

Austin: Al-Qaida may seek comeback in Afghanistan

Associated Press

KUWAIT CITY — Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said Thursday the al-Qaida extremist group that used Afghanistan as a staging base to attack the United States 20 years ago could attempt to regenerate there following an American withdrawal that has left the Taliban in power.

Austin spoke to a reporters in Kuwait City at the conclusion of a four-day tour of Persian Gulf states. He said the United States is prepared to prevent an al-Qaida comeback in Afghanistan that would threaten the U.S.

“The whole community is kind of watching to see what happens and whether or not al-Qaida has the ability to regenerate in Afghanistan,” he said. “The nature of al-Qaida and (Islamic State) is they will always attempt to find space to grow and regenerate, whether it’s there, whether it’s in

Somalia, or whether it’s in any other ungoverned space. I think that’s the nature of the organization.”

The Taliban had provided al-Qaida with sanctuary while they ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001. The U.S. invaded and overthrew the Taliban after they refused to turn over al-Qaida leaders following the Sept. 11, 2001, attack on the United States. During the course of the 20-year U.S. war, al-Qaida was vastly diminished, but questions have arisen about its future prospects with the Taliban back in Kabul.

“We put the Taliban on notice that we expect them to not allow that to happen,” Austin said, referring to the possibility of al-Qaida using Afghanistan as a staging base in the future.

In a February 2020 agreement with the Trump administration, Taliban leaders pledged not to

support al-Qaida or other extremist groups that would threaten the United States. But U.S. officials believe the Taliban maintain ties to al-Qaida, and many nations are concerned that the Taliban’s return to power could open the door to a resurgence of al-Qaida influence.

Austin has asserted that the U.S. military is capable of containing al-Qaida or any other extremist threat to the U.S. emanating from Afghanistan by using surveillance and strike aircraft based elsewhere, including in the Persian Gulf. He also has acknowledged that it will be more difficult without U.S. troops and intelligence teams based in Afghanistan.

Austin and Secretary of State Antony Blinken appeared together in Qatar on Tuesday in a show of U.S. gratitude for that Gulf state’s help with the transit of tens

of thousands of Afghans and others evacuated from Kabul.

Together, the Austin and Blinken trips were meant to reassure Gulf allies that President Joe Biden’s decision to end the U.S. war in Afghanistan in order to focus more on other security challenges like China and Russia does not foretell an abandonment of U.S. partners in the Middle East. The U.S. military has had a presence in the Gulf for decades, including the Navy’s 5th Fleet headquarters in Bahrain. Biden has not suggested ending that presence, but he — like the Trump administration before him — has called China the No. 1 security priority, along with strategic challenges from Russia.

Austin, a retired Army general, has contacts in the Gulf region based in part on his years commanding U.S. and coalition troops in Iraq and later as head of U.S. Central Command.

Some 200 foreigners board flight to Qatar from Kabul

Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan — Dozens of foreigners, including Americans, boarded a commercial flight at Kabul’s international airport on Thursday in the first large-scale evacuation since U.S. and NATO forces withdrew from Afghanistan at the end of last month.

The departure of some 200 Westerners on a Qatar Airways flight to Doha marked a significant breakthrough in the bumpy coordination between the U.S. and Afghanistan’s new Taliban rulers.

The Taliban have promised to allow foreigners and Afghans with valid travel documents to leave, but a dayslong standoff over charter planes at another airport had cast some doubt on

Taliban assurances.

Earlier in the day as the group prepared to board, Qatari special envoy Mutlaq bin Majed al-Qahtani declared it a “historic day.”

“Call it what you want, a charter or a commercial flight, everyone has tickets and boarding passes,” al-Qahtani said from the Kabul airport tarmac, adding that another commercial flight would take off on Friday. “Hopefully, life is becoming normal in Afghanistan.”

A senior U.S. official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they weren’t authorized to brief the media, provided the number of Westerners expected on board and said that two very senior Taliban officials had helped facilitate the departure. The 200 includes Americans,

green card holders and other nationalities, the official said.

The flight represents the first to depart from Kabul airport since American forces left at the end of August, their departure accompanied by a frantic airlift of tens of thousands of foreign citizens and Afghans fleeing the Taliban. The scenes of chaos, including Afghans plunging to their deaths after clinging to military aircraft that was taking off and a suicide bombing that killed 169 Afghans and 13 U.S. service members, came to define the fraught end to America’s two-decade war.

A foreign diplomat, likewise speaking on condition of anonymity because he wasn’t authorized to brief the media, said another 200 foreigners, including Americans, would depart in the next

couple of days. It remains uncertain what the resumption of international flights over the next few days will mean for the tens of thousands of Afghans desperate to flee Afghanistan’s new Taliban leaders over fears of what their rule will hold.

Following the U.S.-led evacuation of over 100,000 people from the country in the wake of the troop pullout, extensive damage at Kabul airport has raised questions over how soon the transport hub could resume for regular commercial flights. Technical experts from Qatar and Turkey have been working to restore operations.

Al-Qahtani told reporters that the airport’s radar was now active and covering some 70 miles after U.S. forces left it inoperable.

Navy to start unmanned, AI task force

BY CAITLIN DOORNBOS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Navy will launch its first task force dedicated to unmanned systems and artificial intelligence in the Middle East on Thursday as the U.S. military continues to shift its counterterrorism forces within the region, the service announced.

