

Maduro defiantly professes innocence

Associated Press

NEW YORK — A defiant Nicolás Maduro declared himself the “president of my country” as he protested his capture and pleaded not guilty on Monday to the federal drug trafficking charges that the Trump administration used to justify removing him from power.

“I was captured,” Maduro said in Spanish as translated by a courtroom reporter before being cut off by the judge. Asked later for his plea to the charges, he stated: “I’m innocent. I am not guilty. I am a decent man, the president of my country.”

The courtroom appearance, Maduro’s first since he and his wife, Cilia Flores, were seized from their home in a stunning middle-of-the-night military operation, kick-starts the U.S. gov-

ernment’s most consequential prosecution in decades of a foreign head of state. The criminal case in Manhattan is unfolding against the diplomatic backdrop of an audacious U.S.-engineered regime change that President Donald Trump has said will enable his administration to “run” the South American country.

Maduro, wearing a blue jail uniform, was led into court along with his co-defendant wife just before noon for the brief, but required, legal proceeding. Both put on headsets to hear the English-language proceeding as it is translated into Spanish.

The couple were transported to the Manhattan courthouse under armed guard early Monday from the Brooklyn jail where they’ve been detained since arriving in

the U.S. on Saturday.

As a criminal defendant in the U.S. legal system, Maduro will have the same rights as any other person accused of a crime — including the right to a trial by a jury of New Yorkers. But he’ll also be nearly — but not quite — unique.

Maduro’s lawyers are expected to contest the legality of his arrest, arguing that he is immune from prosecution as a sovereign head of state.

Panamanian strongman Manuel Noriega unsuccessfully tried the same defense after the U.S. captured him in a similar military invasion in 1990. But the U.S. doesn’t recognize Maduro as Venezuela’s legitimate head of state — particularly after a much-disputed 2024 reelection.

Venezuela’s new interim presi-

dent, Delcy Rodríguez, has demanded that the U.S. return Maduro, who long denied any involvement in drug trafficking — although late Sunday she also struck a more conciliatory tone in a social media post, inviting collaboration with Trump and “respectful relations” with the U.S.

Before his capture, Maduro and his allies claimed U.S. hostility was motivated by lust for Venezuela’s rich oil and mineral resources.

The U.S. seized Maduro and his wife in a military operation early Saturday. Trump said the U.S. would “run” Venezuela temporarily, but Secretary of State Marco Rubio said Sunday that it would not govern the country day-to-day other than enforcing an existing “oil quarantine.”

Sailors charged in fake marriages to Chinese nationals

By ALISON BATH

Stars and Stripes

Two Navy sailors are facing federal charges for what authorities say were sham marriages with Chinese immigrants seeking U.S. residency.

Jacinth Bailey and Morgan Chambers are charged with one count each of conspiracy to commit marriage fraud, federal court records show.

Bailey and Chambers were to receive \$45,000 and \$35,000, respectively, as part of the scheme to recruit American citizens, preferably U.S. service members, prosecutors said in separate filings last month in federal court in Jacksonville, Fla.

The Navy didn’t immediately respond to questions about the rank and duty assignment of the sailors. The service has an air station in Jacksonville.

If convicted, Bailey and Chambers face up to five years in prison. Neither of them has appeared in court or entered a plea, but each waived their right to be formally indicted.

Their attorneys declined comment on Monday, citing the pending case.

At least two other sailors are involved in the case.

In August, former Navy recruiter Brinio Urena pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to commit marriage fraud, *The New York Times* reported on Friday.

As part of his plea deal, Urena admitted to marrying a Chinese woman for money in August 2024 and also admitted to helping recruit fellow service members to do the same.

Navy reservist Raymond Zumba pleaded guilty in July to attempting to bribe a Naval Air Sta-

tion Jacksonville official in exchange for fraudulent military identification cards for two ineligible people with links to China. Zumba’s sentencing in that case is set for Jan. 14.

Separately, he also faces a charge of conspiracy to commit marriage fraud related to his April 2024 wedding to a Chinese national, according to a Dec. 5 federal court filing in Jacksonville.

Urena and Zumba were not named in charging documents for Bailey and Chambers. But in their Dec. 5 filing, prosecutors said Zumba recruited Urena in May 2024 to enter a sham marriage.

After Urena’s wedding, Zumba asked him to obtain a military identification card for his new wife because it would help the immigration process, according to

the filing.

He also asked Urena “to help him find and recruit other U.S. citizens who would be willing to marry Chinese nationals and facilitate their immigration status for money,” the filing states.

In October 2024, Urena and an unidentified Navy sailor contacted another service member to recruit her for marriage to an unidentified Chinese national.

That marriage took place on Jan. 2, 2025, after Zumba and another unidentified co-conspirator drove the service member and her soon-to-be husband from New York City to a Connecticut courthouse, according to court documents.

The documents do not name the service member involved, but the dates and payment terms are consistent with information contained in a court filing for Bailey.

Greenland push raises alarms in NATO

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

President Donald Trump renewed his push for the United States to take control of Greenland, saying over the weekend that the Danish territory will be more of a focal point for his administration in a matter of months.

"We need Greenland from the standpoint of national security, and Denmark is not going to be able to do it," Trump told reporters Sunday aboard Air Force One.

Alarms were raised in Denmark and elsewhere in NATO by Trump's latest Greenland comments, which came one day after the capture of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro by American special operations forces.

