enforcement in Arkansas had previously issued a warrant for her arrest, though it was unclear when that occurred and

how she transported the children.

A “concerned citizen” reached out to authorities to request a welfare check after seeing six children with a woman who was “displaying bizarre behavior,” Anderson police said.

Officers discovered the outstanding arrest warrant and took the woman into custody. The other two children were found in a home about 5 miles away.

Beer belly wrestling in 'Florida Man Games'

FL ST. AUGUSTINE — It ain't the Olympics, but a group of Floridians plan to host competitions themed according to the collective antics of the beer-loving, gator-possessing, rap-sheet heavy, mullet-wearing social media phenomenon known as “Florida Man.”

Organizers of the “Florida Man Games” describe the competition as “the most insane athletic showdown on Earth.” The games will poke fun at Florida's reputation for producing strange news stories involving guns, drugs, booze and reptiles — or some combination of the four.

Among the contests planned for February in St. Augustine, according to organizers, are the Evading Arrest Obstacle Course in which contestants jump over fences and through yards while being chased by real police officers; the Category 5 Cash Grab in which participants try to grab money in a wind-blowing booth; and the self-explanatory beer-belly wrestling.

— From Associated Press

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D-backs, Rangers a Fall Classic few saw coming

Associated Press

Tell the truth: How many people picked Arizona and Texas to meet in the World Series?

Rangers-Diamondbacks in the Series had 1,750-to-1 odds when wagering opened last fall.

But in an era when 12 teams make the playoffs, sustained excellence over the six-month regular season has become a boarding pass, not the journey, leading to a long shot Series that opens Friday night at Globe Life Field.

“Once you get into the big dance, anything can happen,” Diamondbacks manager Torey Lovullo said before Tuesday night’s 4-2 win at Philadelphia advanced Arizona to its first World Series since 2001. “Throw it all out the window. The teams that get in deserve to be in.”

All the glamour teams are watching at home: the Los Angeles Dodgers and Atlanta Braves stumbled in the Division Series, defending champion Houston was ousted by Texas, and the New York Yankees didn’t even make it to the postseason.

Instead, Major League Baseball has its third all-wild card meeting, a Grand Canyon vs. Lone Star finale of second-place teams played in air-conditioned ballparks under retractable

roofs — potentially the first all-indoor Fall Classic.

“I thought it would take a little more time,” Diamondbacks rookie outfielder Corbin Carroll said. “So to be able to do it in this first year just makes it all the more special.”

Both prior all-wild card matchups went seven games. The Los Angeles Angels beat the San Francisco Giants in 2002, and Bruce Bochy’s Giants defeated the Kansas City Royals in 2014 for their third title in five years.

Texas and the Diamondbacks are both two years removed from last-place finishes and 100-loss seasons. Arizona is a No. 6 seed and Texas a No. 5.

“Sometimes, one of the last hurdles to get over is that winning feeling, attitude, when you’ve been losing for a few seasons,” Bochy said.

Bochy, 68 and in his 26th year as a big league manager, joined the Rangers last October. He is going for his fourth title, which would tie Walter Alston and Joe Torre for fourth-most behind Joe McCarthy and Casey Stengel (seven each) and Connie Mack (five). All prior managers with three or more are in the Hall of Fame.

“I don’t think about me. I’m riding their backs, trust me,” Bochy said. “It’s unreal that I’m

here, to be honest. Sitting at the house for three years, and think here I am going to a World Series. Yeah, that’s special. But it’s more about them and trying to find a way to get a ring for those guys.”

Texas started play as the expansion Washington Senators from 1961-71 and has played 10,028 games without a title (9,964 regular-season games, according to the Elias Sports Bureau, plus 64 in the postseason). That’s the second-longest drought behind Cleveland, which last won in 1948.

After losing in the World Series in 2010 and ’11, the Rangers are among six teams without a title, joined by Colorado, Milwaukee, San Diego, Seattle and Tampa Bay.

Arizona’s only title came on Luis Gonzalez’s ninth-inning single off Yankees closer Mariano Rivera in Game 7 in 2001.

Texas headed into the playoffs with the sixth-highest payroll at \$228 million. Arizona was 20th at \$127 million.

Both teams rallied and earned their World Series berths on the road. It was the first time road teams won Games 6 and 7 in both leagues since the LCS expanded to a best-of-seven format in 1985.