Naval Forces Central Command will oversee Task Force 59, which will concentrate unmanned and AI capabilities from across the Navy and roll them out for sailors to use in a real-world, complex setting, said Vice Adm. Brad Cooper, the commander of NAVCENT and 5th Fleet.

“We need to get unmanned

systems out into the fleet into the hands of operators, so this is exactly what we’re doing here at NAVCENT with Task Force 59,” he said Wednesday.

Cooper declined to say whether the new task force would be involved with counterterrorism missions, though he said NAVCENT has “been very involved with Afghanistan from a [non-combatant evacuation] standpoint.”

The establishment of the Navy task force in the Middle East comes as the United States boosts its reliance on unmanned capabilities in the region after withdrawing all American forces from Afghanistan last week and ending 20 years of mil-

itary involvement in the country.

U.S. Central Command has said it will continue to conduct “over-the-horizon” counterterrorism strikes in Afghanistan if needed. That included two drone strikes on Islamic State fighters in Kabul in the final days of U.S. evacuation efforts from the city.

The Task Force will employ some technologies that have not yet been used in daily operations. The idea is to evaluate the systems in a real-world setting, which “is exactly what will help us accelerate the technology development and integration across the fleet,” Cooper said.

“This effort is really to get the unmanned systems in the hands of the operators so they can put it

against real problems and determine whether it helps solve those problems and if it doesn’t, perhaps we should look for [other options],” he said.

Task Force 59 will integrate the Navy’s arsenal of aerial, surface and undersea drones and AI systems “as a means to do two things: enhance our maritime domain awareness and to increase our deterrence,” Cooper said.

Among those unmanned and AI technologies are those used in the Pacific Fleet’s Unmanned Battle Problem 21, a weeklong exercise in April that tested manned and unmanned capabilities in invented scenarios, Cooper said.

Reef transit draws barbs on Twitter over destroyer

BY ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

A top Navy official and the editor of a Chinese state-run newspaper traded digital quips Thursday, a day after a Navy destroyer cruised past a disputed reef in the South China Sea.

Navy Chief of Information Rear Adm. Charlie Brown and Global Times editor-in-chief Hu Xijin got into the back-and-forth on Twitter over the USS Benfold’s pass within 12 nautical miles of Mischief Reef in the Spratly Islands.

“Hopefully when Chinese warships pass

through the Caribbean Sea or show up near Hawaii and Guam one day, the US will uphold the same standard of freedom of navigation,” Hu tweeted. “That day will come soon.”

Brown responded with recent examples of the Chinese navy sailing near U.S. waters, including a September 2015 incident in which the Chinese sailed within 12 miles of the Alaskan coast.

“The [U.S. Navy] sails around the world in accordance with international law. All countries benefit from freedom of navigation in accordance with international law,” Brown

tweeted. “Unfortunately, not all who benefit from freedom of navigation would extend that same freedom to others.”

The aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson’s strike group was also present in the South China Sea on Wednesday and held exercises there Monday, according to the Navy.

China has built up Mischief Reef and constructed underground storage, radar and communications arrays and other improvements, according to the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative. The U.S. does not recognize any territorial claim to the reef, according to a 7th Fleet statement Wednesday.

Helicopter rotor struck USS Lincoln flight deck, causing crash

BY CAITLIN DOORNBOS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A Navy helicopter’s rotor struck the flight deck after landing on the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln, causing the crash that killed five sailors last week, according to a Naval Safety Center report.

An MH-60S Knighthawk had

just touched down aboard the Abraham Lincoln on Aug. 31 when it “experienced side-to-side vibrations causing the main rotor to strike [the] flight deck,” according to the report.

The helicopter then fell over the side of the carrier and into the ocean off the coast of San Diego, according to the report. One sailor was rescued, but five others —

Petty Officer 2nd Class James P. Buriak, Petty Officer 2nd Class Sarah F. Burns, Lt. Bradley A. Foster, Lt. Paul R. Fridley and Petty Officer 3rd Class Bailey J. Tucker — were never recovered.

The Navy and Coast Guard searched for the missing crew members for four days before declaring them dead Saturday. The sailors were assigned to Helicopter

Sea Combat Squadron 8, according to the Navy.

Five other Abraham Lincoln sailors were injured in the incident, but the Navy has not released further detail about how they were hurt. Two were taken to San Diego for treatment while the others were treated on board for minor injuries, the service said Sept. 1.

9/11 took attention off China threat

BY WYATT OLSON

Stars and Stripes

In April 2001, a Chinese J-8 fighter jet collided with a U.S. Navy EP-3 reconnaissance plane as it flew near China's southern island province of Hainan.

The Chinese pilot died during bailout, and the crippled Navy aircraft made an emergency landing on Hainan, where the 24 crew members were detained and questioned before being released after an 11-day diplomatic standoff between Beijing and Washington.

The crisis was the first faced by a recently sworn-in President George W. Bush, who during the 2000 presidential campaign had promised to deal with China as a competitor rather than as a "strategic partner."

"Certainly, there was a realization in early 2001 that China was the thing we had to worry about," said Gregory Poling, a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies think tank in Washington, D.C., in a phone interview Aug. 27.