The new U.S. national security strategy puts the Western Hemisphere at the top of the Pentagon's agenda, and Trump has had an interest in the strategic Atlantic island since his first term.

The United States already has a military presence in Green-

land, home to the Pituffik Space Base and a ballistic missile early warning mission that involves about 200 active-duty U.S. Air Force and Space Force personnel.

It's unclear whether more military access would satisfy Trump or whether the White House is seeking complete political control.

"You know what Denmark did recently to boost up security in Greenland? They added one more dogsled," Trump said.

Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen on Sunday lashed out at the remarks.

"I have to say this very directly to the United States: It makes absolutely no sense to talk about the need for the United States to take over Greenland," Frederiksen said.

Frederiksen added that Greenland, as part of NATO, is protected by the alliance's security guarantee and that the U.S. military already has extensive access to Greenland to carry out operations.

"I would therefore strongly urge the United States to stop

the threats against a historically close ally," she said, adding that the territory and its inhabitants have repeatedly made it clear "that they are not for sale."

Finnish President Alexander Stubb voiced support for Denmark and Greenland on X late Sunday.

"No one decides for Greenland and Denmark but Greenland and Denmark themselves," Stubb said.

The developments could pose a major test for NATO unity in the coming year, according to some security analysts.

Mujtaba Rahman, an expert with the political risk consultancy firm the Eurasia Group, called the possibility of American intervention in Greenland the biggest source of risk to cohesion in the alliance. The risks are "arguably far greater than those presented by Russia's invasion of Ukraine," Rahman said in a statement on LinkedIn.

His comments were a response to posts on X by Katie Miller, wife of Trump's deputy chief of staff Stephen Miller, that featured an image of

Greenland colored with the American flag and the word "soon."

Since taking office, Trump and other top administration officials have repeatedly argued that the U.S. needs to take over Greenland, citing increased Russian and Chinese activity in the Arctic as one of the driving factors.

All U.S. national security issues with Greenland could be addressed through existing agreements, said Luke Coffey, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute.

"If Denmark can't handle the security situation like President Trump is suggesting then we should help them, not annex them," Coffey said Sunday on X.

The Danish ambassador to the U.S., Jesper Moeller Soerensen, had a similar reaction in response to Miller's post, replying on X that Denmark and the U.S. should coordinate their efforts to secure Greenland together.

"And yes, we expect full respect for the territorial integrity of the Kingdom of Denmark," Soerensen added.

Hegseth censures Sen. Kelly over video to troops

By MATTHEW ADAMS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth on Monday censured Sen. Mark Kelly and moved to demote his military rank after telling troops in a video they could refuse unlawful orders.

"The Department of War — and the American people — expect justice," Hegseth posted on X. The Department of War is the secondary name for the Defense Department after President Donald Trump signed an executive order in September.

In November, Kelly, a retired Navy captain, participated in a

video alongside five other Democratic lawmakers who served in the military and intelligence community urging service members to remember their oaths to the Constitution and disobey illegal orders. Kelly, D-Ariz., retired from the Navy in 2011 and is a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, which conducts oversight of the Pentagon.

The Pentagon launched a review at the time.

In response to Kelly's "seditious statements," Hegseth said the Pentagon initiated retirement grade proceedings, which could result in grade and retirement pay reduction. Hegseth al-

so issued a formal letter of censure, saying it "is a necessary step" and will be placed on Kelly's permanent military personnel file.

"Captain Kelly has been provided notice of the basis for this action and has 30 days to submit a response. The retirement grade determination process directed by Secretary Hegseth will be completed within 45 days," Hegseth wrote. "Captain Kelly's status as a sitting United States senator does not exempt him from accountability, and further violations could result in further action."

Hegseth added these actions

are based on comments made by Kelly from June to December 2025 in which he "characterized lawful military operations as illegal and counseled members of the Armed Forces to refuse lawful orders."

Kelly responded on X by acknowledging he risked his life in more than 25 years of service, including 39 combat missions, to protect the country and defend the Constitution — including first amendment rights.

"I never expected that the President of the United States and the Secretary of Defense would attack me for doing exactly that," Kelly said.

NATO urged to use drones to track Russia

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

NATO should build a fleet of polar-hardened drones to keep closer tabs on Russian submarines and military maneuvers in the Arctic, says a recent report that calls for a strategy of “deterrence by detection” in the region.

A wide range of aerial, ground-based and undersea unmanned systems is urgently needed to give allies an edge in the hotly contested High North, the Center for European Policy Analysis said.

To deter Russian aggression, NATO must be able to identify threats as they are gathering,

the authors of the Dec. 16 report said.

“This means being able to track Russian submarine patrols leaving the Kola Peninsula, monitor aircraft flights across the Barents and Bering Seas, identify changes in Russia’s Arctic force posture and infrastructure, and detect potential surface and subsurface threats to critical infrastructure,” the report said.

Over the past decade, Russia has steadily been strengthening its position in the Arctic, adding military capabilities and expanding bases. China also has its eye on the region after declaring itself a “near-Arctic”

state in 2018.

The melting of sea ice has opened the possibility for new sea routes, increased commercial activity and, with it, more military competition.

The United States and other NATO members also have stepped up in the region, with more drills focused on challenges related to operating in polar conditions.

U.S. naval deployments in the Arctic aimed at boosting situational awareness and deterring potential Russian aggression also have increased. Still, gaps are persisting, according to CEPA.