Without Jacob deGrom following a season-ending elbow

injury, the Rangers acquired Max Scherzer and Jordan Montgomery to join a rotation that included Nathan Eovaldi and Andrew Heaney. Adolis García has seven homers and 20 RBIs in the playoffs, leading an offense also powered by 2020 World Series MVP Corey Seager, Marcus Semien, Mitch Garver and Josh Jung.

Arizona’s rotation is led by Zac Gallen, Merrill Kelly and Brandon Pfaadt, and its offense sparked by Carroll, Christian Walker, Ketel Marte, Lourdes Gurriel Jr. and Gabriel Moreno. Lovullo, 58, is in his seventh season as Diamondbacks manager and in the playoffs for the first time since his 2017 team was swept by the Dodgers in the Division Series.

Texas is 8-0 on the road in the postseason but has home-field advantage because it won 90 games to Arizona’s 84 — which could be the second-fewest for a World Series champion in a non-shortened season behind the St. Louis Cardinals’ 83 in 2006. The Diamondbacks split two games at Texas in May and swept a pair at home in August, including an 11-inning win on consecutive doubles by Geraldo Perdomo and Tommy Pham off Will Smith. The Rangers hold a 28-25 edge in regular-season matchups.

Baker confirms retirement after 26 years managing

Associated Press

HOUSTON — Dusty Baker has retired as manager of the Houston Astros, ending an illustrious 26-year career as a big league skipper highlighted by a World Series win last season.

Baker broke the news in an interview with USA Today.

“I’m very grateful and thankful to (owner) Jim Crane and the Houston Astros for giving me this opportunity, and to win a championship,” Baker told the newspaper. “I felt like they’ve been good for me, and I’ve been good for them.

“What I really appreciate is that Jim has been totally honest and transparent with me

on all things.”

Baker told the newspaper that he’d like to move into an advisory role in baseball, either with the Astros or a team closer to his Northern California home.

“I’ve still got a lot to offer; baseball has been my life,” said Baker. “I have a lifetime of knowledge, much more than those who have never played the game.”

Baker made his retirement official at an Astros news conference Thursday morning alongside Crane and general manager Dana Brown.

Baker stepped down after his fourth season with the Astros, who came one win shy of

reaching the World Series for a third straight year with a loss to the Texas Rangers on Monday night.

The toothpick-chewer and epic storyteller, who seemed to know just about everybody, finished his career ranked ninth with 2,183 victories in 4,046 regular-season games. He was the 12th manager in major league history to reach 2,000 wins and the first Black man to accomplish the feat.

Ten of the other 11 managers who have accumulated at least 2,000 wins are in the Hall of Fame. Bruce Bochy (2,093), who is still managing the Rangers and isn’t yet eligible, is the only exception.

Penix's receivers key to Heisman race

Associated Press

SEATTLE — Before the season even began, Rome Odunze believed the way Washington's wide receivers complemented each other would lead to big things.

Turns out that for most of the first seven games for the fifth-ranked Huskies, Odunze was right.

"It's crazy because each position in our offense requires certain things, and I feel like we have the perfect fit in situations where they do a great job of putting people where they'll have success," Odunze said back in August.

Minus some of the issues caused by Arizona State last week, Washington quarterback Michael Penix Jr. has posted video game-like numbers that have landed him squarely in the Heisman Trophy race.

Throwing to one of the deepest sets of wide receivers in the country has clearly made Penix's job easier.

The Pac-12 is blessed with top-quality pass catchers this season. Oregon's Troy Franklin has eight touchdown catches and is averaging 109.9 yards per game. Jacob Cowing at Arizona also has eight TD catches. Washington State's Lincoln Victor had 16 catches last week against Oregon, and Xavier Weaver and Jimmy Horn Jr. have become the top targets for Shedeur Sanders at Colorado.

But no program can match the depth of the Huskies' wide receiver group.

"Like I always say, I've got the best receiving corps in the country," Penix said. "If anybody else says anything different, they've got to turn on the tape because those guys show each and every day."

It hasn't just been Odunze or Ja'Lynn Polk or Jalen McMillan carrying the load for Washington. It's been all of them at various times through Washington's seven-game unbeaten run to start the season.

At least one of those three has topped 100 yards receiving in six of the seven games so far. In five of those six, two of them reached the century mark. And that comes with McMillan having missed most of the past 4½ games with a leg injury. Had McMillan not been injured in the first half of Washington's big win at Michigan State, the Huskies likely would have seen all three hit the 100-yard mark in that victory.