"And then a few months later, China was not the thing anybody was worried about," he said.

The Sept. 11, 2001, attacks by Islamic jihadists on the World Trade Center and Pentagon fixated America on counterterrorism and, soon after, counterinsurgency as the nation became embroiled in lengthy wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The Indo-Pacific and the challenge of an emerging and increasingly forceful China were by no means totally ignored in the years since, but defense and Asia experts say that 9/11 and its aftermath sidetracked the U.S. in competing with China and has left America's military at a disadvantage moving forward.

'Correcting the course'

"Two decades of war in the Middle East not only distracted the United States from rebalancing to Asia, it also dangerously degraded US military readiness and left the Joint Force ill-equipped for the kind of high-intensity military competition that will characterize great power competition with China," Ashley Townshend, a defense expert for the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney, wrote in an Aug. 26 email to Stars and Stripes.

"Only in the last few years has the Pentagon exited this era of strategic distraction," said Townshend, who recently coauthored the white paper "Correcting the Course," which called on President Joe Biden to make the region his top strategic priority.

"But the costs to American power and influence in the Indo-Pacific will be enduring,

necessitating an even larger shift of attention and resources away from the Europe and the Middle East to Asia than would have been necessary a decade ago."

The shift away from a military focused on counterinsurgency is something the U.S. will grapple with well into the future, Poling said.

"The United States bled blood and treasure for 20 years, in ways that are not applicable to the theater that we now say is the foremost threat," he said. "We invested trillions of dollars in upgrading land forces and counterterrorism and counterinsurgency forces that have no applicability to the naval and air theater that is the Pacific. Who knows what our naval modernization could look like right now had we not spent trillions of dollars for 20 years on the Army?"

"The budget fights and fights over what the services will look like are just now getting started, when they should have started 20 years ago, given China's naval modernization."

China closes military gap

Some defense experts are less gloomy in assessing the legacy of the past two decades.

"I think the U.S. has done a lot of things at the same time [as China] because the defense budgets were pretty good," said Derek Reveron, a professor at the Naval War College in Rhode Island who specializes in national defense policy, in a phone interview Aug. 24.

He pointed to the development of the F-35 stealth fighter jet, littoral combat ship, the Zumwalt-class guided-missile destroyer and the Gerald R. Ford-class aircraft carrier — all suitable for a large-scale conflict in a theater such as the Pacific.

Zack Cooper, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute where he focuses on U.S. defense policy in Asia, is not convinced those weapons systems are an entirely apt or sufficient response to the China challenge.

"I guess my view on this is that if you look back 10 years, the U.S. has spent — I'm going to ballpark this — but probably two to three times as much money on defense as China has," Cooper said in a phone interview Aug. 26. "And yet China is far closer to the United States today in military capabilities than it was a decade ago, despite having spent a small portion of what the U.S. spent in the last decade.

"So, either we're spending it on the wrong thing or we're managing so many different challenges that we're struggling to keep up with what [Defense Secretary] Lloyd Austin

has called the 'pacing challenge' of China."

South China Sea inaction

While the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan siphoned off resources from the Pacific, China expert Mohan Malik does not regard that as the core problem.

"More damaging were the fundamentally flawed assumptions underlying Washington's China policy premised on turning Communist China into a 'responsible stakeholder' or 'partner' in the U.S.-led liberal order," said Malik, a visiting professor at the UAE National Defense College in Abu Dhabi, in an Aug. 27 email to Stars and Stripes.

The mindset largely prevailed through Barack Obama's administration, whose "inaction over the construction and militarization of artificial islands in the South China Sea emboldened Beijing and demoralized the United States' friends and allies in the Pacific," Malik said.

But a more aggressive posture regarding China is not always helpful — or even possible, said Srinivasa Sitaraman, a professor at the Center for Asia Pacific Studies in Honolulu, in a phone interview Aug. 24.

"Even if you had devoted more military spending in regard to China, I don't know that it would have made an enormous difference," Sitaraman said. "What would you have done? It's not like they're firing bullets. In the South China Sea, it's [the Association of Southeast Asian Nations] that has to fight the battle. You can't go to war over it so really there's not a whole lot you can do with China in terms of warfighting."

A lesson for China

Denny Roy, a senior fellow at the East-West Center in Honolulu who focuses on Pacific security and China, suggested that the U.S. might not be the only superpower to absorb the chastening lesson of America's failed effort to remake Afghanistan through military force.

For some Chinese, America's quagmire in Afghanistan carries implications for one possible future of China-Taiwan relations, he said in a phone interview Aug. 24.

"That is, if China ever has to resort to military force to try to impose its will on Taiwan — when the Chinese have, as they say, 'exhausted all peaceful methods' of resolving what they see as the problem of Taiwan not being politically part of the People's Republic of China — then China has to think about not only the initial military part. The United States, arguably, won the war in Afghanistan and Iraq, but then lost the nation-building part."

Biden to order vaccine for federal workers

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden on Thursday is toughening COVID-19 vaccine requirements for federal workers and contractors as he aims to boost vaccinations and curb the surging delta variant that is killing thousands each week and jeopardizing the nation's economic recovery.

Just weeks after he mandated federal workers get a shot or face rigorous testing and masking protocols, Biden will sign a new executive order to require vaccination for employees of the execu-

tive branch and contractors who do business with the federal government, according to a person familiar with the matter.