“To begin with, NATO

doesn’t have a formal Arctic strategy,” the report said. “While this is a sensitive policy matter, the lack of a dedicated strategic framework for the region risks diluting resourcing and cooperation between regional allies on various levels.”

Procurement of Arctic-capable drones across NATO remains “fragmented, slow, and risk-averse,” the report said.

Most allies also treat Arctic-specific drone requirements as secondary modifications rather than purpose-built characteristics, which means limited numbers of reliable Arctic-ready drones, according to the think tank.

All Marines eligible for 6 new drone pilot courses

By LYDIA GORDON
Stars and Stripes

The Marine Corps is adding six new piloting courses as the service prepares to field tens of thousands of commercial drones in the coming year.

The plan, announced last Monday in a memo from the service, outlines a two-and-a-half-year framework to standardize drone training across the Corps.

Under the new framework, Marines of any job specialty can apply through their commands for one of the courses, which include basic drone operator, attack drone operator, attack drone leader, payload specialist, attack drone instructor and payload specialist instructor.

Units at Camp Pendleton, Calif., and Camp Lejeune, N.C., and on the Japanese island of Okinawa were selected as regional training hubs for the courses, with Quantico, Va., serving as the current central training site, according to the release.

In addition to the six courses, eight new drone-related certi-

fications will be introduced, broadening qualification pathways for Marines with varying experience levels, the Corps said.

Marines who have completed previous service drone training may be granted corresponding certifications under the new system, the memo said.

First-person view drones will be fielded to all infantry, reconnaissance and littoral combat teams across the Corps as early as May, according to a separate statement Tuesday.

The initiatives align with the Defense Department’s broader effort to develop and field approximately \$1 billion in autonomous and remotely operated systems across the services, the Marine Corps said.

Full operational capability for the Corps’ drone program is expected by 2028, with initial fielding slated to begin in March.

The new program builds on efforts already underway by the Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory, which has begun delivering Neros Archer attack drones to select units.

China increased presence near remote Japan islands

By BRIAN McELHINEY
AND KEISHI KOJA
Stars and Stripes

Chinese coast guard vessels sailed near the Senkaku Islands 357 times last year, setting a record for the fourth year in a row amid increased tension between Beijing and Tokyo.

In 2024, China’s coast guard was spotted 355 times in the contiguous zone around the uninhabited island group, which is administered by Japan, a spokeswoman for Japan’s coast guard said Monday. That year in turn broke 2023’s record of 352 sightings.

The contiguous zone is a 24-mile-wide band beyond the 12-mile territorial limit. Countries may exercise limited control in their contiguous zones, according to the United Nations.

The Senkakus, also claimed by China and Taiwan, include five islets and three reefs 105 miles east of Taiwan and 254 miles west of Okinawa.

“The situation surrounding the Senkaku Islands is becoming increasingly severe, and the situation remains unpredict-

able,” Seishiro Sakamoto, commander of Japan’s 11th Regional Coast Guard, said in a statement Monday.

“We will continue to conduct surveillance and vigilance activities with a high sense of urgency so as not to miss even the slightest change and will take all possible measures to protect our territorial waters,” Sakamoto said.

China refers to the islands as Diaoyu and maintains that its activities in the adjacent waters are “legitimate and lawful,” then-Foreign Ministry spokesman Lijian Zhao told reporters in July 2022.

“The Japanese side has no right to point fingers over these activities,” he said.

Tensions between the two countries escalated when Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi during a November parliamentary session warned that Japan could use military force if China attacks Taiwan. Chinese President Xi Jinping has vowed to unify the self-governing island with the mainland, by force if necessary.

Trump: Ukraine didn't target Putin residence

Associated Press

ABOARD AIR FORCE ONE — President Donald Trump on Sunday told reporters that U.S. officials have determined Ukraine did not target a residence belonging to Russian President Vladimir Putin in a drone attack last week, disputing Kremlin claims that Trump had initially greeted with deep concern.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov last week said Ukraine launched a wave of drones at Putin's state residence in the northwestern Novgorod region that the Russian defense systems were able to defeat. Lavrov also criticized Kyiv for launching the attack at a moment of intensive negotiations to end the war.

The allegation came just a

day after Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy had traveled to Florida for talks with Trump on the U.S. administration's still-evolving 20-point plan aimed at ending the war. Zelenskyy quickly denied the Kremlin allegation.

Trump said that "something happened nearby" Putin's residence, but Americans officials didn't find the Russian president's residence was targeted.

"I don't believe that strike happened," Trump told reporters as he traveled back to Washington on Sunday after spending two weeks at his home in Florida. "We don't believe that happened, now that we've been able to check."

Trump addressed the U.S. determination after European officials argued the Russian

claim was nothing more than an effort by Moscow to undermine the peace effort.

But Trump, at least initially, had appeared to take the Russian allegations at face value. He told reporters last Monday that Putin had also raised the matter during a phone call he had with the Russian leader earlier that day. And Trump said he was "very angry" about the accusation.

By Wednesday, Trump appeared to be downplaying the Russian claim. He posted a link to a New York Post editorial on his social media platform that raised doubt about the Russian allegation. The editorial lambasted Putin for choosing "lies, hatred and death" at a moment that Trump has claimed is "closer than ever before" to

moving the two sides to a deal to end the war.

The U.S. president has struggled to fulfill a pledge to quickly end the war in Ukraine and has shown irritation with both Zelenskyy and Putin as he tried to mediate an end to a conflict he boasted on the campaign trail that he could end in one day.