The one game where none of those three approached 100 yards — Washington's 31-24 win at Arizona — backup Germie Bernard had eight catches for 98 yards in the victory. Even last week against Arizona State, when Washington's offense ran into problems and failed to score a touchdown, Polk still had nine catches for 102 yards.

"I think our guys have just seen this over and over where an opportunity arises and just

being ready at that particular position, whoever it is, to come in and contribute and make a big play," offensive coordinator Ryan Grubb said.

Odunze was on every preseason and midseason All-America team and seems likely to be a first-round pick when the NFL comes calling next spring. Aside from his 6-foot-3 frame that has gotten stronger, he also tends to make his catches go for significant gains. Of his 45 receptions, 37 have gone for 10 yards or more. Throw in a 14-yard TD run and he has the most scrimmage plays of 10 or more yards in the country.

Not far behind is Polk, who has seen his profile grow exponentially this season. He had 41 catches and six touchdowns in 13 games last season. He has 42 catches and five touchdown catches in seven games this season. Thirteen of those catches have gone for 20 or more yards, tied for fifth nationally.

NBA All-Star Game switching back to East vs. West

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — The NBA All-Star Game is going back to its roots, with the best of the East playing the best of the West.

Commissioner Adam Silver made the announcement Wednesday, revealing this season's All-Star Game on Feb. 18 in Indianapolis will pit the top vote-getters from the two conferences against one another. The decision means captains will no longer draft teams, though the players with the most votes in each conference will still serve as captains.

The reason: Silver wants the All-Star Game to look more like traditional basketball.

"It felt like it was time," Silver said. "I said earlier, keeping with this overall theme, it's back

to basketball this season. We heard it from our fans, I think the players recognize it, too, that last year's All-Star Game was something no one was proud of, and I don't think it was anyone's fault in particular. I think, though, that we need to refocus on what this league is really about and that's about the best basketball in the world."

Another change — the game will be 48 minutes. Since 2020, the league added 24 points to the leading team's score after three quarters and played the fourth quarter with only a shot clock but no game clock. The first team to hit the target score won.

And it's no coincidence the changes are taking place in Indiana, where basketball is treated like royalty. The Pacers are hosting their first All-Star

Game since 1985 — three years later than initially scheduled because the 2021 game was moved to Atlanta and played in a mostly empty arena during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"If there ever was a place to restore the NBA to something that seemed more classic, it was an All-Star Game at Indianapolis," Silver said. "Let's just make it a pure 48-minute basketball game, the team that scores the most points in 48 minutes."

The first 66 All-Star Games all featured East-West matchups. The last six have seen the leading vote-getters from each conference serving as captains and drafting teams.

LeBron James served as one captain all six years, with Giannis Antetokounmpo the other captain three times. Kevin Du-

rant had the honor twice, with Stephen Curry doing it once. Some drafts were televised, with last year's taking place live in Salt Lake City less than an hour before the start of the game.

Not enough people watched. Ratings plummeted for last season's game, which wasn't competitive. Some of the top stars, including Curry, Durant, James and Antetokounmpo either missed the game entirely or played very briefly because of injuries.

The 2023 matchup was entertaining in other ways — Boston's Jayson Tatum scored an All-Star record 55 points. His 27 third-quarter points were also a record, but the lack of viewers and lack of buzz evidently forced the NBA into making this change.

Six NASCAR drivers aim for last 2 spots

Associated Press

HOMESTEAD, Fla. — There will surely be elaborate permutations to show all the possibilities of what awaits this weekend at Martinsville, when six drivers will battle for the final two spots in NASCAR's Championship 4.

If this guy does this, and this guy does this, or this guy doesn't do this ... the scenarios are endless.

So, perhaps a simpler mindset, like the one Denny Hamlin has right now, is the way to go.

"Try to win it," Hamlin said. That would work, too.

NASCAR's season has entered its next-to-last week, and good luck figuring out what might happen over the 500 laps around Martinsville's tight oval this coming weekend. Only two of these six drivers — Hamlin, William Byron, Ryan Blaney, Tyler Reddick, Martin Truex Jr. and Chris Buescher — will emerge with a chance to battle Kyle Larson and Christopher Bell in Phoenix on Nov. 5 to win the Cup Series title.

If any of those six win at Martinsville, they'll have a shot at the title. Any other result, break out the calculators.