The word comes ahead of the president's speech Thursday afternoon outlining a six-pronged plan to address the latest rise in coronavirus cases and the stagnating pace of COVID-19 shots.

It wasn't immediately clear if Biden's order includes exceptions for workers or contractors seeking religious or medical exemptions from vaccination. The person spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss Biden's

plans before they were publicly released.

Biden is also expected to outline plans to increase virus testing in schools, in an effort to keep them open safely, amid other measures to show that his administration is working to tackle the alarming rise in COVID-19 cases, which Biden has blamed for last month's weaker-than-expected jobs report. He's warned the surge could further imperil the nation's economy as some pandemic safety net protections expire.

Biden has encouraged CO-

VID-19 vaccine requirements in settings like schools, workplaces and university campuses, and the White House hopes the strengthened federal mandate will inspire more businesses to follow suit.

The Department of Veterans Affairs, Department of Health and Human Services, the Indian Health Service and the National Institute of Health have previously announced vaccine requirements for much of their staffs, and the Pentagon moved last month to require all service members to get vaccinated.

Rate of vaccination for active troops tops 70%

By Karin Zeitvogel
Stars and Stripes

Coronavirus vaccination rates among service members are far outpacing that of the U.S. population as a whole, with just over 70% of active-duty troops already fully vaccinated against COVID-19, the general in charge of a joint-forces health agency said.

The high percentage of fully vaccinated services members is "particularly compelling (because) more than 80% of the active-duty force is 35 or under," Lt. Gen. Ron Place, head of the Defense Health Agency, told Stars and Stripes.

"And if you look across the rest of America, it's typically young men and women who are more reluctant to be vaccinated," he said.

Just under 53% of Americans were fully vaccinated against the virus as of Thursday, according to the Our World in Data website.

Around 82% of troops have had at least one coronavirus shot, and infection rates in the military are significantly lower than they are across the general population, Place said.

Service members have been stepping forward to get the vaccine since before Defense Secre-

tary Lloyd Austin released a memorandum Aug. 24 making vaccination mandatory for members of the armed forces unless they have a medical or administrative exemption.

The Air Force and Navy have set deadlines for active-duty members, reservists and Guardsmen to be fully vaccinated, and the Army was expected to announce a timeline soon.

Austin's memo sparked a flurry of calls on social media for service members to seek exemptions, particularly if they have had COVID-19. Some studies have found that previous infection gives more robust immunity against the illness caused by the coronavirus than the vaccine does.

But Place said he did not expect anything "unique about these exemptions compared to others."

"This is just another vaccine that will go into that bucket of discussions about how leaders either validate or not a particular exemption that a service member may believe they are entitled to," he said.

Place also said there has been no indication that service members would leave the military in droves over the vaccine mandate.

Jobless claims at pandemic low as US economy recovers

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The number of Americans seeking unemployment benefits fell last week to 310,000, a pandemic low and a sign that the surge in COVID-19 cases caused by the delta variant has yet to lead to widespread layoffs.

Thursday's report from the Labor Department showed that jobless claims dropped from a revised total of 345,000 the week before. The number of applications has fallen steadily since topping 900,000 in early January, reflecting the steady reopening of the economy after the pandemic recession.

But the spread of the delta variant this summer has put renewed pressure on the economy and the job market. On Wednesday, the Federal Reserve reported U.S. economic activity "downshifted" in July and August, in part because of a pullback in dining out, travel and tourism related to concerns about the delta variant.

Still, the ongoing drop in applications for unemployment aid — six declines in the past seven weeks — makes clear that most companies are holding onto their workers despite the slowdown. That trend should help sustain the economic rebound through the

current wave of infections.

The pace of hiring, though, has weakened — at least for now. Last week, the government reported that hiring slowed dramatically in August, with employers adding just 235,000 jobs after having added roughly a million in both June and July. Hiring plummeted in industries that require face-to-face contact with the public, notably restaurants, hotels and retail. Still, some jobs were added in other areas, and the unemployment rate actually dropped to 5.2% from 5.4%.

The steady fall in weekly applications for unemployment benefits coincides with a scaling-back of aid for jobless Americans. This week, more than 8 million people lost all their unemployment benefits with the expiration of two federal programs that covered gig workers and people who have been jobless for more than six months. Those emergency programs were created in March 2020, when the pandemic first tore through the economy.

That cutoff isn't yet reflected in the weekly jobless claims report. The report's data on the emergency programs is delayed by two weeks. As of Aug. 21, 8.8 million people were receiving benefits from these two programs.

Ida death toll rises to 26 in Louisiana

Associated Press

HOUMA, La. — The death toll in Louisiana from Hurricane Ida rose to 26 Wednesday, after health officials reported 11 additional deaths in New Orleans, mostly older people who perished from the heat. The announcement was grim news amid signs the city was returning to normal with almost fully restored power and a lifted nighttime curfew.

While New Orleans was generally rebounding from the storm, hundreds of thousands of people outside the city remained without electricity and some of the hardest-hit areas still had no water. Across southeastern Louisiana, 250,000 students were unable to return to classrooms 10 days after Ida roared ashore with 150 mph winds.