Both Trump and Zelenskyy said last week that they made progress in their talks at Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort.

But Putin has shown little interest in ending the war until all of Russia's objectives are met, including winning control of all Ukrainian territory in the key industrial Donbas region and imposing severe restrictions on the size of Ukraine's post-war military and the type of weaponry it can possess.

VA imposes near-total ban on abortions, drawing ire

By LINDA F. HERSEY

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Department of Veterans Affairs has imposed a ban on most abortions, ending a Biden administration policy that made exceptions in cases of rape, incest or when the mother's health was at risk.

The move was immediately condemned by several Democratic lawmakers who accused the VA of trying to avoid public scrutiny in bypassing the formal rule change process.

"A policy issued by VA Secretary [Doug] Collins stops this reproductive care even for women who are victims of rape or incest or whose health is at risk. He's done it by internal memo, not by open rule making, avoiding public attention and scrutiny," said Rep. Richard Blumenthal, of Connecticut, the top Democrat on the House Veterans' Affairs Committee.

Abortions will now be provided only when a physician certifies that the life of the mother is

endangered if the fetus is carried to term, according to the VA.

Under former President Joe Biden's administration, the VA had been providing abortions since September 2022 in limited circumstances.

About 100 to 140 abortions were provided by the VA since 2022, according to the VA. The number is far fewer than the 1,000 that the Biden administration had projected.

President Donald Trump's administration initially proposed reinstating abortion restrictions as a rule change, which it formally announced in the Federal Register back in August.

But the administration did not wait for the internal regulation to be finalized and published, which was expected to happen soon.

The official rule-change process includes a public comment period, a review of comments and revisions to the policy as needed.

The VA said it was reinstating the abortion restrictions based on an opinion from the Justice Department.

"DOJ's opinion states that VA is not legally authorized to provide abortions, and VA is complying with it immediately," said Peter Kasperowicz, VA press secretary. "DOJ's opinion is consistent with VA's proposed rule, which continues to work its way through the regulatory process."

The VA website, however, continues to list abortion as a service offered at VA facilities under limited circumstances.

Democratic lawmakers were quick to oppose the change, and many Republicans voiced their support.

"This back-door move by the Trump administration to impose a near-total abortion ban at VA is an outrageous assault on veterans health care and a profound betrayal of veterans who have put their lives on the line for our country," said Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., a member of

the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee.

But Rep. Mike Bost, R-Ill., who is chairman of the House Veterans Affairs' Committee, said it was wrong for the Biden administration to offer abortion services at the VA. Bost said taxpayer funds should not be used to pay for abortions.

The near-total ban on abortions is effective immediately. The restrictions extend to all VA health facilities, including hospitals and clinics located in states where abortion services are legal, the VA said.

Rep. Julia Brownley, D-Calif., has introduced legislation to overturn the new restrictions.

The Reproductive Freedom for Veterans Act would guarantee veterans and their eligible family members "a protected legal right" to receive abortion services from the VA.

The bill has collected 118 cosponsors so far and has been referred to the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Health.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Coast Guard halts search for overboard woman

FL MIAMI — The U.S. Coast Guard has suspended its search for a 77-year-old woman who went overboard on a cruise ship near Cuba on New Year's Day.

Crews searched for eight hours over 690 square miles for the woman, whose name had not been made public, the Coast Guard said. She was aboard the Holland America Line cruise ship Nieuw Statendam when she went overboard Thursday, about 40 miles northeast of Sabana, Cuba. Details about how the woman went overboard were not immediately available.

The Coast Guard said it had deployed helicopters and a large vessel called a cutter to help with the search.

"Our family assistance team is supporting the guest's family, and our thoughts are with the guest's loved ones during this difficult time," Holland America Line said in a statement.

The ship departed from Fort Lauderdale, Fla., last Saturday for a seven-day cruise in the eastern Caribbean. It was scheduled to dock Friday in Key West, Fla., but the stop was canceled because of the search, the cruise line said.

Firefighters save dog from pond on New Year's Day

RI WESTERLY — A yellow Labrador out for a walk with his owner in Rhode Island had to be rescued by firefighters on New Year's Day after he wandered onto a thin layer of ice covering a pond and fell through the center.

According to the Misquamicut Fire Department, volunteer

firefighters and other emergency officials were dispatched early Thursday morning for a water rescue.

Once on scene, firefighters saw a dog named Phoenix struggling and unable to move to shore in the slushy, icy water.

Members from both the Misquamicut and Watch Hill fire departments donned ice rescue suits, which help protect the body from frigid temperatures, to enter the pond and successfully rescue Phoenix. The National Weather Service reported it was 26 degrees Fahrenheit around 9 a.m. on Thursday, with the wind chill dropping the temperature to 14 degrees.

Phoenix was declared free of injuries.

"He got a little bit of extra food last night," said Steve Howard, deputy chief of the Misquamicut Fire Department. "And he took a little nap."

No mass exodus despite return-to-office warning

VT MONTPELIER — When Vermont Gov. Phil Scott announced that state workers would need to return to offices at least three days per week starting Dec. 1, the state employees' union warned the initiative could cause a mass exodus of top staff.

So far, that doesn't appear to be the case.

Comparing mid-September to mid-December of 2025 to the same period in 2024, retirements are up slightly from 66 to 76, according to data from the Vermont Department of Human Resources. Resignations, on the other hand, have fallen from 205 to 185, a drop of nearly 10% compared to last year.