"It's nice coming in here as far out as we did and leaving where we're at," Blaney said after finishing second at Homestead-Miami on Sunday — moving from seventh in the eight-driver playoff standings to fourth. "Just proud of that effort and we've got to go and perform well. Hopefully we can go do it again in Martinsville."

Larson got his berth in the final by winning at Las Vegas, Bell got his by winning at Homestead. Byron by far is in the best position of the six remaining contenders; he's 30 points clear of the top-four cutoff going into Martinsville. Blaney is 10 points ahead of fifth.

Everyone else either needs to win — which would be an automatic clinch for Phoenix — or get help. Reddick is fifth, 10 points back of Blaney. Truex and Hamlin are both 17 points back and Buescher is 43 points off the pace.

"I think it's hard to get in the Final Four. I'll tell you that," said Joe Gibbs, the owner of three of the playoff cars — Bell, Truex and Hamlin. "I don't think anything's a given ... but we do have a chance."

Bell knows exactly what the

six hopefuls will be thinking this week. He won at Martinsville last year to earn his title shot in Phoenix. He got his walk-off win a week earlier this year.

"Your outlook for the race is completely different. ... Those guys have a lot more to race for than what I do now going into Martinsville, so the mentality is completely different for them than it is for me and you just have to be aware of that," Bell said.

Homestead showed, once again, that nobody ever has any idea what'll happen.

Bell was about to go a lap down and thought his car was one of the slowest in the race at one point Sunday. He was not thinking about winning until the final 10 laps. He was 13th in qualifying, ninth in the first stage, 22nd in the second stage and on top of all that, Homestead is not a track he's fond of.

And he won. A caution flag in the third stage gave him a chance, and he took full advantage.

"A whirlwind," Bell said, "for sure."

Larson's day at Homestead ended when he tried to evade

Blaney entering pit road and instead crashed into the 11 barrels of sand that protect drivers from directly smashing into the wall separating that alley from the track itself. A few tons of dirt went everywhere, and Larson was literally out in a cloud of dust.

"I'm sorry," Larson — who took the blame for what happened — said into his radio. "I did not expect him to slow down that much."

Not long afterward, two of the JGR cars experienced their own misfortune. Hamlin's steering failed and he wound up in the wall, and moments later, something happened to Truex's engine and smoke came out the back of his car.

Truex started Homestead from the pole, and the day went downhill quickly in what almost seemed to serve as a microcosm of his season. He made little effort to hide his frustration while talking on his radio and wound up finishing 30th. He won three times in 2023, but has one top-10 finish in his last nine starts.

"It shows you how hard our sport is because those were the two cars that for a while for us were up front." Gibbs said.

Avs, Bruins, Knights mark first time 3 win first 6 games

Associated Press

The defending Stanley Cup champion Vegas Golden Knights have picked up where they left off, the Boston Bruins are figuring out their game after an early playoff exit last spring and the Colorado Avalanche are winning while not yet playing their best hockey.

All three are undefeated to start the NHL season, making some history in the process. It's the first time the league has had three teams open a season with at least six wins in a row.

Vegas, which already has the best start for a reigning champ with seven consecutive victories, is the closest to tying the record for the longest winning streak to start a season: 10, by the 1993-94 Toronto Maple Leafs and 2006-07 Buffalo Sabres.

The Golden Knights scored twice in the final eight minutes of regulation Tuesday, rallying from down 2-1 to beat Philadelphia.

"We've got talent, for one," coach Bruce Cassidy said, when asked about the undefeated start. "We have different guys that can help you win. That's probably the simplest answer. We've got a lot of good players that can hurt you offensively."

So do the Bruins, even after the retirements of top centers Patrice Bergeron and David Krejci. After beating Connor Bedard and the Blackhawks in Chicago to improve to 6-0-0, coach Jim Montgomery said he was starting to see the team's identity build.

"You're starting to see us become a heavy, grinding team, which I think is what we're going to have to be," Montgomery said after the Bruins won their first six

games for the second time in franchise history and first since 1937-38.

For the Avalanche, not so fast. Sure, they've won their first six after beating the New York Islanders 7-4 Tuesday, but they're not happy about how they're playing even though they set an NHL record with their 15th straight road win.

"We are fortunate to be 6-0," coach Jared Bednar said. "The guys realize that. We are still trying to improve."

One area that doesn't need improving is in net, where Alexandar Georgiev has a league-best six wins with a 1.98 goals-against average and .930 save percentage. Colorado went into the season as the favorite to win the Stanley Cup, and Georgiev's play is a good early indicator of those chances.