The latest deaths attributed to Ida hap-

pened between Aug. 30 and Monday, but were just confirmed as storm-related by the Orleans Parish coroner, the Louisiana Department of Health said in a statement. Nine of the New Orleans deaths — of people ages 64 to 79 — came from “excessive heat during an extended power outage,” while the two others were from carbon monoxide poisoning, the department said.

More than a million people were left without power, including the entire city of New Orleans, when Ida struck on Aug. 29. The state’s largest power company, Entergy, said it had expected to have electricity in the city restored to 90% by Wednesday evening.

Meanwhile, the New Orleans Police Department and Mayor LaToya Cantrell lifted an 8 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew they had imposed

two days after the hurricane hit.

Across New Orleans and southeastern Louisiana, families are still waiting to hear when their children can return to school, as districts assessed hurricane damage. Prior to Ida, schools around Louisiana had been open despite widespread cases of COVID-19, although under a statewide mask mandate for all indoor locations.

“We need to get those kids back with us as soon as we possibly can,” said Superintendent of Education Cade Brumley.

In New Orleans, School Superintendent Henderson Lewis Jr. said damage to schools appeared to be mostly minimal, but power needs to be restored to all buildings, and teachers, staff and families need to return to the city to get schools up and running.

Hot, dry air, possible lightning raise Calif. fire worry

Associated Press

SOUTH LAKE TAHOE, Calif. — The interior of California was very hot and dry Wednesday and the forecast called for a risk of fire-starting dry lightning as thousands of firefighters already have their hands full with wildland blazes that have been burning for weeks.

A National Weather Service heat advisory stretched down the Central Valley and through inland Southern California, with an excessive heat warning extending eastward across the desert into Nevada.

The state energy grid operator called for

voluntary conservation of electricity from 4-9 p.m. because of expected high demand for air conditioning. The alert ended without any major power outages reported but the conservation request was extended to 4-9 p.m. Thursday.

A fire weather watch was issued for Thursday evening through Friday evening in much of the interior of Northern California due to a weather system that is expected to bring a chance of thunderstorms with lightning and erratic gusts.

“The combination of possible dry lightning as well as strong winds with the dry

fuels could lead to critical fire weather conditions,” forecasters wrote.

Nearly 15,000 firefighters were making progress on 14 major wildfires and several smaller new fires, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection said. They include three of the state’s 20 largest fires on record.

In the northern Sierra Nevada and southern Cascades region, the second-largest fire in California history has scorched nearly 1,441 square miles. The Dixie Fire was 59% contained but new evacuation orders were issued for part of Shasta County.

Police plan to reinstall Capitol fencing ahead of rally

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Law enforcement officials concerned by the prospect for violence at a rally in the nation’s capital next week are planning to reinstall protective fencing that surrounded the U.S. Capitol for months after the Jan. 6 insurrection, according to a person

familiar with the discussions.

Though no specific measures have been announced, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi hinted at her weekly press conference Wednesday at extra safety precautions for the Sept. 18 rally by saying: “We intend to have the integrity of the Capitol be intact.”

Briefings for lawmakers, including congressional leaders, are expected in coming days.

The Capitol Police formally requested the fence to the board that oversees it, and it is likely to be approved, according to a House Democratic aide who spoke on condition of anonymity to talk about private discussions.

STARS AND STRIPES®

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

Reporting
World, National
and Military News

Djokovic wins, nears calendar-year Slam

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Never fazed, rarely flummoxed, Novak Djokovic is so collected in best-of-five-set matches — even when falling behind, as he has done repeatedly at the U.S. Open.

No opponent, or the prospect of what's at stake, has been too much to handle. Not yet, anyway. And now he's two wins away from the first calendar-year Grand Slam in men's tennis since 1969, along with a men's-record 21st major championship overall.

Djokovic ceded the opening set for the third consecutive match at Flushing Meadows — and ninth time at a major in 2021 — but again it didn't matter, because he quickly corrected his strokes and beat No. 6 seed Matteo Berrettini 5-7, 6-2, 6-2, 6-3 in a quarterfinal that began Wednesday night and concluded after midnight Thursday.

During his on-court interview, Djokovic cut off a question, sensing where it was headed, and said: "Do not ask me anything about history. I know it's there."

As he came back and improved to 26-0 in Grand Slam play this season, Djokovic found every angle, thwarted every big Berrettini shot and was so locked in he dove and dropped his racket during one exchange yet scrambled, rose and reinserted himself in the point. He lost it, but the message to his foe was unmistakable, essentially amounting to,

"I will do whatever it takes."

After 17 unforced errors in the first set, Djokovic made a total of 11 the rest of the way.

"The best three sets I've played in the tournament, for sure," he said.

Djokovic has added five victories on the U.S. Open's hard courts and now faces 2020 runner-up Alexander Zverev in Friday's semifinals. If Djokovic can win that match and Sunday's final, he will join Don Budge (1938) and Rod Laver (1962 and 1969) as the only men to claim all four major tennis singles trophies in one season. (Three women have done it, most recently Steffi Graf in 1988; Serena Williams' bid in 2015 ended in the U.S. Open semifinals).

One more Slam title also will break the career mark Djokovic shares with rivals Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal.

Zverev goes into the semifinals on a 16-match winning streak, including a 1-6, 6-3, 6-1 semifinal triumph against Djokovic en route to the gold medal at the Tokyo Olympics.