Sarah Clark, Vermont's sec-

retary of administration, said in a recent interview that the number of applicants for state jobs has actually risen.

"When you look out at what's happening both in the federal government and the private sector, I think state government is a very attractive employer," Clark said, crediting in part the state's health and pension benefits.

Likely fatal mountain lion attack not first encounter

CO GLEN HAVEN — A solo hiker who authorities believe was killed by a mountain lion on a remote Colorado trail on New Year's Day was not the first person to encounter a big cat in the area in recent weeks.

Gary Messina said he was running along the same trail on a dark November morning when his headlamp caught the gleam of two eyes in the nearby brush. Messina pulled out his phone and snapped a quick photo before a mountain lion rushed him.

Messina said he threw his phone at the animal, kicked dirt and yelled as the lion kept trying to circle behind him. After a couple of harrowing minutes he broke a bat-sized stick off a downed log, hit the lion in the head with it and it ran off, he said.

The woman whose body was found last Thursday on the same Crosier Mountain trail had "wounds consistent with a mountain lion attack," said Kara Van Hoose with Colorado Parks and Wildlife. Officials were awaiting confirmation.

Wildlife officials later tracked down and killed two mountain lions in the area —

one at the scene and another nearby. A necropsy will determine if either or both of those animals attacked the woman.

Based on the aggressiveness of the animal that attacked him on Nov. 11, Messina suspects it could be the same one that killed the woman on New Year's Day.

"I had to fight it off because it was basically trying to maul me," Messina told The Associated Press.

Famed college football coach picked for board

FL SARASOTA — College football Hall of Famer Urban Meyer has been appointed to the board of trustees at a small public liberal arts college that Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis has transformed from a progressive institute into a staging ground for the Republican governor's war on "woke."

DeSantis last week named Meyer to the board at New College in Sarasota, which the governor's allies took over two years ago by packing the board with DeSantis supporters and conservative figures.

Meyer currently is a college football analyst for FOX Sports. As head coach at the University of Florida, Meyer led the Gators to two national championships in 2006 and 2008. Meyer also steered Ohio State's football team to a national championship in 2014. Meyer was the head coach of the Jacksonville Jaguars in 2021 during his only season leading an NFL team.

Urban's appointment, which is subject to confirmation by the state Senate, was announced along with the reappointment of two other New College trustees.

— From wire reports

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Broncos beat Chargers for AFC top seed

Associated Press

DENVER — The Denver Broncos secured the AFC's top playoff seed with a 19-3 win over the Los Angeles Chargers' bevy of backups Sunday, a victory fueled by Ja'Quan McMillian's 45-yard interception return for a touchdown.

Wil Lutz was 4-for-4 on field goals as the Broncos (14-3) tied their franchise record for most victories in a season and earned their first No. 1 playoff seed since 2015, which they parlayed into a third Super Bowl title.

They'll get a week off before hosting their first playoff game in a decade, which could be against these same Chargers (11-6) if Los Angeles beats the Patriots (14-3) at New England in the wild-card round next weekend.

Denver quarterback Bo Nix had one of his worst games of the season, throwing for just 38 yards in the first half and 141 overall, but he tied Russell Wilson's record of 24 wins in his first two NFL seasons.

With no chance to win the division, the Chargers treated this game much like a bye week as they prepare to hit the road for the playoffs in the wild-card round. Coach Jim Harbaugh sat several of his starters, most notably quarterback Justin Herbert, safety Derwin James and OLB Tuli Tuipulotu.

Steelers 26, Ravens 24: Aaron Rodgers threw a go-ahead touchdown pass to Calvin Austin III with 55 seconds left, and host Pittsburgh beat Baltimore when the Ravens' Tyler Loop missed a 44-yard field goal as time expired, giving Pittsburgh the AFC North title.

The Ravens were poised to swing the lead back their way one last time after Lamar Jackson connected with Isaiah Likely for a 28-yard gain that put the Ravens within Loop's range.

The rookie's kick never had a chance, sailing well to the right of the goalposts as the Steelers poured onto the field to celebrate their first division title in five

years.

Jaguars 41, Titans 7: Trevor Lawrence threw three touchdown passes, breaking the franchise's single-season record for total scores, and host Jacksonville won the AFC South and earned a home playoff game with a win over Tennessee. It was most lopsided outcome in series history.

The Jaguars (13-4) clinched their third division title in nine years, swept the Titans (3-14) for the third time in four seasons and topped a dozen wins for just the second time in the team's 31-year history.

Vikings 16, Packers 3: J.J. McCarthy had a productive first half before he was injured again, fullback C.J. Ham rushed for a short touchdown and host Minnesota finished a frustrating season by beating a resting Green Bay.

The Packers (9-7-1) were locked into the No. 7 seed in the NFC playoffs and had nothing to play for.

Giants 34, Cowboys 17: Jason Dart threw the 14th and 15th touchdown passes of his rookie year and host New York ended its lost season on a two-game winning streak by beating Dallas.

That and other results around the NFL took the Giants (4-13) out of the running for a top-two pick and clinched No. 1 for Las Vegas. New York routed the Raiders last week to end a nine-game skid.

Falcons 19, Saints 17: Dee Alford's red-zone interception stopped a potential go-ahead drive by New Orleans, and host Atlanta beat the Saints to give the NFC South title to the Carolina Panthers.

By closing the season with four consecutive wins, the Falcons (8-9) finished in a three-way tie with Carolina and Tampa Bay for first place in the NFC South. The Panthers won the tiebreaker with the best record within the division.

The Falcons completed a season sweep of the Saints (6-11), who had their four-game winning streak end.

Browns 20, Bengals 18: Myles Garrett set the NFL's single-season record with his 23rd sack and Shedeur Sanders led a late scoring drive that was capped by Andre Szmyt's 49-yard field goal as time expired to help Cleveland rally for a road victory over Cincinnati in the season finale.

Garrett sacked Joe Burrow with 4:09 remaining in the fourth quarter for the record-setting sack, surpassing the 22½ by Michael Strahan and T.J. Watt. Burrow was in the shotgun formation on first-and-10 at the Browns 45-yard line.

Texans 38, Colts 30: C.J. Stroud accounted for two touchdowns and Ka'imi Fairbairn made a go-ahead field goal with 12 seconds left to lift host Houston over Indianapolis and extend its winning streak to nine games.

The victory gives the Texans (12-5) the No. 5 seed in the AFC playoffs.

Commanders 24, Eagles 17: The Eagles' backup plan backfired, and the Super Bowl champions will start their postseason defense of the title as the No. 3 seed in the NFC.

With Jalen Hurts, Saquon Barkley and most key Eagles starters sitting out even with playoff seeding at stake, visiting Washington got fourth-quarter passing and rushing touchdowns from Josh Johnson to beat Philadelphia.

The Eagles needed help to earn the No. 2 seed. They had to beat the Commanders and Detroit needed to win at Chicago. Sure enough, the Lions beat the Bears 19-16 to add some sting to the Eagles' loss.

Patriots 38, Dolphins 10: Rhamondre Stevenson ran for two touchdowns and caught another from MVP contender Drake Maye, and host New England completed its remarkable turnaround season with a win over Miami.

The Patriots finished 14-3, their most victories since they won the Super Bowl to cap the 2016 season. The AFC East cham-

pions will be the No. 2 seed in the playoffs and host the seventh-seeded Los Angeles Chargers in the wild-card round next weekend.

Raiders 14, Chiefs 12: Daniel Carlson made a career-long 60-yard field goal with eight seconds left as host Las Vegas snapped its 10-game losing streak with a win over Kansas City.

This was the first victory for the Raiders (3-14) over the Chiefs (6-11) at Allegiant Stadium. Kansas City, which had won all five previous meetings in Las Vegas, lost its sixth straight game and eighth in 10.

Rams 37, Cardinals 20: Matthew Stafford passed for 259 yards and threw two of his four touchdown passes to Colby Parkinson, and the Los Angeles Rams secured the No. 5 seed in the NFC playoffs with a home victory over Arizona.

Puka Nacua made a one-handed TD grab among his 10 catches for 76 yards for the Rams, who snapped their first two-game skid of the season.

Lions 19, Bears 16: Jared Goff led five scoring drives, Jake Bates kicked a 42-yard field goal as time expired and visiting Detroit regrouped to beat NFC North champion Chicago after blowing a 16-point lead in the fourth quarter.

The Bears (11-6) stumbled into the playoffs with back-to-back losses, though they secured the No. 2 seed in the NFC with Washington beating Philadelphia.

Bills 35, Jets 8: After taking the first snap, Josh Allen headed to the sideline and joined the 70,000-plus fans to watch backup Mitch Trubisky throw four touchdown passes as host Buffalo bid a likely farewell to its longtime home with a rout of New York.

The win, coupled with the Chargers' loss at Denver, led to Bills moving up one spot in clinching the No. 6 seed. Buffalo will travel to play AFC South champion Jacksonville in the wild-card round next weekend.

Raiders fire Carroll after one season

Associated Press

The Las Vegas Raiders fired Pete Carroll on Monday after just one year, meaning they will enter their third consecutive season with a new coach in charge.

Carroll expressed high hopes upon taking over, saying he was used to double-digit victories and he expected the same in Las Vegas. But the Raiders went 3-14, going on a 10-game losing streak before finishing with a 14-12 victory over Kansas City on Sunday.

Now the question is where Las Vegas heads next under the direction of owner Mark Davis, minority owner Tom Brady and general manager John Spytek. Davis said in a statement that Spytek would work with Brady to find the next coach.

The Raiders are not alone in looking for a new coach.

The Cleveland Browns fired coach Kevin Stefanski after six seasons; Jonathan Gannon was fired by the Arizona Cardinals following a dismal third season; and the Atlanta Falcons fired Raheem Morris and general manager Terry Fontenot, announcing the moves Sunday night,

hours after the team completed its second straight 8-9 finish.

Las Vegas is the only one of those four teams seeking a new coach the second straight year.

The Raiders could seek an offensive-minded coach to work with a young quarterback should they draft Heisman Trophy winner Fernando Mendoza or Dante Moore with the first overall pick.

That formula worked well this season in Chicago with coach Ben Johnson and quarterback Caleb Williams and in Jacksonville with coach Liam Coen and QB Trevor Lawrence. Both teams are playoff bound after experiencing losing seasons the year before.

There is no one path to success, however. New England hired a defensive coach in Mike Vrabel, and he worked well with quarterback Drake Maye to helped the Patriots go from a 4-13 record to 14-3 and the No. 2 seed in the AFC playoffs.