"I'm pumped," Djokovic said, looking ahead to what awaits. "The bigger the challenge, the more glory in overcoming it."

The other men's semifinal is No. 2 Daniil Medvedev, a two-time major finalist, against No. 12 Felix Auger-Aliassime. They won their quarterfinals Tuesday.

The No. 4-seeded Zverev, a 24-year-old

German, advanced Wednesday afternoon by beating Lloyd Harris 7-6 (6), 6-3, 6-4.

The women's semifinals don't feature similarly ranked players.

Emma Raducanu, an 18-year-old from Britain, is the first qualifier in the professional era to reach the U.S. Open semifinals. And she hasn't even dropped a set yet.

Showing off the shots and poise of someone more experienced, the 150th-ranked Raducanu became the second unseeded teen in two days to secure a spot in the final four, eliminating Tokyo Olympics gold medalist Belinda Bencic 6-3, 6-4 in Arthur Ashe Stadium.

Raducanu has won all 16 sets she has contested through eight matches in New York — three during the qualifying rounds and another five in the main draw. On Thursday, she will face No. 17 seed Maria Sakkari of Greece, a semifinalist at this year's French Open.

Sakkari won 22 consecutive points she served in one stretch and beat No. 4 Karolina Pliskova, a two-time major runner-up, 6-4, 6-4 on Wednesday night to follow up her victory over 2019 U.S. Open champion Bianca Andreescu in the previous round.

The other women's semifinal will be 19-year-old Leylah Fernandez of Canada against No. 2 seed Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus.

Imbalance of power as NFC lags behind deeper AFC

Associated Press

It's almost as if the NFL is emulating college football heading into the 2021 season. Yes, the Buccaneers are the defending champions and the Packers deservedly have title aspirations.

The rest of the NFC, well, it looks more like Conference USA in comparison to the AFC, the professional version of the SEC. It is that lopsided.

Consider the likes of the Chiefs, Bills, Ravens, Browns, Steelers, Titans, Colts, Dolphins, Patriots and Chargers. All have their supporters as Super Bowl contenders, with Kansas City, Buffalo, Baltimore and Cleveland ahead of a packed field.

On the other side, it's a different story.

It's difficult to take any team in the NFC East or North (aside

from Green Bay) seriously. While the NFC West is strong and will be tightly contested, the Rams, Seahawks, 49ers and Cardinals have major questions that the Bucs, who brought back virtually everyone — a rare feat for a Super Bowl winner — and the Packers pretty much already have answered.

"You want the road to the Super Bowl, the road to where we want to get to, to be as hard as possible," says Titans safety Kevin Byard. "I think that's something we can be proud of, and it also keeps us on our toes to let us know, 'Hey there's a lot of competition out there for the AFC championship or just the Super Bowl.' We have to go out here every single day and work as hard as we can and not take any days for granted. Because at the end of the day ... it's a

crowded race, it's kind of like a horse race ... You got to keep going on.

"It's not one of those deals where you can get ahead early and think you can slack off. No, every single day we have to put the work in and not necessarily really get caught up on who's 5-0 early in the year, just keeping our heads down working and we'll see where we're at the end of the year."

Adds Browns safety John Johnson III, who jumped conferences this season, signing with Cleveland as a free agent after four years with the Rams:

"You got some big-time contenders — even just in this division alone. And then you look at Buffalo and Kansas City and you never know who else in that division with Kansas City can come alive. Denver can come

alive, so I think it is pretty competitive, and it's a different game."

A different game in every way, because the continuing COVID-19 pandemic likely will be a factor as the NFL plays a 17-game regular season for the first time.

Vaccinated players have a distinct freedom advantage in how they can conduct their lives — at least for now — compared to the unvaccinated. More than 93% of the players have gotten the vaccine, but it doesn't take much to cause an outbreak, as the Titans and Cowboys witnessed during the preseason.

"There's people's livelihoods at stake in terms of people's jobs," Bills coach Sean McDermott said late last month; Buffalo has had one of the lowest vaccination rates of the 32 teams.

Robinson, Pepi help US flip on Honduras

Associated Press

SAN PEDRO SULA, Honduras — The United States was skidding to another World Cup qualifying failure when Antonee Robinson entered, quickly tied the score and celebrated with a backward somersault.

The entire game soon flipped. Ricardo Pepi put the U.S. ahead in the 75th minute, Brenden Aaronson and Sebastian Lletget added late goals and the U.S. rolled past Honduras 4-1 Wednesday night.

“I think it’s really important that we did that just to show everyone that at times it’s going to be a hard qualifying process, but we’re ready for the challenges that’ll come ahead,” Robinson said. “We can respond to anything.”

Pepi had a goal and two assists in his debut, and the Americans exhaled after a tumultuous week of injuries, positive COVID-19 tests and a huge disciplinary issue. They won for just the second time in 41 qualifiers in which they trailed at

halftime (six draws).

Coach Gregg Berhalter held a team meeting before the match and told players that opening draws at El Salvador and at home against Canada “wouldn’t have doomed the qualifying.” U.S. goalkeeper Zack Steffen, defender Sergiño Dest and midfielder Gio Reyna had gotten hurt, Steffen tested positive for COVID and midfielder Weston McKennie was sent home by Berhalter for violating team COVID protocols.