Carroll, 74, was the NFL's oldest head coach, and he came to Las Vegas with the intent of winning right away. He got his wish of bringing in quarterback Geno Smith, whom he coached in Seattle. Neither got the success they

expected, with Smith throwing a league-high 17 interceptions as the losses piled up.

The 43-year-old Stefanski is a two-time AP NFL Coach of the Year and had a 46-58 overall record. He led Cleveland to playoff appearances in 2020 and 2023. Cleveland's 48-37 victory over Pittsburgh in an AFC wild-card round game at the end of the 2020 season was the franchise's first playoff win since 1993.

Stefanski was done in, however, by something that has plagued Cleveland since its return in 1999 — the lack of a franchise quarterback. He had 13 starting quarterbacks during his tenure, including seven the past two seasons. Both were the most in the league.

The Browns thought they had their quarterback in 2022 when they released Baker Mayfield and acquired Deshaun Watson from Houston for five draft picks, including three in the first round. Instead, the trade for Watson has set Cleveland back for years.

Stefanski is the sixth coach fired since owners Jimmy and Dee Haslam bought the franchise in 2012. The five coaches

hired by the Haslams have a 73-139-1 regular-season record, the second-worst mark in the NFL.

The 43-year-old Gannon finished his tenure in Arizona with a 15-36 record, including 3-14 this season. His firing was not necessarily surprising, but the speed of his downfall was still jarring.

The Cardinals had an 8-9 record last year in Gannon's second season and the franchise appeared on the upswing. Two-time Pro Bowl quarterback Kyler Murray was in his prime and Ossenfort spent much of the off-season upgrading the defense, adding veteran pieces like Josh Sweat, Dalvin Tomlinson and Calais Campbell.

Now a new coaching staff will get the chance to rebuild a franchise that will have the No. 3 overall pick in April, but has been to the playoffs just once since 2016.

Morris said after Atlanta's 19-17 win over New Orleans on Sunday that he expected to return for a third season. Instead, his 16-18 record was not enough for him to keep his job after the year began with optimism that the Falcons would reach the playoffs for the first time since 2017.

No. 7 Gonzaga tops Loyola Marymount for 9th straight win

Associated Press

SPOKANE, Wash. — Graham Ike scored 16 points as No. 7 Gonzaga overcame early shooting trouble to beat Loyola Marymount 82-47 on Sunday night for its ninth consecutive victory.

Mario Saint-Supery added 13 points and Jalen Warley 12 points for the Bulldogs (16-1, 4-0 West Coast Conference), who were coming off an 80-72 overtime win over Seattle on Friday night and had a slow start against the Lions.

Rodney Brown scored 11 points to lead Loyola Marymount (10-7, 1-3), which defeated Gonzaga in Spokane during the 2022-23 season. The Lions shot just 30% in the

game, compared to 54% for the Zags.

Gonzaga's only loss this year was to No. 2 Michigan in Las Vegas.

The Bulldogs made the first basket of the game, then missed their next nine shots to fall behind 10-2. But Gonzaga went on a 12-0 run to take a 16-14 lead midway through the first.

Loyola Marymount was scoreless for more than eight minutes, missing 11 consecutive shots, before Brown's basket broke the drought.

The Lions tied the score at 19-19, but Gonzaga scored the final 14 points of the first half to take a 33-

19 lead at the break.

No. 4 UConn 73, Marquette 57: Solo Ball scored 11 of his 17 points in the second half and Tarris Reed Jr. finished with 13 points and nine rebounds as the host Huskies rolled to a win over the Golden Eagles to extend their winning streak to 10 games.

Silas Demary Jr. had 14 points for UConn (14-1, 4-0 Big East).

Nigel James had 13 points and Chase Ross added 11 points for Marquette (5-10, 0-4), which opened conference play with four consecutive losses for the first time since dropping its first five Conference USA contests during the 1998-99 season.

Ball had seven points in the first 5:15 of the second half as the Huskies began to pull away. He took an outlet pass from Reed and converted on a three-point play to put them up 48-33 with 14:45 left in the second half. Baskets by Reed and Eric Reibe pushed the lead to 19. Their first 20-point lead came on a Jaylin Stewart dunk with 8:12 remaining.

UConn took its largest lead in the first half on a 3-pointer by Demary to go ahead 31-19 with 4:12 left in the first half. Ross had five points as the Golden Eagles chipped away at the lead. Baskets by Ross and Joshua Clark pulled them within five points.

Bertuzzi lifts Blackhawks past Knights in OT

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Tyler Bertuzzi scored at 1:18 of overtime for his second hat trick of the season and fifth in the NHL to give the Chicago Blackhawks a 3-2 victory over the Vegas Golden Knights on Sunday night.

Arvid Soderblom made 13 saves to help Chicago win its third straight game and fourth in its last six. The Blackhawks extended Vegas' losing streak to six.

Ilya Mikheyev set up the winner with a pinpoint pass, and Bertuzzi directed it in past goalie Akira Schmid.

Bertuzzi's second goal, from the right crease with 8:24 left tied it at 2, and the Golden Knights, who dominated early, could muster only two shots the rest of the way.

Mark Stone and Brandon Saad scored for Vegas. Stone had his fourth goal in four games to give the Golden Knights a 2-1 lead 42 seconds into the second period.

Schmid stopped 17 shots, highlighted by close-in saves on Artyom Levshunov and Ryan Greene in the third period before Bertuzzi tied it.