Berhalter thought the talk helped players begin to relax.

“Despite all this crap that happened in these last couple days, the guys’ spirits were extremely high,” he said.

Still, Brayan Moya put 63rd-ranked Honduras ahead in the 27th minute, breaking free of George Bello and heading a cross from Diego Rodríguez past goalkeeper Matt Turner after John Brooks lost the ball.

That put the 10th-ranked Americans in a daunting position: They had given up the first

goal in 33 previous road World Cup qualifiers, winning two, losing 26 and tying five.

Berhalter told players at halftime they had to change more than formation.

“We need to compete, and that was something I was disappointed with,” he recalled saying. “When they scored, instead of seeing that reaction that we’re used to, I think their heads went down a little bit.”

And to make the challenge greater, Christian Pulisic injured his left ankle early in the second half, tried to continue and fell in a heap during a sprint a few minutes later. He was replaced in the 62nd minute.

“When Christian goes down, it’s always like, mmm, you take like a deep breath because he’s our best player,” Aaronson said.

Pepi, who scored the winning penalty kick in last month’s Major League Soccer All-Star Game against Liga MX, at 18 years, 242 days became the second-youngest American to ap-

pear in a qualifier behind Pulisic at 17 years, 193 days in March 2016.

The Dallas forward chose to play for the U.S. over Mexico, the 65th player to appear for the Americans since the October 2017 loss at Trinidad and Tobago ended a streak of seven straight World Cup appearances. He was the 42nd since Berhalter was hired in December 2018.

“I feel like he had confidence in me,” Pepi said, “so I just went out there and do my thing.”

Berhalter made five lineup changes, inserting Pepi, Bello, Mark McKenzie and James Sands for their qualifying debuts and bringing back Josh Sargent, who started the opener. They were part of a lineup that averaged the youngest ever for the U.S. in a qualifier at 23 years, 85 days, one that had Pulisic, Tyler Adams and Kellyn Acosta in a 3-5-2 formation, with Adams playing wide on the right rather than defensive midfield.

US Ryder Cup team will include 6 newcomers

Associated Press

The only experience that matters to Ryder Cup captain Steve Stricker is how the youngest U.S. team in history prepares for Whistling Straits in a bid to win back that shiny gold chalice.

Equipped with the most captain’s picks in Ryder Cup history, Stricker added four more rookies to his team on Tuesday to join the six players who earned automatic spots. His six selections included obvious choices and, as always, a few that could have gone either way.

Among those left out was Patrick Reed.

Stricker chose the next four players in the Ryder Cup standings — Tony Finau, Xander Schauffele, Jordan Spieth and Harris English — along with

Daniel Berger and Scottie Scheffler.

“We are looking to the best players to perform here at Whistling Straits, and these six guys that we picked we feel like fit Whistling Straits to a T,” Stricker said.

Missing was Reed, who thrives in team events with his bullish personality and great short game. He has a 7-3-2 record in three previous Ryder Cups and is undefeated in singles.

Reed, however, hasn’t seriously contended in the 18 tournaments he has played since his lone victory at Torrey Pines. Stricker was more concerned with Reed’s health.

Reed was hospitalized for five days with pneumonia in his lower lungs that made him fear for

his life, missing the final two qualifying events. He returned at the Tour Championship and tied for 17th in actual score against a 30-man field.

“That was a very, very difficult call — kind of lost sleep over that one,” Stricker said. “He’s a tremendous competitor. He brings a lot to match-play golf. His record here at the Ryder Cup is pretty darned good ... It was just the uncertainty of his health and really the lack of play that led to our decision down the stretch.”

Stricker made it clear he wanted players whose game suited Whistling Straits — a course along the bluffs of Lake Michigan that tends to favor power — and said he wanted his players to know it well ahead of the Sept. 24-26 matches.

All 12 players and their caddies are expected for a two-day practice session over the weekend.

“My message from day one has been to try to out-prepare the other team,” he said.

The six picks join six who earned automatic spots — Collin Morikawa, Dustin Johnson, Bryson DeChambeau, Brooks Koepka, Justin Thomas and Patrick Cantlay.

All are among the top 21 in the world ranking. Six have never played in a Ryder Cup. Eight are still in their 20s, and the average age (29) is the youngest ever for the Americans.

“I think it’s a good time for a younger influx of players,” said Schauffele, the 27-year-old Californian and Olympic gold medalist.

Baseball finally honors 2020 Hall class

Associated Press

COOPERSTOWN, N.Y. — Derek Jeter was simply Derek Jeter on his special day — smooth as silk.

On a Wednesday afternoon that turned cloudy with the temperature in the 70s and a few sprinkles in the air and adoring fans chanting his name, the former New York Yankees star shortstop and captain was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame after a long wait necessitated by the pandemic.

Greeted by raucous cheers in a crowd estimated at 20,000 that included NBA luminaries Michael Jordan and Patrick Ewing, several of his former teammates, and Hall of Fame Yankees manager Joe Torre on the stage behind him, Jeter took his turn after fellow inductees from the class of 2020 Ted Simmons, Larry Walker and the late Marvin Miller were honored. Jeter was touched by the moment

and acknowledged how different the ceremony seemed in the wake of the recent deaths of 10 Hall of Famers.