Penguins 5, Blue Jackets 4 (OT): Sidney Crosby set up Richard Rakell's tying goal with 13.7 seconds left in regulation, then scored at 2:22 of overtime to give visiting Pittsburgh a comeback victory over Columbus.

The Penguins overcame a three-goal deficit to win their fifth straight game overall and third in a row in the road. Ville

Koivunen, Noel Acciari and Tommy Novak also scored, and Ben Kindel had two assists. Arturs Silovs made 25 saves.

Canadiens 4, Stars 3 (OT): Defenseman Lane Hutson scored with 1:20 left in overtime and visiting Montreal beat Dallas.

Wyatt Johnston had two goals and Quebec native Mavrik Bourque also scored for the Stars, who have lost five straight games for the first time this season (0-2-3). Jake Oettinger stopped 25 shots and has lost three straight starts (0-1-2) for the second time this season.

Panthers 2, Avalanche 1: Sam Bennett and Aaron Ekblad scored unassisted goals, Daniil Tarasov made 27 saves and host Florida snapped Colorado's sec-

ond 10-game winning streak of the season by topping the Avalanche.

Artturi Lehkonen scored midway through the second period for Colorado, which lost captain Gabriel Landeskog early in that period with what the team said was an upper-body injury.

Hurricanes 3, Devils 1: Taylor Hall had a goal and an assist against his former team, rookie Brandon Bussi stopped 28 shots and visiting Carolina beat New Jersey.

Nikolaj Ehlers and Logan Stankoven also scored as the first-place Hurricanes snapped a three-game losing streak. The 27-year-old Bussi, claimed off waivers from Florida on Oct. 5, improved to 14-2-1 on the season.

Cunningham scores 27, Pistons get rare win vs. Cavaliers

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Cade Cunningham scored 27 points, Daniss Jenkins added 25 — 21 in the second quarter alone — and the Detroit Pistons held on down the stretch for a rare road win at Cleveland, beating the Cavaliers 114-110 on Sunday.

Despite playing without two starters, the Eastern Conference-leading Pistons snapped a nine-game losing streak at Rocket Arena and beat Cleveland for just the second time in 15 games.

Donovan Mitchell scored 30 — 23 after halftime — to pace the Cavs, who trailed by 13 with less than five minutes to go before cutting Detroit's lead to 108-106 on Darius Garland's basket with 1:16 left.

Pistons forward Ausar Thompson scored on a tip-in with 17.2 seconds remaining, however, and Jenkins made four free throws in the final 5.7 seconds to put Cleveland away.

Suns 108, Thunder 105: Devin Booker hit the go-ahead 3-pointer with 0.7 seconds remaining, Jordan Goodwin scored 26 points with a career-high eight 3-pointers and host Phoenix beat Oklahoma City.

Booker took the late inbounds pass and drilled the long 3-pointer over Alex Caruso, shaking a season-long slump from long range. Ajay Mitchell missed a corner 3 at the buzzer that would have tied it.

The Thunder's four-game winning streak was snapped and the team fell to 30-6, which is still the best record in the NBA. Shai Gilgeous-Alexander led OKC with 25 points.

Magic 135, Pacers 127: Desmond Bane scored 31 points, Paolo Banchero added 28 points and 12 rebounds and host Orlando handed Indiana its 12th straight loss.

Anthony Black had 27 points and 10 assists for the Magic, who beat the Pacers for the second time in five days.

Nets 127, Nuggets 115: Michael Porter Jr. had 27 points, 11 rebounds and five assists in his first game against his former team, and host Brooklyn beat Denver to snap a three-game losing streak.

The Nuggets got Aaron Gordon and Christian Braun back from lengthy injury absences and a huge game from Jamal Murray, who finished with 27 points, a career-high 16 assists and six rebounds. They still fell to 1-2 since Nikola Jokic was lost for perhaps a month with a hyperextended left knee.

Timberwolves 141, Wizards 115: Anthony Edwards scored 35 points, Julius Randle added 22 and visiting Minnesota completed a season sweep of Washington.

Rudy Gobert had 18 points and 14 rebounds for his 15th double-double of the season for the Timberwolves, who outscored the Wizards 76-48 in the paint. Minnesota

went 3-1 on its road trip and won on consecutive days for the third time this season.

Heat 125, Pelicans 106: Norman Powell made a career high nine 3-pointers in a 34-point performance as host Miami beat New Orleans, extending the Pelicans' losing skid to seven.

Powell shot 11 of 15 from the field and 9 of 12 from behind the arc. Nikola Jovic finished with 19 points and Kel'el Ware had 16 points and 12 rebounds for the Heat. Pelle Larsson added 16 points and six assists.

Lakers 120, Grizzlies 114: Luka Doncic scored 36 points with nine rebounds and eight assists, LeBron James added 26 points with 10 assists and host Los Angeles rallied for a victory over Memphis.

Jake LaRavia also scored 26 points against his former team and Deandre Ayton had 15 points as the Lakers earned their second home victory over the Grizzlies in three days.

Bucks 115, Kings 98: Giannis Antetokounmpo had 37 points and 11 rebounds as visiting Milwaukee sailed to a victory over Sacramento.

Antetokounmpo made 13 of 17 shots from the field and 11 of 13 at the free-throw line in 31 minutes as the Bucks won for the fifth time in their last seven games. Kevin Porter Jr. added 25 points and 10 assists, while Myles Turner scored 15 points.