“I’m so honored to be inducted with you guys and linked to you forever,” he said. “The Hall of Fame is special because of those who are in it. We’ve lost way too many Hall of Famers over the last 20 months. These are all Hall of Famers who would have or could have been here, so for that reason it’s not the same.”

The ceremony was delayed a year because of the coronavirus pandemic and it didn’t matter much to Walker, the second Canadian elected to the Hall of Fame. He gave up hockey when he was 16 to focus on baseball. He was selected in his 10th and final year on the writers’ ballot after a stellar career with Montreal, Colorado and St. Louis that included 383 homers and three batting titles.

The 72-year-old Simmons, who starred in a

21-year career with the St. Louis Cardinals, Milwaukee and Atlanta, punctuated his speech to thank four pioneers of free agency — Curt Flood, Catfish Hunter, Andy Messersmith and Miller — “who changed the lives of every player on this stage today by pushing the boundaries of player rights.”

“Marvin Miller made so much possible for every major league player from my era to the present and the future,” the former catcher said. “I could not be more proud to enter this great hall with this great man. Even though my path has been on the longer side, I wouldn’t change a thing. However we get here, none of us arrives alone. I’m no exception.”

Miller, who transformed baseball on the labor front by building a strong players union and led the charge for free agency in the mid-1970s, was honored posthumously.

Renfroe’s homer, arm deliver Red Sox past Rays

Associated Press

BOSTON — Hunter Renfroe hit a two-run homer in the eighth inning and threw out Joey Wendle trying for a triple from deep center field for the final out of the ninth as the Boston Red Sox beat the Tampa Bay Rays 2-1 Wednesday night.

Renfroe’s big bat and strong arm helped the Red Sox avoid a three-game sweep against the AL East-leading Rays.

He drove a hanging slider from JT Chargois (5-1) over the Green Monster in left field just after Boston had fallen behind in what had been a scoreless tie through the first seven innings.

The Red Sox pulled within nine games of Tampa Bay for the division lead.

Garrett Richards (7-7) got the win, and Hansel Robles picked up his 12th save.

Blue Jays 6, Yankees 3: Vladimir Guerrero Jr. hit his 41st homer, and visiting Toronto knocked slumping New York out of the AL’s top wild-card spot.

The Yankees have lost five straight and nine of 11 since winning 13 in a row. This latest defeat dropped them a half-game

behind Boston for the first wild-card slot.

Padres 8, Angels 5: Yu Darvish threw six strong innings for host San Diego, and Adam Frazier had two hits and three RBIs during the team’s eight-run second inning.

The Padres took a one-game lead over Cincinnati for the NL’s second wild card. The Reds lost 4-1 at the Chicago Cubs.

Athletics 5, White Sox 1: Matt Chapman homered and Frankie Montas pitched seven sparkling innings, helping host Oakland beat Chicago and snap a four-game losing streak.

Montas (12-9) allowed one run and six hits in his third straight win. He got some help from his defense, with the A’s turning inning-ending double plays in three of the first four frames.

Giants 7, Rockies 4: LaMonte Wade Jr. and Evan Longoria each had two RBIs during San Francisco’s four-run rally in the ninth inning in a win at Colorado.

The streaking Giants (90-50) won their fourth straight and became the first team in the ma-

riors to win 90 games.

Cardinals 5, Dodgers 4: Adam Wainwright pitched into the ninth inning, Yadier Molina homered and host St. Louis stopped a four-game slide.

Tyler O’Neill also connected for the Cardinals, and Edmundo Sosa had an RBI single.

Cubs 4, Reds 1 (10): Jason Heyward hit a three-run homer in the 10th inning to send host Chicago to its eighth victory in nine games.

Ian Happ homered for the third straight game, extending his hitting streak to a career-high nine games and helping the Cubs win their third consecutive series.

Brewers 4, Phillies 3: Eduardo Escobar hit a tiebreaking solo homer for host Milwaukee in the sixth inning.

Nationals 4, Braves 2: Juan Soto crushed a go-ahead homer in the seventh inning, and Washington relied on its bullpen after Sean Nolin’s first-inning ejection in a win at Atlanta.

Twins 3, Indians 0: Joe Ryan carried a perfect game into the seventh inning of his second big league appearance, leading Minnesota to the victory at Cle-

veland.

Marlins 2, Mets 1 (10): Bryan De La Cruz had three hits for host Miami, including a game-winning single off the center-field fence in the bottom of the 10th inning.

Marlins starter Sandy Alcantara struck out a career-best 14 and allowed one run in nine innings. The right-hander gave up four hits, walked one and hit a batter with a pitch.

Mariners 8, Astros 5: José Marmolejos hit a tiebreaking two-run single for Seattle with two outs in the ninth inning, and J.P. Crawford padded the lead with a two-run homer in a win at Houston.

Rangers 8, Diamondbacks 5: Nathaniel Lowe had three hits, Jose Trevino drove in three runs and visiting Texas matched a season high with its fourth straight win.

Orioles 9, Royals 8: Kelvin Gutierrez hit a tying two-run single in host Baltimore’s ninth-inning eighth inning.

Tigers 5, Pirates 1: Miguel Cabrera and Robbie Grossman each had four hits, helping Detroit avoid a series sweep at Pittsburgh.